SENSEMAKING IN PLACE: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF RURAL SUPERINTENDENTS' SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION JOURNEY

By

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how the rural place mediates Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program implementation in rural northern Michigan school districts. The lack of a clear, universally understood definition of SEL and the politicization of SEL has created variation in how educators and the public understand and perceive SEL programming. This variation in how educators and other stakeholders make sense of SEL is further complicated by the mediating effect of place and prior experience in rural educators' sensemaking of SEL. This study interrogates how rural district leaders define, select and implement SEL programs and communicate these programs to stakeholders within their communities. The findings reveal that SEL implementation in rural districts is widely variant in definition, implementation, and in communication across stakeholder groups, which further confounds the development of a common understanding of SEL.

This dissertation contributes to the literature on SEL implementation by highlighting the centrality of place in rural program implementation and leadership decision-making. Recommendations are provided for policymakers, SEL program developers, and rural district leaders, emphasizing the importance of considerations of the impact of the rural place and rural identity in SEL program implementation.

This dissertation is dedicated to Ben. Your unwavering support and encouragement of my work and educational pursuits over more than 30 years have been indispensable.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Addressing challenges associated with student mental health, behavior, and school safety is crucial. National data from the School Pulse Survey (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022) indicates that more than 87% of local district leaders indicated student behavior and socioemotional development has been stunted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighty-four percent of respondents either "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the pandemic negatively impacted student behavioral development, with highest increases in misbehaviors being reported in classroom disruptions from student misconduct (56% increase), student tardiness (55% increase), rowdiness in non-classroom areas of school buildings (49% increase), and non-permitted use of electronic devices (42% increase). Additionally, 70% of district leaders responded that the degree to which students seek mental health services has increased since the start of the pandemic (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022).

There is a growing consensus that social and emotional learning (SEL) programs are uniquely situated to support these challenges, particularly student mental health, behavior, academic achievement, equity, and school safety (Berman et al., 2018; Durlak et al., 2011; Elias, 2014; Gagnier et al., 2022; Leading with SEL, 2022; Loeb et al., 2018; Mahoney et al., 2018; Payton et al., 2000; Snyder et al., 2010). According to the Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools Survey Report, 90% of public schools increased social and emotional support for students in response to the pandemic in the 2021-22 academic year (Institute for Education Sciences, 2024).

Despite this growing consensus, there is significant variance in any generally accepted definition of SEL, which has led to politicization of SEL programming—which is addressed throughout this dissertation. The variance in how SEL is defined is both broad and deep. Broad

variance in how SEL is understood includes disparate ways of categorizing SEL—as a program to support student social skill development, to support prosocial behaviors or correcting misbehaviors, to support student mental health, or to support leadership skill development. In addition to this variance in the breadth of SEL, there is also variance in the type of intervention used in SEL programs. Using the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework (American Institutes for Research, 2024), SEL programs are varyingly understood as a Tier 1 core program that develops skills for all students in the building or district, or as a Tier 2 supplemental intervention to address specific needs students may have—for example to improve specific student behaviors—or as a Tier 3 intensive intervention for students who need additional supports, such as the use of SEL to address student mental health needs. This variance in how SEL is understood as an intervention to address student mental health is precarious in that schools and educators do not have the structure or expertise to provide mental health services to students in need of intensive mental health care or interventions. These variances in how SEL is understood is further discussed throughout this dissertation, and several implications to address the effects of disparate understandings of both breadth and depth of SEL programs are presented in Chapter 5.

While there is no universally accepted definition of SEL, most SEL programs and educators claim alignment of their program to the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020). However, as will be further developed in Chapters 4 and 5, the broad scope of these competencies allows disparate programs and understandings of SEL to claim alignment to the competencies while themselves being fundamentally dissimilar.

In spite of the challenges in defining SEL, district leaders continue to look to SEL programs to address observed behaviors and student experiences in schools and districts. According to Yoder et al. (2020), 83% of state SEL leaders responded that districts have indicated a need for increased prioritization of SEL since the COVID-19 pandemic. This is also made apparent in the results of the School Pulse Survey (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022), where more than 79% of leaders reported a need for increased student and staff mental health support, 70% indicated a need for training to support student social-emotional development, and 51% stated a need for training on classroom management strategies to address increases in behaviors observed in classrooms (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022).

The data indicate that educational disruptions from the pandemic resulted in a significant lack of the typical supports that build SEL skills and prosocial behaviors (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022; Leading with SEL, 2022). However, at a time when there is both a substantial need and significant interest in SEL programming, a clear and common understanding of SEL remains elusive. This lack of a common definition has led to misconceptions and vociferous debate around SEL implementation (McClain, 2022; Meckler, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a; Prothero & Blad, 2021). This debate is rooted in wide variance of understandings among stakeholders regarding SEL and its intended outcomes. Indeed, SEL in the education community is understood in a fundamentally different way than it is in the public sphere, and there is a vast difference of understandings of SEL in public discourse (Carstarphen, 2018; Carstarphen & Graff, 2018; McClain, 2022; Meckler, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a; Prothero & Blad, 2021; Tyner, 2021).

As districts implement SEL programs, it is important to consider the impact of community and cultural context on student SEL. Hayashi et al. (2022) analyzed SEL programs in

North America, Japan, and South Africa and found that differences in cultural values, beliefs, and norms drive how "social competence" is both defined and perceived. Social and emotional skills can be universal—such as the experience of emotion and communication—however, SEL also includes culturally-specific skills that are defined by the values and beliefs of the culture. For example, the Japanese social practice of bowing in varying contexts and methods are social skills that are important to relationship building (Hayashi et al., 2022) while also unique to the cultural context. Cultures in North America tend to place more value on individualism leading teachers and community members to perceive student independence as social competence. In the culturally diverse setting of American schools, standardization of SEL skills risks privileging and normalizing ways of being and interacting that privilege and maintain power structures that support racism, ableism, and heteronormative lifestyles (Clark et al., 2022). Therefore, careful consideration of the cultural and community context of SEL implementation is vital to ensure students' culture is sustained and supported.

The rural school setting presents a unique cultural and community context for SEL program implementation. Nationally, rural school enrollment accounts for 19% of total public-school enrollment, and 28% of all public-school districts are in areas classified as rural (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In Michigan, approximately 66% of public-school districts are in rural areas and rural students represent 26% of all public-school students (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance Information, 2024). Rural communities have unique characteristics—such as demographic, economic opportunities, values, history, identity, organization and resources—that drive rural residents' experiences of the rural place (Farmer et al., 2021). These unique characteristics of the rural place and the specific rural identity within

each rural place provide a framework for understanding how programs and policies uniquely impact students, stakeholders, and educators within the rural district.

Rural education is not often a distinct research or policy analysis focus (Arsen et al., 2022; Schafft, 2016) despite the novel challenges experienced, which are highly contextualized to the community (Azano et al., 2023; Blinn-Pike, 2008; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). In addition, due to the centrality of rural school districts in community engagement and identity, rural district leaders are perceived as both school and community leaders in the rural community (Schafft, 2016). This highly visible leadership position can create challenges for leaders when navigating implementation of politicized educational policy or programming (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Sutherland & Seelig, 2023) resulting in unique challenges for rural leaders implementing SEL programs.

This research analyzes rural district leader's program implementation through the lens of SEL program implementation. Central to an understanding of SEL implementation, this research sits at the intersection of SEL sense-making, district leaders' experience of SEL program implementation, and the rural community context. Specifically seeking to understand how district leaders in a rural district make sense of SEL, how the rural place impacts this sensemaking, and how SEL is implemented, this research will contribute to an understanding of the rural community context and its impact on program implementation through the lens of SEL. Research questions are presented next.

Research Questions

This research will contribute to the SEL literature by examining how rural district leaders make sense of SEL in the rural community. The research questions are:

How do education leaders in three rural Michigan districts navigate SEL implementation?

1. How do rural educational leaders define SEL? Why do district leaders choose to implement SEL, and how do they communicate about SEL?
2. How do they identify the need for SEL implementation? How do they select specific SEL programs?
3. How do rural education leaders navigate the different perceptions of SEL in their community, and how consistent are the choices and understandings of SEL across these rural districts?
4. How does place mediate all of these decisions?

These research questions will interrogate rural leaders' sense-making throughout SEL implementation, from initial decision-making to implementation and communication across stakeholder groups. By examining the implementation process from initial decision-making through implementation, and with a focus on communication across stakeholder groups, these research questions focus the analysis of SEL implementation on district leaders' sense-making and experiences within the rural community.

As SEL has faced significant challenges in building a common definition (Durlak et al., 2010; Mahoney et al., 2018; Taylor et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015) and in many cases has become a divisive and political issue (Hall, 1992; Kleiman, 2020; Lawson et al., 2017; McClain, 2022; Meckler, 2022; Menominee County, 2022b; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a; Prothero & Blad, 2021; Tyner, 2021), particularly relevant in rural areas of Michigan that have historically been politically aligned with groups opposed to SEL (Kleiman, 2020; Menominee County, 2022b), rural district leaders face challenges unique to the rural context. In addition, rural communities' experiences of persistent out-migration, economic challenges resultant of the consolidation of family farms into industrial models, and reliance on

resource extraction, while simultaneously the school being one of few remaining social institutions existing within the rural community and a significant employer, present unique challenges to the rural district leader (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

These challenges faced by the rural district leader in implementing SEL are deeply embedded in the rural place and how they and their stakeholders make sense of SEL. The analytic framework for this research combines sensemaking and place consciousness to elucidate how rural district leaders make sense of SEL within their rural context—and how, and to what extent, the rural place and the individual's sense of place interact with and drive sensemaking of SEL.

This dissertation is qualitative study that includes three remote rural district superintendents who are leading districts in northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. Qualitative analysis was selected to allow for an in-depth analysis of the experiences remote rural school district superintendents as they navigated SEL implementation in their unique rural place. The inclusion of three superintendents allowed for analysis of multiple experiences and perspectives within three unique rural communities. Data collection methods include semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Interviews provided an opportunity for data collection regarding the experiences of each superintendent, observations allowed for more robust data collection regarding the district, its SEL implementation, and the experiences in each district as they implemented their SEL program. Finally, document analysis provided data regarding how SEL was embedded throughout district policies and how SEL was communicated with stakeholders.

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter 2 is the Literature Review, which explores how SEL is defined and perceived, and then specifically within the relevant

stakeholder groups: the education community, in public discourse, and then the rural context for SEL. Next, outcomes associated with SEL program implementation are discussed, with specific consideration of SEL and the COVID-19 pandemic and the ways in which SEL addresses issues of equity. Next, literature of district leaders' implementation practices and communication across stakeholder groups are considered.

Chapter 3 presents the analytic framework which combines sensemaking and place consciousness to understand how place interacts with participant sensemaking. The qualitative analysis is defined, with detailed descriptions of each participating rural district leader's district and the rural context in which the district is situated. Next, the data collection methods of semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis are presented, followed by coding and data analysis methods employed.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the research. The major theme of variation throughout SEL implementation is discussed, including variation in SEL sensemaking, implementation, programs, and communication. Further findings presented include the ways that SEL sensemaking is mediated by the rural district leader's insider or outsider status, and how relationships mediate sensemaking. Finally, the finding that SEL implementation in the participating rural districts is leader-driven is described and discussed.

Chapter 5 presents the implications of this research. This chapter begins with a discussion of key findings, which put particular emphasis on the theme of variation throughout SEL implementation. Next, a review of the research questions and how the key findings respond to the research questions are provided. Implications are presented, separated into implications for rural district leaders, implications for SEL program proponents and policy makers, implications

for SEL program developers, and implications for future research. Limitations of the research are also considered.

This research seeks to understand how rural district leaders make sense of and navigate this complicated context throughout implementation of K-12 SEL programs. This research also contributes to understanding how rural district leaders might successfully support student's social and emotional needs through K-12 SEL programs in a rural district.

The literature review is presented in the next chapter, including how SEL is understood in various contexts, then moving to discussion of how the research literature has grappled with defining SEL and its associated outcomes. The final section discusses the proposed research methods.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

SEL programming is purported to address the student mental health, behavior, and school safety challenges reported by school administrators (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020; J. Durlak et al., 2010; M. J. Elias et al., 1997; Institute of Education Sciences, 2022; Knutson et al., 2021; van de Sande et al., 2019; Xia et al., 2022). However, there is disparity in how SEL is defined—both in breadth and depth—among researchers and practitioners (Battistich et al., 2004; Cascarino & Weissberg, 2013; M. Elias, 2014b; Galla et al., 2014; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Mckown, 2017; Payton et al., 2008a; Xia et al., 2022). This disconnect between the need to implement SEL programs to address challenges observed across public school districts and the disparity in how SEL is defined has led to controversy surrounding SEL. Without a common definition and understanding, SEL programming has been misrepresented as programming to promote "progressive" policies, critical race theory, and LGBTQIA+ "ideology" (Anderson, 2022; McClain, 2022; Meckler, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a; Prothero & Blad, 2021). Therefore, this literature review begins with an analysis of how the research community has defined SEL and how various stakeholder groups understand and perceive SEL, then considers outcomes associated with SEL. Next, research on SEL effectiveness, the impact of culture, community, and equity are discussed. Finally, district leaders' experiences implementing SEL is considered.

Definition of SEL

Several definitions of SEL have been used in the research literature, often with different and even competing components. Some of the components included in definitions of SEL have included emotional intelligence and character-building (Xia et al., 2022), 21st century skills

(Elias, 2014), school "connectedness" (Battistich et al., 2004), "soft skills" (Heckman & Kautz, 2012), and academic diligence (Galla et al., 2014). In an analysis of SEL assessments and considering how SEL assessments should be developed, McKown (2017) identifies this definitional challenge and attempts to summarize underlying commonalities among definitions and defines SEL as programming that includes empathy, prosocial interactions, and the ability to manage emotions. Elias et al. (1997) defined SEL as the ability to manage and express self-awareness, impulse control, cooperative work, and caring about self and others. This definition aligns to the five Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020).

Several research studies have attempted to coalesce around understanding SEL through the lens of the CASEL framework (Cascarino & Weissberg, 2013; Payton et al., 2008; Payton et al., 2000; Ross & Tolan, 2018; Scott et al., 2021; Ura et al., 2020; Weissberg et al., 2015). Taylor et al. (2017) and Payton et al. (2008) list the CASEL competencies as the proximal goal of SEL programs, and development of one or more of the CASEL competencies is used as inclusion criteria in their research studies. Focusing on SEL skill measurement, Ura et al. (2020) define the SEL skills to be measured as the CASEL competencies. And Mahoney et al. (2018) also used the CASEL definition for inclusion criteria. In addition, Cascarino and Weissberg (2013) use this definition to argue SEL should be a national priority in education policy and Weissberg et al. (2015) introduce SEL using the CASEL definition.

In addition to the research literature, several states have adopted the CASEL competencies (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022; Mckown & Herman, 2020). Dermody and Dusenbury (2022) found that 27 states, including Michigan, have adopted K-12 SEL competencies that are aligned to the CASEL competencies (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022;

Michigan Department of Education, 2017). Further, McKown (2019) states the CASEL definition is “widely cited” and “highly influential” in SEL research and practice. Because the CASEL framework is widely cited as “the” definition of SEL in some research, in SEL programs, and by educators (Covey, n.d.-b; Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022; McKown, 2019; Tides Center, 2024), the CASEL framework is presented next.

The CASEL framework defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals” (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020, p. 1). Based on this definition of SEL, five CASEL competencies were developed to align to this framework (2020), these competencies are self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills. The five CASEL competencies are self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020). Self-awareness is defined as the ability to understand one’s thoughts, emotions, and values; self-management is the ability to manage one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors; responsible decision-making refers to the ability to make constructive choices; relationship skills are the ability to maintain healthy and supportive relationships; and social awareness is the ability to empathize with others across diverse backgrounds and cultures (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020).

Relying on this definition of SEL, Weissberg et al. (2015), provide a framework for SEL implementation in schools that includes explicit instruction using a student-centered learning approach. In a study of student-centered learning, Friedlaender et al. (2014) found that student-centered learning inherently helps students develop SEL skills (Friedlaender et al., 2014). In

addition to student-centered learning environments, Weissberg et al. (2015) suggest the inclusion of sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) skill training to improve outcomes (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). SAFE practices were also highlighted in Taylor et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis of 82 school based SEL programs, representing 97,406 students in kindergarten through high school. In addition, Denham (2018) centers the importance of students' developmental level in SEL programming.

Thus, claims that support the CASEL framework for SEL implementation suggest explicit instruction in the five CASEL competencies (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020). Further, research suggests ideal SEL programs are student-centered, SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, and explicit), and tailored to student developmental level (Denham, 2018; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Friedlaender et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). However, across the research literature and over time there is substantial variance in how SEL is defined, and research studies are inconsistent in the breadth of targeted SEL skills and in depth of the programs—whether they are viewed as Tier 1 core programs for all students or Tier 2 and 3 programs for targeted groups of students based on identified needs (Durlak et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Wrigelsworth et al. (2022) posit that this wide breadth and depth of SEL understanding is resultant of varying educational subfields, such as character education, conflict resolution, social skills, bullying prevention, and recently mental health and wellbeing, each using their own jargon when describing SEL which has created complexity of terminology that describes similar or related ideas (Wigelsworth et al., 2022). Wigelsworth et al. (2022) recognize that the CASEL framework is the most commonly cited framework for SEL, and the research literature has begun to converge to claiming alignment to the CASEL framework to define SEL (Cascarino & Weissberg, 2013; Leading with

SEL, 2022; Payton et al., 2000, 2008a; Ross & Tolan, 2018; Scott et al., 2021; Ura et al., 2020a; Weissberg et al., 2015). Table 1 shows how the SEL definitions discussed above relate to the CASEL competencies.

Table 1

CASEL Competencies and SEL Skills

CASEL Competencies	**Definitional Constructs**
Self- awareness	Emotional intelligence (Xia et al., 2022), impulse control (Elias et al., 1997), soft skills (Heckman et al., 2012), mental health and wellbeing (Wigelsworth et al., 2022)
Self-management	Impulse control (Elias et al., 1997), emotional management (McKown, 2017), soft skills (Heckman et al., 2012), conflict resolution, bullying prevention (Wigelsworth et al., 2022)
Social awareness	Character building (Xia et al., 2022), Caring about self and others (Elias et al., 1997), empathy, prosocial interactions (McKown, 2017), soft skills (Heckman et al., 2012)
Relationship skills	School connectedness (Battistich, 2004), cooperative work (Elias et al., 1997), social skills, conflict resolution (Wigelsworth et al., 2022)
Responsible decision-making	Academic diligence (Galla, 2014), character education, conflict resolution, and bullying prevention (Wigelsworth et al., 2022)

While the definitional constructs listed across the research literature can be aligned to the CASEL competencies, researchers listed in Table 1 did not conceptualize SEL as all of the CASEL competencies, rather the understandings of SEL have largely included some—but not all—of the CASEL competencies and have included these concepts in varying depths of intervention as Tier 1, 2, or 3 interventions. As will be illustrated throughout this paper, this challenge of disparate understandings and definitions of SEL persists throughout SEL research. The next section turns to an analysis of the importance of cultural and community context in SEL implementation by a discussion of SEL sensemaking, and then how SEL is defined and perceived across different education stakeholder groups.

Sensemaking: Equity and the Rural Context for SEL Program Implementation

In this section, the interaction between SEL skills and the local cultural and community context on SEL implementation is discussed, followed by a discussion of how three stakeholder groups make sense of SEL: the education community, the general public, and the rural context for SEL implementation.

Community aware leaders understand how students' and families' culture and community shape their experiences and needs (Casto & Sipple, 2022), and impact their perceptions, skills, and approaches to SEL competencies. Explicit consideration of equity and the impact of SEL programs on students' and the community culture and community can ensure that SEL programming sustains the cultural values and norms of the students, families, and communities it is intended to serve (Gagnier et al., 2022). As leaders consider SEL program implementation, they must attend to existing systemic inequities; failure to do so can lead to harm for students and families from a non-dominant community culture (Gagnier et al., 2022).

McHenry-Sorber et al. (2018) challenge the assumption of homogeneity within rural communities and claim that rural scholarship has centered rural and non-rural differences at the expense of close examination of social inequity within rural communities. While maintaining a critical place-conscious lens, they contend, rural leaders must address within-community inequity and marginalization that occurs in rural places and intersects with gender, class, race, and religious identities. Rural communities can also be understood as stratified, heterogeneous spaces that have marginalized, oppressed subgroups that are resultant of racism, gender discrimination, and sexism, along with highly localized systems of privilege and oppression (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) when considering how SEL implementation and standardization of SEL skills may impact students from marginalized groups. Indeed, according

to McHenry-Sorber (2018), assumptions of rural community homogeneity and unity risk further marginalization of these oppressed subgroups and maintain and reinforces the dominant and privileged community structures.

Clark et al. (2022) challenge the conception of standardization of SEL competencies and illustrates how standardized SEL competencies may exacerbate oppression of students from marginalized groups. They warn that a top-down approach to SEL standardization creates "normal" skills and behaviors that others students from non-dominant cultures. This concern was borne out in Kvist Lindholm's (2017) ethnographic study of a SEL program with 12–13-year-old children in a Swedish elementary school. Students described an experience after a lesson on managing anger where one student's low social position was sanctioned and supported because the student reacted to teasing with anger and frustration; students then described the student as having "problems with anger" after acknowledging that their own actions were directed to create this anger (Kvist Lindholm, 2017). Although this study did not explicitly analyze differences among dominant/non-dominant cultural groups within the school, it does portray how students whose behaviors are deemed not to align to the "norms" presented during direct instruction can be further marginalized through reinforcement of behaviors labeled as "normal" through institutionalized and standardized instruction in SEL skills. All leaders implementing SEL must carefully examine SEL curriculum within the specific community and cultural context of the students and families they intend to serve to ensure that student, family, and community culture is supported and maintained.

An example of how SEL can be adapted to the local community and cultural context is the work done by the Association of Alaska School Boards in the Culturally Responsive, Embedded, Social and Emotional Learning (CRESEL) program (Gagnier et al., 2022). Through

intentional inclusion of local community members, Alaska Native associations, and school and district leaders, to develop and implement CRESEL, the program centers and sustains the unique cultural value systems and experiences of Alaska's rural indigenous population. CRESEL adapted the CASEL framework (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020) by engaging with community stakeholders, fostering partnerships, and hosting community conversations to co-create a culturally responsive program defined by the local community and culture. This included changing language used in the CASEL framework to better align with the community, at times leading to reshaping CASEL competencies to fit into existing cultural and community structures rather than imposing the CASEL competencies onto the community context (Gagnier et al., 2022). Rural leaders—who are already perceived as both community and education leaders and work within the local community structures (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018)—must engage stakeholders across the stratifications that exist within their community to ensure that they do not further marginalize students and families from non-dominant community subgroups and to build a common understanding and perception of SEL for all stakeholders. Next, the rural context for SEL implementation is discussed, followed by SEL sensemaking within each stakeholder group, first in the education community, then in public discourse.

The Rural Context for SEL

Nationally, nearly a quarter of public-school students attend rural school districts, 57% of school districts are in rural areas, and 97% of the total land area is classified as rural (Schafft, 2016). In Michigan, approximately one-third of students attend rural districts, 66% of districts are rural, and rural areas represent more than 88% of total land area, (Arsen et al., 2022). Several rural education researchers claim that there is insufficient scholarship on the unique aspects of rural education leadership to generate a leadership theory unique to the experiences of rural

leaders (Azano et al., 2023; Biddle, 2023; Blinn-Pike, 2008; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Sutherland & Seelig, 2023). Centering the rural context in this study will add to the research regarding the unique factors faced in rural districts when implementing SEL as well as illuminating the challenges faced during program implementation by rural district leaders.

Rural communities, even within demographically homogenous rural communities, have a complex social culture and class political structure that influences the work of rural leaders (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). McHenry et al. (2018) argue that it is crucial for rural leaders to construct a deep understanding of place-based consciousness to understand these structures that exist in rural communities and suggest that community engagement to develop a deep understanding of the community's norms, ideologies, and assumptions about "how things are done here" is imperative. Critical place-conscious leadership centers the community context by recognizing cultural and economic dynamics impacting the community and its members, and centers service to community in leadership practice (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). This leadership approach, deeply embedded in the rural community's unique context, can surface how some rural community members may be marginalized and focuses work to address these issues. To understand the rural context and how it interacts with district leadership, the next section discusses rural population and demographics and then describes how the experiences of people living in rural communities create a uniquely rural context for SEL program implementation.

Population dynamics of rural areas have been shifting in the United States since 1940. In 1940, 57 percent of all U.S. residents—or 75 million people—lived in rural areas; by 2018 only 14.1 percent—46.1 million people—lived in rural areas (Schafft & Maselli, 2021). Schafft and Maselli (2021) show that rural areas with population declines tend to show even greater declines in school-aged populations, due to increased out-migration in this groups as a result of the lack

of economic opportunities for young people and families, and—in some areas such as rural retirement destinations—in-migration of older residents. In addition to these changes, rural areas in some regions of the United States are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse (Schafft & Maselli, 2021). In four states, student enrollment demographics show that the percent of BIPOC students in rural districts in New Mexico, Alaska, Arizona, and California was greater than the percentage of White student enrollment in 2015-16. However, this observation is highly dependent on region; for example, according to Schafft et al. (2021), more than 92 percent of Black residents who live in rural areas live in the South, specifically South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Rural Latinx residents are primarily found in the southwest, and Native American rural populations are primarily in the west and southwest (Schafft & Maselli, 2021). This regional disparity is also noted by Logan et al. (2017) when they note that rural districts in the northeast and midwest have higher proportions of White student enrollment when compared to the south or west.

In Michigan, 95 percent of the rural population in Michigan identifies as White—compared to 74 percent in urban areas of Michigan—demographic trends that are consistent with observed trends of rural population demographics in midwestern states (Arsen et al., 2022; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Citizen's Research Council of Michigan, 2018; Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; Schafft & Maselli, 2021; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Additionally, while rural school districts represent more than 88 percent of the total land area they also represent less than one-third of students (Arsen et al., 2022). Rural communities in Michigan also have lower rates of postsecondary educational attainment, which is also consistent with national trends (Citizen's Research Council of Michigan, 2018; Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017).

Some challenges faced by rural students are not unique to the rural context. For example, Arsen et al. (2022) noted that upward mobility opportunities for students in rural northern Michigan are comparable to students in urban areas of Michigan, a finding echoed by Logan et al. (2017) when analyzing schools in midwestern and northeastern states: students in urban and rural schools tend to have similar poverty rates. Logan et al. (2017) also found that rural BIPOC students in the south and west experience higher rates of poverty than their rural White peers (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). These challenges, such as economic opportunity, upward mobility, and poverty are experienced in rural as well as suburban and urban communities; it is the intersection of the challenges and the rural identity, community, and culture that interact to create the uniquely rural context. Additionally, the rural context varies by region, as observed in demographic differences in populations of rural communities across the United States (Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017). Rural communities—like other locales—require a place conscious understanding of the community being served (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Schafft, 2016).

In addition to long term population and economic decline experienced by rural communities (Arsen et al., 2022; Schafft & Maselli, 2021), the ongoing out-migration of young persons (Biddle & Azano, 2016; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Schafft & Maselli, 2021; Theobald & Wood, 2010), and a lack of upward mobility opportunities within rural communities in Michigan in particular (Arsen et al., 2022), the unique context of rural education also includes deficit identity constructions of rural persons as unsophisticated and subpar, (Howley & Howley, 2010; Theobald & Wood, 2010), and a lack of understanding of or investment in the purpose or benefits of formal education in rural communities (Schafft, 2016; Theobald & Wood, 2010).

Self-identification as “rural” can be undesirable for students due to negative perceptions and popular culture references regarding what it means to be “rural” (Howley & Howley, 2010).

Theobald et al. (2010) provide examples of popular culture messages conveying a deficit identity in popular media, including comedy by Jeff Foxworthy, reality shows including The Simple Life where two wealthy socialite women, Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, leave the city to go "down to the sticks", movies such as Joe Dirt, and long-standing stereotypes shown in television shows like the Beverly Hillbillies and the "slack-jawed yokel" character Cletus Spuckler in the Simpsons, with a common theme that people living in rural areas are less intelligent or less sophisticated (Theobald & Wood, 2010). Indeed, Howley et al. (2010) state that schools themselves often facilitate out-migration through implicit messaging and shaping of a rural identity as a place to be "from" or a place to leave, as they prepare for a life outside of their rural community. This deficit identity construction can lead to people from rural communities rejecting these messages from popular culture, and this rejection of negative representations of rural life itself becomes central to the identity of some who live in rural communities (Theobald & Wood, 2010). The impact of these popular culture messages becomes an undercurrent in the rural community that creates both an out-migration imperative which communicates that to find success youth must leave the rural community, and, in other cases—or for other community members—rural communities can become exclusionary and oppressive in defining who is and is not a "member" of the community, actively limiting access to structural, systemic supports and opportunities while claiming to "protect" the local history and culture of the community (Corbett, 2020; Howley & Howley, 2010; Youngblood Jackson, 2010). This portrayal in popular culture of rural people deeply impacts the self-perceptions and experiences of those living in rural areas, and it contributes to a uniquely rural experience that affects rural residents, both those privileged within the social structure of the rural area and those who are excluded and marginalized from participation in the local community. In addition to identity construction of

young people in rural schools, differences in interest and investment in education contribute to the rural context.

While rural schools have comparable rates of student achievement and completion, this does not apply for post-secondary attainment (Drescher et al., 2022; Schafft, 2016; Wells et al., 2019). In urban and suburban areas, 30 percent of adults 25 and older hold a 4-year postsecondary degree, compared to 19 percent of rural adults (Howley & Howley, 2010; Logan & Burdick-Will, 2017; Schafft, 2016). Rural areas also commonly offer employment in sectors such as agriculture and resource extraction, employment which may not require a college degree (Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2016), resulting in less interest or perceived need for formal education in some rural communities. When this is combined with the rural identification—particularly the stereotype of rural persons being unintelligent or unsophisticated—and rural residents' rejection of external stereotypes, students who intend to remain in a rural community may not view education as vital to their future economic prospects (Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft, 2016; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Rural district leaders employ critical place consciousness to attend to the unique context and needs of these students and families of their community.

Leadership in rural districts is impacted by these unique factors, and these factors impact how programs are successfully implemented in the district. One example of how the rural context impacts district leadership has been conceptualized in the literature is the insider/outsider perspective, specifically analyzing longevity of rural superintendents based on their status as an "insider" community member or an "outsider" (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). Rural district leaders with long tenure in the district are more likely to be community insiders who have risen from within the district and who perceive the board and community positively (McHenry-Sorber

& Budge, 2018). Community insiders were also found to better understand the local political landscape and were perceived more as a part of the political and educational culture of the community. Local values and beliefs led to insider superintendents placing a higher priority on community relationships and focusing more on district and community members compared with outsider superintendents (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). However, some outsider superintendents have been more effective than insiders when functioning as a change agent who raises community expectations and builds educational programming. How leaders are perceived within their communities, and whether they are accepted as the educational leader impacts acceptance of leader-driven program implementation. This is particularly important when considering implementation of programming that may not align with the community cultural and political values and beliefs. As has been discussed, this is particularly relevant for consideration of SEL implementation in the rural setting.

Three additional factors that impact district leadership are how the community perceives the role of the school within the social structure of the area. The link between school and community is important in rural districts as the school is central to community life, identity, and economic development (Azano et al., 2023; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Sutherland & Seelig, 2023). Schools in rural areas function not only as community centers and the focal point of community identity, but they also represent a proportionately significant employer and purchaser of local goods and services (Azano et al., 2014; Schafft, 2016). Finally, rural schools prepare youth for work in local businesses and industry (Arsen et al., 2022), which is necessary to maintain the local economy as well as local cultures, traditions, and atmosphere.

Capacity for implementation can be a challenge faced by rural districts, which is an important consideration for understanding implementation of SEL programming in a rural

district. Azano et al. (2014) found that rural schools implementing a gifted education program were overrepresented in the low-fidelity group. Analyzing this finding, the researchers found that rural schools faced unique factors impacting implementation fidelity (Azano et al., 2014). They found that structural factors, limited resources, and time constraints led to low implementation fidelity when implementing the program. Structural factors specifically identified were multi-age classrooms that were resultant of limited number of students requiring teachers to support students across grade levels, meaning that rather than concentrating on single lessons, one teacher implemented multiple lessons across grades. Resource limitations also impacted implementation fidelity, with some staff stating that their "teacher" roles included teaching, administration tasks, teacher training, and curriculum development. This limitation of professional resources also extended into concerns of time constraints, where staff serve multiple roles, which necessarily limits time that can be dedicated to any single role (Azano et al., 2014). These factors are likely to impact rural communities regardless of the program being implemented, as fewer students and staff directly impact school structures, and resource and time availability.

Another factor impacting program implementation—and specifically SEL implementation—in rural districts is the community perception of SEL. As discussed above, conservative communities tend to distrust SEL programming, which will impact rural district leaders' implementation efforts. In Michigan, rural areas are most commonly politically conservative, with Republican candidates winning most of the rural precincts in northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula in the 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022 elections (Mack, 2018.; Menominee County, 2022; Wilkinson & Oosting, 2022). In fact, there has not been a congressional Democrat elected in the Upper Peninsula since 2010 (Wilkinson & Oosting, 2022).

As we have seen, conservative-aligned stakeholders and communities have frequently not supported SEL implementation (McClain, 2022; Meckler, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a; Prothero & Blad, 2021; Tyner, 2021). This community context necessarily impacts district selection, communication, and implementation of SEL programs, in addition to structures, resource, and time availability. As we consider SEL implementation in the rural setting, one important consideration is the need for SEL programming: both community perceived need and need based on data.

According to Arsen et al. (2022), rural schools reported significantly increased need to support student mental health, resultant of both an increase in traumatic home experiences and scarcity of access to professional mental health services in rural areas in Michigan (Arsen et al., 2022; Riddle, 2022). SEL programming has the potential to provide these needed supports for students in rural schools, however, misunderstanding of SEL and its intended outcomes creates unique challenges for district leaders attempting to address student social emotional and mental health needs. District leaders must address these challenges with a critical place-conscious approach that acknowledges the local culture and community context.

These factors all combine to create a unique rural context for SEL implementation: changing population dynamics, and in the Michigan setting the rural demographics of 95 percent White students, lower rates of postsecondary educational attainment, rural identity construction—which can be both in reaction to negative stereotypes, while others are marginalized by those who conform to defined community norms and hold power—limited opportunities for upward social mobility, and limited options for employment, and ongoing out-migration and economic decline (Arsen et al., 2022; Citizen's Research Council of Michigan, 2018; Corbett, 2020; Drescher et al., 2022; Howley & Howley, 2010; Schafft & Maselli, 2021;

Theobald & Wood, 2010; Wells et al., 2019; Youngblood Jackson, 2010). Additionally, Michigan rural communities tend toward conservative political beliefs, which are shown to be less likely to embrace SEL programming when it is called "SEL", while also reporting an increased need for mental health and social supports (Arsen et al., 2022; Mack, 2018; Riddle, 2022; Wilkinson & Oosting, 2022). Finally, rural communities are characterized by centering schools in community life and prioritizing their own place-based consciousness throughout the schools and community (Azano et al., 2014; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Howley & Howley, 2010; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Youngblood Jackson, 2010).

This proposal is situated within this context of educational leaders' quickly growing interest, the rapid dissemination of SEL programming, uncertainty in the research regarding the outcomes associated with K-12 SEL implementation, and the vociferously debated climate of SEL in rural communities. The next section begins to tackle the underlying challenge that has contributed to politicization of SEL: the wide disparity among stakeholders in understanding and defining SEL.

SEL in the Education Community

As discussed above, the education community has struggled to identify a common definition of SEL among educators. Educators have made sense of SEL in several ways, including as programming to support emotional intelligence and character-building (Xia et al., 2022), 21st century skills (M. Elias, 2014a), school "connectedness" (Battistich et al., 2004), "soft skills" (Heckman & Kautz, 2012), and academic diligence (Galla et al., 2014) since its inception.

Differences in sensemaking among educators can be influenced by the outcomes they associate with SEL (Weick, 1995). Educators' sensemaking occurs in the context of their

understanding and interpretation of student needs, educational pedagogy, program implementation, and their role within the educational system. These cognitive frameworks interact with their interpretation of student needs and influence how they understand and define SEL (Coburn, 2005; Weick, 1995). Their local community context further interacts with how educators make sense of and understand SEL programming, which influences how they understand the program, implementation, and its intended outcomes. Educators may identify disparate needs of students—such as character building, bullying prevention, or academic diligence—and then interpret SEL programming as suited to their outcomes and use the definitions available in the literature of SEL.

These varying understandings among the education community lead to programming that focuses on different skills and competencies. Emotional intelligence is understood as the ability to understand one's own feelings and emotions and to use that understanding to guide one's thinking and actions (Xia et al., 2022), whereas character-building is understanding how to behave ethically, fairly, honestly, and with responsibility (Xia et al., 2022). Elias' (2014a) 21st century skills are the "four Cs": communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Heckman et al. (2012) define soft skills as the personality traits, goals, and motivations that are valued in the labor market and schools, and list examples of the "Big Five" as openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and emotional stability. School connectedness refers to students' sense of the school community, perceptions and affinity for school and school engagement (Battistich et al., 2004), and academic diligence is working intently on academic tasks, and is understood as a facet of self-control (Galla et al., 2014). These tangentially related but widely variant definitions of SEL highlight the need to clearly define the skills and characteristics of SEL among educators.

With the advent of SEL organizations such as the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in 1994, many educators have begun to claim to coalesce around understanding SEL through the lens of the CASEL framework and competencies (Cascarino & Weissberg, 2013; Leading with SEL, 2022; Payton et al., 2000, 2008a; Ross & Tolan, 2018; Scott et al., 2021; Ura et al., 2020b; Weissberg et al., 2015). A new effort, led by CASEL, to establish a common, research-based understanding of SEL and promote SEL implementation was launched in September 2022—the Leading with SEL coalition—representing more than 20 national organizations and education stakeholders with the goal of developing a common understanding of SEL through the lens of the CASEL competencies (Leading with SEL, 2022). The mission of the Leading with SEL coalition is to broaden awareness of what SEL is and address the politicization and misinformation about SEL (Leading with SEL, 2022).

In addition to the education research literature and educational organizations advocating for SEL, several national and state education agencies actively promote SEL implementation. Forty-four states currently provide guidance to districts supporting SEL implementation (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022). Of those, 39 states provide websites specifically dedicated to supporting SEL; this represents an increase of 30 percent in just two years (Yoder, Dusenbury, et al., 2020). Additionally, 27 states established state K-12 SEL standards (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022). SEL has also experienced growing national attention, including Congressional approval of $123 million in funding for SEL in 2018 and the establishment of the Center to Improve SEL and School Safety (Yoder, Dusenbury, et al., 2020).

Districts and local education leaders also support—and are implementing— K-12 SEL programs (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022; Leading with SEL, 2022). Nationally, educational leaders have reported both a need for SEL programming and support for staff in

implementing SEL (Carstarphen, 2018; Carstarphen & Graff, 2018; Institute of Education Sciences, 2022; Tyner, 2021). In Michigan, the District-wide Social and Emotional Learning Community of Practice (CoP) is comprised of 19 Michigan districts that meet monthly to learn about SEL using the CASEL framework and tools. The Michigan SEL and Children's Mental Health Network represents 25 educational organizations and stakeholders, including districts, ISDs, the Governor's office, teachers, and professional organizations from across the state working to build capacity for and support local SEL implementation (Michigan Department of Education, 2022).

The data and the ongoing work of local, state, and national education leaders in schools, districts, education agencies, and organizations strongly indicate both a need for programming that SEL programs purport to address and strong interest in implementation of K-12 SEL programs. However, leaders face challenges when implementing SEL in their local communities. These challenges include the disparate understandings of SEL, which have led to opposition based on these various understandings; and the need to carefully examine how SEL competencies are understood, expressed, and perceived within students' cultural context to ensure harmful assumptions and ideologies are not supported or maintained. This deep examination of how social norms and ideologies interact with explicit SEL skills is imperative to ensure that the SEL programming affirms and supports students' cultural practices, behaviors, and values (Clark et al., 2022). The challenge presented by a lack of a common understanding of SEL, is clearly discussed and targeted through the work of the Leading with SEL coalition (Leading with SEL, 2022). This definitional challenge extends to the research of SEL, resulting in significant variance in SEL program intended outcomes and how SEL outcomes are measured across studies (Domitrovich et al., 2017; J. Durlak et al., 2010, 2011; Mahoney et al., 2018;

Payton et al., 2000; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017). These challenges lead to a wide range of understanding of SEL in the public sphere, and this variation of understanding leads to strongly held positions that are based on disparate conceptualizations of SEL. How SEL is understood and discussed in public discourse is discussed in the next section.

SEL in the Public Sphere

The definitional challenge of SEL has led to misrepresentation and misinformation regarding SEL in public discourse. Several articles, web pages, and blogs strongly oppose SEL and claim that SEL promotes a "progressive agenda", critical race theory, and LGBTQIA+ "ideology" (Anderson, 2022; Larson, 2022; McClain, 2022; Meckler, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a; Prothero & Blad, 2021). The citizenry is introduced to and makes sense of SEL within the context of their existing cognitive frameworks (Weick, 1995). When people who are conservative or liberal are presented with SEL as a program to promote a progressive agenda, then they make sense of SEL within that context—and construct their interpretation of SEL based on those understandings. Despite the claims of promoting a progressive agenda, when presented with a list of specific SEL-related skills—including goal setting, approaching challenges in a positive way, self-efficacy, navigating social situations, ethical behaviors, becoming an active citizen, understanding, expressing, and controlling emotions, standing up for people from different backgrounds, and empathy—81-93 percent of parents supported this instruction (Tyner, 2021). This dichotomy is also apparent in national headlines that suggest "liberal values" have been spread into schools, with SEL programs being included in lists of "liberal" programs while at the same time parents and community members are increasingly asking schools to do more to support student mental health and SEL (Kingkade

& Hixenbaugh, 2021; Leading with SEL, 2022; Prothero & Blad, 2021; Riddle, 2022; Roegman et al., 2022).

Some of the misunderstandings surrounding SEL originate in the lack of a common understanding of SEL. Indeed, Poff (2021) identifies these varying definitions of SEL and directly attributes this disparity to nefarious purposes of promoting critical race theory in American classrooms. An example of the claim that SEL exists to promote critical race theory can be seen in the Parents Defending Education blog (2022a) wherein the author claims that the "old version" of SEL was an "innocuous" program that supported soft skills including self-awareness, self-management, empathy, and goal setting. However, according to Parents Defending Education, critical race theory has since been included in SEL because "everything changed" by shifting to Transformative SEL, wherein "race and gender ideology" was embedded in the CASEL competencies (Parents Defending Education, 2022a). The blog does not define critical race theory, but cites terms such as culturally responsive, intersectionality, and identity as evidence of its inclusion. McClain (2022) delves deeper into Arizona school districts' SEL implementation by analyzing the Social and Emotional Toolkit for Educators resource provided to teachers in Phoenix Union High School. Again, McClain points to key phrases as evidence that the SEL program is critical race theory and gender ideology disguised as a social skills program. She highlights terms and phrases like "violence against Black, Brown and Indigenous people," "anti-racist," "identity," "sexual orientation," and "gender identity" to support her claims that SEL is a program intended to indoctrinate children into progressive ideology and to "second guess themselves and their parents" (McClain, 2022).

This misrepresentation has resulted in the conflation of SEL with highly political issues that impact public perception of SEL in a way that does not align to what SEL programming

actually is (Anderson, 2022; Klein, 2022). This is evidenced by 34 percent of school district respondents to the EdWeek Research Center survey stating they had received feedback indicating parent concerns regarding "SEL programming", (Prothero & Blad, 2021). The Social Emotional Learning: What Parents Need to Know blog maintains an "Incidents" tracker that highlights SEL work across states, including posts regarding Atlanta Public School SEL implementation, the availability of state guidance and documents about SEL from the Arizona Department of Education, the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals conference theme, "Putting SEL at the Core of our Work", Omaha Public school SEL investment, and more (Parents Defending Education, 2022a). There is also a form for readers to complete to submit further "Incidents" for inclusion. Of the 36 incidents listed since November 9, 2021, 11 highlighted anti-racism programs or lessons in schools, 10 reported on public money spent to implement SEL programs or assessments, 9 were stories of a school, district, or state that was implementing or supported implementing a SEL program, and 6 were stories that described LGBTQIA+ related lessons or policies were discussed in schools.

Each "incident" is described in the blog post, highlighting a topic the authors purport is deceptive or biased. In each blog post reporting that a school or district is implementing SEL, the district's standardized assessment scores are reported. For example, in the blog post titled Atlanta Public Schools Implemented CASEL's Social-Emotional Learning in Response to Cheating Scandal (Parents Defending Education, 2022b), after describing SEL work in the school district, the final sentence reports that "35% of students are proficient in math and 38% are proficient in reading." In posts that describe anti-racist lesson plans or trainings, terms such as cultural competency or culturally proficient are enclosed in quotation marks and cited as an example that critical race theory is being taught to participants (Parents Defending Education,

2022a). This distortion of SEL has led to widespread disagreement among stakeholders regarding the appropriateness of SEL (Anderson, 2022; Larson, 2022; Leading with SEL, 2022; Roegman et al., 2022; Tyner, 2021).

Some districts have received sufficient parent complaints that they have chosen to pause or end their SEL programs (Larson, 2022; Meckler, 2022). In Minnesota, the Anoka-Hennepin School District began SEL implementation to address student mental health and well-being post-pandemic but immediately faced complaints from Minnesota's Child Protection League, a conservative group that claimed SEL is critical race theory and "child indoctrination" (Meckler, 2022). Closer to home, Paw Paw Public Schools in Michigan discontinued implementation of the TRAILS SEL curriculum after the school board received parent complaints. In October 2022, the district discontinued use of TRAILS after less than a year of implementation as a result of community outcry. The decision to "pause" was made after a contentious board meeting that included requiring teachers to remove rainbow flags from elementary school classrooms, which were intended to show support for the LGBTQIA+ community (Larson, 2022). This controversy creates unique challenges for education leaders interested in implementing SEL to respond to data showing increased behavior and mental health concerns (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022).

Interestingly, Tyner (2021) found that parents agree with schools teaching specific skills often identified as SEL skills, including goal setting, how to approach challenges productively, how to navigate social situations, how to control emotions, and empathy broadly—from 81-93 percent of respondents supported teaching these skills. However, in the same study, parents responded most negatively to the terms "soft skills" and second-to-worst was "social-emotional learning". They responded most positively to the use of the term "life skills". This juxtaposition

of support for instruction in SEL skills while responding negatively to the term "social-emotional learning" illustrates how the definitional challenge of SEL has led to misunderstanding and misrepresentation of SEL (Tyner, 2021).

Tyner (2021) also found that parents who self-identify as Democrats are significantly more supportive of "social and emotional learning" as compared to Republican parents. According to Tyner (2021), while there are some differences in perception of SEL by race, class, and religion, the most consistent differences were by political party. The term "SEL" was ranked more negative than positive (-18%) by Republicans and more positive than negative (10%) by Democrats. When asked specifically about support for SEL skill development, approximately 90% of Democratic parents strongly support SEL-skill development. However, it is important to note that, when describing specific SEL skills without the "SEL" label, Republican parents also expressed support for teaching those skills by 66-92% across the listed skills. There were significant differences between political parties when discussing SEL, particularly as it relates to culturally responsive and sensitive curriculum. Fifty-one percent of Republican parents, compared to 87 percent of Democratic parents, indicated support for curriculum that is designed to be "sensitive to different cultures", and 52 percent of Republican parents, compared to 79 percent of Democratic parents, indicated support for more "social and emotional" supports and specialists in schools. Republican parents were more likely to indicate that SEL is better learned outside of schools than were Democratic parents. Based on these findings, Tyner recommends education leaders focus on specific SEL-skills and avoid abstract or general descriptions of "SEL" (Tyner, 2021).

It is in this climate that district leaders are working to implement SEL to support student social and emotional skills and development. Opponents of SEL tend to be politically

conservative and perceive “SEL” as promoting progressive values in the public-school setting (Anderson, 2022; McClain, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a), whereas proponents of SEL tend toward more liberal politics and are more comfortable with the term “SEL” (Tyner, 2021). Encouragingly, however, a significant majority of parents support SEL skill development in schools, when understood as specific skills rather than the politicized term “SEL” (Tyner, 2021). The next section summarizes the challenges with consolidating a common understanding of SEL.

Attempts to Consolidate a Common Understanding of SEL

As we have seen, defining SEL has been a central challenge in discourse across stakeholder groups. This challenge persists in the research literature, often with different and even competing components that constitute “SEL skills”, as discussed above, and extends into how individuals conceptualize SEL as Tier 1, 2, or 3 interventions. However, several studies have begun to claim coalescence around understanding SEL through the lens of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework (Cascarino & Weissberg, 2013; Payton et al., 2008; Payton et al., 2000; Ross & Tolan, 2018; Scott et al., 2021; Ura et al., 2020; Weissberg et al., 2015). Further, Taylor et al. (2017) and Payton et al. (2008a) list the CASEL competencies as the proximal goal of SEL programs, and development of one or more of the CASEL competencies is used as inclusion criteria in their meta-analyses. Focusing on SEL skill measurement, Ura et al. (2020b) define the SEL skills to be measured as the CASEL competencies. And Mahoney et al. (2018) also used the CASEL definition for inclusion criteria in their study. Finally, Cascarino and Weissberg (2013) use this definition to argue SEL should be a national priority in education policy and Weissberg et al. (2015) introduce SEL using the CASEL definition.

However, while there exists some consensus around CASEL as the common definition of SEL, the definition is so broad that most programs and understandings of SEL can be subsumed within the CASEL definition. The CASEL framework defines SEL as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals" (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020, p. 1). The five CASEL competencies (2020) are self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills. Based on this definition of SEL, Weissberg et al. (2015), are attempts to provide a framework for SEL implementation in schools that includes explicit instruction using a student-centered learning approach. In a study of student-centered learning, Friedlaender et al. (2014) found that it inherently develops students' SEL skills (Friedlaender et al., 2014). In addition to student-centered learning environments, Weissberg et al. (2015) suggest the inclusion of sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) skill training to improve outcomes (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). SAFE practices were also highlighted in Taylor et al.'s (2017) meta-analysis of 82 school based SEL programs, representing 97,406 students in kindergarten through high school. In addition to these factors, Denham (2018) centers the importance of students' developmental level in SEL programming.

Based on this foundational understanding, a practical approach to SEL implementation may include defining SEL programs to include explicit instruction in the five CASEL competencies (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020). Further, research suggests ideal SEL programs are student-centered, SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, and explicit), and tailored to student developmental level (Denham, 2018; Domitrovich et al., 2017;

Durlak et al., 2011; Friedlaender et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). However, in the research and over time there is substantial variance in how SEL has been defined, and SEL program research studies are inconsistent in the breadth of targeted SEL skills (Durlak et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). This challenge persists throughout SEL research. To begin to contextualize outcomes that may be associated with SEL programming, conceptual frameworks are presented next.

Conceptual Frameworks of Schoolwide SEL Programs

The CASEL conceptual framework (2020) centers the five competencies surrounded by classroom, school, family, and community supports working together to advance educational equity through partnerships with stakeholders to establish supportive learning environments that foster relationships and students' sense of community. These collaborative relationships and community partnerships build supportive learning environments that support rigorous curriculum and instruction (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020), leading to improved academic outcomes.

A conceptual framework for SEL program implementation developed by Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2015) describes the intended proximal and distal outcomes of SEL implementation. Proximal outcomes include student-student and student-teacher relationship-building, student SEL skill development, and improved classroom climate and culture. Distal outcomes are student prosocial behaviors and academic achievement. Hesterberg et al. (2021) developed a framework for equity centered SEL that includes professional learning in diversity, equity, and inclusion training, adult SEL skill building, and data analysis. They recommend the program be student-led and designed to ensure practices that affirm student lived experiences, be community-based and reflective of the local community values and strengths, and aligned with diversity, equity,

and inclusion initiatives to create sustainable, cohesive structures of support (Hesterberg et al., 2021).

Commonalities among these frameworks are a focus on explicit SEL instruction, a student-centered approach fostering community and relationship building, and culturally sustaining practices that uplift and uphold community strengths and values. These outcomes are realized by development of student SEL skills to support relationship- and community-building leading to academic outcomes such as increased attendance, graduation, and academic achievement (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020; Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015; Rowe & Trickett, 2018). These frameworks (explicit SEL instruction, student centered approaches that foster community, and culturally sustaining practices) are vital in any program implementation and in every place—regardless of urbanicity. The unique context of any community should drive program implementation and be tailored to the unique needs, identity, and culture of the community. The next section discusses outcomes that may be associated with SEL.

Review of SEL Efficacy in the Research Literature

Several research studies indicate SEL may be associated with increases in student prosocial behavior, SEL skill development, and academic achievement (Corcoran et al., 2018; J. Durlak et al., 2011; Moffitt et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2010; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016; Xia et al., 2022). However, the lack of a common understanding of SEL has resulted in research based on widely variant definitions of SEL and programs. A common understanding of SEL and its intended outcomes is necessary to generate consensus across stakeholder groups regarding student SEL skill development and to understand the

outcomes associated with SEL. This section discusses the outcomes associated with SEL, how the COVID-19 pandemic may affect outcomes, and how equity is addressed in SEL literature.

Outcomes Associated with SEL Program Implementation

Broadly defined SEL leads to uncertainty associating outcomes with SEL programming. There are a variety of outcome variables used to make inferences about program outcomes using different measures. Table A1 in Appendix A illustrates this variation in studied outcome variables and findings across studies. Durlak et al. (2011), Taylor et al. (2017), Wigelsworth et al. (2016), and Sklad et al. (2012) are meta-analyses of SEL program implementation, whereas the remaining studies examine specific SEL programs (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Battistich et al., 2004; Cahill & Dadvand, 2020; Corcoran et al., 2018; Moffitt et al., 2011; Snyder et al. 2010; Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010; Xia et al., 2022).

As seen in Table A1 in Appendix A, researchers have examined SEL program impact on a wide range of outcomes; additionally, studied programs have significant variation. The meta-analyses' inclusion criteria were research studies that investigated "one or more" of the SEL competencies (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). The remaining studies focused on a SEL program with intended outcomes that varied across the studies (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Battistich et al., 2004; Cahill & Dadvand, 2020; Corcoran et al., 2018; Moffitt et al., 2011; Snyder et al., 2010; Xia et al., 2022). The remaining study by the Social and Character Development Research Consortium (2010) analyzed several SEL programs using the same outcome variables to determine whether there were significant impacts across programs and individually. However, research of SEL outcomes across programs produced non-significant findings (Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010). Students who participated in the Collaborative Districts Initiative (CDE) SEL

programming were better able to understand emotions and perspective-taking, could set goals, solve conflicts, and make responsible decisions (Osher et al., 2015). Osher et al. (2015) posit that SEL implementation helps increase academic achievement, improves school climate, relationships, equitable practices, and improves student health and well-being. The next sections provide more information about these studies.

Four Major Meta-analyses of SEL Programs. Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school based SEL programs impacting more than 270,000 students that is widely cited in the research literature. Durlak et al. (2011) found SEL programs improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance. To define SEL, Durlak et al. (2011) state that proximal goals are the CASEL competencies. Inclusion criteria were that the studied program participants were students between 5 and 18 years old, the program was a program and developed "one or more" SEL skills. Research studies in this meta-analysis include programs targeting conflict resolution, behavior improvement, self-esteem development, drug abuse prevention, school connectedness, problem-solving skills, and more (Durlak et al., 2011). Studies included varied in the scope of SEL addressed, ranging from addressing a single competency to all CASEL competencies. This disparity may indicate a comparison of non-similar programs with significant variation in intended outcomes. Additionally, 53 percent of the interventions included were classroom-based, other interventions were implemented by non-school personnel, and multiple component programs.

Outcome variables included for analysis were student SEL skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance. Results showed statistically significant mean improvements across all outcomes. Of the 213 studies, 33 collected follow-up data six or more months after the intervention.

Follow-up effects remained significant. The last finding was that implementation problems and sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) intervention practices moderated outcomes. This seminal meta-analysis is an important first step in identifying outcomes associated with SEL implementation (Durlak et al., 2011, 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). However, there remain questions regarding associating SEL outcomes with SEL programs due to the broad definition of SEL. Disparate programs with varied intended outcomes may not be comparable and therefore aggregated outcomes may not be indicative of SEL program impact.

Another meta-analysis conducted by Taylor et al. (2017) included 82 school-based SEL interventions representing more than 97,000 students. This analysis studied follow-up outcomes six months or more post-intervention. As in the Durlak et al. (2011) study, programs were included that had varied intended outcomes, varied SEL skill focus, and variation of program approaches (explicit or embedded instruction). Results showed statistically significant mean increases in SEL skills, attitudes, social behavior, academic performance and significant decreases in conduct problems, emotional distress, and drug use. Differences across race/ethnicity subgroups were not observed nor were differences observed by socio-economic status. Finally, Taylor et al. (2017) found students ages 5-10 had significantly higher follow-up effects compared to ages 11-13 and as compared to ages 14-18, indicating student age may be an important moderator of student outcomes. Again, it is noted disparate SEL skill foci and program approaches make it difficult to associate outcomes with SEL programs.

Another meta-analysis conducted by Wigelsworth et al. (2016) included 89 studies to determine whether there were differential effects based on the stage of the evaluation, whether the program developer was involved, and whether the program was developed in the country in which it was implemented. The significant variation in implementation, including format,

training, and relative focus on each competency is acknowledged and differences in observed outcomes among individual SEL interventions is posed as a central question. Wigelsworth et al. (2016) state there is "little clarification in the SEL literature" whether any SEL programs, including those deemed successful, have undergone sufficient efficacy research. The study uses the Denham (2005) social and emotional competence framework, which claims alignment to the five CASEL competencies (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2020). Inclusion criteria were an intervention with one or more of the core SEL competencies defined by Denham (2005), programming, and students ages 4-18. Unlike Durlak et al. (2011) and Taylor et al. (2017), studies where the only intended outcome was academic or physical health (such as prevention of drug use or teen pregnancy) were excluded. Findings again suggested SEL programs typically have positive impacts on the measured outcome variables: increased SEL skills, attitudes, academic achievement, pro-social behavior, and decreased conduct problems and emotional distress. However, significant variation was observed among studies. This study confirmed its hypotheses: implementation fidelity, involvement of the program developer, and implementation within the culture of origin moderate student outcomes. The finding of the impact of implementation fidelity also supports Durlak et al.'s (2011) finding that implementation problems lead to decreased outcomes.

Sklad et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 75 studies of SEL programs to understand how explicit teaching of SEL skills can support student social and emotional development. The authors define SEL programs broadly as including competencies that help students manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships. Inclusion criteria were programs that taught one or more SEL skills. The meta-analysis included programs intended to improve school culture and climate, interventions to change general

education instruction (such as cooperative learning and student-centered learning), and programs that embedded SEL instruction into academic curriculum. This analysis again confirms improved SEL skills, prosocial behavior, academic achievement and declines in mental health problems and antisocial behavior. These findings align to findings in previously discussed meta-analyses (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016), as well as in meta-analyses and reviews conducted earlier (Durlak et al., 2010; Payton et al., 2008; Solomon et al., 2000). Challenges of associating the observed outcomes with SEL programming persist due to the variance in SEL definition and skill focus.

Inclusion criteria in these meta-analyses include programs targeting one or more SEL skills and in the type of intervention, whether core Tier 1 programming or as targeted Tier 2 or 3 interventions, which vary across included studies. In addition to the challenges of varied definitions and SEL programs, and as noted by Morrision et al. (2019), the wide timespan between the studies included in the meta-analyses also leaves uncertainty as to whether observed outcomes are necessarily a result of SEL programming. Research of individual programs may help illuminate outcomes associated with individual SEL programs. The next sections of this paper analyze individual studies of SEL programs' impact on each of these identified outcomes: SEL skills, prosocial behaviors, and academic achievement.

SEL program impact on student SEL skill outcomes. To move toward a clearer understanding of the impact of specific SEL programs on student SEL skill development, this section discusses studies that analyzed implementation of specific SEL programs and the associated SEL skill outcomes.

The Social and Character Development Research Consortium (2010) reviewed seven social and character development programs over three years of implementation from fall 2004

through spring 2007. The programs were evaluated both individually and across programs. Programs included were: Academic and Behavioral Competencies, Competence Support, Love in a Big World, Positive Action, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), The 4Rs Program (Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution), and Second Step. Each program focused on social skills training; other foci of the programs varied, including character education, behavior management, interpersonal problem-solving, anger management, and impulse control. Each research team in the study analyzed one SEL program using randomly assigned treatment and control schools over three years with four time points for data collection. One research team evaluated all seven SEL programs during the same period to examine program impact considered together and separately. Across programs over three years of implementation, researchers found no statistically significant impact on social and emotional competence. When programs were analyzed individually, the study did not find any statistically significant social and emotional competence outcome for any program. There were very few statistically significant findings across programs: behavior changes across programs showed no statistically significant outcomes; analyzing by individual program did return eight significant outcomes, but two of those outcomes were negative. Again, across programs, there was no significant impact to academic scores and individually only four programs had significant impact to academics, three of which were detrimental. Finally, there were four across-program statistically significant impacts to perceptions of school climate, two of which were beneficial.

Ashdown and Bernard (2012) studied the effects of the You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program (YCDI) in early elementary students at a Catholic school in Australia. The program features a series of explicit lessons in SEL skills and specifically targets skill development. Participants included 99 students in preparatory (5-year-old) and one grade 1 class

in Australia. Four classrooms of one school were randomly assigned to the treatment (YCDI program) and the measures used were pre- and post-test social skills surveys completed by students' teachers. Findings show the YCDI program improved early elementary students' social and emotional competence, and grade 1 students showed greater growth than preparatory students.

Although many research studies have claimed SEL programming improves student SEL skills through explicit instruction (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Bîrle & Coita, 2014; Cahill & Dadvand, 2020; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2021; Miyamoto et al., 2015; Positive Action, 2022; Sklad et al., 2012; Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010; van de Sande et al., 2019; Wigelsworth et al., 2016; Xia et al., 2022), variation in SEL skill(s) targeted, how skills are developed, and how SEL skill acquisition is measured present challenges of interpretation of the results. Many of the studies that measured SEL skill outcomes include outcomes associated with SEL skill development, such as mental health issues, risky behavior such as drug and alcohol use, and conduct problems (Cahill & Dadvand, 2020), but are not direct measures of SEL skills. Other studies rely on measurements with known social desirability bias, such as teacher-observation surveys (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012) or other self-reported questionnaires. More information is needed to fully understand the student outcomes associated with better SEL skill application. Prosocial behavior was also identified in the research as an outcome associated with SEL programs and is discussed in the next section.

SEL program impacts on prosocial behavioral development. Prosocial behaviors are actions that benefit others in society (Bîrle & Coita, 2014). SEL programs support prosocial development through explicit SEL skill instruction (Denham, 2005; Domitrovich et al., 2017;

Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017). Prosocial behavior development is particularly crucial after the COVID-19 pandemic, as students have experienced extended disruptions to typical supports. Findings from the School Pulse Panel (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022) discussed above reports key findings from the School Pulse Panel which found more than 87% of public-school leaders either agreed or strongly agreed that the pandemic negatively impacted student social and emotional development. Eighty-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that student behaviors have been negatively impacted. The most frequently cited increased negative behaviors reported were classroom disruptions, tardiness, disrespect toward teachers and staff, and increased use of electronic devices. These statistics show the importance of programming targeting development of prosocial behaviors after the COVID-19 pandemic and the degree to which the programming is effective in improving these behaviors. This section reviews the research of SEL program implementation impact on student prosocial behavior development.

Snyder et al. (2010) analyzed the effects of the Positive Action (PA) program implemented in Hawai'i from 2002 through 2006. PA is a SEL program that provides systematic, explicit instruction in student self-concept, managing student behavior, and self-development (Positive Action, 2022). Intended outcomes are improvements in academics, behavior, and character. The measured outcomes were academics, attendance, and suspension. The study was a matched-pair random control trial that used a pre- and post-test design on the measured variables. Although this study did identify statistically significant increases in math and reading scores and reductions in absenteeism, a reduction in suspensions was observed but did not meet the $p<.05$ threshold for statistical significance ($p=0.056$). The PA program was also reviewed by the Social and Character Development Consortium (2010) over three years of implementation in

grades three through five in a large urban district in Illinois beginning in fall 2004. Growth curve analysis across all three years of implementation did not find evidence to suggest beneficial impacts on students' social and character development. Lewis et al. (2021) also researched PA impact in elementary schools on student behaviors and social-emotional competencies in 14 K-8 Chicago Public Schools, that had more than 50 percent of students from low-income homes and fewer than 50 percent of students who passed state achievement assessments using longitudinal growth curve analysis. They found the program significantly improved student prosocial interactions while decreasing antisocial behaviors (aggressive problem-solving, maladaptive self-esteem, and normative beliefs that support aggression) (Lewis et al., 2021). The results from these three studies are mixed, with a study of implementation in Hawai'i from 2002 through 2006 not showing significant impact on exclusionary discipline reductions (Snyder et al., 2010), nor was evidence found from implementation in a large urban district in Illinois conducted from 2004 through 2007 to suggest improvement in student behaviors or SEL competence (Social and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010). Importantly, these studies measured different variables to infer program outcomes: suspension reduction and 18 separate self-report variables for SEL competence and behavior were measured in Snyder et al. (2010) and Social and Character Development Research Consortium (2010), respectively. Whereas Lewis et al. (2021) did find significant impacts based on their outcome measures—which were student self-report measures of emotional health, self-esteem, health behavior, problem behavior, climate, and academics. This variation in research findings further illustrates the challenges of connecting SEL programs to associated outcome variables: across three studies of student behavior and prosocial development, outcomes and measures of each outcome varied.

Battistitch et al. (2004) researched the effects of an elementary SEL intervention program, the Child Development Project, on middle school students. Intended outcomes of the Child Development Project were to promote prosocial behaviors and resilience among youth (Battistich et al., 2004). The study was a longitudinal cohort design of 15 matched treatment/comparison schools that used annual self-report student and teacher questionnaires over the four years of the study. Overall, schools that administered the program scored higher in personal and social attitudes than the comparison group. Positive and negative behaviors did not differ significantly in student involvement in drug use or delinquency, however students included in the program were less involved in misconduct and more involved in "positive youth activities" such as sports and community youth groups. A subset of students from elementary schools in the "high implementation" category were separately studied. Students from high implementation schools had significantly higher scores in personal and social attitudes and better scores in positive and negative behaviors: they engaged in less misconduct and delinquency and were more involved in positive youth activities. However, students in high implementation schools still did not have differences in reported use of alcohol and other drugs.

The research is mixed on the impact of SEL programs on student prosocial behavior. There are promising programs that have shown positive impacts on student behaviors, but more research is necessary to determine which characteristics of successful programs are associated with outcomes. This is a particularly important aspect of the potential of SEL, considering reported declines in prosocial behaviors after the COVID-19 pandemic and district leaders' intended use of SEL programs to address these declines. The next section reviews research regarding SEL impact on academic achievement.

SEL program impacts on increasing academic achievement. Researchers have consistently pointed to SEL as an intervention to support academic achievement (Cascarino & Weissberg, 2013; Durlak et al., 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; Elias, 2014; Fricke et al., 2021; Mahoney et al., 2018; Payton et al., 2008b; Taylor et al., 2017). This is important for educators who are under pressure to increase test scores and prepare students for success in college and/or career, particularly after learning loss experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). In the SEL frameworks, academic achievement is a distal outcome of SEL programming because increased student engagement, safety, and the ability to take risks and collaborate with peers within the social environment of a school have a significant effect on students' academic achievement (Berman et al., 2018). Elias (2014a) goes further to argue SEL skills are inherent in the common core standards.

Some research has shown increases in academic achievement. Snyder et al. (2010) found increases in both reading (8.8% score increase) and math (20.7% score increase) after three years of implementation of the Positive Action program in Hawai'i. Using matched pair *t*-tests, they found the results were statistically significant for both math and reading ($p < 0.05$). Random effects growth curve models also showed significant differences in between-schools growth in math and reading (Snyder et al., 2010). Xia et al. (2022) found academic achievement in ELA and mathematics after implementation of the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) SEL program—which provides explicit instruction targeted to improve student behavior—showed a higher growth rate in scores in treatment schools in Michigan. However, the difference in academic achievement measures was not statistically significant. The study included a one-to-two treatment-to-control school match during the years 2015 through 2018, with varying cohorts for each year's data based on the school's year of entry to the program.

Total participating schools across all four years were 77 for ELA and 79 for math. The authors attributed the non-significant results in academic achievement in comparison to the significant results for SEL skills and improved attendance to a potentially indirect effect on academics that may be better understood with further longitudinal analysis (Xia et al., 2022). Corcoran et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of pre-K to 12th grade SEL programs' effect on academic achievement. Inclusion criteria were that the program address growth across all CASEL competencies, involved a comparison group, and had outcome measures of reading, math, and science. Findings indicated a moderate positive effect on scores in reading and math and small positive effect in science.

Emerging research indicates there may be a positive impact of SEL programs on academic achievement. However, studies continue to have the limitations discussed throughout the SEL research, in the expansive definition of SEL and variance in SEL programming. Further research is necessary to understand how SEL programs impact academic achievement. The COVID-19 pandemic had a pervasive impact on schools; therefore, this impact is considered next, along with the potential for SEL programs to address these challenges.

SEL and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated student's pre-existing social, emotional, and mental health challenges (Gagnier et al., 2022). Data from the School Pulse Panel survey show a need for support for student and staff mental health (79%) and student SEL development (70%) to address increases in disruptive behavior and student mental health needs (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). Some evidence of the potential positive impact of some SEL programs on student behavior has been reported (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Miyamoto et al., 2015; J. Payton et al., 2008b; Scott et al., 2021; Sklad et al., 2012; Social

and Character Development Research Consortium, 2010). In addition, Scott et al. (2021) analyzed the connections among SEL, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and trauma-informed strategies to understand how educators can address the pandemic's impact on student development. They found ACEs may be linked to hindrances in SEL skill development, suggesting SEL programs may provide support for students experiencing trauma and lead to positive academic and behavioral outcomes for all students. Scott et al. (2021) also note the impact of social isolation during the pandemic on SEL skill development, concluding the effects of the pandemic may themselves be ACE events collectively experienced. SEL programs are well-suited to address the student behavior challenges noted by education leaders (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022).

Another important aspect of SEL is its potential to address equity by centering culture and context with intentionality. Affirming students' cultural experiences in SEL programming helps build community and culture within the school (Gagnier et al., 2022). The next section discusses how SEL programs can address equity.

SEL and Equity

Students' individual social realities, including their identities, experiences of poverty, family dynamics, and cultural background interact and influence their social, emotional, and academic development (Gagnier et al., 2022). Therefore, SEL programs must address the community context. The program also needs to incorporate a systemic approach within the context of student experiences. Indeed, Duchesneau (2020) warns that without an equity focus, SEL programs may cause harm to students from non-dominant cultures.

According to Hesterberg et al. (2021), equity centered SEL programs focus on inclusion, adult SEL, a student-led design that affirms students' lived experiences, is embedded within the

community reflecting community strengths and values, and aligns explicit SEL with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives to create a cohesive and embedded system. Gagnier et al. (2022) suggest incorporating a culturally responsive and sustaining, and social-justice-oriented approach to SEL programming that focuses on empowering students, relying on the diverse cultural knowledge, lived experiences, and understandings of the students and community. An example of an equity focused SEL program is the Culturally Responsive, Embedded, Social and Emotional Learning program (CRESEL) in Alaska, as previously discussed. A major recommendation from the CRESEL team is that staff should be immersed in culturally responsive equity work within the community and prioritize relationship building and deep understanding of the culture and history of the community who will be served. This aligns to findings from rural education researchers and the importance of centering the specific community context in program implementation (Azano et al., 2023; Biddle, 2023; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Sutherland & Seelig, 2023). Focusing on the strengths and values of the local community allows a deeply embedded, culturally sustaining approach to SEL skill development (Gagnier et al., 2022). The context of SEL programming both in addressing students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and student and community culture are impacted by—and themselves impact—SEL programs. The next section considers district leader program implementation and then specifically discusses district leaders' experience of implementing SEL programming.

District Leader Experiences Implementing SEL

District leadership may play an important role in creating and sustaining the vision, climate, and culture of schools (Welsh et al., 2021). As such, it is important to note that district leaders strongly expressed a need for student social emotional support post-pandemic, as

reported in the School Pulse Panel, where 87 percent of district leaders responded they need support for social emotional and mental health supports (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022). Further, the School Pulse Panel (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022) highlights education leaders expressed need for more supports for student mental health, behaviors, and social emotional skills. Aligned to this stated need, Carstarphen (2018) goes as far as to describe the "moral imperative of SEL", particularly to support students living with stress and trauma as community supports have become less available. For successful implementation of SEL programming, it is necessary to consider the district leader competencies—and specifically rural district leader—that are necessary for successful program implementation.

Evidence-based implementation strategies must be tailored to the context and community served (Metz et al., 2020). To apply these strategies and achieve successful implementation, Metz et al. (2020) identified the core competencies that implementation practitioners need. The competencies are categorized into three domains: co-creation and stakeholder engagement, ongoing improvement, and sustaining change (Metz et al., 2020). Considering the controversial nature of SEL programming, particularly in the rural setting, and the plethora of sources of misinformation related to SEL, stakeholder engagement may be particularly important throughout implementation of SEL programming. Engaging interested stakeholders in co-creation can provide opportunities to develop a common understanding of SEL and its intended outcomes and to align SEL programs to the community's culture and context. Cultivating relationships with community members is particularly important for rural district leaders to generate acceptance and build support for programs (Biddle, 2023). This section discusses what the research says about how district leaders' implementation practices may moderate SEL outcomes.

Implementation practices

Several SEL studies include implementation practices as a potential moderator of SEL outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008; Sklad et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2010; Solomon et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). This section discusses how implementation fidelity, SAFE practices, and cultural considerations may moderate observed outcomes.

Implementation Fidelity. Durlak et al. (2011) and Taylor et al. (2017) suggested that implementation problems moderated outcomes. According to Durlak et al. (2011), programs with implementation problems found significant effects only in attitudes and conduct problems, whereas interventions without implementation problems found significant mean effects across all six outcome variables (SEL skills, attitudes, social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance). Also, in a study of the Child Development Project, Battistich et al. (2004) used "high implementing" and "low implementing" elementary schools to examine differences in outcomes among program schools and found more positive effects that were greater in magnitude for those schools whose implementation fidelity was closely aligned to the program's intended implementation.

Sequenced, active, focused, explicit (SAFE) practices. In Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis, SAFE practices were included as a dichotomous independent variable to test if these implementation practices moderated outcomes. They found significant improvement in programs using SAFE implementation practices on SEL skills, attitudes, prosocial behavior, academic performance, and decreases in conduct problems and emotional distress. Taylor et al. (2017) also included SAFE practices in their meta-analysis, however, 89 percent of all interventions included

SAFE practices, and therefore were unable to compare SAFE implementation practices compared to implementation without SAFE practices.

Cultural considerations. Culturally sustaining SEL programs are deeply embedded in the cultural norms, values, and practices of both the developer and students. Wigelsworth et al. (2016) included cultural transferability as a moderating variable in their study of how developer involvement and culture impact implementation of the SEL program. Their findings include that programs developed and implemented within the same cultural context show larger effect sizes than those implemented outside of the country of origin. Alaska's Culturally Responsive Social Emotional Learning (CRESEL) Initiative further highlighted the importance of cultural considerations in SEL implementation (Gagnier et al., 2022). By building on the cultural value systems and the knowledge, experiences, and values of indigenous Alaska communities, CRESEL modeled how SEL programs can be designed and implemented in culturally responsive and sustaining ways through community co-creation of the SEL model. This important finding highlights the importance of engaging communities in the work of SEL.

In rural districts, community engagement and cultural considerations are important aspects of program implementation. As noted by Casto et al. (2023), rural district leadership often comes with multiple and varying roles that are unique to the rural setting. Often referred to as "wearing many hats", rural leaders may have responsibilities that are outside of typically administrative tasks, such as transportation, janitorial responsibilities, student supervision, or other roles that may be short-term, temporary, or even just spontaneous one-time tasks that must be accomplished. These varied roles can impact program implementation both in how the leader directs the program, the level of fidelity that is attainable in the rural setting (Azano et al., 2014), and the leader's understanding of the program goals (Blinn-Pike, 2008; Casto & Sipple, 2023).

In addition to the multiple roles held by rural district leaders, stakeholder perceptions and community acceptance also strongly influence the success of rural district leaders (Biddle, 2023; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Sutherland & Seelig, 2023). According to Casto et al. (2023), collaboration with appropriate stakeholders ensures a common definition and understanding of program implementation; further, successful rural schools are ones that engage communities and families in their work, which requires leaders to prioritize family and community engagement. A community-aware perspective is necessary for rural district leaders to develop partnerships that are aligned to community values and are mutually beneficial to the school and its community (Casto et al. 2023). These perspectives, along with attention to the insider/outsider standing of the rural district leader (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018) are necessary considerations when planning and implementing SEL programs in the rural setting.

The findings of Wigelsworth (2016) and the unique factors experienced in rural districts during program implementation (Azano et al., 2014; Biddle, 2023; Blinn-Pike, 2008; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Schafft, 2016) highlight the importance of considering the rural context and the varying external factors that impact rural district program implementation. Stakeholder engagement is particularly important to district leaders in the rural context. At the heart of stakeholder engagement is effective communication, which is discussed next.

Communication with Stakeholder Groups

Communication and trust are an important factor throughout implementation of any program. According to Lawson et al. (2017), district leaders build communication among district, school, and teacher stakeholders which results in reciprocal trust and strengthened communication among stakeholders. This communication is facilitated with a culture of intentional collaboration and communication. This collaboration is supported through explicit

strategies that ensure collaboration, including scheduled collaboration meetings, consistent, clear communication of shared goals, and deliberate organizational norms that support shared mindsets (Lawson et al., 2017). Throughout implementation—and in particular the experiences of some districts implementing SEL who have faced significant misinformation and opposition to SEL such as PawPaw Public Schools (Larson, 2022; McClain, 2022; Meckler, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a; Prothero & Blad, 2021)—communication across stakeholder groups is important to maintain partnerships and support for SEL program implementation (Lewis et al., 2001).

Hall (1992) points out that stakeholders communicating from different paradigms of SEL contribute to misunderstandings. These varying paradigms lead to different perspectives of the work of schools: external stakeholders, such as policy makers or community members, can see the work as straightforward and simple and fail to understand the detailed complexities of work in schools. However, at the same time, internal stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, do not fully understand the perspectives of external stakeholders or understand the inherent complexities that lead to differences in understandings among stakeholder groups (Hall, 1992).

Across stakeholder groups, there are alternative, and competing, goals for public education that drive conflict in public discourse about education: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility (Labaree, 1997). These competing goals lead to varying perspectives among stakeholder groups regarding to what extent the purpose of schooling should be to prepare citizens, workers, or for competition for social and financial status. SEL most closely aligns with the perspective of democratic equality: preparing students to be competent and successful citizens in society. For heavily conservative, rural Michigan districts, the Republican platform on education focuses on parent empowerment, school choice, and local

control of education (Republican National Committee, 2016), leading to a perspective the prioritizes social efficiency and mobility over democratic equality, as parents are centered in children's social, emotional, and moral development.

School districts navigate these disparate perspectives and perceived goals among and even within various stakeholder groups. These different understandings of purposes of school, and the associated goals, can lead to ambiguous and diverse goals for the organization (Lewis et al., 2001). Two-way communication allows input from stakeholders to build consensus (Lewis et al., 2001) and may help to address misinterpretations and misunderstandings during SEL program implementation. It is important for implementation practitioners to understand that two-way communication among stakeholder groups is an important ongoing process that continues throughout the implementation process. Metz et al. (2020) list two-way communication as an important component of brokering and addressing power differentials in the stakeholder engagement domain. Implementation leaders practice brokering by disseminating information among stakeholder groups and by engaging disconnected individuals or groups through direct communication. Building trust is an important component of addressing power differentials, and requires implementers to understand, acknowledge, and mitigate the effects of power structures to protect all voices during the implementation process (Lewis et al., 2001). Two-way communication is an important component of implementation and is particularly important to address the various understandings—and misunderstandings—of SEL among stakeholder groups.

Summary

A clear, common understanding of what constitutes SEL programming and associated outcomes remains elusive in the existing SEL literature, leading to misconceptions about what

SEL is and what it is intended to do. There is significant risk that the lack of a common definition, associated outcomes, and the impact of those who have misconstrued the intended purpose of SEL could lead to wide and varied implementation of disparate programming that may not deliver on those promises. Further, as educational leaders advocate for SEL to address observed declines in student prosocial behaviors and mental health, the research regarding outcomes associated with SEL is not yet settled. This premature adoption of the latest popular trend—SEL programs—while not yet understanding whether or how—SEL programs contribute to improvements in student outcomes may lead to ultimate rejection of SEL as ineffective before there has been sufficient opportunity to understand its effectiveness and whether (or how) it contributes to student success. Additionally, the public discourse of SEL is rife with misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and politization of what it is and intended outcomes. This is particularly true in the conservative, rural contexts in Michigan.

This challenge is further contextualized in the rural setting, where district leaders work within the unique context of their local rural community. It is necessary for researchers to better understand how rural district leaders grapple with finding a common definition of SEL and its intended outcomes, and how leaders communicate and work with stakeholders to support implementation. This research will fill this gap by exploring how one rural Michigan district navigates SEL implementation in this uncertain context. Only with a deep understanding of SEL implementation within the rural community context can rural educational leaders ensure SEL programing lives up to its promise.

The next chapter presents the research methods, beginning with the philosophic approach and analytic framework, then discussing the methods—including descriptions of district included in the study, and next the data collection methods of semi-structured interviews, observation, and

document analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of data analysis and coding and validity methods.

CHAPTER 3: PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES AND FRAMEWORK

In this research I seek to understand how education leaders in three remote rural Michigan districts make sense of universal SEL program implementation in their rural context. As we have seen, despite variance in understandings of SEL and limited research regarding the outcomes associated with universal SEL programs and the efficacy of SEL programming, education leaders are looking to SEL programs to address data showing increased need for support in student behavior, mental health, and social emotional skills (Institute of Education Sciences, 2022; Riddle, 2022; Scott et al., 2021; Yoder, Posamentier, et al., 2020). This research, situated in this context of wide interest in SEL despite limited research evidence, district leader sensemaking, and the rural context addresses a gap in the literature of universal SEL implementation. As presented in Chapter 1, the research questions for this research are:

How do education leaders in three rural Michigan districts navigate SEL implementation?

1. How do rural educational leaders define SEL? Why do district leaders choose to implement SEL, and how do they communicate about SEL?
2. How do they identify the need for SEL implementation? How do they select specific SEL programs?
3. How do rural education leaders navigate the different perceptions of SEL in their community, and how consistent are the choices and understandings of SEL across these rural districts?
4. How does place mediate all of these decisions?

The research questions for this dissertation required a qualitative approach. Qualitative research focuses on the experience, interpretation, and meaning construction of research participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study explores how rural district leaders make sense of SEL—from identifying a need for SEL, selecting a SEL program, to program

implementation, and ongoing interactions with stakeholders in their unique, rural context. The rural context is an important aspect for consideration because rural places tend to have unique characteristics, community values and expectations, organization, and structural supports (Farmer et al., 2021). Therefore, a place-conscious approach was necessary and centers the unique experiences and perspectives of participants in this study. The next section reviews the analytic framework for this research.

Analytic Framework: Sensemaking, Place Consciousness, and Social Emotional Learning

The analytic framework for this research combines district leader sensemaking and place consciousness to understand leader and community experiences of SEL program implementation in a rural context. Sensemaking is a philosophical approach that elucidates how people make sense of and construct new paradigms in response to new experiences and stimuli (Weick, 1995). According to Weick (1995), sensemaking can be defined as how we place new information into frameworks, how we construct meaning from new stimuli, and how we interact with others as we seek to understand new information. In the SEL context, this could mean that the way rural district leaders make sense of SEL is influenced by and interacts with the rural place and rural identity in their rural community. Place consciousness foregrounds the local and/or regional politics of place that influence the experiences and perceptions of a community (Gruenewald, 2008). According to Budge (2010), leaders with place consciousness may better engage with the challenges that are faced when local interests are misaligned to external policy requirements. Place consciousness relies on three underlying principles: place shapes identity, place is pedagogical, and a shared sense of place can lead to advocacy and activism. Place conscious leaders promote relationships with community members and advocate for understandings of how localized power and privilege lead to and create marginalized and silenced groups within place,

and then actively engage marginalized or silenced groups in the work of co-creation of schooling for all members of the community (Budge, 2010). These ideas matter a great deal for those studying rural contexts because the rural setting shapes a unique rural identity shared within each rural community, and this rural identity affects how rural leaders, staff, and stakeholders make sense of SEL implementation. The rural place maintains local systems of power and privilege in which rural district leaders and stakeholders work throughout SEL implementation.

There is a dearth of research that explores the intersection of district leader sensemaking and place (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019).This approach to research does not frame the rural place in a deficit perspective, wherein rural residents and the rural education system is cast as sub-par or lacking, nor does it approach the rural place from an idyllic lens of rural life as simple and virtuous (Azano et al., 2023). Rather, place is centered as a lens through which to understand district leaders' sensemaking and sense-giving throughout SEL program implementation. The next sections of the paper discuss sensemaking and place-conscious research individually, then consider how sensemaking and place consciousness will be applied to this research of SEL program implementation in the rural setting.

Sensemaking

District leaders engage in sensemaking as they make meaning from uncertainty, and then use this derived meaning to make decisions (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). Sensemaking involves actively constructing understanding and interpretation by absorbing new information into extant cognitive frameworks. This process of meaning-making occurs within a social context both internal and external to the school, influencing how leaders make sense of, and respond to new ideas (Coburn, 2005). Several aspects of the process of sensemaking will impact this research as participants retrospectively consider their experiences of SEL implementation.

The first consideration is that an outcome can be determined first, and then subsequently retrofitted to an explanation for the decisions made leading up to that outcome—a concept closely related to cognitive dissonance theory. Weick (1995) explains how, retrospectively, after a choice is made—such as SEL implementation—an actor may emphasize positive aspects of the decision while simultaneously highlighting negative aspects of the non-selected choice. This retrospective effort reduces the actor's dissonance and makes sense of a choice based on different information than was available at the time the decision was made. As this research will seek to understand how rural leaders make sense of SEL implementation, it will be necessary to explicate rural leaders' experiences of SEL implementation as they retrospectively consider their past decision-making process.

Sensemaking is also heavily influenced by identity construction (Weick, 1995). Any understanding of how leaders make sense of SEL implementation must be attentive to how an actor's identity affects sensemaking and how the identities of participants across the organization interact with and affect organizational sensemaking. Identity construction includes the need for self-enhancement (maintaining a positive perception of oneself), efficacy (perceiving oneself as competent), and consistency (continuity of identity) (Weick, 1995). This need for positive perceptions of one's identity can lead an actor to restructure how they make sense of an experience. As sensemaking is influenced by identity construction, it is also a retrospective activity: making sense of an event which has already occurred. Because it is largely retrospective, what occurs in the moment of sensemaking influences the retrospective sense that is made. As made clear by Weick, "if hindsight is a bias, then everyone is biased all the time" (1995, p. 26).

Meaning that is ascribed to an event or experience can also be driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019; Weick, 1995). As district leaders make sense of the SEL program implementation, they receive input from multiple stakeholders with varying—and even competing—goals, beliefs, and interpretations. These differing interpretations lead to an emphasis on plausibility and what can be achieved. For a district leader implementing a SEL program in a conservative rural area, sensemaking that relies on plausibility and reasonableness, along with a good story (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019; Weick, 1995) can be sufficient for decision-making and sense-giving across stakeholder groups.

Spillane et al. (2002) developed a cognitive framework to explore how sensemaking influences policy implementation. The authors argue that policy implementation is not a simple process of decoding the policy and then implementing with fidelity; rather it should be understood by applying a cognitive framework that illuminates the complex sensemaking that leaders use to understand, interpret, and implement the policy. The stages of this complex sense-making framework are the individual's cognition, the context of the situation in which sensemaking occurs—and how a policy is discussed, shared, and presented (Spillane et al., 2002)(Spillane et al., 2002). Each of these stages of sensemaking are discussed next.

An individual's sensemaking is influenced by the person's prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences (Spillane et al., 2002). These prior understandings frame how the individual makes sense of the world and guide how the individual interprets and interacts with new information. The individual creates schemata that connect the individual's understanding with their beliefs and understandings. These schemata encode the biases, expectations, and explanations for how the world works, which are then the frame through which an individual incorporates new ideas. This process of interpretation based on individual schemata illustrates how different actors can

construct disparate understanding based on the same new ideas. When a new idea challenges existing schema, the individual is faced with assimilating the new information into existing schema, or a more complex process of accommodation that requires the individual to restructure existing schematas around the new ideas (Spillane et al., 2002). This research seeks to understand how leaders in conservative, rural districts—where leaders and the community may have existing schemata that are contrary to the idea of universal SEL program implementation—assimilate or accommodate those existing understandings to create new schemata for SEL program implementation.

New ideas about teaching and learning are often closely connected to an individual's values and beliefs, including their understanding of the purpose of learning. This is particularly salient within the context of understanding leaders' sensemaking throughout implementation of universal SEL programs in the rural context. The individual's own experiences are often over-represented in reasoning about new policies or ideas than those of external experts, leading to greater consideration of personal experience in the decision-making process. An individual's motivation can also lead to an overemphasis on information that is consistent with a desired outcome or disregarding information that is inconsistent with that outcome. The affective aspect of cognition also influences individual sensemaking through emotional associations within knowledge structures that can guide individual decision-making. Closely related to this is the individual need to maintain one's positive self-image and identity (Spillane et al., 2002; Weick, 1995). Rather than face the possibility that one has failed at something important—such as teaching or supporting student's social and emotional development, an individual's bias can influence their judgment and therefore it may become difficult to convince the individual of the need for the change. An individual's values can influence the individual's understanding and

implementation of a new policy: a policy that aligns with their values and promotes their existing schemata of purpose and identity may lead the individual to embrace and advocate for a policy (Spillane et al., 2002). District leaders implementing a SEL program face this challenge both personally and as they communicate with teachers and other stakeholders regarding the program. This research will consider this component of sensemaking—and sense-giving—as it examines how district leaders themselves make sense of SEL program implementation and how they communicate with various stakeholder groups regarding SEL. This research includes interviews and observations to analyze how district leaders make sense of SEL program implementation in the rural context.

The organizational context for policy implementation is the second part of Spillane et al.'s (2002) cognitive framework for sensemaking. Sensemaking occurs within a social context; this includes the organizational context, an individual's community, identity, social class, and political ideas all influence how an individual makes sense of new policies. Organizational context can define how meaning is derived, what new ideas are embraced, and influences individual sensemaking. Social interactions are also highly influential in how policy is decoded, interpreted, and implemented by individuals, often in informal groups with similar prior understandings. These social interactions are closely connected to individual's values and beliefs, which, as we have seen, have a significant impact on individual sensemaking; when incorporated into social groups these values and beliefs influence sensemaking across individuals within the social group (Spillane et al., 2002). These social groups may be within an organization, such as a school or district with informal teacher groups or teams, or within the community. The inclusion of an observation protocol in the methods for this research elucidates

how stakeholders interact and whether there are informal groups that engage in sensemaking in SEL programming in similar or dissimilar ways.

The final component of the cognitive framework of sensemaking is how the policy is represented (Spillane et al., 2002). This research analyzed how district leaders communicate regarding universal K-12 SEL implementation. Understanding how representation affects sensemaking is a vital aspect of this research. There are several levers through which policy can be communicated to stakeholders. For SEL program implementation, this can include through media, school and district programs, flyers, meetings, or other communication documents. The messages conveyed influence individual stakeholders' sensemaking (Spillane et al., 2002). Therefore, this research included document analysis to examine how the SEL program is represented across stakeholder groups.

Sensemaking is a complex process of interpretation based on the knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of the sense-maker, replete with ambiguity and bias (Spillane et al., 2002). Understanding that sensemaking occurs retrospectively, is grounded in identity construction, and that actors reduce dissonance by emphasizing positive aspects of an action taken while de-emphasizing negative aspects or alternative choices, is important for understanding rural district leaders' perspectives regarding SEL implementation. Spillane et al.'s (2002) cognitive framework of sensemaking illuminates how individuals make sense of new ideas through individual cognition, in the social context, and how representation of the new ideas influences sensemaking. This framework supports the methods selected for this research: interviews provided data to analyze individual cognition during sensemaking, observations provided data to analyze the social context, and document analysis provided data to examine how the SEL

program was represented. The next section will discuss place consciousness and how place interacts with leaders' and stakeholders' sensemaking of SEL programming.

Place consciousness

Central to this research is an analysis of how place affects district leader experiences implementing SEL. Research has shown rural schools and communities—even within the same region or state—have unique characteristics which impact implementation and outcomes (Farmer, 2020). These unique characteristics include demographics, economic opportunities, values and expectations of the local community, school and district organization, resources available, and the experience and background of rural residents (Farmer, 2020; Farmer et al., 2021). *Critical* place conscious research incorporates the necessary critical lens to challenge conventional assumptions and practices. Finally, a focus on place-based pedagogies elevates the wellbeing of the local community's social, cultural, and ecological places that participants inhabit (Gruenewald, 2008). This section begins by defining place consciousness, then moves to consideration of critical place consciousness, and concludes with a discussion of how rural is defined in the research and how it will be defined for this research.

People and communities are impacted by the places they inhabit (Budge, 2010; McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). One impact of the rural place can be observed in close school-community relationships, which are resultant of the key characteristics of the rural place: smaller school and classroom sizes, and the centrality of the school as employer and community center as well as connection to the school as a community identity (Gruenewald, 2008). A place-consciousness analytic framework centers the local place—social, geographic, and ecological aspects of place—to understand how connection to place shapes identity and how it affects schooling (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018).

A critical place conscious analytical framework, founded in critical theory, analyzes how the local community shapes participants' identity, culture, ideology, connectedness, and interdependence with both people and place (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). Critical place consciousness argues that rural places have marked stratification within their communities, and this stratification intersects with gender, class, race, and religion creating systems of privilege and oppression within the rural place (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). These social systems of privilege—based in biased constructs including racism, sexism, gender discrimination, ableism, heteronormativity, and cisnormativity—are exacerbated by rapid changes rural places face in the 21st century, including declining resources in mineral extractive communities, outmigration in areas with limited resources and opportunities, changing populations in agricultural or meatpacking industrial areas, and limited economic opportunity in rural tourist areas, which are characterized by increased business growth alongside increased low-wage and part-time job opportunities (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018). This lens foregrounds the impact of the local place and how decisions—or programs, such as SEL implementation—uniquely impact particular places (Gruenewald, 2008). The critical place consciousness analytic framework centers an understanding of the local community and how place shapes how participants make sense of their world. Although this research does not use a critical theory framework, it does take from the critical place consciousness framework the understanding that power structures of place—from social structures, economic opportunities, and other characteristics of the rural place—impact how stakeholders make sense of SEL program implementation. The lens of the rural place drives educational leader sensemaking, their interaction with stakeholders, and how they lead program implementation. This research also seeks to understand how these intersecting identities and the homogenizing assumptions frequently applied to rural places by those outside

rural communities (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018; Theobald & Wood, 2010) interact with stakeholder sensemaking throughout SEL implementation.

What it means to "be" a rural place and how rurality can be interrogated in this research requires a deeper understanding of how rural is defined and understood in the research. One way to understand rural is through the lens of geography and population density, relying on definitions of governmental agencies. However, governmental agencies define rural differently (Longhurst, 2022). The US Census Bureau (2016) defines rural as geographic areas that are not urban; that is, urban is defined and rural is "what is left" (Ratcliffe et al., 2016, p. 1). Population thresholds, population density, land use, and geographic distance are used to define rural and urban areas. According to the US Census Bureau's definition (2016), urbanized areas have more than 50,000 people, and urban clusters have 2,500 to 49,999 people and at least 1,000 people per square mile. The definitions also include an analysis of land cover and impervious surfaces (pavement), and non-continuous urban development, such as housing areas, using a "hop and jump" criteria. After analyzing these factors, rural areas are defined as any place that does not meet the urbanized area or urban cluster criteria (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) uses a higher threshold to define "metropolitan" or "micropolitan" areas, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) uses the U. S. Census designations but superimposes classifications of rural, town, suburban, and urban, each with designations of fringe, distant, and remote based on proximity to urban centers (Longhurst, 2022). Michigan's rural districts are designated using the NCES criteria in CEPI data (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2021). These differences in quantitative measures of rural areas can lead to differences in classification; for example, in 2010, using the U.S. Census Bureau classification, 19.3 percent of the U.S. population lived in

rural areas, compared to 18 percent according to thresholds followed by the Federal Office of Rural Health, and 15 percent according to the OMB definition (Longhurst, 2022). These differences can lead to differences in measurement and outcomes of statistical tests in research, depending on how "rural" is defined. One way scholars have addressed this challenge is by incorporating a qualitative lens to understanding the rural place. Understanding the importance of the particular rural place on the lived experiences, histories, and social structures in rural communities, many rural researchers advocate for an emphasis on thick rich descriptions of the rural place—emphasizing the unique experience of rurality by the particular rural participants in the study (Longhurst, 2022). Other researchers challenge the binary concept of urban and rural, arguing that this division is a colonial concept that positions the rural place in an inherently deficient position, or it presents rurality as an idyllic monolithic experience shared across rural places, both of which are biased and inaccurate understandings of the experience of rural dwellers (Longhurst, 2022).

Crumb et al. (2023) propose the rural cultural wealth framework wherein an asset-based approach to understanding the rural space centers the assets of rural residents while acknowledging and addressing systemic inequities that exist in rural places. Rural places are a set of diverse culture and experiences (Crumb et al., 2023; Schafft & Maselli, 2021) that tend to be small, close-knit communities with a strong community identity. The small community often leads to suppression of differences, including race, sexuality, religion, socioeconomic status, and other identities (Crumb et al., 2023), however the rural wealth framework is an asset-based approach that seeks to capitalize on rural community assets to address observed systemic inequities for marginalized rural residents. Assets of the rural space include resourcefulness that is seen in addressing structural challenges of access to quality resources, ingenuity to leverage

extant resources on novel problems, familism and community unity to refer to the unified cultural community often observed in rural places (Crumb et al., 2023). This research approaches the rural place from an asset perspective, with this clear understanding of both the assets and challenges faced in rural places.

This research uses the place conscious analytic framework to define the rural place. A thick, rich description of place that foregrounds the experiences and perspective of the unique rural participants of this study in their unique place emphasizes the lived experience of the study participants.

Sensemaking, Place Consciousness, and Social Emotional Learning

This research explores the confluence of sensemaking, place, and SEL program implementation. As noted by McHenry et al. (2019), meaning can be ascribed to events with an emphasis on plausibility rather than accuracy, leading to divergent meaning and interpretation among stakeholders from the same event. This is particularly prescient within the seemingly contradictory setting of a politically conservative rural community implementing a SEL program. This intersection of how sensemaking and place consciousness interact and influence each other is the core analytic framework of this research. The impact of place—in this research remote rural school districts—on the different stakeholder groups' sensemaking throughout the process of SEL program implementation will be analyzed. This research aims to illuminate how place impacts stakeholder sensemaking, specifically through the lens of SEL programming within a rural community with political, social, economic, and geographic characteristics that would be expected to reject SEL.

Positionality

As a researcher, it is important to consider the impact of my positionality on my own ontological and epistemological beliefs and worldview. As a White, cis-gendered heteronormative woman from rural northern Michigan, and as a professional with experience as an administrator of a small K-12 building in rural northern Michigan, I am positioned as a rural-insider in a general sense. However, as a woman, non-member of any of these particular rural communities, and in my separate role as the statewide summative assessment consultant for the state department of education, I am also an outsider to these rural communities. This section considers how each of these roles may impact this research.

Insider

As a rural resident having lived in rural areas for more than 20 years, particularly as a rural resident with my racial identity (White), gender, sexual orientation, and combined with my professional experience in a rural district, my worldview, and the assumptions I make regarding rural education, are shaped by these experiences. As an insider, I understand that many rural students may assume their schooling experience was inadequate or substandard due to limited resources available in the rural community. My own experiences as a nontraditional undergraduate student in off-campus programs in a rural area in northern Michigan led to a sense of inadequacy. A similar experience was shared and expressed by my own children—and students from the school I led—when it came time for them to apply for college. I also identify with the deep connection to place and its primacy as a source of identity. While there are both real and imagined perceptions of a lack of resources and access to programming in many rural communities, there is also a deep self-identification with place and values in a rural community. This deep sense of identification with place permeates how one perceives the world: it biases

both how one sees one's own community and how one sees other communities and the world. All of this shapes how I view the experiences of rural students and rural educational leaders, and it also affords me the ability to be viewed as a trusted insider in spite of my true outsider status to this community. This insider perspective may privilege interactions with participants and allow me to be viewed as a trusted insider with an outside perspective.

Outsider

Although in many important ways I could be viewed as an insider to a rural northern Michigan school district, I am also an outsider. Most importantly, I am an outsider to the specific rural communities in this research. In addition to this, I was both a Ph.D. Candidate from MSU and an employee of the state education agency (SEA) responsible for oversight of the administration of the statewide summative assessment. My role at the SEA may have created a perceived power imbalance leading to participants' hesitation to share authentically about challenges experienced throughout the process of SEL implementation. To address these perceived power imbalances, I clearly communicated my role as researcher (only) throughout this project. In addition, to develop open relationships with participants, I centered my role as researcher and focused conversations on my role as researcher and interested observer while minimizing any focus on my role as SEA staff.

Methods

In this study I seek to understand district leader experiences in remote rural Michigan districts as they navigate universal SEL program implementation within the distinct, challenging, and often precarious context of a rural community. This section begins with a description of how qualitative research supports and responds to the research questions, then further defines this research project by describing the districts included in the study and site selection. Next, three

data collection methods are described: semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Data analysis and the coding technique applied are then described and connected to the analytic frameworks for this project, the use of triangulation, member checks, and audit trails are also described to ensure validity of the research findings.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative research methods support researchers as they seek to understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct understanding, and how they assign meaning to lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research methods also allow the researcher to discover deeper understandings of social phenomena unavailable from quantitative methodology (Gill et al., 2008). The research questions necessitated a qualitative approach to understand participants' experiences and how they make sense of SEL within the context of their rural place.

Methods. To address the research questions, this qualitative study examined district leaders' experience implementing SEL programming in three remote rural school districts in Michigan. This study included analysis of data from interviews with three rural school superintendents, observations of three rural districts—including observation of SEL program implementation and SEL leaders in each district—and document analysis of policy and communication documents.

Characteristics of qualitative research include a focus on how participants make meaning about the research topic and are typically involved in field research to gain an understanding of how the participants make meaning in the context of their work (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Qualitative research often includes multiple forms of data collection, which is subsequently analyzed by the researcher to identify codes and themes across data sources (Creswell &

Creswell, 2023). This research was an iterative process, which included data collection and analysis, the development of themes, clarification of the research questions, and attending to threats to validity (Maxwell, 2012). This qualitative analysis was aligned to the research questions by identifying and data collection from participants in remote rural districts that were implementing a SEL program. These participants' sensemaking—and how it interacted with the rural place—were interrogated qualitative data collection that allowed participants to explain and model how they made sense of SEL, SEL program selection, and implementation. Methods were selected to collect data from semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. The data was then analyzed using deductive analysis to identify themes of the research.

Participants. This research collected data from interviews with three remote rural school district superintendents in Michigan. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) to address the research questions. There were two criteria used for participant selection. The first criterion was that the superintendent district was a rural district. Rurality is defined using geography and population density; however agencies define rural differently (Longhurst, 2022). The US Census Bureau (2016) defines rural as geographic areas that are not urban; that is, urban is defined and rural is "what is left" (Ratcliffe et al., 2016, p. 1). According to the US Census Bureau's definition (2016), urbanized areas have more than 50,000 people, and urban clusters have 2,500 to 49,999 people and at least 1,000 people per square mile. The definitions also include an analysis of land cover and impervious surfaces (pavement), and non-continuous urban development, such as housing areas, using a "hop and jump" criteria. In sum, rural areas are defined as any place that does not meet the urbanized area or urban cluster criteria (Ratcliffe et al., 2016). The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) uses a higher threshold to define "metropolitan" or "micropolitan" areas, and the National Center

for Education Statistics (NCES) uses the U. S. Census designations but superimposes classifications of rural, town, suburban, and urban, each with designations of fringe, distant, and remote based on proximity to urban centers (Longhurst, 2022). Michigan's rural districts are designated using the NCES criteria in CEPI data (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2021). For this research, the NCES criteria that is commonly used within the education community in Michigan was used to identify "remote rural" districts according to the Educational Entity Master (EEM) data (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2024). Remote rural districts were selected as a criteria for inclusion because they will provide an information rich environment to interrogate the research questions and how the unique rural place is experienced by district leaders. The second criterion was that the superintendent district is currently implementing a SEL program.

Three remote rural district leaders were the participants in this study. Each superintendent was the district leader of a remote rural district listed in the EEM dataset (2024). A mail-merge email was sent to the superintendents of the 66 remote rural public-school districts listed in the EEM (Michigan's Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2024). Remote rural district leaders who were interested in participating in the study were asked to complete a Qualtrics survey indicating the SEL program they were implementing in their district. Two initial responses were received, prompting a follow-up email one week after the initial email was sent. This follow-up resulted in a phone call from a district superintendent expressing interest but with concerns regarding their remoteness due to being an island community accessible only by plane for five months of the year. The district confirmed they were implementing a SEL program and consented to join the study. It is noted that all district leaders emphasized the uniqueness of their rural context, making their perspective compelling for inclusion in the study.

Each remote rural district had one staff member who was responsible for implementation of the SEL program in their district. This study refers to this staff member as the SEL lead, and there was a SEL lead from each district who was a participant in the study.

Two of the participating superintendents' districts in this study implemented the TRAILS SEL curriculum (Tides Center, 2024). The TRAILS curriculum is a 25-lesson course in four grade bands: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Each unit is aligned to one of the 5 CASEL competencies (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2018): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Students are presented grade-appropriate lessons and activities for each competency.

The third participating district implemented "Lead It!" which is a supplemental program to The Leader in Me (F. Covey, n.d.-a). Lead It is intended for use as a supplement to the full program, The Leader in Me, which is a whole-school transformational model based on the Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens, and which requires all teachers and staff to be trained. The Leader in Me program was selected as a CASEL SELect program and is endorsed by CASEL (Patterson, n.d.). According to Patterson (n.d.), CASEL's review identified alignment between the CASEL SEL competencies and the Leader in Me program. The seven habits are: 1) Be proactive, 2) Have a plan, 3) Work first, then play, 4) Think win-win, 5) Listen before you talk, 6) Together is Better and 7) Balance feels best (Covey, n.d.).

Pseudonyms were developed to highlight a unique characteristic of each rural place while obfuscating the specific participating district. Participants and their school district (pseudonyms) and the SEL program implemented in the participants' district are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Study Districts, Participants, and Programs

District	Participants	SEL Program
Shipping Lanes School	Superintendent SEL Lead	Lead It!
Island Community School	Superintendent SEL Lead	TRAILS
Wilderness School District	Superintendent SEL Lead	TRAILS

The analytic framework for this research centered participants' experiences of place. Place was an underlying factor in participant sensemaking throughout SEL implementation. Due to this centrality of place in this research, each rural district and community are described below as well as each program and superintendent.

Shipping Lanes School. Shipping Lanes Schools' community is distributed between the mainland community and a larger, more robust island community. The island is accessed by a short 5–10-minute car ferry ride, where you drive onto the ferry and remain in your car for the short ride. Population characteristics are available by county. The county population—which encompasses this school district plus four others—has declined by 6 percent between 2010 and 2022 (USA Facts, 2024a). The mainland community of the district has 750 registered voters (Chippewa County Clerk, n.d.), with a median age of 66.1, and mean persons per household is 1.8. The median household income is $45,313, and 6.2 percent of residents live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The island, in contrast, has 1,005 registered voters (Chippewa County Clerk, n.d.), a median age of 60, mean persons per household is 1.9, and the median household income is $60,573, with 13.4% of residents living below the poverty line according to the American Community Survey (2022).

Countywide, employment by industry is 23 percent healthcare, education, and social services, 14 percent recreation and food services, and 13 percent construction and manufacturing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). In the area served by this district, the island has a foundry which is a major employer in the area. There is no local hospital in the community, residents travel for healthcare, and the school district employs K-12 teaching staff and several non-professional positions. The larger portion of this community lives on the island because the foundry—which is the major employer in the area—is located on the island.

Students who graduate from the school district can look for work locally at the foundry or in the few service-oriented jobs in the area, however, to pursue other careers or work that requires additional training, they must leave the community. According to the district superintendent, he recommends students leave either by attending college or joining the military to better understand what opportunities exist "out there." The number of students graduating in a given year is less than 20, and only a small portion of those students enroll in college from year to year; for the graduating years 2021 through 2023, only one year had any students who enrolled in college and that was fewer than five students (MI School Data, 2023).

The community is welcoming, but very close knit. For example, on my first night I went to dinner on the mainland at a pub, and the other patrons all knew each other and greeted everyone as they entered; it was apparent I wasn't from the area. The second night, the superintendent recommended "the best Mexican restaurant in the UP," which was on the island. It was a very busy place, but again everyone knew each other, and several conversations were ongoing across tables. As much as the people were kind and open to each other and newcomers, there were some differences in political affiliation seen between mainland and island residents are observed in analysis of the 2020 election results (Chippewa County Clerk, n.d.). According

to the general election results, the mainland community cast 541 votes in the presidential election, with 226 votes for the Democratic party (42%) and 307 for the Republican party (57%); the island community had 735 total votes, 240 Democratic (33%) and 484 (65%) Republican. The conservative nature of the communities is evidenced by the superintendent's office with prominently displayed pictures of him with prominent conservative leaders, including Dr. Ben Carson, John McCain, and Rick Snyder.

Program Description. In addition to the uniqueness of the remote rural community, the school district composition is unique. There are two districts with two buildings and three schools that are all served by the same superintendent. One district is a traditional public school, and the other is a charter district. The traditional public district has an elementary K-6 building on the island and the high school, 7-12th grade, is on the mainland. The charter school is a K-8 school that is in a separate portion of the 7-12th grade building on the mainland. This represents two unique school districts, but both school districts hire the same superintendent. Each school district has its own board and exists as a separate and unique entity, requiring all reporting, testing, and improvement planning to be completed separately for each district. Additionally, teaching staff for the charter school are contracted through the traditional public school system. The traditional public K-12 system has an enrollment of 102 students and the K-8 charter school has 79 enrolled students in the 2023-24 school year (Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2021; MI School Data, 2022). Even with this unique structure, implementation of the SEL program followed the same procedures and employed the same staff at both districts.

The SEL program used is called "Lead It!" Due to cost, the district was unable to purchase the full Leader in Me program, so they purchased the supplemental program, Lead It, which is aligned to Leader in Me but is not the intended whole-school transformational model.

All teachers were trained in the program and the program was administered by a contracted SEL lead who has several years of experience and expertise in training and implementation of both Leader in Me and Lead It programs. The lead teacher provided training to staff and then taught the lessons to elementary students in a pull-out program with the Lead It lessons offered several times per week.

Participants. This superintendent was the ultimate insider. He attended school in the district from kindergarten through graduation, as did his parents and grandparents. He is a navy veteran, and former high school and college football coach, and immediately prior to his superintendency at Shipping Lanes Schools, he was a school leader at a military academy. These experiences in the school (and community) as a student, coaching football, and his experience in the military guide his interactions with students. He views his role first as a mentor to guide and build relationships with students to help them find success the same way he did—by leaving the community and seeing more of the world while in the navy, going to school, then coming home to support his local community. He described himself as "the stinker of the class" and shared that he and his younger brother were "both kind of terrors" (personal communication, January 22, 2024), and identifies with students as a rural resident, having experienced living through rural poverty himself, and growing up in the "fishbowl" that the community can be, which establishes reputations that can be hard to change when living in the community.

In his office, the superintendent has several pictures of himself standing with conservative political leaders, including Dr. Ben Carson, and John McCain. He shares stories about each picture, and also shared that he used to have a picture of him with Lee Chatfield that he has taken down. He does not hesitate to share his conservative political ideology or the heavily conservative nature of most residents of his community.

Island Community Schools. Island Community School is a single building, K-12 district. Students enrolled at Island Community School are children of the small population of year-round residents of the island. According to the 2022 American Community Survey (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), there are fewer than 700 year-round residents of the island with a median age of 65. 94 percent of residents are white, 3 percent identify as two or more races, 1 percent Native American and 1 percent listed as "other." Median household income is $69,000, and 6.6 percent of residents live below the poverty line: 5 percent of children and 4 percent of residents 65 years old or older. Out of the 340 households on the island, there is a mean of 1.9 persons per household, and only 11 percent of households have any children. These statistics show that the population of the island is very small, primarily white, about half of the population is 65 years or older, and households with school-aged children are the minority of households.

Approximately 22 percent of the total population of the island is working age (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022), representing approximately 150-200 people. 20 out of 28 total employment establishments have fewer than five employees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Job opportunities on the island are the school, service industry, trades, or construction. Reports of student post-secondary enrollment after graduation are obfuscated due to fewer than 10 graduates each year (MI School Data, 2023).

Island Community School district voters are the most liberal leaning of the three districts included in this study. Based on the 2020 Election Report Summary (2020), 54.2 percent of voters in the district voted Democratic and 45.3 percent voted Republican. Interestingly, Island Community School was also the district that most openly discussed dissent regarding SEL implementation. There were more instances of codes indicating topics regarding community, parent, and staff buy-in from this district than the other included districts. Both during the

superintendent interview and during the field observation, the topic of parent and community buy-in was discussed, indicating there has been some pushback from parents, described by both the superintendent and SEL lead, however the superintendent is passionate and dedicated to the importance of the TRAILS program to support the needs of students after the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, while the superintendent at Shipping Lanes School is the most deeply embedded insider superintendent, the superintendent at Island Community Schools is the most outsider superintendent—he is not from the area and does not have other family in the area, but he does have school leadership experience in other rural districts.

Program Description. Island Community School enrolls fewer than 60 K-12 students in their single building campus. The school building is located in the center of the two-block town area on the island. The building is separated into two wings, one for elementary (Pre-K through 6th grade) and one for secondary (7-12th grade). The elementary wing includes combined age classrooms: Pre-K and Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade, 3rd and 4th grade, and 5th and 6th grade. Student counts in the elementary ranged from four to ten in the combined grades. There is an eating area in the middle of the elementary classrooms, where student lockers, recess materials, and four tables sit for students to eat lunch. Lunch is alternated, so that the early elementary students have recess while upper elementary students eat lunch, then switch. The high school wing has a similar construction with the cafeteria in the center of four classrooms—one classroom for each core content area. Again, for lunch the middle school students have recess while high school has lunch, then they switch.

The district SEL program at both Island Community School and Wilderness School District is the TRAILS program. TRAILS lessons are taught explicitly in elementary classrooms as a specials class. The TRAILS SEL curriculum is organized into units using the five CASEL

competencies (self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making) for each of four grade bands: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. Each grade band has five lessons per unit with a total of 25 lessons in each grade band. Lessons in the program follow a consistent structure: begin with a mindful check-in, introduce, model, and practice the SEL focus for the lesson, and conclude with a wrap-up and "mindful check-out." Post-lesson activities are also suggested (Tides Center, 2024).

At Island Community School, kindergarten through 3rd grade have SEL for 45 minutes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. 4th through 6th grade have SEL for 45 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The SEL teacher modifies the TRAILS lessons to fit the multi-age classrooms, as the TRAILS grade bands do not align to the district multi-age classes. She focuses on the SEL competency or skill taught in a lesson and maintain the TRAILS lesson plan structure but modifies for the ages and specific needs of the students in the class. In high school, SEL is not taught explicitly and does not follow the TRAILS curriculum, however SEL skills are discussed during the Student Success lab according to the specific and individual needs of students. For example, on the day of my observation, there had been a weekend end-of-year banquet that students and staff were talking about. The SEL teacher reported using these discussions to talk about relationship skills and self-awareness in the context of the event.

The island is a very unique rural place. When the superintendent initially expressed interest in participating in this study, he asked to discuss the district over the phone, out of concern that the district's unique experience of rurality may not be suitable to the study. He stated, "We are the most remote and most isolated community in the 48 continuous states, because there is only air access to the island for five months of the year, from November to May." For my observation, travel to the island was by a four-seater plane, with one other

passenger and the pilot. The airport itself was a just small building, and I was able to park my car feet from the entrance to the airport. Upon entering the building, the person behind the counter knew my name, because there were only two passengers on the flight. Check-in consisted of weighing luggage and finalizing payment. A shuttle took the other passenger and I out to the hangar where the plane was waiting. The pilot and shuttle driver loaded our bags in the back of the plane.

Upon arrival on the island, the school superintendent greeted me, apologizing for his fishing attire. He brought with him a school pickup truck for me to use during my stay. On the ride from the airport to the hotel, he provided a brief tour of the island. There is one highway that is paved on the island for about 6 miles, all other roads are dirt or gravel roads. This includes the roads to the airport, where wild turkeys and deer can be seen grazing in the fields. Throughout this ride, each time we passed a car, or saw a person walking or in a yard, they waved and the superintendent waved back. Initially, I thought this was because, as the school superintendent, he was well known in the community. However, I soon learned that this is the local custom for all people on the island. As I traveled to the school, explored the island, and even during dinner at the only restaurant on the island, everyone I saw greeted me with either a wave or invitation. I mentioned this observation to the superintendent and another school staff member, who confirmed that this is the common practice on the island.

On Mondays, school begins in the gym, where all students, Pre-K through 12th grade gather for the Pledge of Allegiance, then they sing Happy Birthday for any students having a birthday that week, and then announcements. After this community gathering, students go to their classes. Elementary students are kept mostly separate from middle and high school students, with the exception of the Monday community gatherings. The remainder of the

schedule is traditional, with elementary students attending their multi-age classrooms and middle and high school students moving classes to attend classes by content area; the only other difference is the small class sizes.

Participants. This superintendent was the most-outsider superintendent of the three superintendents included in this study. He was not from the community that he was working in and moved to the island for the job as superintendent. He was a lifelong rural resident—but of a very different type of community. The rural community he came from was a wealthy community primarily composed of summer tourists with second homes on Lake Michigan and retirees. However, he expressed a deep commitment to his adopted rural community throughout our conversations. Hunting and fishing are important activities of residents on the island, and the superintendent shared a love of these—and other outdoor activities. Although this superintendent is an outsider to the rural community, he does espouse the same values of community and cultural norms as residents in the community.

The superintendent's prior experience before becoming the superintendent in this district was as a middle school principal in his previous (rural) community. He explains there are significant differences between the students in his current district than students in his prior school and expresses a deep empathy for the students' experiences of rural poverty and the challenges of place that exist in his adopted island community that did not exist in his previous community. However, while he expresses empathy and a commitment to support students, his own lived experiences are different than those of students in his district. He explained his surprise regarding students' home lives during the COVID-19 pandemic when interacting with students and parents over Zoom calls—having not himself lived in rural poverty in a remote

district he was not previously familiar with what that experience looks like and how families interact differently when living in those circumstances.

Political leanings were also different for this superintendent as compared to his rural district. The superintendent came from a left-leaning, wealthy rural community of mostly vacationers who owned second homes on Lake Michigan and lived in gated communities, or retirees who moved to the area for retirement. He maintains his own liberal political ideology and explicitly states that he has a goal to build a more inclusive community among rural residents of his community, and to ensure students have more access to ideas that are different than the ones they are exposed to in their local community. As with the superintendent from Shipping Lanes Schools, this superintendent is not hesitant to share his political ideology and how it is different from the majority of residents in his community; however this superintendent's political beliefs do not align with the majority of residents in his district.

Wilderness School District. Wilderness School District is a geographically large district that serves several small local villages and townships. Population in each village and township ranges from 200-600, however, the county population is 23,433. The school district boundaries encompass several of these townships and villages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Due to the large geographic area and the several townships and villages served by the district, county-wide population characteristics are included here. The county has three school districts, each covering a large geographic area (Department of Technology, 2021). Of the three districts included in this study, this district is the largest in both size and enrollment.

The county median age is younger than either other district at 49.6, 10.8% of residents live below the poverty line, including 11 percent of children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). There

were more persons per household in the county at 2.3 and the median household income is $54,074 in the county.

Manufacturing accounts for 33.7 percent of employment industry in the county and the most common occupations reported are in production, transportation, and material moving (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). There is a community college approximately 30 miles from the school, which provides students from this district the opportunity to attend college locally for two years. According to Michigan's Center for Educational Performance Information (2023), 60.7 percent of graduated students were enrolled in college within six months of graduation. However, for students remaining in the local area, whether to attend the local community college or to enter the workforce, finding local housing can be a challenge. For example, in one village, there are 115 households in population and only 130 available housing units, and another village served by the district has 273 households with 288 available housing units (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). These statistics show that Wilderness School District serves a much more geographically dispersed, younger population with a higher poverty rate than either of the other districts. In addition, the population of the county has declined by 2.9 percent between 2010 and 2022, compared to growth in Michigan of 1.6 percent and nationwide growth of 7.7 percent (USA Facts, 2024).

Wilderness School District is situated in a conservative county. Using Michigan gubernatorial election results in 2022, 63 percent of voters voted for the Republican candidate while only 34 percent voted for the Democratic candidate (Menominee County, 2022a). This aligns with descriptions of the community during both interviews and observations. One SEL teacher in the district specifically addressed the conservative nature of the community and its impact on how teachers make decisions and interact with parents and how students interact, their

beliefs, and how those beliefs drive their worldview and perceptions of larger communities, places, and spaces. The teacher specifically referenced a small, rural town in northern lower Michigan as a place that students viewed as a 'big' community with a large population and access to opportunities and resources that are not available locally.

Program Description. Wilderness School District is the largest participating district in this study with 286 students (Center for Educational Performance and Information, 2021; MI School Data, 2022). The district has two buildings, an elementary building serving grades K-6 and a high school for grades 7-12.

The district has experienced declining enrollment since the 2019-2020 school year, declining each year from 350 in 2019-2020 to 286 in the 2023-2024 school year. The largest decline was between the 2022-2023 to 2023-2024 school year: there were 40 fewer students enrolled. During this period of enrollment decline, the racial composition of the student enrollment shifted slightly, increasing percentages of Native American and Hispanic/Latino students over this time period. In 2019-2020, 96 percent of students were white, 1.5 percent Native American or Alaska Native, and 1 percent Hispanic/Latino. Then, in the 2023-2024 school year, 91 percent of students were white, 4 percent Native American or Alaska Native, and 4% Hispanic/Latino. All other reported race/ethnicity subgroups were obfuscated in the data due to small size. Percentages of students enrolled by grade did not have significant differences across the reported years, however the superintendent noted there are 14 kindergarten students enrolled for fall and 20 graduating seniors this year. He noted that schools of choice and online virtual schools have had a significant impact on enrollment since the pandemic.

This district also uses the TRAILS SEL curriculum, "because it's free and developed in Michigan" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). The ISD provides support to its districts

to use the curriculum, so it was selected for the SEL program. SEL is taught in elementary as a specials class once per week for 35 minutes by the high school counselor. Elementary teachers do not participate in SEL training or the SEL lessons; there is an acknowledged "buy-in issue" with elementary teachers in the program implementation. In the middle school—which is conceptualized as grades 6-8 in the 6-12 building—there is one teacher who teaches a SEL lesson from TRAILS every Friday. High school similarly has one teacher whose regular teaching assignment is high school social studies who also teaches one SEL lesson from TRAILS once per week to his homeroom class.

The communities served by Wilderness School District are geographically spread out. There is not a downtown or local business area to walk around town or to see a community gathering; there are just two intersecting highways with little more than trees on the corners when driving through. There was also no hotel or place to stay during my visit, so I stayed at the casino, which was a 10-minute drive on a mostly empty highway, away from the school. There is a small residential subdivision with a few blocks of single-family homes near the elementary school. The middle and high school building is on the highway with a gas station nearby and mostly state forest or vacant land in the surroundings. For meals, there is one restaurant nearby that is connected to the gas station. Similar to some gas stations that have fast food businesses, this establishment had a homestyle restaurant in the building. There were only a few people at the restaurant and there was some interaction among the staff and patrons throughout my time there, indicating they knew each other. The school serves as a central location where people travel relatively large distances to come together and participate in school activities, sports, or clubs.

Participants. The superintendent at Wilderness School District was an insider to the district. He was from the area originally, then moved away for school and worked in several roles in other remote rural communities in northern Michigan with similar demographics—high rates of rural poverty, limited economic opportunity in the area, and conservative communities. In addition, this was the only of the three superintendents who had kids in the school—he had a son who was on the championship basketball team that he (the superintendent) also coached. This district had successful football and basketball teams, having recently won several regional and state championships, and his involvement as coach and his children's involvement on the team, combined with his history of having been raised in the area, made him an insider to this community. In addition to these factors, this superintendent shared the cultural values and ideals as the local community. He was uniquely vague regarding his own political ideology, however was clear in sharing that the area is "very conservative" throughout our conversation, and acknowledged the impact of the conservative nature of the community on decision-making and SEL program implementation.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Interviews provided opportunities to explore participants' experiences and perspectives of their experiences in qualitative research (Gill et al., 2008). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis. Observation can be used to provide thick, rich descriptions and context for specific events or behaviors, to gather data on topics that participants may not feel free to discuss in a more formal interview setting, and to triangulate emerging findings from data collected through other methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Document analysis as a supplementary data collection technique adds rigor to a study and allows the researcher to discern how policies and programs are integrated and can provide important data to confirm emerging hypotheses, or to confirm data collected during interviews (Cardno, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis align to the analytic frameworks for this study: sensemaking and place consciousness. Semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity to interact with participants to understand how they make sense of their experiences throughout SEL implementation and how that sensemaking is driven by—or is not—their experience of place in the rural setting. Observations provide opportunities to observe how stakeholders interact and how they make sense of and respond to stimuli within the context of the unique rural place. Document analysis provided an opportunity to examine how stakeholder sensemaking is formalized through policy documents and communication documents within and external to the educational system, as well as to understand how those documents are grounded in the place. This section discusses each data collection method.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with district leaders to gain a deep understanding of district implementation, SEL programming, and parent and community perspectives and interactions. Semi-structured interviews include key questions and areas to be explored while allowing the interviewer flexibility to discover new areas previously not considered or to ask for elaboration based on participant responses (Gill et al., 2008). According to Brown et al. (2019), developing rapport and relationship building is an essential component of a semi-structured interview. As a methodological tool, interviews are based on the principles of

connectivity, humanness, and empathy in planning, relationship and rapport development, and exploration of key ideas (Brown & Danaher, 2019).

Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom. Informants include district-level leaders at the school, including superintendent, principal, and other relevant central office administrators or heads of department.

Interview questions for each stakeholder group are provided in Appendix B. The interview questions begin with easy-to-answer questions, both to build rapport and to make participants more comfortable (Gill et al., 2008). As a semi-structured interview, there is both a checklist of topics to be discussed during the interview and open-ended questions to maximize participant opportunities to provide detailed information about the unique rural context, how SEL is defined, perceived, and how participants interact with the community regarding SEL implementation. The next section discusses the data that will be collected through observations.

Observation

Observations we conducted to observe district leaders, staff and community interactions regarding social and emotional learning. According to Merriam et al. (2016), observations provide opportunities for a researcher to observe interactions among participants, particularly if there exists any dissention among participants that were not revealed in interviews. Observations were conducted employing the "Complete Observer" researcher role (Baker, 2006). In this research, the use of observations provided an opportunity to gather data regarding how research participants interact and communicate about how SEL is defined, its intended outcomes, and perceptions among stakeholder groups. The researcher was non-participatory and attended meetings and events as an observer only. Advantages to the complete observer role are the ability

to observe more authentic participant interactions and the opportunity to combine data from observations with other data collection techniques (Baker, 2006).

Observations included observation of district leaders, school staff, and SEL programming. The district leaders included the district superintendent and elementary and middle/high school administration at one participating district (both of the other districts had one superintended who also functioned as K-12 administrator). School instructional staff observations include teachers and the SEL lead implementing a SEL lesson.

Staff meeting observations. Staff meeting observations provided opportunities to observe whether SEL program implementation is included in staff meeting discussions, and if so, how leaders interact with teachers and other staff as they discuss SEL program implementation. In addition, the topics of discussion regarding SEL implementation will help illuminate the successes and challenges faced by staff as they implement SEL programming. Finally, staff meeting agendas—if used—were collected to include in document analysis.

In addition to providing data for understanding district leaders' interactions with staff regarding SEL implementation, observations of staff meetings provided data regarding participants' experiences of place, including ongoing events and event planning within the community, student and community experiences and any other concerns or celebrations that are discussed during staff meetings.

School-community events observations. Particularly important to develop and understanding of the unique rural place in which this research is conducted is an observation of local events, participants within those events, and any other school and community activities that showcase community pride and the community's understanding of its own history, values, and core identities. By attending school-community events, such as sports programs, school

academic programs, arts programs, or other local events that include stakeholders in this study, a deeper understanding of this unique place will become more apparent.

SEL Lead and Lesson Observations. Each participating district had one staff member who is responsible for leadership and implementation of the district SEL program. The lesson observation and subsequent discussion with the SEL program lead provided a better understanding of how the local SEL Lead defines SEL—and its alignment to the district leader definition of SEL, the structure and format of SEL lessons, and how the SEL leads perceive staff and student acceptance of SEL programming

Fieldnotes were kept using the observation protocol in Appendix D. focusing on participant interactions, district leadership communication regarding SEL, content of interactions among participants, and understandings of and expressions of the rural place in each setting. The fieldnote templates provided in Appendix C are aligned with the research questions and provide a framework for observations. The next section discusses the third data collection method included in this study: document analysis.

Document Analysis

Document analysis, including both policy and communication documents both adds rigor and provides supplementary data to better understand how rural education leaders make sense of SEL implementation. Policy document analysis illuminated how—and where—SEL programming intersected with district policies, student discipline expectations, athletic program requirements, and whether SEL programming was integrated into the core functioning of the district, or whether it was a stand-alone program maintained separately from other district initiatives. Analysis of communication documents provided important data to understand how

SEL was communicated across staff and community groups. Inclusion of document analysis allowed triangulation of the data collected from semi-structured interviews and observations.

According to Cardno (2018), documentary analysis adds rigor to research findings when used as a supplementary data collection tool. It can be particularly useful to identify events that may not otherwise be highlighted or that occurred prior to the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and allows the researcher to unobtrusively collect data that otherwise may not be elucidated through interviewing alone, or which can confirm—or contradict—information learned through interviewing (Cardno, 2018).

This document analysis included two types of documents to be analyzed: policy documents related to SEL implementation and communication documents. Policy documents were publicly available documents and help answer research questions one through three about SEL implementation. Communication documents—such as newsletters, programming communications to parents and community, social media messaging— answer questions four and five, which are about communications and interactions with the community about SEL implementation.

Documents included in this analysis were publicly available documents or documents that are available online or in other public locations. There was no requirement for Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to coerce the district to share documents not readily available. The purpose of this research is to understand how stakeholders make sense of SEL implementation in the rural setting; documents that pertain to this purpose do not require the use of FOIA.

Policy Documents. Publicly available policy documents were reviewed. The district's student handbooks, policies related to attendance and behavior, athletic program requirements,

and SEL curriculum were analyzed. As Cardno (2018) points out, this research includes analysis of what is—and is not—included in the documents. District attendance and behavior policies will be analyzed to gain a deeper understanding of how SEL implementation guides—or does not guide—district policies. Analysis of the SEL curriculum include a definition of SEL, which can be compared to responses of interview participants to understand how the SEL definitions and intended outcomes align to the program implemented and will provide an understanding of how SEL is implemented in the district. Table 3 lists policy documents analyzed for each school district.

Table 3

Policy Document List

District Name (obfuscated)	Policy Documents Analyzed
Shipping Lanes School	• Elementary School Handbook (includes student discipline policy) • Secondary School Handbook (includes discipline policy) • Athletic Handbook • Wellness Policy
Island Community Schools	• Board Discipline policy
Wilderness School District	• Elementary School Handbook (includes student discipline policy) • Secondary School Handbook (includes discipline policy • Athletics Handbook • Technology Use Agreement

The processes of gathering policy documents and requesting documents are discussed for each district in the next section.

Shipping Lanes School. Policy documents from Shipping Lanes school were readily available on the school website. Student handbooks were prominently displayed on each school web page, the Athletic Handbook for the high school students was posted on the web page. And

a district Wellness Policy was provided on the district web page. Board policies were not posted on the website, and only available by request to the district office.

Island Community Schools. Island Community Schools did not have a student handbook available. The very general board policies are available and posted on the district website and were analyzed as part of policy documents. Island Community Schools was the smallest district included in the study, and when asked, the superintendent stated that the policy documents requested (student handbook, athletic handbooks, or "any other district policy") are currently under development and pointed to the district board policy book—which is posted on the district website—as the policy source document.

Wilderness School District. As the largest of the three included districts, Wilderness School District had the most robust website and discipline policies, student handbooks for each school, the athletics handbook, and a separate technology use policy were all posted on the district website.

Communication Documents

School communications were analyzed. These documents include school board meetings agendas and minutes, school newsletters, social media, and the district web site. School board meeting agendas and minutes provide information about whether, and how, SEL is included in discussions with school board members and the community on the agenda, whether there are public comments and—if recorded—whether SEL is discussed. The district web site is analyzed to determine how SEL is communicated, the content of the communication, and how it is organized in the overall structure of the website. Finally, the district social media account(s) and communications apps were analyzed to understand whether SEL is communicated through social

media, and if so, how often and the content of the communication. Table 3 displays the communications analyzed for each district.

Table 3

Communication Documents Analyzed

District Name (obfuscated)	Communication Documents Analyzed
Shipping Lanes School	• District website • Announcements posted to the district application
Island Community Schools	• District website • Community "News" web page postings • Announcements posted to the district application
Wilderness School District	• District website • Board meeting minutes August 2023 through June 2024

Communication documents in all three districts were much more sparsely available than policy documents. Surprisingly, none of the participating districts maintained a school- or districtwide newsletter, and communication was primarily at the classroom level, based on specific classroom-level information. Districtwide communication was limited to primarily the school app for the two districts who included that, the website, and social media pages.

Shipping Lanes School. Shipping Lanes School maintains a web page but primarily relies on the district application to communicate announcements and updates regarding school events, sporting events, athletic events or other updates. Some announcements are also made on the school Facebook page. Parent and community information was reviewed for relevance to the district SEL program and relevant communications were uploaded and coded in the Dedoose software.

Island Community Schools. Island Community Schools maintains a school "news" page with announcements regarding school programs, community opportunities, school and community events, athletic events, and classroom events. These announcements were reviewed

for relevance to SEL programming and relevant announcements were uploaded and coded in the Dedoose software. There were four relevant announcements analyzed.

Wilderness School District. Wilderness School District was the only school district that posted board meeting minutes to the district web page. The first board minutes were posted to the district web page from the August 2023 board meeting. The September 2023 meeting minutes (which was the meeting at which the August 2023 minutes were approved) indicated a public comment request to begin posting the minutes on the district website. The district maintains a robust district website, with most district policies posted, forms and resources, the district calendar, and much more, however it does not participate in the communication application that the other two participating districts utilized.

The next section discusses the analysis methods applied to the data collected through semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis.

Data Analysis

An interpretivist approach to understanding the sensemaking and experiences of the unique rural place throughout SEL implementation and work across stakeholder groups was applied during data analysis to data collected from interviews, observations, and document analysis. Interpretive research is the most common type of qualitative research and focuses on constructing an understanding of participants' reality through lived experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This understanding is developed through interactions with participants during the research and analysis of data. An inductive process will identify key themes and support data analysis. This section describes how data from semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis was coded using deductive coding (Deterding & Waters, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2021).

Coding

Deductive coding was used to analyze data collected. According to Saldaña (2021), deductive coding is recommended when the research questions suggest certain codes and provide a starting point for analysis prior to fieldwork. The research questions and the uniquely rural place of this research lend themselves to the use of deductive coding.

Deductive codes were developed based on the research questions place-consciousness specific to the rural place, and research literature (see Appendix E). Codes were identified to align to the research questions—how district leaders define SEL, intended and observed outcomes, how SEL is communicated Codes to identify how district leaders' define SEL, leaders' SEL outcomes, how SEL is communicated with staff and the community—to understand how the rural context affects SEL implementation: how the local culture shapes SEL, leaders' place consciousness and how they experience SEL implementation within that context, rural identity construction, how the rural place affects access to resources, opportunity, and culture, and the leaders' status as insider or outsider—and to analyze how leaders make sense of SEL in their rural place—meaning making, interpretation, how prior experiences and understandings affect sensemaking, retrospective understanding, and identity construction influences on sensemaking.

Codes were first applied to semi-structured interviews for each district leader. This was necessary to understand how the district leader defined SEL and intended outcomes, and to apply that definition of SEL to policy document analysis. After semi-structured interviews were coded, memos were generated with initial impressions and understandings about the local context, the district leaders' status as insider or outsider, and understandings of SEL and the intended outcomes of the selected SEL program.

Policy and communication documents were analyzed next. Policy documents included student handbooks, discipline policies—both board and administrative policies, athletic handbooks, rules, and eligibility requirements. Communication documents included board meeting minutes and web site announcements. Two of the three districts also used a software application for communication with community. The app included announcements such as snow days, athletic events, cafeteria menus, and occasionally included program-specific information.

After coding of semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the observation protocol and codes were developed based on the research questions, policy and communications documents, and initial coding. The Observation Protocol (Appendix D) was also aligned to the research questions and included observations of the local context and place. In addition, after review of the semi-structured interview and document analysis for each district, specific remaining questions or observations were added to the protocol for each district to ensure completeness of data and clear understanding of the district leaders' experience implementing SEL programs in their rural context. Observation codes for data analysis were again aligned with the research questions, place consciousness (see Appendix E).

Analysis

The coding analysis was conducted in two steps using descriptive coding and subsequently, pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021). Descriptive codes were used in initial coding and analytic memos were written based on the initial codebook codes. According to Saldaña (2021), research based in analytical frameworks of "theories of knowing" (sensemaking) and in understanding the phenomenon of interest are well suited to descriptive coding techniques. Subsequently, after review of emerging themes in the codebook codes and analytic memos, pattern codes were developed and applied to data from semi-structured interviews, document

analysis, and observations to generate deep analytic findings (Saldaña, 2021). This section begins with a description of the application of a priori descriptive codes and analytic memos, then describes the application of pattern codes to analyze emerging findings.

For each participating district, interview transcripts were coded first. This identified how the district defined SEL when analyzing the district policy documents for alignment to the district definition. After each interview transcript was coded, an analytic memo was written with initial data, including the district's SEL definition, program, and the district leader's description of the unique rural context and how SEL is received in the local community. Next, policy and communication documents were coded using a priori codes. (See tables above for lists of documents analyzed by district.) After coding of policy documents for each district and again for communication documents, analytic memos were written to describe the data collected.

After initial a priori codes were applied to both interview transcripts and document analysis and analytic memos were completed, the data were reviewed to identify emerging themes, determine any outstanding questions or missing data, and the observation protocol as developed for each district (see Appendix D) to prepare for in person observations at each district. Next, in person observations were conducted at each district. Observation fieldnotes were collected using the observation protocol and analytic memos with descriptions and impressions of each district were written after each district observation. Fieldnotes were reviewed and coded using a priori codes, then analyzed together with the data collected from semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Once all a priori coding was completed, initial findings were developed and then process coding was applied to the data.

Pattern codes help to identify themes and pull together codes from initial coding into meaningful findings (Saldaña, 2021). Pattern coding was selected to support identifying themes

across data collection media as districts leaders implement, communicate, and navigate the unique rural context during SEL implementation. According to Saldaña (2021), pattern coding is appropriate for analysis when generating common themes across districts and to identify themes in the data. Analysis of pattern coding illuminated actions of district leaders as they work through SEL implementation in their unique rural setting.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to ensure the validity of findings from this research: triangulation, member checking, and audit trails (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation is a strategy used to verify the internal validity of a study, that is: does the data collected through various methods or in different iterations of the same method confirm a finding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation was conducted to confirm findings both across data collection methods (interviews, observation, and document analysis) and within each data collection method. Member checking is an internal validation strategy wherein the researcher requests feedback and confirmation of emerging findings. This strategy is often used to minimize any misunderstandings of participant feedback or as a way to identify researcher bias in interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This strategy was employed in this research to verify emerging findings. The third strategy to ensure validity and trustworthiness used in this research was an audit trail. Audit trails are used to ensure research reliability, that is: if the research was conducted again would the findings be the same? Audit trails are detailed research journals that include detail regarding how data was collected, how data was analyzed, and how decisions were made throughout the research process (Carcary, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This section describes how each validity check will be applied to this research.

Triangulation

Throughout the data analysis process, emerging themes were validated through triangulation. Farmer et al. (2006) define methodological and data source triangulation as containing two types: methodological and data source triangulation. Methodological triangulation compares data from multiple methods of data collection, whereas data source triangulation compares data and emerging findings within a single data collection method (Farmer et al., 2006). This research employed both methodological and data source triangulation by analyzing emerging findings both across the three data collection methods (semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis) as well as within each method. Methodological triangulation entails analysis and comparison of codes across the data collection methods. This helped to identify emerging findings from each method and surfaced inconsistencies across the emerging findings, where relevant. These observations were logged in audit trails throughout the data analysis process. Data source triangulation was also conducted within each data collection method. By comparing emerging findings within each data collection method, emerging findings were confirmed. In some cases, differences in communication by data collection method were surfaced, identifying variation in how participants make sense of SEL implementation. Analysis of emerging findings within each data collection method was logged in audit trails throughout the data analysis process to create a record of the research process. Cross-checking of findings throughout the analysis process identified opportunities to collect follow-up data in preparation for observations which allowed both a better understanding and opportunities to clarify data, which created a more robust, complete, and accurate understanding of participants' sensemaking and how the rural context interacts with how they make sense of SEL implementation.

The triangulation protocol used, presented in Table 4, is based on a protocol originally developed by Farmer et al. (2006). This triangulation protocol was used throughout the triangulation process in this research.

Table 4

Triangulation Protocol

Task	Description
Categorizing	Categorize and organize findings from each data source according to the research question(s)
Sorting	Sort the findings from each data collection into emerging findings
Analysis	Compare the findings to identify similarities, differences, or nuances to the findings

Member checks

As initial findings emerged through data analysis, I conducted member checks with district leaders. This allowed district leaders the opportunity to verify emerging findings, or to provide additional clarifying data or suggest further details to ensure a more accurate finding of the results. Member checks have been conducted in different ways in the research, including requesting participants to review data for accuracy before data analysis and reviewing emerging themes (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A challenge faced when conducting member checks is the potential that participants' experiences lead to an evolution of their understanding after the initial data collection (DeCino & Waalkes, 2019). As sensemaking is an ongoing process, and perceptions or understandings of a phenomena can change over time (Weick, 1995), this is a relevant concern for this research. To address this, member checks in this project were conducted only on data collected in interviews and observations. Member checks were conducted—via email during the data analysis process, using emerging findings from

interview and observations. District leaders were informed throughout this process that their role is to verify the accuracy and interpretation of the data, but not to change responses or data.

Audit trails

Throughout this research, detailed memos that describe data collection to analysis and final interpretation were maintained. Memos were kept within the coding software, Dedoose, and in a dedicated folder after each structured interview, throughout document collection, after each coding session, and after each observation. The audit trails included categories described by Carcary (2020): raw data, data analysis notes, process notes, and other relevant materials. Applied to this research, audit trails included raw data, coding analysis, process notes, and other logistical notes and reflections. The content of the audit trails for each component is listed according to each data collection method in Table 5.

Table 5

Audit Trail Components

Component	Semi-structured Interviews	Observations	Document Analysis
Raw Data	Interview Transcripts	Field Notes	Documents
Coding Analysis	Initial codes, selection of new codes with rationale for each	Initial codes, selection of new codes with rationale for each	Initial codes, selection of new codes with rationale for each
Process Notes	Research journal notes, including notes regarding impressions of interviews, research participants, spaces interview was conducted, any other impressions during interviews.	Research journal notes, including notes regarding the place, time, setting. Impressions of activities, how participants interact.	Research journal notes documenting ongoing impressions throughout both identification of documents and analysis.

Table 6 (cont'd)

Audit Trail Components

Component	Semi-structured Interviews	Observations	Document Analysis
Other logistical notes, reflections	Interview schedules, changes to scheduling. Notes regarding how research participants were contacted and scheduled.	Events and meetings attended, any associated agendas, time and date, where observation occurred.	Information regarding how documents were accessed, format of documents, how documents are shared with relevant stakeholders, the intended audience of the documents.

The next chapter discusses the research findings.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

This chapter begins by considering SEL implementation in rural districts. SEL program implementation was based on superintendents' anecdotal observations of student behaviors and social skill development—which was retrospectively applied to a SEL program they were exposed to from an external source. Once leaders were exposed to a SEL program, they made sense of its as a program that would address their anecdotally observed challenges with student behaviors, and then they decided the program should be implemented. Implementation was heavily leader-driven, the superintendent decided the program would be implemented and then they identified staff who would be supporters and proponents of the program. Next, the major theme of variation is discussed, including how variation is observed throughout data analysis in how educators make sense of SEL, how SEL is implemented, how SEL programs themselves diverge even as they claim alignment to the CASEL competencies, and how all of this variation leads to variation in the understanding of SEL among non-educator stakeholders. The research questions and purpose of the research are addressed through the discussions of the findings and the theme of variation, and how participants' sense-making and place consciousness undergird and even lead to variation. Each section begins with a summary of the finding, and then provides the details to support it.

Place consciousness was interwoven throughout all of the data and data analysis. Place affected how participants make sense of SEL, how they think about and define SEL, and how SEL programs are selected for implementation. The impact of place was central to all aspects of SEL program implementation, from decision-making to program selection, to implementation and communication with the community and stakeholders. The unique aspects of the rural community in which participants lived and worked are infused in the data from every interview,

observation, and interaction. Place consciousness is interwoven throughout the discussion of the theme of variation in this chapter and will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Variation was also an overarching theme throughout data analysis. The theme of variation permeates every aspect of SEL, from sensemaking, to decision-making, implementation and program selection, and communication with stakeholders about SEL. It even extended to variation within the selected SEL programs—although each program individually claimed alignment to the CASEL competencies.

Rural SEL Implementation is Leader-Driven

SEL program selection and implementation is driven by the district leaders' exposure to SEL programs and their own sensemaking that is mediated by the leaders' own prior experiences and understanding of place. To understand rural district leader decision-making processes when choosing to implement SEL programs, participants were asked questions related to how and why the SEL program was selected, how they learned of the programming, and what the intended outcomes were for SEL program implementation. There was consistency across participants in that the decision to implement SEL was based on anecdotal observations of student behavior and mental health needs post-COVID and exposure to a specific SEL program. Participants described being exposed to the SEL program, how they thought it would align to their anecdotal observations of student need, and then discussed how funding was secured to implement the program—which was funded through non-recurring COVID relief funds for schools in two of the three represented districts (personal communications, May 22, 2024; May 23, 2024).

SEL Decision-making was based on anecdotal observation and exposure to a SEL program

Participants were asked about their decision-making process when deciding to implement a SEL program to understand what factors were considered during the decision-making process.

In all cases, district leader decision-making was based on anecdotal observations of student behavior, mental health needs, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Wilderness School District's superintendent described how he came to decide to implement the TRAILS curriculum in his district:

> I actually was asked to be on a committee during COVID—sort of to restart schools back up. And I was on a subcommittee and one of the leaders of it was one of the professors who had founded TRAILS and was in charge of TRAILS…. So, I looked more into it and reviewed some of the curriculum (and) really liked it. And then talked with someone at our intermediate school district (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

In the two districts currently implementing the TRAILS program—Island Community Schools and Wilderness School District—both stated that they learned of the TRAILS program at the same professional development event described above and chose to implement the program based on that professional development. There was no description of analysis of student data indicating a need for a SEL program, or any research into any other SEL program other than the one presented, or any analysis for how the SEL program would fit into existing district continuous improvement planning on current and ongoing initiatives. Both participants who selected the TRAILS program shared that the program was also selected—at least in part—because it was free. Wilderness School District's leader directly stated the program was selected because "it's free and developed in Michigan" (personal communication, May 22, 2024); Island Community School's superintendent explained that the ISD was purchasing the program for use by districts in the ISD and stated:

> And then [I] talked with someone at our intermediate school district. And the intermediate school district was like, 'Yeah, that's a great program. We're thinking about adopting it and paying for it here at the ISD and sharing it with schools.' I'm like, Oh, that's perfect. Great. You are paying for it and I'm not (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

The leader relied on anecdotal observations to justify the need for the SEL program, and then selected the program that he was exposed to during the professional development program. When asked what issues the program was intended to address in his school he responded:

> My first thought was like, okay, let's talk about COVID. But there were some things prior to COVID that were sort of there, but COVID sort of identified. One is student to student interactions, particularly at the elementary level. And what we found was that COVID, and the isolation of COVID…. was challenging for everyone (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Anecdotal observations of student behavior and social skill development, in some ways—but not all—attributed to the effect of the pandemic were the basis for decision-making regarding the need to implement a SEL program. Subsequently, the leader adopted the SEL program that was presented at the professional development opportunity.

Decisions regarding the need for SEL implementation were not always clear, one district leader stated, "We had started setting up something in [his previous district] and I thought it would work here" and after attending the same professional development opportunity described by the other TRAILS district, decided, "So, I was out trying to find something… that was cheap, to be honest, but was used, that I could use and research-based and that's where TRAILS came about" (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

District leaders were presented with the SEL program and retrospectively made sense of how the program can address anecdotally observed challenges with student behaviors and social skills after the COVID-19 pandemic and used non-recurring funding available after the pandemic (personal communications, May 22, 2024; May 23, 2024) to implement the SEL program. They then communicated regarding the SEL program implementation with stakeholders, making sense of SEL within their own cognitive framework of their unique rural place and how SEL can support those needs and their prior experiences. Subsequently, despite varying understandings of SEL and programs that claim to align to the CASEL competencies, they intend the program to address several challenges faced by students, including behavior, mental health, and social skill development. In each case, these varying understandings are held differently by implementers and the district leads, leading to varying understandings of SEL among stakeholders. Decision-making regarding SEL in the two TRAILS districts was similar at Shipping Lanes Schools, the district implementing the Lead It! supplemental program, which is described next.

Shipping Lanes Schools superintendent selected the Lead It! program when the SEL lead moved to the area and became a substitute teacher in the school district. Through personal conversations with the SEL lead, he learned of the Leader in Me program, and used COVID relief funding to implement the smaller, supplemental Lead It! program (personal communication, May 23, 2024): "We have a retired schoolteacher…[who] was a Covey trainer…. She brought an idea for that and we took some of our SEL moneys and purchased contracted services through her" (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

Participants' decision-making for SEL program implementation was based on anecdotal observations of challenges with student mental health and behaviors—in some cases explaining

the increase as a result of COVID-19, but at other times not—and subsequently being presented an opportunity to implement a SEL program. Island Community Schools superintendent stated:

> Prior to COVID [problems] that were sort of there but COVID identified. One is student interactions… what we found was that the isolation of COVID….we realized that our kids are experiencing stuff that we didn't know about. So then those kids when they came back to school, were bringing trauma into the classroom, in terms of how they interacted with each other, how they interacted with the teacher, how they went about their school day, so we're like, okay, we need to really purposefully talk about how we deal with emotions, how we deal with anxiety, how we deal with stress, how we deal with pain, how we deal with anger (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

At Shipping Lanes Schools, the superintendent also chose to implement SEL programming due to a lack of social skills in elementary students:

> Our kids had no social skills and they still don't. I've got kids in kindergarten and first grade that can't say their ABCs or count to ten. You know, it's like starting over. They're almost like feral children. And I hate to say it that way but quite honestly, that's what it feels like. No social skills, they'll walk over and grab whatever they want. They don't know how to say 'Excuse me, please,' clean up after themselves... it's kind of like the parents throw them in and let 'em run" (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

The decision-making process to implement a SEL program notably did not start with a review of student data that indicated a need for a SEL program nor with any in-depth review of available SEL programs to select a program that aligned to the identified needs within the

district. Rather, random chance—participation in the specific professional development program that was presented and introduction to the person implementing the Lead It! program—and anecdotal observations of student social skills—led to the adoption of the SEL program. Program was centered and then subsequently retrofitted to fit within the leaders' perception of student needs and the leaders' own cognitive frameworks for understanding SEL.

Program implementation was leader-driven

Across all cases, implementation was leader driven. Once the decision to implement the selected SEL program was finalized, the leader identified a SEL lead who would implement the program—the SEL leads were already familiar with the selected program—in the case of the district implementing Lead It!, the SEL lead was the person who brought the program to the attention of the leader and suggested it be implemented. There was only one district that required teacher or staff training, and implementation was conducted by the SEL lead independently of the general education classroom. There was no involvement of teaching staff or any other school staff in training, support, or policy modification that would support a SEL program that would lead to transference of the student skills during the general education classroom or any other part of the school day. All instances of implementation were decided by the leader, then a staff member already familiar with and supportive of the program was selected to teach the program. Teachers and other staff had little—and in some cases no—involvement in program implementation.

The next section will discuss the theme of variation throughout SEL program implementation. Variation was observed in how SEL is defined, in implementation, in the programs themselves, and in communication with stakeholders.

Variation in defining SEL

Participants define SEL in fundamentally different ways. Differences in how SEL is defined were observed both across district leaders and within the districts themselves. Participants' sensemaking of SEL is intricately linked to their experience of the rural place and each participant's prior experience. This section begins by explaining how each rural superintendent makes sense of SEL—both with variation of how they understand SEL and variation in how SEL is conceptualized as core programming and simultaneously as Tier 2 and 3 programming, then describes how prior experience mediates understanding of SEL. This section concludes with a discussion of commonalities that were identified across participants' understanding of SEL—which included very broadly defined SEL, and selecting SEL programming to address student lack of social skills development resultant of the COVID-19 pandemic and to address increases in student behavior and mental health challenges.

Place Consciousness Mediates Rural Superintendents' Understanding of SEL. Sensemaking theorists explain that sensemaking occurs as individuals construct understanding and interpretation by placing new information into an existing cognitive framework (Coburn, 2005; Weick, 1995). This was observed in this research as participants constructed meaning of SEL within the context of their rural place and prior experience. The rural leader from Island Community Schools, illustrated how his experience of place influences how he constructs meaning when defining SEL:

> An important element of social emotional learning is belonging…. So, all of our kids, they're instantly needed in the community. And so there's this sense of like, 'Okay, we need you. You're valuable' (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Place is centered as he makes sense of how he understands SEL and thinks about how the rural place builds students' SEL. He continues by discussing his understanding of SEL and explicitly connecting this understanding to his rural place:

> We hit the high marks on sense of belonging. We hit the lowest marks on being able to provide professional care for anything related to SEL. And I look at SEL broadly—it's not just mental health, it's physical health, it's food and nutrition. Because everything gets flown over here or on a boat here, there's a premium for good fresh food. And I think a lot of families eat crap, which I think impacts their SEL (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Place drives how this participant understands SEL, as he weaves both different categories of SEL—mental health, nutrition, physical health—into this understanding, while also thinking variously about SEL as a core program into a targeted intervention that can support specific needs of students.

The superintendent from Wilderness School District similarly connected his understanding of SEL to his existing cognitive framework of his rural place:

> There's the 'Huskies' way' and we implement that right from the second you come into the building. There's a way that we handle ourselves a little different. There's a certain expectation across the board K-12… there's a Huskies' way of doing things (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

In both instances, the district leader connects his understanding of SEL within the existing cognitive framework of their rural place: the deep sense of belonging within a small community that relies on its children in one case, and in the self-identification of the rural place that is embodied in the school's way of being.

This personal rural identity of being a rural resident of their rural community and doing things differently due to place was further developed when the superintendent from Shipping Lanes Schools described how people in his community think about addressing social and emotional and mental health needs, "…the people up here … don't go to therapists, formally, you know. Jimmy on the end of the bar has more answers than a therapist will… and that reflects on their kids, too." (personal communication, January 22, 2024). Here, the rural resident identity of "the people up here" and how they have navigated social and mental health needs—which is often due to lack of resources as this participant shared that the nearest mental health services are 60 miles away drives his understanding of the need for SEL implementation. He illustrates this need when he reflected, "It kind of benefits us to be by ourselves but it also hurts us sometimes, you know?" (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

Place drives how rural residents access resources and how they frame sensemaking regarding their need for mental health services, which extends to students in the district. This conflation of SEL with mental health services also illustrates how participants consider SEL simultaneously as a core program for all students as well as a Tier 2 or 3 intervention to address individual students' needs, and how the rural leader's experience of place—including both the lack of access to mental health services as well as the rural resident identity of avoidance of mental health services—which drive his understanding of SEL.

Place was centered throughout the data as participants discussed how they understood SEL. Variations in SEL definitions emerged both across the districts and within each district. The superintendent from Shipping Lanes Schools defined SEL as "providing opportunities for students to really find themselves… providing a life-coping skill" (personal communication, January 22, 2024). This understanding of SEL as a life-coping skill was further developed as he

describes how place affects student social development within the rural community, “It’s like living in a fishbowl….they know they’re hearing this at home, at school… Where we live there are benefits and I also think because we’re not worldly… they have no desire to leave… and see the world” (personal communication, January 22, 2204).

SEL is seen primarily as a leadership development program in Shipping Lanes Schools that also builds student social skills—although at times the leader discusses SEL as a program to address student mental health—while the leadership skill development is deemed important as students take their place in the world and workplace in the local community or beyond. As is often seen in the literature (Biddle & Azano, 2016), this rural leader encourages out-migration to broaden students’ experiences and connects SEL as one way to provide students more opportunity and choice, “I think it’s providing opportunities for students to really find themselves. To be able to function better within a prescribed area like school or church or society in general” (personal communication, January 22, 2024). The leader’s sensemaking interacts with both his prior experiences in the military and in athletic coaching, and his deep experience of place and commitment to advocating for students to find their place in the world, whether within the rural community or elsewhere.

At Island Community Schools, the superintendent also connects his understanding of SEL and the need for SEL within his community to the unique needs of students within his rural community when he describes how the SEL program can help address some needs of students in his district, “That's where we fall down. Because we don't have enough people here to sustain a mental health provider” (personal communication, January 29, 2024). This lack of access to resources due to the rural place was further discussed:

> Secondly is the services that we are able to tap into for our students for mental health are online… Now those are useful and valuable, but not all of our kids really want to have—it just doesn't work for some kids having a remote therapist... So, that's one of the real drawbacks of where we are" (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Again, SEL is understood as a way that this rural district can provide students access to mental health resources that are not otherwise available within the community, based on resources available in the rural place, and the rural leader understands SEL simultaneously as a core program for all students as well as a Tier 2 or 3 intervention—or even more, as it is imperative to note that true mental health services must be provided by mental health professionals, not educators.

The superintendent at Wilderness School District --had a different definition of SEL and defines it as an all-encompassing program that becomes "just the way we are" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). The way things are done and how community members interact in the rural community are centered, as the 'way things are' in the rural community is centered and normalized—we behave and interact in the ways we do because that is the expectation in this rural community—and this is connected to his understanding of SEL as normalization of behaviors and interactions in ways that support the status quo. He emphasized students' need for social skill development and mental health as the purpose for SEL programming. This rural leaders' personal experience as a former high school counselor who worked with students in need of mental health support served as the lens through which he viewed students' need for mental health resources. The rural place interacted with this perspective when he explained the lack of access to mental health support or resources within the

community and limited ability of all students to travel to access these resources. The leader makes sense of SEL as a program that can provide an additional support for students that is not otherwise available within the community, "We're at a point in our society where we need to teach our students, you know, it's okay to talk about these things…. I mean, there's so many things that don't fit in any curriculum, but we still should be addressing" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). In this case, while the leader connects his understanding of SEL as a program to support student mental health needs, he extends this understanding to include addressing student social and emotional needs holistically.

These examples illustrate how participants make sense of SEL within their existing framework of the rural place. They approach SEL within their cognitive framework of the needs of their students and community and then fit SEL into that framework to identify how SEL can support those needs.

Prior Experience Mediates SEL Sensemaking. Prior experience also mediated how participants make sense of SEL. One leader, at Wilderness School District and with a background in mental health, focused on mental health and wellbeing as a description and intended outcome of SEL throughout discussion and observation. Another leader, from Shipping Lanes Schools, with a background in athletics and the military spent most of the time discussing SEL as a leadership development program—while also stating that the program can provide support for student social and mental health support. And the leader from Island Community Schools primarily expressed a passionate commitment to building a more inclusive and accepting community within both the district and his rural community. This sensemaking process of fitting their understanding of SEL into existing cognitive frameworks of both place and prior experience has led to the variance in SEL understanding across district leaders—one

understanding as primarily leadership development, one as a mental health resource, and one as a program to support a more inclusive community—while at the same time all leaders view the SEL program as an opportunity to provide social and mental health supports that are currently not available in their remote rural place. This variance in understanding is also seen within each district, between how the district leader understands and defines SEL and how the SEL implementers define SEL.

Each district had one person who was the "SEL lead" or "SEL teacher" who was primarily responsible for planning and delivering the SEL curriculum to students. Analysis of observation data showed district leader's understandings are often different than the understanding of the SEL lead. In all cases, the SEL leads are more conversant and understand in more detail the SEL program being implemented, and they discuss SEL more closely within the framework of the program. Both districts implementing the TRAILS program discussed SEL as being more closely aligned with the CASEL competencies, but even in these instances understanding of SEL was reliant on the prior experience of each SEL lead. In the field observation data from Island Community Schools, the SEL lead described prior experience in an urban district in another state with high poverty rates, and she connected that experience to the experience of students in her rural place which also has a high poverty rate—those experiences led to her understanding of SEL as a program that can support student social skill development in ways that will supplement the lack of access to resources and opportunities that are more available to students in more affluent communities. This understanding of SEL was different than the understanding of the district leader who focused on aspects of SEL that support students to be "healthy in all ways" (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

The TRAILS SEL lead at Wilderness School District was the middle and high school counselor and understood SEL through the lens of supporting student mental health. This was the most consistent understanding of SEL within any of the three districts. The leader of this district was a former high school counselor who approached SEL within this framework, however his understanding of SEL was a more expansive understanding than the SEL lead: his definition was more broadly "the way we do things," whereas the lead described SEL more to fit within the supporting mental health framework and did not expand the definition beyond mental health.

At Shipping Lanes School, which was the district implementing the Lead It! program, where the leader primarily understood SEL as a leadership development program, the SEL lead was first a proponent of the Leader in Me program and the supplemental Lead It! program that was implemented in the district, and subsequently retrofitted her training into her understanding of SEL. She was a Leader in Me trainer, and when discussing SEL she spoke primarily of the program itself, then provided documentation that showed how the program is aligned with the CASEL framework (Patterson, n.d.), which was an analysis conducted after the program was initially developed in 1999 (Covey et al., 2020). She did not use the term "SEL" except when responding to researcher prompts and did not discuss the CASEL framework or competencies except to provide the documentation showing how the program aligns with the CASEL framework.

There is variation in definitions of SEL both across the districts and within districts. These differences in how SEL is understood are rooted in how participants' cognitive frameworks mediate understanding of SEL. Both the rural place and participants' prior experience mediate how SEL is defined, leading to variation among educators' understandings.

In addition to the variation observed in district leaders' definitions of SEL, there is variation in their own understanding of SEL and how it is discussed with stakeholders.

Variation in Understanding of SEL Programs as Core Programs or Targeted Tier 1 and 2 Programs. Each district leader shared how their SEL program was a core Tier 1 program that was intended to support students in differing ways, but also identified ways that students may need targeted supports that would be more characteristic of Tier 2 or 3 interventions. Tier 1 programming is core programing that is intended for all students in a general education setting (American Institutes for Research, 2024). Tier 2 programming is a supplemental intervention that is provided for small groups of students based on assessment of proficiency in Tier 1 instruction, and Tier 3 is an intensive intervention for students who have not gained proficiency in Tier 1 or Tier 2 instruction; Tier 3 instruction is typically individualized and provided in either the general special education setting, depending on the specific needs of individual students (American Institutes for Research, 2024). First, district leaders' different understandings of SEL as a Tier 1 core program are presented. Next, SEL as an intervention program to support specific students' needs are discussed.

At Shipping Lanes Schools SEL is "a life-coping skill." SEL was understood as a "life-coping skill" in the district that emphasized leadership development in SEL that was primarily viewed as a core program for all students. The prior experiences of this leader as a military academy graduate and athletic coach drove his understanding of SEL, both initially and subsequently as he changed his perspective about SEL:

> I think my perspective's changed for the better acceptance of SEL as a legitimate thing because, when it first came out, everybody's all SEL became a big fad word… but after seeing it implemented, it's like 'OK, this is pretty decent,' I

> don't mean to be close-minded but I ran a military school before I came here so our therapy solved a lot of fights and arguments (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

However, the leader also discusses SEL as a program to address targeted needs of students, particularly students who need access to mental health services that are not available in the local community. He states they were able to "reach those kids who actually need therapy" (personal communication, January 22, 2024). As he makes sense of SEL as a leadership development program, while simultaneously describing challenges in student social skill development and student mental health that was found after COVID (although he does not attribute the issues directly or exclusively to COVID) he explains the need for the SEL program to address declines in student behavior, social skill development, and mental health. The rural district leader makes sense of SEL as a leadership development program for all students while simultaneously conceptualizing the SEL program as a way to address students' social skill development and mental health needs, both as a broad core program for all students and also as a program to address targeted and identified needs of individual students or groups of students.

The leader's sensemaking was mediated by his prior experience in a military school, where he describes an initial hesitance to SEL in general, and he also relies on this prior experience once he came to understand and accept SEL as a beneficial program, viewing it through the lens of leadership development, while also describing SEL as a program that will address targeted needs of students' social skill development and mental health needs.

At Island Community Schools, SEL is "ensuring our students are healthy in all ways."

This district leader makes sense of SEL within his cognitive framework which includes a prior commitment to ensuring all students have access to programming and resources that help them feel safe and supported. This is illustrated when the leader passionately described the importance of creating safe spaces for each student, "it helps make it okay to talk about your feelings, to talk about the stress that you have, to talk about depression… To me, that's important" (personal communication, January 2, 2024). This cognitive framework is further connected to the experience of the rural place and emphasis on the sense of community and belonging within the community. As he points to the rural place as an environment that nurtures a deep sense of belonging and of being needed within the community, he illustrates how the smallness of the community requires each student to participate in athletic programs, clubs, and as summer workers.

The superintendent makes sense of SEL as both a core program to support all students as well as a program that can support the individual needs of students, "To me, that's important to have kids… talk about if they're depressed, if they're feeling suicidal, if they're feeling anxious about something…. So I think it's really helped with that" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). However, it is also conceptualized as a core program for all students when he states, "I think what SEL does is it makes the hidden curriculum visible and brings consciousness and conscientiousness to what we are teaching with the hidden curriculum" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). Envisioning the hidden curriculum as "the citizenship piece… the social piece… the emotional piece" (personal communication, January 25, 2024), the leader makes sense of SEL as both a Tier 1 core program as well as a targeted Tier 2 or 3 program to address individual student needs.

The district leader also discussed how the SEL program can provide supports for students experiencing trauma at home, "… you're like, okay, these kids are experiencing stuff that we didn't know about. So then those kids, when they came back to school, were bringing that trauma into the classroom" (personal communication, January 29, 2024). The leader described learning about students who have adverse childhood experiences at home and then need support to ensure they develop the appropriate prosocial behaviors necessary for success in school. Here, the superintendent views the SEL program as a program to intervene for specific students based on identified needs—which is characteristic of a Tier 2 or Tier 3 program.

At Wilderness School District, SEL is "just the way we are." The leader espousing this broad understanding of SEL places the program within his prior experience and the rural place—this is the way things are done here, in this community. He described his expectation that when students come to the district they adapt to "how things are done here" and align their behavior and understandings to those expectations. This expectation for all rural residents was echoed by another district leader when he said:

> A lot of people … moved up here to get away from all that and … tried to bring all their ideas and their ordinances and people were like ... 'You moved here. You fit in with us. Don't bring your crap up north with you' (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

How "things are done" is defined by the rural place and prior experiences of rural residents of the area. SEL is subsumed within this prior understanding of this district leader as "just what good people do" (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

This superintendent primarily discussed SEL as a core program to address needs of all students, "we're at a point in our society where we need to teach our students… it's okay to talk

about these things and…. There are so many things that don't fit in any curriculum, but we should still be addressing" (personal communication, January 29, 2024). The leader makes sense of SEL as a way to address these needs for all students, however, also describes targeted needs of students when he describes the SEL program as a way to support individual student's emotions and behaviors as well as individual students' mental health needs (personal communication, May 22, 2024). The superintendent considers SEL a Tier 1 core program for all students to develop and support student social skills and mental health needs, while also addressing targeted needs of individual students in need of specific mental health or behavior supports.

The superintendent similarly pointed to the SEL program as an opportunity to provide targeted interventions for individual students:

> We know kids need services. But the funding was always not there. Once moneys became available, we were able to extend that, you know, to a greater extent, reach those kids who actually need therapy—instead of saying "rub dirt on it" and move on. You know? (personal communication, January 25, 2024)

The leader identifies the challenge in the remote rural community of finding access to mental health services and identifying funding. SEL is viewed, then, as a program that can provide the intervention that students may need when facing mental health challenges—which would be analogous to Tier 2 or 3 interventions, even as SEL is simultaneously discussed as a Tier 1 core program to support all students.

Each district leader constructs meaning of SEL by incorporating their understanding within their prior experiences and beliefs and based on their understanding of their rural place. These understandings vary in both the breadth in how SEL is understood, and in how SEL can be

used to address students with more intensive or targeted needs. In spite of these differences, there were some commonalities across participants understanding of SEL, which is discussed next.

Commonalities Across Participants' Understanding of SEL. Amid the differences in understanding SEL, there were some common generalities that were included in discussions of SEL. These commonalities include very broad definitions of SEL, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student behavior and mental health leading—at least in part—to the need to implement SEL programming, and the need to address increases in student behavior and mental health challenges.

In all cases, when asked to define SEL, each superintendent provided a very broad definition. One district leader's definition of SEL was, "meeting our obligation to ensure that our students are healthy in all ways when they graduate" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). Another leader defined SEL as, "just the way we are… it's all-encompassing" (personal communication, January 29, 2024). The third district leader defined SEL as, "providing opportunities for students to really find themselves… I think it's providing a life-coping skill" (personal communication, January 22, 2024). These general definitions were then expanded to emphasize the aspect of SEL that most closely aligned to the leader's experience of the rural place and their prior experience. These expansive understandings of SEL broadly included the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student social development, access to mental health resources in the rural community, and addressing student behavior challenges.

All participants discussed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated school closures as impactful on elementary student social skill development and identified their SEL program to address this issue. However, the intended outcomes for the program varied according to the leader's prior experiences and understanding of SEL: The district leader at

Wilderness School District understood SEL as a way to support student mental health needs and identified students' mental health needs resultant of the COVID-19 pandemic as the reason for implementation:

> We're at a point in our society where we need to teach our students, you know, it's okay to talk about these things…. I mean there's so many things that don't fit in any curriculum, but we still should be addressing" (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

This understanding of SEL as a program to support mental health and social skill development was envisioned as necessary support to address isolation experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another commonly identified challenge SEL was intended to address was lack of access to mental health resources in the community. This lack of access was connected to the rural place and influenced decision-making regarding implementing SEL programs. Participants thought that SEL could help support students' needs when the necessary resources were not available in their community. This is an important finding because SEL programs implemented by educators are not mental health services, and students needing mental health services must be provided services by trained mental health professionals—not educators.

Addressing student behavior challenges was also mentioned by all rural district leaders when discussing SEL programs. Leaders understood SEL as a program that will promote prosocial behavior among students—by providing social skill competency which would lead to more positive interactions among students and between and among students and staff. The idea that SEL will promote prosocial behavior through social skill development leading to better student behavior and more positive community involvement and participation in the rural place

was illustrated when Island Community Schools' leader described addressing student behavior using SEL practices from the district SEL program, "when something happens that tends to trend in that realm of social-emotional learning and we can use it as a learning opportunity….I don't have to rely on [other communication methods]. I can do it face to face, and it seems to work a lot better" (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Shipping Lanes Schools' superintendent also describes his SEL sensemaking to help address behavior challenges:

> What we found is that [the SEL program] … kind of fit with what we felt our kids needed. We were very concerned and felt we needed to do something, and [the SEL program] addressed both those needs of those early elementary kids who were still struggling with 'How do I behave in a classroom?' to our middle school and high school kids where we were like, 'Okay, we've just spent the last three months at home' (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

In both instances, the district leader makes sense of the SEL program as a program to support social skill and prosocial behavior development resultant of the experiences faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the behavior challenges were not exclusively attributed to the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, "[Some of] this is things kids used to get by going to church, by being involved in Boy Scouts, other things like that" (personal communication, January 22, 2024). The idea of involvement in community organizations and the effect of community on student behavior and social development was summed up by the same leader, "We're essentially contracting this out so these kids can have some sense of self… and being part of the greater society" (personal communication, January 22, 2024). The district leader

attributes the need for the SEL program to the lack of student participation in extra-curricular activities that have declined in his community.

Differences in how each leader defined SEL and how it is discussed were reflective of the leaders' prior experience in SEL and their understanding of place. While SEL was very broadly defined and included general commonalities of understanding SEL as a way to address COVID-19 behaviors, behavior support, and access to mental health support, when discussing the program, leaders emphasized the aspect of SEL that they perceived as more important to their community and students. Leaders wove their understanding of SEL as core programming for all students as well as a targeted program to support students' identified needs, particularly in behavior and mental health challenges.

This process of individual sensemaking by district leaders and within each district leads to the wide variance in how SEL is understood—both in depth and breadth—and communicated. The widely variant understanding of SEL, combined with individualized sensemaking around SEL leads to the very broad definitions provided by district leaders. These broad definitions, then, allow widely disparate programs to "fit" under the umbrella of "SEL programs." This creates a situation where implementation of SEL in one district may be quite different than implementation of SEL in another district—leading to the observed challenges of associating any specific student outcome to SEL programming. The next section describes this variation in implementation.

Variation in SEL implementation

SEL implementation across the districts varies according to the differences in how SEL is understood by leaders in each district and the rural place. Variation stemming from the rural place is related to the school structure compared to the structure of the SEL program, where the

program's prescribed format does not align to the school's structure. Of the three districts, only one—Wilderness School District, which was the largest of the three districts—was structurally aligned to support the program's intended implementation practices. The TRAILS program is set up to provide a sequence of lessons for each grade band: K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and high school (Tides Center, 2024). One of the two districts that implemented TRAILS had large enough classes to implement the lessons in this way. In Island Community Schools, however, there were combined age classes of K-3 and 4-6, where the SEL teacher selected lessons according to the content of the lessons and accommodated younger students and older students throughout the lesson. On the day of my observation, as an example, the 5th and 6th grade classes, which were supposed to be part of the 4-6th grade lesson, were not in school due to an overnight school trip. Therefore, the 4th grade students were combined with the K-3rd grade class for their SEL lesson. This was decided moments before class started, so the SEL teacher invited the 4th grade students to join the K-3 class and included both her planned (and already modified) K-3 lesson, but also included some previously planned 4-6th grade (and already modified) lesson activities.

In Shipping Lanes Schools, the district implementing the Lead It! program—the program itself was intended to be a supplemental program to the whole-school transformational program, Leader in Me (F. Covey, n.d.-b). Due to the cost associated with implementation of the full program, the district opted to implement the less expensive program using non-recurring Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds (personal communication, May 23, 2024). The district SEL lead is a national trainer for teachers and school staff in the program, so she stated she was able to supplement the Lead It! program to provide a more comprehensive program, although the Lead It! program itself is not intended to be comprehensive. For example, she stated she provided required teacher training and requires

teachers to be present during lessons—which is not a requirement of the Lead It! program but is included in the full Leader in Me program to ensure teachers are aware of the content of the lessons.

Another source of variation in implementation was resultant of the within district differences in understanding of SEL. Leaders and SEL leads understood the purpose of SEL differently, leading to emphasis on different aspects of the program or different types of activities highlighted. For example, one district leader stated the specific challenges that the SEL program was intended to address was socialization of the students, while the SEL lead stated the program was intended to develop children's leadership skills. The two SEL advocates in this district—leader and SEL lead—expressed diverging understandings of the purpose of SEL. In the case of the leader, SEL was implemented to address observed challenges in social skill development and to address post-COVID behavior issues—and it was discussed as a leadership development program, whereas the SEL lead was committed to the program as a leadership development program—which was subsequently aligned to the CASEL competencies (Patterson, n.d.). These different understandings led to differences in how the students experienced the program when interacting with the SEL lead as compared to the district leader—and school principal. Students learned specific leadership skills while in class with the SEL lead, but when interacting with the rural district leader a different perspective was shared and discussed—largely as it related to behavior and student's future abilities. Whereas the SEL lead encouraged students to develop skills to build their leadership capacity, the district leader focused on building both leadership and social skills for students to be successful in their everyday life and to prepare them for life outside of their community.

This within-district variation was also observed when Island Community Schools' leader stated that the program, "helps make it okay to talk about your feelings, to talk about the stress that you have, the depression" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). In the same district, however, the SEL lead described two instances where students attempted to discuss the topic of mental health and were provided resources for mental health support rather than discussing it in the school environment—largely in response to parent concerns that "the school should not be talking to kids about those topics" (personal communication, May 20, 2024). The leader's aspiration to build an environment wherein students are comfortable discussing their feelings and problems or other personal concerns while in school has not been supported by parents when attempted. Therefore, the SEL lead opted to provide students with mental health resources for support rather than to engage those conversations in the school environment.

During observations, the SEL leads were more involved in program implementation, lesson planning and direct instruction which led to a closer familiarity with the program being implemented. They also tended to more closely align their understanding of SEL to the CASEL framework. However, even among implementers, each SEL lead made sense of SEL implementation through their own prior experience and the rural place. Shipping Lanes Schools' SEL lead came to the idea of SEL through experience with the Covey program. Her interest was first in the Lead It! program, which was subsequently aligned to the CASEL competencies and framework (F. Covey, n.d.-b). At Island Community Schools, the SEL lead indicated experience in a large urban district in another state and made connections to her experiences of urban poverty to rural poverty and understood SEL as a mechanism to provide mental health, social awareness, and social supports to students from underserved communities. The SEL lead at Wilderness School District understood SEL through the lens of a mental health professional and,

while teaching explicit CASEL competencies in the TRAILS program, focused on the mental health needs of students in discussing the need for SEL. These disparate understandings by SEL leads mirror the disparate understanding of SEL by rural district leaders.

This difference in understanding of SEL among educators who are implementing the program further underscores the challenge of identifying SEL program outcomes. Outcomes listed by participants range from mental health and behavioral support to leadership development to providing a safe, welcoming environment for all students regardless of student identity, social status, or race. And, while each of these are important and laudable goals, they are distinct purposes for implementation each fitting within the variant understanding of SEL by district leaders, which is understood through the lens of the leader's experience of place and prior lived experience.

Despite the observed variances in SEL implementation, there was one commonality across districts in SEL program implementation. In every case, SEL was implemented as a pull-out program where explicit SEL lessons were administered by a SEL teacher. Only one district had any requirement that general education teachers be included or trained in the SEL program, the other districts treated SEL as a specials class that students attended during the general education teacher's preparation period. No district had an embedded SEL program reflected in analysis of policy documents or during any part of the school day outside their SEL class.

Variation in SEL implementation was observed across districts. Factors leading to the observed program implementation were rooted in the variance of understanding of SEL—which occurred both across the cases included in this study and within each case. As educators brought their cognitive frameworks to sensemaking of SEL and SEL programming, this led to implementation strategies that varied. The variation in implementation was also based on the

rural place resultant of school and district structures that do not align to the selected SEL program and based on variances in how educators understood SEL and its purpose. The theme of variation in how SEL is understood and implemented further extends to variation in the selected SEL programs, which is discussed in the next section.

Variation in SEL programs

Across the three participating districts, there were two SEL programs offered: the TRAILS curriculum (Tides Center, 2024) and the Covey Lead It! (Covey, n.d.) program. Comparison of these two programs reveal variation across the programs. While both programs claim alignment to the CASEL framework, the programs are not similar. Indeed, the programs' own descriptions denote different foci. According to the Covey program description, "Leader in Me is … designed to teach leadership to every student, create a culture of student empowerment, and align systems to drive results in academics" (Covey, n.d., p. 3). Whereas the TRAILS program describes its purpose to, "strengthen academic learning while fostering qualities such as empathy, self-awareness, and respect … [so] educators can empower their students to build healthy relationships, manage strong emotions, and make caring, responsible decisions" (Tides Center, 2024, para. 1). The two programs implemented in participants' districts, both described by the district leader—and the program itself—as a SEL program aligned to the CASEL competencies, have different goals: one to empower students and develop leadership skills and the other to foster healthy relationships, manage emotions, and support students to make caring and responsible decisions. This section compares the programs.

The TRAILS program has five units with five lessons aligned to the CASEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Each grade band—K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12—has developmentally

appropriate lessons within this structure of units and lessons (Tides Center, 2024). The Lead It! program, which is supplemental to the Leader in Me program, is situated within a more comprehensive transformation process. In order to consider the Lead It! supplemental program, first the Leader in Me program is described, followed by a discussion of the Lead It! program. The Leader in Me program is a "whole-school improvement process" which includes lessons and curriculum but also includes integrated approaches that include systems for direct instruction, classroom management, and leadership trait training for all school staff (Patterson, n.d.). The Lead It! program—which is also referred to as the Exploration Series—is described as a summer or after school extended learning program that includes 130 lessons at each level to build competencies in vision, responsibility, communication, prioritization, relationship building, higher-order thinking, collaboration, developing strengths, and fostering wellness. The program also includes required professional learning for educators and school staff (Covey, n.d.).

These two programs—both of which are implemented as a SEL program and claim alignment to the CASEL competencies—are widely different in several ways. First, the purposes of each program are fundamentally different—one purporting to build student relationship skills, social skills, and empathy and the other in developing leadership skills. The structure of the programs is also different: TRAILS is a curriculum, complete with lessons, stated objectives, and ancillary documents including parent communication and student worksheets. The Lead It! program—which is only supplemental to the full version of Leader in Me—is a comprehensive program that includes a curriculum, but also includes required professional development for educators and all school staff and builds upon a whole school transformation where leadership skill development is infused into all aspects of the school day. The variance in these programs is rooted in the broad definition of SEL provided, which allows widely disparate programs to claim

alignment to the CASEL competencies while impacting the students in fundamentally different ways.

One factor that drives the adoption of the widely disparate SEL programs is the adoption of SEL in the education community as a panacea that will address the needs of students post-COVID, support students in developing social skills, decrease disruptive student behaviors, and help to address mental health challenges that are all reported as increasing concerns by school leaders (J. Durlak et al., 2010, 2011; Institute of Education Sciences, 2022; Taylor et al., 2017).

The broad, all-encompassing definitions of SEL provided by district leaders make it difficult to distinguish between programs that align with SEL as they have defined it and programs that are simply general education climate or culture programs or wellness initiatives. This was observed in the literature review, as discussed in Chapter 2, and was borne out in this study.

The ability to align programs to the CASEL competencies was further observed during document analysis of the districts' athletic policies. The document analysis a priori code "SEL is implicit but not mentioned by name" appeared most frequently among document analysis codes in the athletics policies for each district. While the athletic policies promote the CASEL competencies of responsible decision-making, self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills, the athletics policies were not written or intended to be a SEL program. Appendix F shows how athletics policies analyzed during document analysis were aligned to the CASEL competencies.

The broad definition of SEL combined with the observed differences in how SEL is understood among educators leads to dissimilar SEL programs while the program implementers and the program itself claim to be CASEL-aligned SEL programs. Subsequently, those

experiencing the SEL program, whether teachers, parents, students, or other community stakeholders—necessarily perceive any claim of SEL implementation as the version they experienced, which further leads to misconceptions regarding SEL noted in the literature review. The next section presents findings related to communication about SEL to stakeholders.

Variation in communication with stakeholders

Variation in how SEL is defined and implemented among educators leads to the observed disparity in SEL programs themselves, and ultimately in how SEL is communicated by educators to stakeholders and the community. As each educator interacts with parents and community with their own interpretation of SEL, community members then make sense of SEL according to the educator(s) they interacted with and their experience of SEL through the selected program implemented within their district.

Across districts, district leaders indicated communicating about SEL with different stakeholder groups that SEL leads did. District leaders reported communicating with board members, community groups, and other community leaders about SEL. Communication with parents, however, was primarily the responsibility of the SEL lead. SEL leads described using the program's parent communication resources and communicating with parents about the SEL curriculum. Given the variances observed in how district leaders and SEL leads make sense of SEL, and the differences in the SEL programs implemented, as board members, parents, and the community make sense of SEL their understanding will be based on different information, it can be inferred that this variance necessarily leads to differences in understanding among stakeholders both within and across districts. Further research is necessary to analyze how variances in district leader understandings of SEL lead to variant understandings across stakeholders.

In addition to the variation in the stakeholder groups the educators communicate about SEL with, there are differences across the communities in their experience of SEL. Parents and community members in the district implementing Lead It! experience the SEL program as a leadership development opportunity, whereas parents and community members in the districts implementing the TRAILS program experience SEL programming as a program that develops social skills such as empathy, relationship skills, and social awareness.

Widely variant understandings of SEL were observed throughout the SEL literature, and in particular across the public domain (Anderson, 2022; Larson, 2022; New Discourses, 2022; Parents Defending Education, 2022a, 2022b; Poff, 2021). Sensemaking—even among educators—varies based on the educator's prior cognitive framework and their experience of the rural community. Subsequently, educators communicate with stakeholders in the community using these differing understandings of SEL to the stakeholder groups within their sphere of influence, and these stakeholders' experiences of SEL programs vary according to the SEL program implemented in their district. These stakeholders then make sense of SEL based on their own cognitive framework, how SEL is presented to them by the educator(s) they interact with, and their experience of the SEL program implemented. All this variance in understanding, variance in implementation, variance in programs themselves, leads to the continued variance in perception of SEL across education stakeholders. In addition, there are differences in the feedback received by district leaders as compared to the SEL leads when they are engaging in conversations with parents and community members, which is presented next—starting with the experiences of communicating with parents by SEL leads, and followed by the experiences of district leaders' communication regarding SEL.

One SEL lead described the challenges faced when communicating with parents and stated that he can say things that the other SEL teacher could not, because due to her outsider status she would receive pushback from parents (personal communication, May 22, 2024). This experience of pushback from parents was echoed at Island Community Schools when the SEL lead indicated she had stopped sending home the parent letters from the TRAILS program after being confronted by several parents regarding concerns about "talking about student feelings" in the school setting (personal communication, May 20, 2024). In Shipping Lanes Schools, however, the SEL lead did not report any issues with parent communication. She described discussing the SEL program as the Lead It! program that teaches student leadership skills and parents were supportive of the program (personal communication, May 23, 2024).

These experiences of pushback received from parents by the SEL leads in two districts were not the same experience described by the district leader when communicating with their board members or other community leaders. One district leader summed up his experience succinctly when he said, "people just seem to agree with me" when discussing his interactions with the school board and community regarding SEL implementation (personal communication, May 22, 2024). Island Community Schools' superintendent said,

> We didn't have an ounce of pushback on this…. So, with the school board, it's like, you know, I think this is a problem. We've got to deal with it. The school board, it's like 'yeah, it's a problem. Deal with it.' So the communication is really simple there (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

In both instances of the district leader stating they have not received pushback from parents or community regarding SEL, the SEL leads stated they'd received complaints from parents when communicating with them regarding the SEL program. This difference in

experiences of communication is at least in part due to the differences in whom participants are communicating with; district leaders centered their communication with board members whereas SEL leads centered communication with parents.

It is important to note, in Shipping Lanes Schools—the district that was implementing the Lead It! program and framed SEL as a leadership development program—neither the district leader nor the SEL lead expressed any concerns from parents, the community, or board member perceptions of the SEL program. Both indicated that they used the terms "leadership program" and "SEL" interchangeably and that SEL was primarily understood as the Lead It! Covey program and aligned to the Leader in Me program (Covey et al., 2020). This framing of SEL shapes parent, community, and board member understanding of SEL as primarily a leadership development program—which is different than the understanding of SEL that is promoted in the TRAILS districts wherein one commonly discussed parent concern was that the school should not be talking to students about their "feelings" and mental health. This understanding of SEL, expressed by parents to the SEL lead in both TRAILS districts, is fundamentally different than understanding SEL as a leadership development program teaching habits that will foster leadership skills in their students.

Another finding regarding how SEL is communicated and understood among stakeholders was that the relationships between the district leader and stakeholder mediated how stakeholders make sense of SEL. This finding is discussed in the next section.

Variation in Stakeholder Sensemaking is based on Personal Relationships

Stakeholder sensemaking of SEL is mediated by their perception of the educator communicating with them about SEL. The insider-outsider status of the educator and the relationship between the stakeholder and the educator both influence their perception of SEL.

This section begins by considering how a district leader's status as an insider or outsider to the rural community influences how their school board, community, and parents make sense of SEL in their district, then discusses how the stakeholder relationships with an educator mediates SEL sensemaking and their perception of SEL.

Insider-Outsider status drives how stakeholders perceive SEL.

The insider or outsider status of the educator communicating to the community mediates how stakeholders perceive SEL. The insider superintendent from Shipping Lanes School District explained:

> We're on our own island and we're all related to each other, you know what I mean? We're all cousins. I got three cousins on the school boards and two of the girls on the school board I dated in high school… It's like living in a fishbowl (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

He also shared his long family history in the area, and connected that to how he has developed long-term relationships with the parents and community that provide him with support from the community when he makes decisions regarding SEL program implementation:

> My whole family lived here. I mean, my mom and dad graduated from here. My grampa and gramma went to school here. In fact, my grandfather dropped out of the eighth grade so he could drive bus here, drive school bus…. So we didn't have any pushback… The only comments I had ever gotten were positive comments. Glad you guys are doing this. Glad we're doing this. (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

Due to his long relationships with his community and school board members, when he presented the problem to the board, "Our kids had no social skills and they still don't," there was

fast consensus that the SEL program selected by the district leader would be the program that would address the identified issue, “I think it was because people were seeing for themselves—whether at home or at the store—I think they’re able to see it and see a need more so than ever before” (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

The insider status of this district leader resulted in board member agreement with the leader’s sensemaking of the issue that identified a need for the SEL program, and subsequently his decision-making regarding the specific SEL program selected for implementation in the district was accepted by board members. This experience was shared by the other insider leader in this study when he said, “I just don’t get a lot of pushback on things” (personal communication, May 22, 2024). In both instances of the district leaders perceived as insiders to their rural community, board members tended to agree with the leader’s assessment of the problem and their proposed resolution with few concerns raised. This experience of communicating about SEL with the board and receiving agreement was not fully shared by the only outsider superintendent included in this study.

The district leader who is an outsider to the community acknowledged receiving some pushback from his school board and community when communicating about SEL when he said:

> I don't want to sound too defiant, but I have basically made it clear to my teachers, to my school board members that we are going to run this school in a way that makes it clear that every kid matters. And I don't care if they come in with purple hair, I don't care if they're dressed in goth, I don't care if they want to change their gender 15 different times between the time they're 13 and 18, I don't care. Every kid that walks in this building deserves love. Every kid that walks in

> this building deserves a safe place to be themselves (personal communication, May 29, 2024).

Although the two insider district leader participants both indicated that their school boards generally agreed with their decision to implement their SEL program to address the concerns expressed by the district leader, the district leader acknowledged some instances of school board and other community members expressing disagreement with the SEL program:

> And we might have a couple parents who are like … 'you're spending so much time having my kids talk about their feelings. Teach the kid how to read, right?' So we maybe had a little bit of that, but we never had anyone saying, 'Oh, I don't want you teaching my kid about their feelings.' Okay, there might have been a little pushback being like, Okay, you're spending a lot of time on the social emotional stuff. Let's get on with it. Right? (personal communication, January 29, 2024)

This district leader describes some instances where he was questioned by board members and parents—in informal conversations and settings—and how the stakeholder approached him with an established understanding of SEL and its value. However, in every instance he explains that he is able to have a conversation with the stakeholder to make them understand what they are trying to accomplish by implementing the SEL program (personal communication, January 29, 2024). Although buy-in is not immediate and requires personal conversations in face-to-face settings—either formal or informal—stakeholders do come to understand the need for SEL implementation through these individual conversations which build relationships and understanding between the superintendent and the stakeholders on an individual basis.

The experience of the district leader insider or outsider status mediating stakeholder sensemaking was mirrored in the experience of the SEL leads. In one case there were two SEL teachers in one district. One of the teachers explicitly stated that his insider status led parents to perceive communications about SEL more positively than if the other teacher—an outsider to the community and recent teacher graduate—had said the same thing (personal communication, May 22, 2024). In both of the other districts, the SEL teachers were outsiders to the community. However, only one experienced pushback from parents; the teacher who taught Lead It! and in the district that framed SEL as a leadership development program did not report any pushback from parents or community when presenting or communicating about the program. However, this SEL lead and teacher did acknowledge variation in teacher buy in—all teachers were required to be present throughout each SEL lesson, and some teachers participated actively throughout the lessons and activities while other teachers focused on completing other, unrelated tasks (personal communication, May 23, 2024).

The other district SEL lead indicated that one reason she has had parents express concerns to her was that they "didn't believe the school should be talking to kids about their feelings" or any type of mental health concern. She connected this perspective to the perspectives of parents when she worked in a large urban district in another state that served a community with a high poverty rate—similar to her current rural community. Her sensemaking of parental resistance was based in her cognitive framework about poverty and not necessarily the rural place.

Insider or outsider status mediated stakeholder sensemaking of SEL, for both district leaders and SEL leads. In addition, the district leader's personal relationships further mediate how SEL is understood in the rural community. This finding is presented in the next section.

Rural district leader relationships influence how SEL is understood in the community.

Rural district leader's relationships within the rural community inform how stakeholders make sense of SEL. Relationships are driven by the unique rural setting and rural residents' understanding of "how things are done here." This phenomenon was most directly observed when visiting Island Community Schools. As I was visiting the district with the superintendent, each time we passed a car, or saw a person walking or in a yard, they waved and the superintendent waved back. Initially I thought this was because, as the school superintendent, he was well known in the community. However, I soon learned that this is the local custom for all people. As I traveled to the school, explored the community, and even during dinner at the only local restaurant, everyone I saw greeted me with either a wave or invitation to conversation. I mentioned this observation to the superintendent, who confirmed that this is the common practice in the community. This serves as an example of the importance of the rural identity of this rural community, and how it informed how rural residents interacted with each other, and how they built relationships with other rural residents. In several cases, the district leader waved or interacted with students and parents of students while driving by through a wave, or a quick hello. This constant communication and interaction—on weekends and at times when he was out in the community—leads to relationship development that he stated allows him to approach school-related conversations that are based on a pre-existing relationship; that is, when interacting with parents or board members or other stakeholders, there is already an established understanding between the superintendent and the stakeholder that allows them to build consensus—even if they initially disagree. This creates an openness to understanding when the district leader communicates regarding SEL program implementation that allows stakeholders to understand and trust the superintendent based on those prior interactions:

> So, yeah, it is a different way of living… And that kind of makes it kind of cool. It makes it kind of unique, you know what I mean? It puts, you know, this place with the remoteness puts an exclamation point on rural in terms of, you know, the remoteness and how those values that are typically associated with rural America, you know, both the common interests of rural America. Of both independence, but also caring for each other. Those values are alive and well here (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

This sense of rural residents with well established relationships was further observed in another participant community when visiting and I went to dinner at a pub, and the other patrons all knew each other and greeted everyone as they entered and talked together across tables. The second night, the superintendent highly recommended a popular local restaurant. It was a very busy place, but again everyone knew each other, and several conversations were ongoing across tables. These informal conversations that occur among rural residents all throughout the day, whether at school, in a restaurant, at a game, or any other public event, are opportunities for communication and relationship building with and among district leaders and stakeholders. These relationships mediate how the stakeholders make sense of the decisions made by district leaders. Throughout the interviews and observations, all district leaders shared anecdotes and stories about their communication and interaction with stakeholders—parents, students, community, and board members—that illustrated how their individual relationships with stakeholders affect their work, as described by the Island Community Schools superintendent:

> I think communicating with other schools, with the kids, with the individual kids and with the parents is really important. And like I said, we're really lucky. I can do this by picking up the phone. I don't have to rely on sending out a tweet. I don't

> have to rely on sending out an email. I don't have to rely on school messenger. Right. You can do it face to face and it seems to work a lot better (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Due to the small size of the district, the leader does not have to rely on mass communication and is not limited to sending notes home or communication through social media. They are able to engage in face-to-face communication with their parents, community, and board members to build consensus and understanding.

Another example of reliance on close relationships across the community was provided to show how the community is able to come together because of these prior relationships to acknowledge and support each other even when they disagree: when the COVID vaccine became available. He explained that there were "definitely some folks" who were "anti-vaxxers," and when the local health department wanted to do a vaccine clinic but had no space in the community large enough to hold a vaccination clinic, they closed the school for the day since it was the only building of sufficient size. Although there were a few in the community who opposed to closing school to host the vaccine clinic, others—including those who were opposed to the vaccine—said no, this is "the way we roll here," even if they were not personally planning to get the vaccine. He said:

> I think that the culture wars piece of vaccines is a good example of the community saying yes, this is how the school relates to this community. You can choose your own path when it relates to vaccinations, but it makes sense to have the clinic at the school—it's the only facility … that can handle it (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

Despite deep division in stakeholders' perspectives regarding the COVID-19 vaccine, the Island Community Schools district leader was able to build consensus based on prior relationships to close school for the day to provide the space for the clinic to operate. The prior relationships that extend beyond the school and provide a basis for understanding were also shared in another district:

> Again, the school is the center of town, really. You know, this is where everybody comes for everything. We've had funerals in here, we've had weddings in here. We've had emergency shelter here. It's interesting. It's neat. It's fun (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

District leaders interact and communicate with stakeholders personally all throughout their day—at work and outside of work. These interactions lead to relationships with stakeholders that subsequently affect how stakeholders make sense of SEL programs—because of the relationships that existed before and in other contexts. These relationships can lead to the experience expressed by one superintendent who said, "People just tend to agree with me" (personal communication, May 22, 2024).

Place Permeates Rural SEL Implementation

Place permeates the data as participants centered the experience of place in every interview and observation throughout data collection. Centering place was both in how the participant experienced their rural place and in how they described their community and the students and families they served. Each rural place maintains a deep understanding of identity, history, culture, and place (Biddle, 2023; Biddle & Azano, 2016; Brenner, 2023). The understanding of place and relationships among rural residents mediates how SEL is understood, implemented, and how SEL programs are selected for implementation. Pattern codes were

applied to the data to identify how the social, psychological, and physical aspects of place drove rural SEL implementation. This section begins with a discussion of the findings in the data of the social aspects of the rural place, then the psychological aspects of place are discussed, and finally the physical aspects of place.

Social Aspects of Place

The social experiences of the rural place were centered throughout the data and were the most frequent of the three included aspects of place. Social aspects of the experience of place include the close-knit community relationships that are developed in rural areas, cultural norms and understandings of "how things are done here," and the social and emotional experiences of rural residents. This section discusses each aspect of the social experiences of place.

The close-knit community experience of both the rural superintendents' experience of place and the experiences of rural residents in the community were succinctly described by the ultimate-insider superintendent at Shipping Lanes School when he elaborated on the "fishbowl" experience of living in the small rural community:

> …when you're out in the community, you see Louie's acting silly running around on the island, somebody's gonna check him. Like the old days. I remember the first time I dropped the F-bomb was in front of a store and my Uncle Murray heard me. I was outside the store and he came out and whooped my ass right there on the sidewalk (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

His social experiences as a child in the rural community drove how he understands and makes decisions about students' needs for social and emotional skill development. These experiences lead to a worldview and decisions made by students and individuals in the community that are unique to the place:

> I've got kids … who never want to move away from here because they're comfortable. I can pick up a job, maybe a handyman or work at the quarry. They have no desire to leave the island and see the world (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

The small, insular world that rural residents inhabit is the place where they are comfortable and feel confident in their ability to succeed socially and economically. This understanding is also undergirded by an apprehension of "how things are" outside of the small rural community and the differences in people who are not from their community. A deep and personal understanding of this perspective is shared by the superintendent in this district, and he explicitly links this understanding to his decision to implement his Lead It! program to support students in leaving the community to find success and fulfillment anywhere they choose:

> …my job is to make sure these kids have opportunity to live where they want, you know get paid for what they want to do, that's my goal is every student has an opportunity to choose what they get in life (personal communication, January 22, 2024).

The experience living in the small rural community drives rural residents' understanding of "how things are done here" and their rural identity construction. The Wilderness School District superintendent describes this experience:

> You know. hunting, fishing, things like that. It's just ingrained in who we are and what we do. Still small-town USA. So still a lot of Friday night football games, basketball games, things like that. You know, you're still in a small town where the school district is still the center of, you know, churches, schools—they're still

the center, the pillars of the community (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

He describes an idyllic small-town social community with a strong emphasis on traditional community experiences. However, this idealism is belied in the same district when the SEL lead described a challenge he faces when attempting to change "how things are done" when he had conversations with parents regarding not allowing teenagers to drink and have parties at their houses because parents state that they did those things and "were fine" and the dangerous expectation that 'it's safer to do it at home with me' than elsewhere. These experiences, combined with the "very conservative" nature of the community drive the superintendent's decision-making regarding SEL implementation. His experience of "people just agreeing" with him is based in relationships in the community and the ubiquitous understanding within the community that the superintendent's decision-making, as an insider to the community, can be trusted—whereas the young, female, outsider teacher communicating the same information is viewed with suspicion and distrust, as described by the SEL lead in this district.

The Island Community Schools superintendent summarized the importance of rural residents' social and emotional experiences of place when discussing the impact of remote learning during the COVID pandemic, "our school is all about face to face, our school is all about the personal connection" (personal communication, January 29, 2024). The school and community prioritize and function based on the personal and one-to-one connections made between students and staff, which led to significant challenges when those personal face-to-face interactions were not possible during remote learning. These challenges identified issues that led to the leader's decision to implement SEL, as he described when he stated:

> And so we're like, okay, we need to really purposefully talk about how we deal with emotions, how we deal with anxiety, how we deal with stress, how we deal with pain, how we deal with anger (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

The leader's understanding of the importance of the student and staff experience of personal interactions—which were based on the social aspects of the experience of the rural place—drove his decision making when considering SEL implementation. He connected these concerns regarding students' social and emotional skills directly to the TRAILS SEL curriculum implemented in the district:

> TRAILS is really good. It's like, okay, what are your feelings? …. If you're feeling this, how does that relate to your behavior … how does that impact somebody else … how are these kids dealing with anxiety … depression … peer pressure … potential substance abuse? …. what we found is that TRAILS, because it was really age appropriate, it kind of fit with what we felt our kids needed (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

The superintendent directly connects his observations of student social and emotional skills to the decision to implement the TRAILS SEL curriculum in the school: students were facing the unique challenges associated with the rural place and needed a program that would support that identified need. When presented with the opportunity to implement the TRAILS curriculum at a professional development event, he made sense of the needs of his students and that program through this lens of the specific needs of his rural students.

Psychological Aspects of Place

Psychological aspects of place included how participants' understood and discussed mental health and wellness and rural residents' sense of belonging and identity within the community. This section discusses the data related to how participants' experienced these psychological aspects of the rural place.

The most common description of the mental health needs and resources in the rural communities was rural residents' negative perceptions of mental health support and the lack of access to mental health resources. Put candidly by the superintendent at Wilderness School district, "…we have a lot of kids … you know they don't go to therapy up here" (personal communication, January 29, 2024). This is both a description of "how things are done" in the rural community and the experiences of rural residents who may require these services—they are inaccessible both in the context of the rural expectations of "how things are done" and in the limitations of access to mental health resources in the rural place, "…but they have the resources down there. We don't have that. And the people up here … They'll sit at the bar and tell their stories. They don't go to therapists formally" (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

This lack of access, due both to rural residents own decisions and lack of resources, affects the ability of rural residents to access needed supports, as described by the Shipping Lanes District superintendent, "And they've needed it. That's the thing. Nobody knew that they needed it until they saw the need for it" (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

These experiences of the psychological aspects of the rural place drive how superintendents made sense of SEL and the need for SEL program implementation in their districts. The Island Community Schools superintendent described how he makes sense of SEL in the context of social and psychological needs of the students in his district:

> Yeah, I think it is bigger in a rural area because … there's not a lot of the clubs ... There's no other opportunities for engagement with other youth other …which is not very healthy … we talked about the hidden curriculum. And so I think what SEL does is it makes the hidden curriculum visible and it brings consciousness and conscientiousness to what are we teaching with the hidden curriculum—we clearly know now, and we kind of always did, that it's not just academics, you know, it's the citizenship piece, it's the social piece, it's the emotional piece, and that we can't refer to that and kind of ignore it as the hidden curriculum anymore. We have to pay attention to it (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

He makes sense of SEL within this context of students' need for social and psychological connection and belonging and the context of the rural area and its lack of access to support the social and psychological needs of students in some ways. The decision-making process to implement an SEL program is then based on this understanding and perception of SEL as a program that will address these needs.

Physical Aspects of Place

Physical aspects of the experience of place include the geographic limitations that are inherent in the remote rural location and the ways that these geographic limitations affect the rural residents of the community. Physical geography and remoteness was an important part of the experience of place by participants. At Island Community Schools, this was highlighted by the superintendent:

> And that's where we fall down. Because we don't have enough people here to sustain a mental health provider who's working in a private practice … Secondly is the services that we are able to tap into for our students for mental health are

> online, they're remote, they're virtual… Now those are useful and valuable, but not all of our kids really want to have—it just doesn't work for some kids having a remote therapist or remote counselor. So, that's one of the real drawbacks of where we are. And I think that's really due to the travel-transportation… You know, if I lived on the mainland and I had a kid that needed therapy, I could drive him 30 miles to go see their counselor. I can't do that. (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

The experience of the physical aspects of the rural place drives how rural residents access resources and their experience of accessing resources, making sense of their own needs and needs of students. This experience extends beyond accessing the psychological or educational needs of rural residents to how they access and make sense of accessing any resource, including the expenses associated with gaining access to those resources and services:

> Any healthcare, whether it's dental, whether it's medical, whether it's mental—if I want to go have my kids get their teeth cleaned, you know, which is a $50 thing with my copay, it costs me $250 to go get that because I have to fly me and my kid across to the (mainland). So there's the roundtrip took me about $125 bucks for me and my kid each... And if I get stuck over there, then I have to pay a hotel room. So my $50 teeth cleaning for my kid ends up costing $300 minimum. So, kids go without just because their parents can't [afford it]. (personal communication, January 29, 2024).

This experience of accessing basic resources are rooted in the physical characteristics of the place are also associated with positive experiences. When asked about how the rural place affected outcomes associated with the Lead It! SEL program implemented at Shipping Lanes

School District, the superintendent responded, “I think there have been positive outcomes because of where we live—we’re on our own island and we’re all related to each other” (personal communication, January 22, 2024). The tight social networks that are the result of physical features that limit the size of the local community can result in a positive outcome in the sense of community and belonging. This idea that the physical features of the rural place enhances a sense of belonging was echoed by Island Community Schools superintendent:

> … so on the plus side, because this place is so small, you know, we have a full cadre of teachers from pre -K through 12th grade. We teach everything ... So because we're so small, we can really tailor our academic offerings to each student. So no student falls through … the cracks. If you've got [so few] students, then you better be making sure that each student is getting what they need. So that's one thing. Two is because we're so small, all of these kids need to be engaged. (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

The experience of place is intricately linked to the physical remoteness of the rural community—both in the few residents within the rural community as well as the limitations of accessing nearby communities that are either physically distant or separated due to the island community, as further described in Wilderness School District, which creates a similar sense of remoteness or separateness:

> We're remote. You don't stop here unless you stop here. You go in here for a purpose. If not, I mean, you just drive through. You know, there's no stoplights... But, unless you're meaning to come here, you just keep on going (personal communication, January 25, 2024).

Rural residents' experience of place is—in part—based in the physical characteristics of the unique rural place and this experience informs their place consciousness and how they make sense of the need for SEL implementation within their rural setting.

Summary of Findings

The findings presented in this chapter reflect variance throughout rural district SEL implementation: in how district leaders, SEL leads, and stakeholders make sense of and understand SEL, in how SEL programs are implemented, variance in the selected SEL programs—despite claiming alignment with the CASEL competencies—and communication with stakeholders regarding SEL. This variation throughout SEL is rooted in the rural place—the identities, history, culture, and relationships of the place that drive the perspectives of the rural resident—and their cognitive frameworks of SEL. In the rural place, the effect of the leader's status as a community insider or outsider and the relationships leaders have with stakeholders mediates how their community perceives and understands SEL. Implementation is heavily leader-driven and based on the leader's own sensemaking of SEL and exposure to the selected SEL program. Finally, rural leaders' experience of place and how they make sense of their place is based on social, psychological, and physical aspects of the place that drive their perceptions and sensemaking of SEL implementation. The next chapter considers the implications of these findings.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter presents a summary of the key findings of this research in Table 6. Next, a discussion of the themes of this research is presented. These themes are variation throughout SEL sensemaking and implementation, and place mediates participants' sensemaking, decision-making, and SEL implementation. First, the theme of variation throughout SEL sensemaking is discussed, including how variation permeates all aspects of SEL implementation. Variation is considered separately as it relates to sensemaking, then how variation is found in implementation, how variation is even found when reviewing SEL programs that both claim alignment to the CASEL competencies, and variation in communication of SEL which furthers variations in how stakeholders make sense of SEL. Next, place mediates how participants make sense of SEL and how it is implemented is discussed. Within the theme of place, the way that relationships mediate stakeholder sensemaking is discussed as a central aspect of the experience of place and how rural residents make sense of their unique rural place and how they interact. In addition, the theme of place was a driver of leader-driven SEL implementation, which is also discussed in the section that discusses the theme of place. Next, a discussion of each research question and how it is addressed by the key findings and themes is included. Finally, this chapter concludes by considering the implications of and includes recommendations for future research.

Key Findings

The key findings of this research were variation in SEL sensemaking, variation in implementation, variation in SEL programs, variation in communication, leader-driven implementation, and relationships mediate stakeholder sensemaking. Each key finding is summarized in Table 6.

Table 7

Key Findings and Summary

Key Finding	Summary
Variation in SEL Sensemaking	Variation in SEL sensemaking was observed in both the breadth (what SEL was understood to encompass, such as leadership development or mental health) and in depth (whether SEL is conceptualized as a core program versus targeted interventions. This variation was shaped by two key factors: prior experience and the rural place. 1. Prior experience: Participants' sensemaking of SEL was influenced by prior experience. Each participant brought their cognitive framework to SEL, viewing it through the lens of their prior knowledge or understanding. 2. Rural Place: Place mattered throughout the data. The rural community's values, identity, and history also mediated how SEL was understood. Leader sensemaking was deeply embedded in their experience of their rural place. Rural identity influenced how participants understood and perceived SEL.
Variation in Consistency in SEL Implementation	SEL implementation varied based on the unique rural place and how leaders made sense of its purpose. In two out of three districts, the program was modified to fit the district structure and resources.
Variation in SEL Programs	The two SEL programs in this study—TRAILS and Lead It! —each claimed alignment to the CASEL competencies. However, as the findings presented in Chapter 4 show, the focus, intended outcomes, and content of the programs are dissimilar. This dissimilarity, while also claiming alignment to the same CASEL competencies, illustrates the broadness of how SEL is defined. This was further shown during the document review, where the only policies developed that showed any alignment to SEL were the athletic policies—which were developed before SEL program implementation in the districts and were not intended as a SEL program by the policymakers.
Variation in SEL Communication	Communication was dependent on the stakeholder role. District leaders described communicating with school board members, community leaders, and other community groups. However, the SEL leads exclusively reported communicating with parents and staff regarding SEL. This finding, combined with the findings regarding variation in SEL sensemaking and how SEL is defined, indicates that stakeholders' experiences of SEL will be dependent upon the person with whom they are communicating regarding SEL.

Table 7 (cont'd)

Key Findings and Summary

Key Finding	Summary
Rural District SEL Implementation is Leader-Driven	Program implementation was leader-driven. The consolidation of leadership—wherein superintendents were also the principal with no other central office district staff—gave district leaders the structure to centralize decision-making regarding SEL, although they relied on key staff members for support in implementation. District leaders learned about SEL programs through professional development and networking, then retrofitted that to anecdotal observation of student behavior or mental health needs. They subsequently decided the program presented to them would address these anecdotal needs and decided to implement the program, rather than through a systematic review of data, programs, and alignment.
Relationships Mediate Stakeholder Sensemaking	The rural district leader's status as an insider or outsider to the community and the leader's personal relationships with stakeholders mediated stakeholder perceptions of SEL. Insider superintendents described fast consensus that the selected SEL program would address the challenges that were described. The outsider superintendent faced some challenges gaining this consensus and built more consensus through face-to-face interactions with individual stakeholders, relying on prior relationship interactions to gain consensus.

Themes

The themes of this research are discussed in this section. The themes are variation permeates SEL implementation, the place mediates SEL sensemaking, implementation, programs, communication, and perception. These themes are discussed next.

Variation permeates SEL implementation

Variation in SEL was observed both across districts and participants in this study. The theme of variation was developed from variation in sensemaking, implementation, the SEL programs themselves, and variation in how SEL is communicated—all leading to variation across stakeholder sensemaking of SEL.

This theme of this study aligned to the literature presented in the literature review: how SEL is defined varies not just by stakeholder group but also within stakeholder group—including

educators and the public. The variation in how SEL is understood is based in sensemaking—which is mediated by prior experiences and the rural place. Common themes of variation across the cases in this study were: variation throughout sensemaking and implementation of SEL programs leading to variation in SEL programs, which leads to variation in stakeholder perceptions and understanding of SEL. The variation can be attributed to the broad definition of SEL, resultant of individual sensemaking of SEL that is based on the individual's prior experience—leading to a preconceived understanding of SEL—and anecdotal observations of the challenges faced within in each rural community. As sensemaking of SEL is mediated by prior experience and the rural place, SEL is then understood according to these perspectives that further lead to varying understanding of SEL.

Variation was observed in how SEL is defined in the research, how participants make sense of SEL, how it is implemented in the rural districts, the programs themselves, and how SEL is communicated across educators and stakeholders in the community. The variation in how SEL is defined in the research, combined with an understanding that participants do not come to SEL without a prior cognitive framework of understanding SEL—whether the individual described it as character building or hidden curriculum, and this leads to further variation in how participants are making sense of SEL when they are approaching SEL for implementation. Subsequently, when the rural leader makes sense of SEL according to his prior understanding and the framework of place, then they select a SEL program that claims alignment to the CASEL competencies. However, the breadth of the CASEL competencies allows very disparate programs to both claim alignment while themselves being different programs, with different foci and different intended outcomes. Now, with these variances in educator definitions of SEL, and differences in SEL programs themselves, there are also differences in how educators

communicate about SEL with their communities. Superintendents have a different understanding and a different audience when they communicate about SEL than do SEL leads or teachers. This leads to stakeholders having understandings of SEL based on SEL in the public discourse—itself highly politicized and variant—their experience of their child in the selected SEL program implemented in their district, and which educator(s) they communicate about SEL with. This leads to variation not only within a community, but across communities implementing SEL programming.

Place mediates SEL sensemaking, implementation, programs, communication, and perception

Place isn't just a backdrop—it's a dynamic factor that shapes how people interact with SEL. Place consciousness was found throughout the interview and observation data, and the interaction of social, physical, and psychological dimensions of rural life influence identity construction and place consciousness in ways that are critical for understanding SEL implementation.

According to the data, social and relational factors were the most dominant factor that contributed to rural residents' experience of place and identity construction, followed by the physical and psychological factors. Rural-social co-occurs most frequently with rural place consciousness (29 times) and rural identity construction (16 times), indicating that social dynamics within rural communities are deeply connected to rural identity construction and how they make sense of the rural place and develop their understanding of place. Rural-physical co-occurred with identity construction (10 times) and place consciousness (8 times). This suggests that the physical aspects of the rural community also play an important role in shaping both rural identity and place consciousness in the rural context. Rural-psychological interacts with rural

identity construction 5 times, indicating a psychological element that is less frequent but still important in shaping rural identity of rural residents.

Place was central to how participants made sense of SEL, made decisions about which programs to implement and implementation itself, and how they communicated with their boards, community, and parents regarding SEL program implementation. Participants' own identities are informed by the rural places they inhabit—driven by the social, physical, and psychological factors of the rural community in which they reside—and these factors influence how rural residents think about, make sense of, and make decisions about SEL.

The rural identity was also central to how participants build relationships, how they interact with people—whether they are insiders to the community or outsiders to the community. Rural identity construction was an important factor that was influenced by the social, physical, and psychological experiences of the rural place. The rural identity was two-fold: there was a general identity as a rural resident that included rural residents from other communities, but also an identity that was unique to the rural place they resided in that was more central to participants' sensemaking of SEL, how to implement SEL within their unique rural community, and how to communicate about SEL to their communities. The superintendent's understanding of their rural community drove decision-making in all aspects of SEL implementation—from program selection to implementation decisions, to how to communicate with stakeholders.

The social aspect of the rural experience was an important factor in how rural residents understand and make sense of their rural place and how they understood themselves, their community, and how they made sense of SEL program implementation. These social factors were observed in how individual relationships were an important aspect of the impact of place. Relationships within the rural communities were important mediators of how the rural residents

interacted with each other, and relational trust was paramount when making sense of SEL. Stakeholders more readily accepted leaders' sensemaking of SEL and the need for program implementation when there were established, authentic relationships resultant of the superintendent's role as a member of the community. These relationships extended beyond only school-related relationships and included the day-to-day interactions outside of school which included informal interactions on topics unrelated to school or work. The primacy of these relationships provided insider superintendents with the luxury of both being perceived as an insider in the community plus having been in the community to establish those relationships for very long periods of time. Outsider superintendents used relationship building as a way to address the challenges they experienced as an outsider to the community and district.

The impact of place is also seen in how rural district leaders implement SEL programming. One key finding was that SEL implementation is heavily leader-driven. This was driven by several factors, all based upon the primacy of the social experiences of place, both in stakeholder perceptions and how they make sense of SEL programing dependent upon their relationship with the leader as well as in the tight social networks inherent in a small rural community. First, in all cases, the rural district superintendent served as both principal and district superintendent—there was no central office staff or other education staff on whom the leader could rely to manage the program implementation—making the superintendent and principal more visible and accessible to stakeholders than is generally possible in larger communities. As is common in small schools, there were teachers interested in supporting the SEL program implementation, and they were relied on for implementation—but not decision-making or program selection. The rural leader solely determined the program would be implemented, relied on relationships and their own understanding of the rural place for

messaging to garner support for the program, then selected a staff member who could support and implement the program. The SEL lead/teacher (in all cases, this is one person) was responsible for all aspects of implementation, including training of staff (where it occurred), providing the lessons, communicating with parents, and measuring outcomes of implementation.

How the Key Findings and Themes Address the Research Questions

Research questions for this study were presented in Chapter 1. This section considers each research question and how the findings respond to each question.

How do rural educational leaders define SEL? Why do district leaders choose to implement SEL, and how do they communicate about SEL?

There is significant variation across educators' definitions of SEL. When asked directly, definitions given were broad, from "just the way we do things," to "life coping skills," and "mental health and physical health." This section considers these two research questions separately. First, how rural leaders define SEL is considered, next, how leaders choose to implement SEL is discussed, followed by a discussion of how leaders communicate about SEL.

How do rural educational leaders define SEL? Prior experience and the rural place mediate how rural educators make sense of SEL. Further consideration of district leader sense-making revealed district leaders make sense of SEL based on their existing cognitive frameworks—leaders do not come to SEL as a blank slate. Rather, they have had some sort of experience or understanding of SEL prior to their introduction to SEL programming—in some cases described as "what we used to call the hidden curriculum" (personal communication, January 29, 2024) and "just how things are done" (personal communication, January 25, 2024). Educators tended to align their understanding of SEL based on this prior knowledge. Educators with prior knowledge in mental health tended to align their understanding of SEL within the

framework of supporting student mental health; the district leader with a background in athletics and the military framed his understanding of SEL as a leadership skill development program. And the superintendent whose prior experiences prioritized the need to build a more inclusive environment to support all students approached and understood SEL through that lens.

In addition to the mediating effect of prior knowledge, the rural place also mediated leaders' sensemaking of SEL. Leaders' experiences of place in their rural context drove how they understood the purpose and intended outcomes of SEL, and the variation across these experiences led to differences in how SEL was understood and experienced in their community. Knowledge of the rural community's identity construction, history, and sense of community among rural residents led district leaders to select and implement SEL programs that aligned with the rural identity, history, and culture of their communities. Rural leaders and residents construct identity rooted in their experience of the rural place and constructed their understanding of SEL through this identity. SEL was a program that would support the unique needs of the students and residents of the rural community—to support the strong sense of belonging that is important to the Island Community Schools community, to build future community leaders and provide opportunities outside of the local community at Shipping Lanes Schools, and to support mental health challenges experienced by students in the Wilderness School District.

Why do district leaders choose to implement SEL? District leaders choose to implement SEL based on exposure to a specific SEL program which is then fitted into their interpretations of anecdotal observations of student and community behaviors and needs. Although all district leaders in this study attributed the need for SEL implementation to the COVID-19 pandemic, each leader's sensemaking led to a different understanding of how SEL

program implementation would address this need: by supporting social skill development and prosocial behaviors, by developing leadership skills, and by supporting students' mental health needs. These varying purposes for SEL program implementation led to variation across the programs in the experiences of students and the community.

In every case, the selected SEL program for implementation was the program the district leader was exposed to. Two of the district leaders attended the same professional development opportunity that was promoting the use of one of the programs as a post-COVID program to address issues observed as students returned to school after the pandemic, and the third selected the SEL program after the SEL implementer moved into the area and started substitute teaching in the district. Conversations with the trained program implementer led to his decision to implement the program.

How do rural education leaders communicate about SEL? Communication about SEL was also varied—again both across districts and within districts. During document analysis, it was found that there was no district-wide communication about the SEL program being implemented in any district—all districts relied on SEL leads to directly communicate with parents through the use of program communication letters and worksheets sent home with students. Communication relied on the SEL lead in the building, resulting in parents' experiences of SEL being constrained by the SEL lead's and program's interpretation of it.

Across districts, district leaders communicated about SEL with school boards and community organizations, with limited descriptions of direct communication with parents. SEL leads, however, exclusively communicated about SEL with parents and other staff members. This, coupled with the knowledge that there is variation in how the district leader understands SEL and how the SEL lead understands SEL, supports the conclusion that stakeholder

understanding of SEL is dependent on how they receive communications regarding SEL and their experience of the SEL program implemented in their district.

How do they identify the need for SEL implementation? How do they select specific SEL programs?

There is significant variation in how rural superintendents identify the need for SEL implementation, SEL leads' intended outcomes for implementation, and SEL programs' intended outcomes. Although all the leaders, SEL leads, and programs claimed alignment to the CASEL competencies as both their definition and identified need for SEL program implementation, deeper review uncovered disparate understandings within and across the rural districts included in this research. One program—and SEL lead—focused heavily on leadership skill development, whereas in the other two districts the program was intended to support student relationship skills, social skills, and empathy building. However, in those districts, there was still variation in the district leaders' identified need for SEL implementation—which included improved prosocial behavior and mental health support and building a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students, and the SEL leads' understanding of intended outcomes—which ranged from social skill development to addressing student behavior and mental health. This variation across programs, compounded by variation across and within educators in each district further illustrates the theme of variation throughout this study.

How do rural education leaders navigate the different perceptions of SEL in their community, and how consistent are the choices and understandings of SEL across these rural districts?

This section considers the research question in two sections. First, how rural education leaders navigate different perceptions of SEL in the community is considered. Next, the consistency in how rural districts understand SEL is discussed.

How rural education leaders navigate different perceptions of SEL in their community. Rural education leader participants in this study relied on relationships with individual stakeholders to address any varying perceptions of SEL in their community. The experience of the two insider superintendents reported that they experienced little to no negative concerns related to SEL implementation. Importantly, the superintendents described conversations with their school boards and teachers regarding SEL implementation. In interactions with school boards, insider superintendents described easy agreement with their identification of the issue(s) the SEL program was intended to address and agreement that their selected SEL program would address the identified intended outcomes. Some hesitance was reported in some teachers in the rural superintendents' districts, however, SEL lessons were offered as a specials class by a dedicated SEL lead—meaning teachers did not significantly interface with the SEL program in any district.

However, the one outsider superintendent did express some challenges with stakeholder perceptions regarding SEL. These issues were addressed by relying on prior relationships and through individual meetings and conversations held in both formal and informal settings to communicate more directly his intended purpose for implementation and address any concerns brought by the stakeholder. The superintendent was a strong advocate for the SEL program and with the board expressed a deep commitment to implementation of the program—regardless of any stated board concerns. His reliance on building relationships across stakeholders maximized on the rural identity in the place that prioritizes a small, close-knit community where residents are safe and supported.

At Shipping Lanes Schools, the SEL program was represented as a leadership skills development program, and this framing of the SEL program led to a ready acceptance of the

program by the local community. This ready acceptance of SEL as a "leadership development" program also relied on the rural residents' identity construction that prioritizes self-reliance and independence. The program was called "Lead It!" and was used synonymously with "SEL," leading individuals to make sense of SEL within the framework of leadership skill development. By framing SEL as a leadership skill development program, stakeholders understood SEL as a program that builds student opportunity and leadership capacity, limiting stakeholder understanding and conversations regarding SEL to the framework of leadership.

How consistent the choices and understandings of SEL across these rural districts are.

Understanding of SEL across the participants and districts are varied. Across districts, superintendents and SEL leads had significantly different understandings in how they understood SEL and the reasons for implementation. These differences are also observed within each district. This section first discusses the variations in how the rural participants make decisions and understand SEL within districts—Shipping Lanes Schools, Island Community Schools, then Wilderness School District—then discusses the differences in understanding across the districts represented in this study.

At Shipping Lanes Schools, both the superintendent and the SEL lead envisioned SEL implementation as a program to develop students' leadership skills. However, when discussing a definition of SEL, the superintendent provided a very broad definition and discussed student mental health and behavioral needs. Additionally, he stated that the need for SEL program implementation was to address anecdotally observed student mental health and behavior needs. The SEL lead at Shipping Lanes Schools was primarily interested in promoting the selected program, Lead It!, which was first a leadership development program that had later been aligned to the CASEL competencies to be included on the CASEL list of SEL programs. The

superintendent at Shipping Lanes Schools selected the SEL program for implementation based on exposure to the program—the SEL lead had moved to the area after retiring from teaching and was a substitute in the district who presented the program to him as a leadership development program. Subsequently, the superintendent made sense of SEL based on the program that was proffered and chose to implement the program, pointing to anecdotal observations of student behaviors.

At Island Community Schools, the superintendent also provided a very broad definition of SEL and stated that he selected the program based on a professional development opportunity that he attended. He believed that the program could address anecdotally observed behaviors and mental health needs of students and made sense of SEL through the lens of his rural place and the professional development event he attended. The superintendent also pointed to a strong desire to build an inclusive environment for all students and viewed the SEL program as a way to build student social skills and empathy to support his envisioned inclusive environment and to support his stated desire to implement restorative justice practices when addressing student behavior issues.

Interestingly, the superintendent at Wilderness School District attended the same professional development that the superintendent at Island Community Schools did and decided to implement the program based on that professional development as well. This superintendent, however, noted that his decision-making for implementation was based on his perception of the rural place and the rural residents in the community, and anecdotally observed student mental health needs. Despite attending the same professional development event, this superintendent's decision-making for implementation was based on his perceived need for student mental health support.

Across the superintendent participants, decision-making followed the same process: exposure to the program, fitting the program into prior anecdotal observation, then determining that the program they were exposed to would address the perceived student need. Once the superintendent determined the program would address the student need, they then brought the program to their district and board, where the two insider superintendents experienced easy acceptance, while the outsider superintendent relied on relationships and the rural identity to garner acceptance of the program. The decision-making process was the same across superintendent participants despite different understandings of SEL, different intended outcomes for program implementation, and the necessary differences in program implementation based on the rural school size and structure.

How does place mediate all of these decisions?

Place permeated the data in this study and drove participants sensemaking of SEL, how SEL programs were implemented, and how they communicated regarding SEL. In every interaction, place was centered—it defined participants' own identity construction as rural residents of their specific rural community to how they perceived students' needs to how they thought about the resources necessary in their rural district. Place was driven by social, physical, and psychological experiences of the rural place, and these were centered throughout SEL implementation. Rural residents' experience of the social aspects of their rural community were the most impactful aspects of the experience of place, influencing rural identity construction and how participants made sense of place. Physical and psychological factors also influenced how participants and stakeholders experienced the rural place and rural identity construction and their experience of the rural place.

Place mediated decision-making in three primary ways: rural identity construction influenced decision making when superintendents understood both themselves and the community they served through the lens of their unique rural place and the ways that the rural place drove their identities, the unique aspect of the rural place drove how services are or could be provided—educational services as well as SEL programming, and the lack of access to resources—particularly mental health resources—that was resultant of the rural place was a key driver in superintendent decision-making regarding SEL implementation. This section discusses each factor next.

Rural identity construction was a central aspect of how participants defined themselves, how they defined the district's identity within the community, and how they understood their students and community. Superintendents' centered place as they defined SEL and their decision-making regarding SEL implementation. They identified the unique social, physical, and psychological aspects of place to explain how their students and the community understand themselves and construct identity, how they interact with the school, and how the students' own rural identity is constructed within the rural place. The rural superintendents in this study were keenly aware of the uniqueness of their rural district, centering their understanding of place as they described the needs of the students in their districts, how parents and the community perceive those needs and their perspectives regarding how those needs can be served. Rural identity was the driver for how the rural resident participants perceived SEL and how they made sense of SEL implementation in their unique rural place. This was most observed when each rural superintendent discussed the impact that a lack of access to resources within the rural community resulted in unmet student needs, and the rural superintendent indicated that, although the school was not an intended provider of that service, they wanted to work with local residents

to fill that gap in whatever way would work given the school structure. This was particularly prescient when discussing the lack of access to mental health resources across the participants' districts, which is discussed next.

In all cases, the superintendent in the rural district pointed to lack of access to resources—particularly mental health resources—and the impact the lack of resources has on the community and the students in their district. This understanding of the lack of access to mental health resources in particular both drove how they understood their community, but also drove them to look for ways the school could supplement this need—at times looking to the SEL programming as a way to provide the necessary resources. Rural superintendents in this study expressed a strong desire to support student social skills, behavior, and mental health needs and identified their SEL program as a way to accomplish that goal.

Implications

The findings of this research led to several implications for rural district leaders, SEL policy proponents and organizations, SEL program developers, and researchers. These implications are presented in this section.

Implications for Rural School District Leaders

Findings in this research have several implications for rural district leaders. First, rural leaders have a unique opportunity to leverage relationships to build consensus around SEL, its intended outcomes, and SEL programming due to the small size and frequent formal and informal interactions possible in the rural setting. In addition, there are different implications for rural district leaders as they build consensus for SEL implementation based on their insider or outsider status. Finally, the need to embed SEL in the continuous improvement process, to ensure systematization of the program, as well as to support the need for robust review—which

is particularly relevant in the rural setting with fewer barriers to implementation exist, particularly for insider rural district leaders. This section discusses each implication next.

Leverage relationships to build consensus on understanding of SEL, intended outcomes, and SEL program selection. Findings presented in Chapter 4 suggest that relationships in the rural community affect how district leader programs are perceived and understood. This is an important finding because it provides rural leaders an opportunity to build a common understanding of SEL and its intended outcomes. This will ensure stakeholders within the district and the community hear the same message about SEL and the selected SEL program. Further, a common understanding of the SEL program implemented in the district will ensure that SEL is not co-opted by politically motivated individuals or groups to misrepresent the program and its intended outcomes.

Due to the variance in how stakeholders understand SEL, and the varying perceptions of SEL, rural district leaders should be specific in their definition of SEL. A specific definition and explicit intended outcomes will help insulate the SEL program from political controversies based on widely variant understandings of SEL (Tyner, 2021). According to Tyner (2021), when discussing SEL with stakeholders, explicit, skill-based descriptions of the SEL program and its intended outcome tend to garner agreement with stakeholders across political ideology groups. By relying on relationships to build consensus on an explicit definition and understanding of SEL, with explicit skill-based descriptions of the intended outcomes, rural district leaders can ensure their community has one common understanding of SEL and its intended outcomes while also protecting the program from external, politically motivated discourse that may generate controversy around the program based on misconceptions and disparate understandings of SEL.

Rural leaders can build consensus and an explicit definition of SEL—both in its breadth and whether the SEL program is a core program for all students or a targeted intervention for students based on identified need—by relying on the relationships that are characteristic of the small rural place. Through direct conversations with stakeholders, and frequent, explicit communication, leaders can leverage the relationships to build a common understanding. Involvement of teaching staff and SEL leads in discussions of observations that lead the rural leader to consider SEL program implementation—student behavior or social skill development—will allow school staff to develop one, common, three-dimensional understanding of SEL, both what it is and whether it is a Tier 1, 2, or 3 program. When staff have developed the common definition of SEL, then their communications with stakeholders will ensure the community builds a common understanding while the rural leader's description of SEL in school board meetings and communication with other community leadership groups will ensure all stakeholders understand SEL in the same way.

Once the staff and stakeholders have a common understanding of SEL and a consensus is built regarding the intended outcomes for SEL implementation, a careful review of available SEL programs should be undertaken. As the findings in Chapter 4 suggest, SEL programs themselves can vary even while claiming alignment to the CASEL competencies. Rural district leaders need to engage educators within their district to review and analyze available SEL programs within their specific rural context to identify a program that aligns with the intended outcomes for the district's SEL program and aligns to the structure of the local district. As the data showed—and as presented in the findings in Chapter 4—rural district SEL program implementation does not always align with the program's intended implementation, and there may be structural challenges to implementation with fidelity. Rural educational leaders need to

take this into account during their review of possible SEL programs to gain a deep understanding of the intended implementation of the SEL program and how that aligns to the district structure—and to what extent the required modifications may impact program outcomes.

In addition to the review of the SEL program for impediments to implementation fidelity, the rural district educational leaders should review each SEL program's intended outcomes for alignment with the district's intended outcomes. Findings in Chapter 4 illustrated that disparate programs can claim alignment to the CASEL competencies, but due to the broad nature of the CASEL competencies, the programs themselves can vary significantly. Basing their review on the explicit understanding of intended outcomes developed through consensus and relying on relationships within the local rural place, rural leaders need to identify how each reviewed SEL program aligns—or does not—to their intended outcomes for SEL program implementation.

Implications for Insider and Outsider Rural District Leaders. Implications for insider and outsider rural district leaders are considered separately, based on different findings for each leader group. First, the experience of insider rural district leaders is considered, followed by discussion of implications for outsider rural district leaders.

The findings discussed in Chapter 4 suggest that insider rural district leaders experience less pushback and faster agreement with proposed SEL program implementation. School boards and community groups tended to readily agree with the rural district leaders' description of the challenges they faced and their proposed solution: SEL program implementation. This is an important finding because SEL programs affect the experiences of students in the district and depending on the decisions made by the insider rural district leader, the programs can support student needs, or they may not—even when leaders intend to address a challenge. Therefore, it is imperative that insider rural district leaders carefully consider the challenges they intend to

address with a SEL program, what their intended outcomes are, and analyze and select a SEL program that will address their identified challenges.

The small size of the rural community—and therefore the limited social networks within the rural place—limit the availability of interactions with people who may have different perspectives or ideas. According to Granavetter (1973), the strong ties characteristic of a small social network as extant in small rural communities limit access to different ideas because persons who are weakly tied to your social network are more likely to encounter ideas different than your own and have access to new and different information. Therefore, insider rural leaders need to be mindful of the limitations of the dense social networks within the local rural community and intentionally build ties to people who may have different ideas and different perspectives that may inform SEL program implementation. Including other local educators throughout the decision-making process, from identification of the need to implement the program, to identifying intended outcomes and selecting the program for implementation, will provide opportunities for challenges to implementation that may not be apparent from the perspective of the rural leader. This process will also build consensus across educators within the district, which will lead to greater adoption of the program and understanding across staff of SEL and the selected SEL program.

Rural district leaders with outsider status may face a more robust review process when identifying the need and selecting a SEL program, as discussed in the findings from Chapter 4. Purposeful emphasis on relationship-building across stakeholders in the rural environment will help to build deeper connections and understanding among community members which rural residents rely on when interacting with community members. Intentionally developing relationships supports SEL program implementation. Subsequently, rural district leaders should

follow the steps insider rural district leaders followed in a deep, robust analysis of the challenges a SEL program is intended to address, intended outcomes, and review of the SEL programs for alignment with those goals, including district staff to both build consensus and to ensure the program aligns with the intended outcomes.

Include SEL Programming in the Continuous Improvement Process. Findings from Chapter 4 suggest that rural leaders relied on anecdotal evidence and chance exposure to a specific SEL program when deciding to implement SEL in the district. Subsequently, they did not define the intended outcomes or analyze available SEL programs to select a program that aligned to their intended outcomes. This is important because SEL program implementation that is not aligned to specific intended outcomes is unlikely to lead to successful or sustainable implementation and is likely to contribute to further misconceptions regarding SEL, among both educators and external stakeholders.

Instead, rural district leaders should embed SEL program implementation within the continuous improvement process already established for public schools. This will require continuous improvement teams to identify and analyze data to determine the need for a SEL program, which subsequently would be analyzed prior to adoption for alignment with the intended outcomes (as described above) and would place the program in the monitoring and evaluation cycle embedded in the continuous improvement process to ensure the program is implemented with fidelity and is achieving the intended outcomes. Embedding SEL program implementation within the continuous improvement process would systematize the program and embed SEL throughout the school day—rather than as an ad hoc specials class that is not connected to the general education classroom or district policies.

There are several implications for rural district leaders implementing SEL programs discussed above: leverage relationships to build consensus and a common understanding of SEL and its intended outcomes, involve the educational team to analyze and select a SEL program that aligns to the district's intended outcomes and can be implemented with fidelity within the structure of the rural district. Implications for insider rural leaders largely mirrored this analysis process, with the added emphasis of working with educators to conduct a thorough review and analysis to ensure the program is suitable for the district. Outsider rural leaders should rely on relationship building to first build consensus and understanding—understanding that they will need to build these relationships more than an insider who already has long relationships in the district and community would. Then following the same process to analyze the need, intended outcomes, and program alignment that is described for all rural leaders. Finally, embedding the SEL program within the continuous improvement process will ensure all rural leaders rely on data to identify the need for SEL program implementation, its intended outcomes, program alignment, and ongoing monitoring and evaluation. The next section discusses implications for SEL policy proponents and organizations as they aspire to support rural SEL program implementation.

Implications for SEL Program Proponents and Organizations

The rural setting provides a unique context in which to consider SEL program implementation. The unique context of the rural school district creates unique opportunities for SEL organizations and proponents to support the needs of rural residents. This section presents implications of this research for SEL organizations and proponents.

Consider defining SEL in contexts. A common definition of SEL remains elusive in the literature and across educators and the public. This was a key finding of this research—and the

variance in how rural residents make sense of SEL led to variation through SEL implementation, from program communication, implementation, to program selection and outcomes. Consolidating a narrow three-dimensional definition of SEL that incorporates both the breadth of the understanding of SEL as well as its depth—as either a core Tier 1 program or a targeted intervention Tier 2 or 3 program will insulate SEL from the variation that is observed across programs and stakeholder sensemaking and facilitate common understanding, better program selection and implementation by practitioners, and promote research into outcomes associated with SEL.

One finding in this research illustrated how rural residents are looking to SEL to solve several problems: to address student behavior challenges, to support the lack of access to mental health resources within their local community, to build leadership skills, and to support students developing social skills. One way that SEL proponents and organizations could support rural leaders in these goals would be to separate aspects of SEL according to an intended outcome or program goal. For example, "SEL" could be divided into subsections based on these identified themes: SEL for mental health, SEL to support student social skill development, SEL to support leadership skill development, and SEL to support prosocial skills. Then, each subsection could have its own specific, explicit definition connected to the intended outcomes for that 'type' of SEL, along with identification of programs that align. This way, rural district leaders would be able to review and analyze SEL programs based on their intended outcome initially, rather than wading through the wide array of programs that now claim alignment to the CASEL competencies, even while exhibiting vastly different outcomes.

In addition to identifying the 'type' of SEL according to its intended outcomes or the challenges it is intended to address, program proponents should explicitly define how SEL can

support core needs for all students, how and which aspects of SEL may—and may not—support targeted student needs, such as prosocial behavior supports. Along with this definition of SEL based on its scope of implementation, it will be important for SEL proponents to explicitly differentiate between SEL that can support general student wellbeing and development of positive mental health practices and the targeted mental health needs of students that must be supported by trained mental health professionals. This fundamental imperative is further discussed in the next section.

Support Rural Students' Mental Health by Providing Access to Resources. Amidst all the variation reported throughout the findings of this research, there was one commonality that stood out: rural leaders in each district reported looking to SEL to support the lack of access to mental health resources in their community. This finding echoes findings in other research regarding the need for—and lack of access to—mental health services in rural communities (Arsen et al., 2022).

This key finding in this research that rural district leaders are looking to universal SEL programs to supplement limited access to resources in the community, particularly mental health services, was striking given this research was not intended to address mental health services or access. This is important because rural district leaders report both an increased need for student access to mental health services and a dearth of access within their local community. In all cases, rural leaders reported nearest access to mental health services being more than 60 miles away—and in some cases, inaccessible for several months of the year.

It is important to note that SEL is not a mental health service or program. SEL can include general wellness strategies and explicit instruction in those wellness strategies—similar to what may be considered a Tier I strategy to support prosocial behaviors and social skill

development, or even wellness strategies to help students as they cope with normal daily stressors and feelings. However, for students experiencing mental health challenges or crises that require more comprehensive support, it is imperative that educators do not imply or perceive that SEL can provide mental health services in the way that a trained mental health professional can support those more significant Tier 2 or 3 needs students may have. SEL programs must not attempt to supplant the necessary mental health resources and services that some students need.

SEL proponents and organizations can support this need for access to mental health services and resources by advocating for adequate funding for rural school districts to provide school counselors and psychologists that could provide mental health services in rural districts. Additionally, rural district leaders should work with SEL proponents and mental health advocates to find funding opportunities to support the attainment of mental health services. Finally, SEL organizations could partner with school mental health organizations to identify solutions that support students' social and emotional health, while also providing the mental health services that are lacking in rural school districts—and which rural district leaders are searching to serve.

Implications for SEL Program Developers

There were two important implications for SEL program developers as they create SEL programs. First, by framing their SEL program within a three-dimensional understanding of SEL to include both the category or type of SEL program as well as aligning the program to the MTSS Tier 1, 2, and 3, SEL program developers can clearly communicate to stakeholders the intended and appropriate use of their SEL program. The second implication is for SEL program developers to center place in how the program is developed and communicated. Each implication is discussed next.

Develop a Three-Dimensional Description of the SEL Program. The findings that rural district leaders have different purposes and understandings of SEL programming and varying intentions for how the program will be used: as a Tier 1, 2, or 3 program indicate a need for more clear descriptions of SEL programs. Program developers should provide clarity in the type or category of SEL that is addressed in the program—such as leadership skill development, social skills development, wellness programming. In addition to clear descriptions of the program and its intended use—or outcomes that can be achieved by implementing the program—program developers should clearly describe the program as either a Tier 1 core program or Tier 2 or 3 targeted and intensive support program.

Consider Place in SEL Program Descriptions. Place was an important mediator of how the rural superintendents understood SEL and how they selected and implemented SEL programming. This is an important finding because context matters: rural leaders seeking SEL programs for implementation will understand each program according to their perspectives and experiences of the rural place. With this knowledge, SEL program developers should include deep descriptions of how the SEL program addresses the unique needs of the rural place. Next, implications for future research are described.

Implications for Future Research

This research identified several implications for future research into rural school district SEL program implementation. The first recommendation for future research is based on the finding that across the rural districts in this study, rural leaders are looking for opportunities to support students' growing need for mental health services despite limited access in the local rural community. This important finding highlights the need for further study regarding rural student access to mental health services to identify ways to support this need and provide necessary

services. Currently, rural district leaders are searching for opportunities to provide this resource within their districts and buildings. However, a more comprehensive approach is required, with mental health professionals accessible to rural residents who are in need of this service.

A second implication for future research is how social networks in rural districts direct rural educator and stakeholder sensemaking for SEL program implementation. The key finding that relationships mediate how rural residents make sense of SEL shows that the local social networks are central to building understandings of SEL and drives stakeholder perception. This provides an opportunity for further research to elucidate how social networks impact sensemaking, and who is—and is not—impacted by these social networks.

The experience of place was rooted in social, physical, and psychological factors that influenced how rural residents constructed identity and developed place consciousness. These factors of the rural place each affected rural district leader understanding of SEL, and this finding would support future research into how the place affects decision-making. Research that considers what are the aspects of place that drive how leaders understand SEL, and how do those drivers influence decision-making, and by whom could provide a better understanding of how place and sensemaking interact. Place interacted with how rural residents make sense of the SEL program—it mediated how rural residents understood SEL and its intended outcomes. Future research could develop a framework that shows how place is centered in rural resident sensemaking.

Limitations of this research were also considered. The findings of this research are based on data collected through interviews, observations, and document analysis which is reliant on the perceived experience of participants; it does not quantify the impact of SEL implementation or identify the unique impact of SEL implementation among all rural schools. Rather, this study

focuses on the intersection of sensemaking within these rural community contexts throughout SEL implementation.

This research is limited to the perspectives of three remote rural superintendents in rural northern Michigan. Not all rural communities are alike (Schafft & Maselli, 2021; Theobald & Wood, 2010). Context matters, it is important to note that the experience of SEL implementation in a remote rural community in the south, or the west, or any other region may be vastly different than the experiences of these three remote rural communities in Michigan.

Another important limitation is that this research does not provide information about the effectiveness of any SEL program implemented nor provide information about the outcomes associated with SEL implementation. The findings from this research are informative regarding how rural district leaders understand SEL, how leaders communicate with stakeholders regarding SEL implementation, their intended outcomes, and how they attend to varying perceptions of SEL throughout implementation, however this research does not include an analysis of a SEL program or its efficacy.

Conclusion

This research adds to the literature of SEL implementation through the lens of the rural district leader. The findings of this dissertation show how variation permeates rural district SEL implementation. This variation is rooted in individual sensemaking. Rural residents do not come to SEL understanding with a blank slate; they come to SEL with preconceived ideas regarding what SEL is or isn't, and these ideas are mediated by the rural place and prior experiences. The effect of these mediating influences of place and prior experience contribute to the variation seen in how SEL is understood, how it is implemented, and even variation in the programs themselves—even as they claim alignment to the CASEL competencies. This variation in

understanding of SEL, along with the broad definitions of SEL, contributes to the vastly disparate understandings of SEL that have been observed throughout the research literature, within the education community, among stakeholders, and across the public discourse. The implications of this variation are rural leaders need to identify specific intended outcomes for SEL implementation and analyze SEL programs for alignment to their intended outcomes. Rural leaders have opportunities to leverage relationships to build a consensus for understanding SEL that is unique to the rural place and possible due to the small size of the community served. This should be capitalized to build a common understanding of SEL so that communication, programming, and outcomes align to one common understanding. There was an important finding that rural leaders are searching for ways to provide necessary mental health services to students who are increasingly in need of them. While rural leaders are currently looking to SEL as a way to bridge this gap, further research and partnerships among SEL organizations and school and student mental health organizations and proponents could fill this identified gap for rural districts by finding solutions to ensure every student has access to the mental health resources they need.

Rural places have unique social structures and networks, challenges, and opportunities. There is an ongoing need for future research into how rural places drive rural residents' experience of SEL, and how this experience of place drives sensemaking when considering SEL programs. Without a clear understanding of how rural residents make sense of SEL and its intended outcomes, SEL in rural spaces will continue to be implemented as a solution to numerous identified challenges, never fully serving any of them, and then be discarded as the most recent educational panacea that did not pan out. Instead, researchers and rural residents alike must clearly identify and understand the unique needs of rural residents and identify which

challenges SEL can support—and which it cannot. This awareness will allow rural residents and SEL advocates to ensure rural districts are provided with the resources necessary to support the social, emotional, and mental health needs of all students in rural districts.

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APPENDIX A: STUDENT OUTCOMES ASSOCIATED WITH SEL PROGRAMS

Table A-1

Student Outcomes Associated with SEL Programs

	SEL Skills	Attitude (improved)	Behavior (improved)	Academic Achievement	Conduct problems	Emotional Distress	Drug Use	Prosocial Behavior	Attendance	Suspensions	Perception of School Climate
Durlak et al. (2010)	X	X	X	X							
Taylor et al. (2017)	X	X	X	X	X*	X*	X*				
Wigelsworth et al. (2016)	X	X	X	X	X*	X*		X			
Sklad et al. (2012)	X			X	X*	X*		X			
Cahill & Davand (2020)	X				X*	X*					
Ashdown & Bernard (2012)	X										
Snyder et al. (2010)				X					X	non-significant findings	
Moffit et al. (2011)								X			
Battistich et al. (2004)					X*		Non-significant findings	X			
Corcoran et al. (2018)				X							
Xia et al. (2022)				non-significant findings					X		
Social and Character Development Research Consortium+ (2010)	non-significant findings		non-significant findings	non-significant findings							X

Note. Blank cells indicate the outcome variable was excluded from analysis.

[+] Social and Character Development Research Consortium (2010) findings represented in this table are across-program findings (only).
* indicates decline in outcome variable.

APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

The following protocols will be used to interview participants in each stakeholder group. For participants who may belong to more than one stakeholder group, the participant will be asked non-duplicative questions from both protocols. Parenthetical and italicized questions are clarifying and follow-up questions.

Table B1

Topic Checklist

	Topic
	Definition of SEL and how it was developed
	Challenges that SEL is intended to address
	Outcomes: intended and unintended
	Communication among various stakeholder groups
	Perceptions of SEL in the community

Unique Rural Context

- Tell me about your community. *(What's it like to live in _____?)*
- What do you like about living in _____? Why do you live here?
- Why do you think people choose to live or stay here, instead of moving to a larger community or city?

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Resources:

- Are there specific SEL-related tools or programs available in the community for educators or leaders? *(Where do people go if they are seeking leadership trainings or opportunities? How are students involved in community events or leadership?)*

- What mental health resources are accessible to individuals in the community? *(Where are the local mental health centers?)*
    - Are there adequate resources?
    - Are there barriers to accessing these resources?
    - Does the school fill in this need? If so, how?

Community Organizations and Groups:

- Are there local organizations, such as Rotary or Kiwanis, that play a role in community development? If so, how? *(Which community groups are active? What types of community events are they involved in? Are students included in these events?)*

Unique Aspects of the Community:

- What, in your opinion, makes this community unique compared to others? *(What makes ____ unique, compared to other rural communities?)*
- What are popular recreational activities that people engage in? Who is involved? How is it run/organized?
- What are the community events that are important to the local community, how is that planned, who participates?
    - Are there seasonal events or community events that are important to the community?

Traditions and Cultural Practices:

- Could you share some of the prominent traditions or cultural practices observed in the community?
- How do these traditions contribute to a sense of identity and cohesion among community members?

Research Question 1: Why do district leaders choose to implement SEL?

- How did your district decide to implement SEL? (*What kind of process did you go through? Whose idea, how did it come about?*)
    - How did your rural community context contribute to the decision-making process? (*Did you have unique challenges because you are a rural district, and if so, what were they? How do you think being in a rural setting impacted this process? Can you describe the strengths and challenges that you faced?*)
- What challenges were you trying to address when you chose to implement SEL?
    - In what ways were the challenges you faced impacted by your rural context? *(Were these challenges that were unique to the rural context, or to your community context specifically?*) If so, how?
- What outcomes have you seen from SEL implementation in your district? (*Did SEL address the challenges you listed in the previous section?*)
    - Are there unintended outcomes associated with SEL implementation in your district? If so, what? (*Were there positive or negative outcomes that you did not anticipate from SEL?*)

Research Question 2: How do rural educational leaders define SEL?

- How do you define SEL?
- How did you come to that definition?
- Has your definition of SEL changed throughout your process of SEL implementation?
    - Has implementation of SEL it changed your perception of SEL?
- Do you have a Theory of Action or conceptual framework of SEL? (*How does SEL 'work'?*)

- How does SEL address the challenges you identified?
- How will SEL impact your intended outcomes?

Research Question 3: What are leaders' intended outcomes for SEL implementation, and how does this align to SEL program intended outcomes?

- What were your intended outcomes for SEL implementation?
  - How are the intended outcomes aligned to your local community context? How do the outcomes you selected connect to community goals and values?
  - Are your intended outcomes driven by the rural context? If so, how?
- Have you achieved those outcomes? Has your rural setting facilitated or impeded achieving your intended outcomes? If so, how?
  - How do your observed outcomes align with what you intended to accomplish?

Research Question 4: How do rural education leaders communicate about SEL to internal and external stakeholders?

- In what ways do you communicate with staff about SEL?
- In what ways do you communicate with parents about SEL?
- In what ways do you communicate with the School Board about SEL?
- What kind of responses have you received from each stakeholder group? (*What were some of their comments, concerns, suggestions?*)
- How does your communication vary across stakeholder groups, in both mode and content?

Research Question 5: How do rural education leaders navigate the varying perceptions of SEL in their community?

- What has been your experience of community buy-in to SEL implementation?
- What challenges have you had with explaining SEL to the community?
- Have you had challenges gaining buy in from any stakeholder groups? If so, what were those challenges and how were they resolved?
    - How were these challenges connected to your local community context?
    - Were they related to or driven by the unique rural context of your district? If so, how?
- Were there any surprises as you have engaged in discussions about SEL?

Final Network Sampling Question

- Who are some additional participants that could provide me more information about what we've discussed today? Can you identify people from each stakeholder group:
    - School Board member(s)
    - School staff – teachers or other instructional staff
    - Parents or community members

APPENDIX C: OBSERVATION FIELDNOTES

Table C1 describes fieldnotes that were taken during each observation and aligned to each research question.

Table C1

Observation Fieldnotes

Event	Research Question(s)	What to Observe
Staff Meetings	1, 2, 3, 4; rural context	What are the stated or understood expectations for SEL implementation? What is the content discussed regarding SEL? How does the staff define and understand SEL? How is SEL woven into discussion of content, student behavior, or other topics? Are there any explicit conversations regarding communicating about SEL with parents or the community?
School-community events	RQ 1, 2, 5; rural context	Is SEL discussed? If so, how and by whom? If discussed, are there common understandings of SEL among participants? How do participants respond to varying understandings of SEL, if extant?
SEL Lead and Lesson	RQ 2, 3, 5; rural context	Does the SEL lesson align to the leaders stated definition of SEL? Does the SEL lesson align to the SEL lead's stated definition of SEL? What are the intended outcomes of the SEL lesson? Do these outcomes align to leader outcomes? How does the unique rural context impact the classroom – setting, discussions, interactions among students or with staff and students?

APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

Table D1

Observation Protocol

District	RQ(s)/ District-Specific	Event/Observation Type	What to Observe
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	What are the stated or understood expectations for SEL implementation?
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	What is the content discussed regarding SEL?
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	How does the staff define and understand SEL?
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	How is SEL woven into discussion of content, student behavior, or other topics?
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	Are there any explicit conversations regarding communicating about SEL with parents or the community?
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 3, 5	Staff Interactions	Are there any explicit intended outcomes discussed regarding SEL? If so, what are they and do they align to district leader and/or staff understandings?
Wilderness school district	1,2, 5	Community/Parent Interactions	Is SEL discussed? If so, how and by whom?
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 5	Community/Parent Interactions	If discussed, are there common understandings of SEL among participants?
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 6	Community/Parent Interactions	How do participants respond to varying understandings of SEL, if extant
Wilderness school district	1, 2, 3, 4, 5,	Community/Parent Interactions	What are the common understandings—or different understandings—of SEL among community? Do they align to district leader's understanding?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	Superintendent Discussion	What do you attribute the enrollment decline this year to?

Table D1 (cont'd)

Observation Protocol

Wilderness school district	**Wilderness school district**	**Superintendent Discussion**	**When did WILDERNESS SCHOOL DISTRICT begin implementing TRAILS?**
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lead	Why did you get into SEL?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lead	How do you define SEL?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lead	How would you describe staff buy-in to SEL?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lead	What outcomes have you observed? Expected or unexpected?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lead	Have you needed to modify how the TRAILS lessons are presented due to the school/district program? i.e., multi-age classrooms, time and resources?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lesson	Describe student engagement
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lesson	What SEL competency is taught?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	SEL Lesson	Is the SEL competency taught explicitly?
Wilderness school district	Wilderness school district	Superintendent Discussion	I noticed in reviewing your policy documents that SEL competencies come out most in your athletics handbook. Does that surprise you? What do you attribute that to?
Island community schools	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	What are the stated or understood expectations for SEL implementation?
Island community schools	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	What is the content discussed regarding SEL?
Island community schools	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	How does the staff define and understand SEL?

Table D1 (cont'd)

Observation Protocol

Island community schools	**1, 2, 3, 4**	**Staff Interactions**	**How is SEL woven into discussion of content, student behavior, or other topics?**
Island community schools	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	Are there any explicit conversations regarding communicating about SEL with parents or the community?
Island community schools	1, 2, 3, 5	Staff Interactions	Are there any explicit intended outcomes discussed regarding SEL? If so, what are they and do they align to district leader and/or staff understandings?
Island community schools	1,2, 5	Community/Parent Interactions	Is SEL discussed? If so, how and by whom?
Island community schools	1, 2, 5	Community/Parent Interactions	If discussed, are there common understandings of SEL among participants?
Island community schools	1, 2, 6	Community/Parent Interactions	How do participants respond to varying understandings of SEL, if extant
Island community schools	1, 2, 3, 4, 5,	Community/Parent Interactions	What are the common understandings—or different understandings—of SEL among community? Do they align to district leader's understanding?
Island community schools	Island community schools	Superintendent Discussion	Do you have a student handbook or other student-related policies document? Things like discipline code, behavior expectations, athletic policies, eligibility, etc?
Island community schools	Island community schools	SEL Lead	Why did you get into SEL?
Island community schools	Island community schools	SEL Lead	How do you define SEL?
Island community schools	Island community schools	SEL Lead	How would you describe staff buy-in to SEL?
Island community schools	Island community schools	SEL Lead	What outcomes have you observed? Expected or unexpected?

Table D1 (cont'd)

Observation Protocol

Island community schools	**Island community schools**	**SEL Lead**	**Have you needed to modify how the TRAILS lessons are presented due to the school/district program? i.e., multi-age classrooms, time and resources?**
Island community schools	Island community schools	SEL Lesson	Describe student engagement
Island community schools	Island community schools	SEL Lesson	What SEL competency is taught?
Island community schools	Island community schools	SEL Lesson	Is the SEL competency taught explicitly?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	What are the stated or understood expectations for SEL implementation?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	What is the content discussed regarding SEL?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	How does the staff define and understand SEL?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	How is SEL woven into discussion of content, student behavior, or other topics?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 3, 4	Staff Interactions	Are there any explicit conversations regarding communicating about SEL with parents or the community?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 3, 5	Staff Interactions	Are there any explicit intended outcomes discussed regarding SEL? If so, what are they and do they align to district leader and/or staff understandings?
Shipping lanes school	1,2, 5	Community/Parent Interactions	Is SEL discussed? If so, how and by whom?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 5	Community/Parent Interactions	If discussed, are there common understandings of SEL among participants?
Shipping lanes school	1, 2, 6	Community/Parent Interactions	How do participants respond to varying understandings of SEL, if extant

Table D1 (cont'd)

Observation Protocol

Shipping lanes school	**1, 2, 3, 4, 5,**	**Community/Parent Interactions**	**What are the common understandings—or different understandings—of SEL among community? Do they align to district leader's understanding?**
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lead	Have you needed to modify how the TRAILS lessons are presented due to the school/district program? i.e., multi-age classrooms, time and resources?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lead	Why did you get into SEL?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lead	How do you define SEL?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lead	How would you describe staff buy-in to SEL?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lead	What outcomes have you observed? Expected or unexpected?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lesson	Describe student engagement
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lesson	What SEL competency is taught?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	SEL Lesson	Is the SEL competency taught explicitly?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	Superintendent Discussion	I noticed in reviewing your policy documents that SEL competencies come out most in your athletics handbook. Does that surprise you? What do you attribute that to?
Shipping lanes school	Shipping lanes school	Superintendent Discussion	How long has Shipping Lanes School been implementing the Covey program? Is Covey implemented at Shipping Lanes School?

APPENDIX E: CODE BOOK

Semi-structured Interview Protocol A Priori Codebook

This codebook establishes the interview protocol anchors that will be used during the coding process and provides a framework for initial analysis.

Table E1

Participant Interview Codebook

Research Question	Code	Justification
1	**First learn about SEL**	
1	Challenges to address with SEL	Will identify why the leader chose to implement SEL.
1	SEL competencies	Does district define SEL as a set of competencies?
2	Definition of SEL	
3	SEL intended outcomes	
4	Communication about SEL	
5	Participant perception of SEL	
5	Parent buy-in to SEL	
5	Community buy-in to SEL	
5	School board buy-in to SEL	
5	Staff Buy-in to SEL	
Rural Context	SEL impact on community culture	SEL programming sustains students cultural values and norms (Gagnier et al., 2022)
Rural Context	Local culture shapes SEL	Local family & community shapes student needs and experiences (Casto & Sipple, 2022)
Rural Context	SEL addresses inequity	Rural communities are heterogeneous communities with unique stratified spaces that include marginalized, oppressed subgroups as a result of racism, gender discrimination, sexism, and highly local systems of privilege (McHenry-Sorber & Budge, 2018)

Table E1 (cont'd)

Participant Interview Codebook

Rural Context	**Place-based Consciousness**	**Rural leaders construct a deep understanding of place to understand the complex heterogenous social and political structure (McHenry et al. 2018). Will help understand how rural leaders are thinking about their local context as it relates to SEL.**
Rural Context	Rural Identity Construction	Intersection of access to resources and opportunity (Logan et al. 2017), local community and culture, and deficit identity constructions (Howley & Howley, 2010). This code will highlight how identity is considered or included in SEL implementation.
Rural Context	Leader Insider/Outsider	Insider/outsider perspective of rural superintendents impacts how the leader interacts with community and how the community perceives the leader (McHenry-Sorber & Budge). Specifically, insiders tend to place higher emphasis on community interaction and relationship building, whereas outsiders have been more effective as change agents (McHenry-Sorber & Budge). This will be important to this study to understand whether these leaders are insiders to the community and differences in how communities perceive SEL implementation.
Rural Context	Implementation capacity	Rural schools face unique factors that impact implementation fidelity, including structural factors, limited resources, and time constraints that are unique to the rural context (Azaon et al. 2014)/
Rural Context	Political Ideology	This code will identify places where political ideology is discussed.

Table E1 (cont'd)

Participant Interview Codebook

Rural Context	Political Groups Opposition to SEL	This code will identify places where specific political groups have stated opposition to SEL.

Document Analysis A Priori Codebook

To ensure document analysis codes are aligned to the research questions and to provide a conceptual framework for analysis, a priori codes were developed to ensure analysis is confined to the fundamental elements of interest in this research: how educational leaders define SEL, their intended outcomes for SEL implementation, and how they communicate with stakeholders about SEL. The following a priori codes are the a priori descriptive codes applied to document analysis (Saldaña, 2021).

Table E2

Document Analysis Codebook

Research Question(s)	Document Type (Policy or Communication)	Code
1, 2, 3, 4, 5*	Policy	**SEL is explicitly included**
1, 2, 3, 4, 5*	Policy	**SEL is implicit but not mentioned by name**
1, 2, 3, 4, 5*	Policy	**SEL is not included**
2	Policy	**Aligns to district SEL definition**
2	Policy	**Does not align to district SEL definition**
4	Communication	**SEL is explicitly included in communication**
1, 2, 3, 4, 5*	Communication	**SEL is implicit but not mentioned by name**
1, 2, 3, 4, 5*	Communication	**SEL is not included**

Table E2 (cont'd)

Document Analysis Codebook

2	**Communication**	**SEL definition is provided**
2	Communication	**Aligns to district SEL definition**
2	Communication	**Does not align to district SEL definition**

* research question alignment will depend on content of document analyzed.

Pattern Codes

After a priori coding of interviews and document analysis and as themes began to emerge both within districts and across districts, pattern codes were developed to identify themes within and across districts.

Table E3

Pattern Codes

Theme	**Pattern Code**
CASEL-competency aligned SEL program	**CASEL as definition of SEL**
Leader-driven implementation	**Leader-driven implementation**
SEL competencies are primarily embedded in athletics policies	**Embedded SEL competency**
Staff/community buy in	**Staff/community buy in**
Staff/community opposition	**Staff/community opposition**
Insider Superintendent	**Insider Superintendent**
Outsider Superintendent	**Outsider Superintendent**
District structure is able to support implementation with fidelity to program	**Implementation with fidelity**
District structure requires implementation modifications to fit district	**Implementation modified**
Communication regarding SEL	**Communication at classroom level**
"Leadership" is used to describe SEL within district and to external stakeholders	**"Leadership" used to describe SEL**

Table E3 (cont'd)

Pattern Codes

Participants' experience of the rural place was central to SEL program implementation	**Rural-Physical**
Participants' experience of the rural place was central to SEL program implementation	**Rural-Psychological**
Participants' experience of the rural place was central to SEL program implementation	**Rural-Social**

APPENDIX F: ATHLETICS POLICIES' ALIGNMENT TO CASEL SEL COMPETENCIES

Table F1 and the excerpts from each district athletic policy highlight alignment between each district's athletic policies and the five CASEL competencies

Table F1

Athletic Policy Alignment to CASEL Competencies

CASEL Competency	Shipping Lanes School Athletic Policy	Wilderness School District Athletic Policy	Island Community Schools Athletic Policy
Self-awareness	X	X	X
Self-management	X	X	X
Social awareness	X	X	
Relationship skills	X	X	X
Responsible decision-making	X	X	X

Wilderness School Athletic Policy Ten Guidelines for Parents, Coaches, and Players Excerpt

Data from the document analysis showed that athletic policies—which were developed prior to SEL program implementation and did not have an intention to embed SEL to the program—can be aligned with a SEL program. The ten guidelines for parents, coaches, and players illustrate how SEL is embedded throughout the policy:

1. Make sure your children know that win or lose, scared or heroic, you love them, appreciate their efforts, and are not disappointed in them. This will allow them to do their best without fear of failure. Be the person in their life they can look to for constant positive reinforcement.

2. Try your best to be completely honest about your child's athletic capability, their competitive attitude, sportsmanship, and actual skill level.
3. Be helpful, but don't coach them on the way to the rink, pool, or track or on the way back or at breakfast, and so on. It is tough not to, but it is a lot tougher for the child to be inundated with advice, pep talks, and often critical instruction.
4. Teach them to enjoy the thrill of competition, to be "out there trying" to be working to improve their skills and attitudes. Help them to develop the feel for competing, for trying hard, and having fun.
5. Try not to relive your athletic life through your children in a way that creates pressure: you fumbled too, you lost as well as won. You were frightened.
6. Come prepared to work at every practice where he/she is physically able
7. Accept the team rules as established by the coach and the athletic department.
8. Attempt to communicate all questions and concerns with the coach in a timely fashion.
9. Display a respectful attitude towards his/her teammates, coaches, officials, spectators, and opponents, at all times.

Shipping Lanes School Athletics Policy Excerpts

Document analysis of athletics policies at Shipping Lanes School showed how the athletic program could be aligned with a SEL program, illustrated by this excerpt:

> Athletics at Shipping Lanes School offers all students many opportunities for fun, competition and personal development. Athletic activities develop the qualities of hard work, physical fitness, cooperation and team spirit. It is an honor to represent

our school as a member of any team. This honor carries with it a tremendous responsibility.

SPORTSMANSHIP OF STUDENTS & SPECTATORS

The student body and spectators should display the following characteristics of good sportsmanship at all times.

• Show respect for the officials

• Show respect for the opponent at all times

• Know, understand, and appreciate the rules of the contest

• Maintain self-control at all times

• Recognize and appreciate skill in performance regardless of affiliations

Island Community Schools Interscholastic Sports Policy Excerpts

The following excerpt from the Interscholastic Sports Policy at Island Community Schools can be aligned with the CASEL competencies listed above:

The program of interscholastic athletics should provide students the opportunity to exercise and test their athletic abilities in a context greater and more varied than that which can be offered by a school or the School District alone.

The program should foster the growth of school loyalty with the student body as a whole and stimulate community interest in athletics. Game activities and practice sessions should provide many opportunities to teach the values of competition and good sportsmanship.

Since the primary purpose of the athletic program is to enhance the education of participating students as indicated in this policy, the Board places top priority on

maximum student participation and the values of good sportsmanship, team play, and fair competition, rather than on winning, particularly at sub-varsity levels.