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Perspective

SEL Is Adaptive: Exploring Implementation Integrity Through SEL Adaptations in OST Settings

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Abstract

Although social emotional learning (SEL) is generally regarded as beneficial for children, there is an enduring tension between the need to observe fidelity to SEL programming (to reach desired outcomes) and the need to adapt SEL programming (to make implementation more feasible in a given setting). This tension can be heightened in out-of-school time (OST) settings, which are often not considered in the design of traditional SEL programming. The perspective presented in this paper examines the fidelity–adaptation dilemma by describing the SEL adaptations of one OST practitioner to illustrate *integrity-centered*, effective SEL implementation. As such, we consider this paper a "case illustration." We begin by presenting the characteristics of OST settings that create unique opportunities and challenges for SEL implementation. We summarize the tension between fidelity, integrity, and program adaptations, and we position an intervention called *SEL Kernels* as a flexible, adaptable SEL solution for OST settings. Next, we describe recent research on SEL Kernels in OST settings in the American Midwest and present a compelling case illustration that centers the SEL Kernels implementation of one afterschool practitioner whose work strikes a noteworthy balance between integrity and adaptation. We outline our process for coding and mapping her adaptations onto high-quality SEL implementation practices, which are essential for effective learning. Finally, we present our findings as a series of classroom challenges surmounted by integrity-centered, effective adaptations to SEL Kernels. Possible future directions for this work include the continued collection and coding of integrity-centered adaptations to SEL Kernels in OST to learn more about what drives those adaptations, how they are implemented, and how to make them successful for a wider population of OST practitioners.

Keywords: social emotional learning; SEL implementation; integrity; fidelity; early childhood care and education; out-of-school time settings; play-based learning; adaptations; practitioner reflection; research

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1. Introduction

1.1. What Is SEL?

Research indicates that children with stronger social and emotional skills, such as attention, self-control, emotion awareness, prosocial behavior, and conflict resolution, do

better in school and have more positive long-term outcomes in learning, behavior, and health (S. M. Jones & Kahn, 2017; D. E. Jones et al., 2015; Moffitt et al., 2011). Evidence from dozens of experimental studies and multiple meta-analyses indicate that high-quality school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs improve student social and emotional skills, as well as mental health, attitudes toward school, and academic performance (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Ha et al., 2025; Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017). SEL in afterschool settings has also been associated with gains in child and youth personal and social development (Durlak et al., 2010). As a result, SEL programs are increasingly used in school and out-of-school time (OST) settings to improve key outcomes for children and youth.

1.2. Opportunities and Challenges of SEL in OST

OST programs offer distinct advantages for implementing SEL. According to Hurd and Deutsch (2017), OST settings like afterschool programs are especially well-suited to SEL programs and strategies because they face fewer academic pressures and often emphasize broader developmental goals, such as self-expression, exploration, and relationship-building, more than schools typically can. Historically, these programs have centered their programming on safety, play, belonging, and social connection, where children and youth feel valued, can express themselves, and develop a strong sense of belonging, all of which are key outcomes of SEL (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Afterschool programs also cultivate close, supportive youth–adult developmental relationships, which research identifies as a key mechanism driving the effectiveness of interventions for children and adolescents, including social and emotional learning interventions (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017; S. M. Jones et al., 2019; Li & Julian, 2012). In addition, afterschool programs can extend and reinforce SEL beyond the school day through school–OST partnerships that align goals, share practices, and coordinate SEL routines, creating a more coherent, system-level approach that supports children's social and emotional development (Schwartz et al., 2020). Within these contexts, SEL can be both effective and contextually relevant when implementers use high-quality, locally responsive practices, as OST environments provide opportunities for children to practice social and emotional skills in authentic, real-world contexts (Mahoney & Weissberg, 2018).

Despite the promise of SEL, traditional comprehensive programs can be difficult to implement because they are often complex, time-intensive, and costly (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012). These challenges are heightened in low-resource contexts where funding is limited, staff have minimal formal training, and the support needed to implement and sustain new programs is often lacking. Afterschool settings face additional constraints that can further complicate SEL implementation, including limited staff preparation, high turnover, and variable schedules (Afterschool Alliance, 2024; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). These resource and workforce pressures are exacerbated by ongoing threats to key OST funding streams; for example, the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative, which supports more than 10,000 local afterschool and summer learning program sites across the United States, has experienced persistent funding uncertainty in recent budget cycles (DiNapoli & Griffith, 2025). At the same time, there are relatively few SEL programs designed specifically for out-of-school time settings, so many afterschool programs must borrow from or adapt school-based SEL curricula (S. M. Jones et al., 2021; Schwartz et al., 2020).

1.3. A Flexible, Adaptable SEL Solution for OST: SEL Kernels

In response to these implementation challenges and opportunities, Jones and colleagues developed SEL Kernels, a low-cost, strategy-based approach that distills common

elements of evidence-based SEL programs into flexible, easy-to-use practices to promote children's social and emotional development (S. Jones et al., 2017). Described as the "active ingredients" in more traditional, comprehensive programs (Embry, 2004; Embry & Biglan, 2008), SEL Kernels were identified through a content analysis of over 50 effective SEL programs (S. Jones et al., 2017; S. M. Jones et al., 2021). SEL Kernels target specific social and emotional skills through a variety of activities, including games, art-based activities, and routines for building relationships and positive peer interactions. Additionally, SEL Kernels require minimal training or materials, can be used across many settings (such as school, afterschool, and home) and encourage practitioners to select the strategies that best fit their student or community needs (S. Jones et al., 2017). These features make Kernels particularly appropriate for OST settings, where staff may have limited planning or preparation time and may not possess formal teaching or SEL training. Kernels are also non-prescriptive (i.e., not tied to a fixed scope and sequence), which means they can be easily adapted to fluctuating learner populations, and learning progress is not jeopardized in the face of high staff turnover (two realities that often characterize OST environments). SEL Kernels have been adapted, implemented, and studied in diverse contexts including schools, afterschool and summer programs, and refugee and non-formal education in over twenty countries (HundrED, 2025). Their inherent flexibility and adaptability constitute a core strength of SEL Kernels, enhancing their feasibility and relevance for a variety of populations and settings while also allowing implementors to tailor practices to local cultural contexts, developmental needs, and implementation constraints (Colagrossi et al., 2024; Raisch et al., 2024).

Given this emphasis on flexibility and contextual fit, adaptation is a key characteristic of Kernels that is highlighted in training sessions, Kernels materials, and implementation supports. Through these resources, practitioners develop the knowledge and skills needed to adapt activities to meet their children's needs while also ensuring fidelity to the Kernels' core principles, practices, and learning goals. For example, during initial training sessions (which typically last 1–2 h), practitioners learn and practice core instructional moves that constitute integrity-based implementation of the SEL Kernels intervention: clearly explaining the target social and emotional skill, explicitly practicing the skill, and reflecting on the skill-building experience to promote skill transfer. In subsequent booster training sessions, practitioners design Kernels adaptations that align with their group's interests, strengths, and developmental needs, and which *continue to embody* the essential "explain–practice–reflect" elements of the Kernels intervention. For example, one booster training activity presents practitioners with different play-based learning strategies and highlights ways to incorporate those strategies into Kernels instruction, such as connecting the content to children's interests and identities, or exploring different types of expression. Practitioners then work in small groups to make play-based adaptations to different Kernels and share their ideas with the larger training group. Alongside training, practitioners receive demonstration videos that model high-quality facilitation practices and a monthly newsletter showcasing exemplary practitioner adaptations. Furthermore, on each Kernel, practitioners can find example adaptations designed to promote relevance, engagement, and enjoyment for children. These resources communicate that adaptation does not undermine fidelity but rather ensures that SEL Kernels are responsive to the needs of the learners and the community.

1.4. Understanding the "Fidelity–Adaptation Dilemma"

The tension between fidelity and adaptation is well-documented in implementation science research (Castro & Yasui, 2017; Castro et al., 2004; Lendrum et al., 2016). Proctor et al. (2011) define fidelity as "the degree to which an intervention was implemented

as it was prescribed in the original protocol" (p. 69), and adaptations are commonly described as changes or modifications made during the intervention (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Lendrum et al., 2016). Within the "fidelity–adaptation dilemma," implementation quality is understood as adherence (i.e., fidelity) to prescribed program structures, and deviations are frequently considered potentially detrimental to outcomes (Castro & Yasui, 2017). As a result, fidelity is often treated as a key indicator of whether an intervention is being implemented well (Durlak & DuPre, 2008), and adaptations to an intervention can be deprioritized or even actively discouraged.

Adaptations, Integrity, and High-Quality Implementation Practices

While fidelity is important to high-quality implementation, evidence suggests that adaptations can improve outcomes when implementers also adhere to core program components (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Adaptations have also been shown to increase implementers' sense of ownership of the program or strategy and can strengthen relevance and ecological fit (Berkel et al., 2010). These findings highlight the importance of examining how and why adaptations are made in order to assess their impact on outcomes and/or identify adaptations that can be applied more broadly across a program, strategy, or intervention. Building on this work, Meland and Brion-Meisels (2023) call for increased attention to *integrity* within implementation to better understand the impact and efficacy of implementer adaptations. They define integrity as maintaining the core active ingredients of an intervention while also integrating the assets and needs of the local community. By differentiating and documenting both fidelity and integrity, researchers may gain greater insight into the underlying mechanisms of change within programs, strategies, or interventions (Meland & Brion-Meisels, 2023).

These considerations are particularly relevant for SEL implementation in OST settings, due to the varying conditions across programs. For example, OST practitioners frequently mention challenges with student engagement and behavior because children are often tired before or after the school day. In these cases, sticking to a "script" (i.e., maintaining fidelity) may limit practitioners' responsiveness and ability to connect with children, both of which are central to high-quality OST and SEL practices. An integrity-focused approach is therefore better aligned with the realities of OST settings, enabling practitioners to adapt materials to meet their local needs and goals while maintaining core active ingredients for change.

Furthermore, SEL has the potential to be highly effective in OST settings due to the close alignment between high-quality SEL practices and OST programming goals. Both SEL and OST are centered on supporting the whole child through the following practices: (1) using developmentally appropriate, relevant, and engaging strategies; (2) providing a safe and supportive environment; (3) promoting high-quality, connected relationships between children and adults; and (4) providing opportunities for children to build social and emotional skills (S. M. Jones et al., 2021). These shared characteristics highlight how SEL can be effectively adopted and adapted in OST settings to address contextual priorities (S. M. Jones et al., 2021). By attending to these practices—including through the use of adaptations—implementers can strengthen the fidelity and integrity of their SEL work in OST settings.

However, despite the alignment between SEL and OST learning and teaching priorities, there seems to be a dearth of research on balancing fidelity, integrity, and adaptation in SEL implementation in OST settings (or other learning settings more generally). In this paper, we highlight the importance of adaptations that promote integrity by examining how one practitioner in an OST setting adapted SEL Kernels in ways that reflect the high-quality SEL practices highlighted above.

This work resembles a case study in that it focuses on "the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). We have also sought, as in Tight's (2017) conceptualization of case studies, to create "small-scale research with meaning" (p. 3). However, Tight (2022) also advocates for discernment in applying the term "case study," and recommends limiting its use to research that purposefully observes case study design. In designing our work and analyzing and reporting our findings, we have not explicitly utilized case study methodology. For example, we did not establish theoretical propositions related to our topic of study, explicitly bound our case, perform typical case study analytic techniques (like pattern matching or time-series analysis), or examine the quality of our research process in terms of validity or reliability—all commonly accepted case study design considerations (Yin, 2017). Therefore, we consider the work presented here a "case illustration": although not systematic, from the study of one individual we draw findings which we believe to be *illustrative* of important phenomena related to integrity and adaptation. As such, we believe our discussion represents an important opportunity for the field to learn more about (a) the challenges implicit in teaching SEL in OST settings, and (b) possible solutions to better support children's learning through adaptations that maintain fidelity while enhancing relevance and fit.

2. SEL Kernels in Action: Learning from OST Practitioners in the American Midwest

For over 10 years, the research team has created Kernels and studied their implementation and impact in a variety of contexts. In designing and carrying out these studies, we work directly with and learn from practitioners via focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and project planning exchanges. Our extensive research experience on Kernels in OST settings informs our ability to identify noteworthy adaptations, and in this case illustration, we present adaptations made to SEL Kernels by a single OST practitioner, Cris, as they demonstrate a level of responsiveness and creativity that we consider important to share with the field. As such, we invited Cris to share more about her adaptation experiences as a co-author. (She has also given permission to disseminate these findings, to quote her directly, and for her name to be used.)

Although we focus on the adaptations of a single practitioner, her work is situated within a 2-year RCT of SEL Kernels in 59 OST sites across one state in the American Midwest. These sites provide care for children before and after their regular school day. Our partnerships with many of these sites began in 2020, and since then, a series of Kernels pilot and implementation studies have provided the foundation for the current RCT. Although the majority of the study OST sites are located in the state's two largest cities, there are also 10 sites in rural districts. All sites serve children approximately 5–12 years old, although the study is designed to gather data on the impact of Kernels on the outcomes of learners in kindergarten, first, and second grade. Cris works with a group of approximately 24 children (though the exact number differs each day) in kindergarten through fifth grade, though most of her learners are kindergarteners, first graders, and second graders (ages 5–8).

The current Kernels RCT began in 2024. In May 2024, the research team recruited sites by joining monthly Zoom meetings with OST agencies throughout the state and sending emails to site directors to share information about the study. Ultimately, 59 sites enrolled and participated in the first year of the study (academic year 2024–2025), and a total of 30 sites were randomized to the Kernels condition. Kernels participants received materials and attended a training session. At the training session, participants learned how to implement the core components of Kernels (explain–practice–reflect) and practiced leading a Kernel in small groups to solidify their learning. To stem issues resulting from

potential staff turnover, the training session was recorded and has become one tool in a set of "onboarding" materials that is offered to practitioners who begin implementing Kernels mid-year. These "late beginners" can also benefit from multiple touchpoints with the research team (e.g., booster trainings, personalized support), continual peer learning opportunities (e.g., implementation "success stories" and effective adaptations presented via a monthly newsletter), and in many sites, support from their site directors, with whom the research team communicates often and who serve as sources of continuity in the project, informing about and advocating for the Kernels intervention amidst volatile staff rosters.

Training participants also learned how to submit implementation data to the research team using an online tool called KERNELSfolio. KERNELSfolio is a website developed by CAST (www.cast.org) that permits bi-directional communication between the research team and study participants. Every week from October 2024 through May 2025, the research team issued participants a free-response question and a call to submit implementation data (to report which Kernels were implemented on which days of the week). The free-response questions were efforts by the research team to gather qualitative data that could be used formatively. For example, participants were once asked "What do you do to keep the Kernels fresh and fun for your students?" Via participant responses, the research team captured information about which Kernels were adapted most often and in what ways.

Generally, participants' KERNELSfolio responses fell into three categories: (1) responses that directly answered the prompt; (2) responses that reflected more broadly on the participant's Kernels implementation in a given week (including implementation successes or challenges, favorite or least favorite activities, or adaptations to make the Kernels work better for children); or (3) responses that provided more context for the implementation information related to dose and specific Kernels choices (for example, highlighting holiday weeks in which OST programming was closed and thus no Kernels were done). Through KERNELSfolio, we were able to directly access participant perspectives in real time, which allowed us to respond agilely to the data that participants shared week over week.

To prepare this paper, the research team first pulled Cris' complete set of 27 KERNELSfolio responses for the 2024–2025 academic year. Many of Cris' responses fell into the second category: she often provided a high level of detail that described what Kernels she used, the context of implementation, the changes or adaptations she made, and the children's response to the activity. Then, the research team began an inductive coding process to document and describe how Cris' Kernels implementation responded to teaching challenges frequently encountered in OST settings. We highlighted every instance of Cris making a change to a Kernel, and where possible given the information shared, why that change was made. The codes that emerged described the different types of adaptations that Cris made. Then, we mapped the codes onto characteristics of high-quality SEL practice and OST programming to better understand the alignment between the types of adaptations that Cris made and any positive teaching practices that she may have simultaneously demonstrated. Finally, we provided Cris with our data and our analyses to corroborate our interpretation of her adaptations as consistent with her intent in making them. We requested her feedback and incorporated her responses into our findings. The quotes in this paper are pulled directly from Cris' KERNELSfolio responses.

It is important to note that Cris possesses various personal and professional characteristics that may not be typical of the average OST practitioner. First, she has been a practitioner at her OST site for 29 years, which is likely not reflective of the general population of practitioners in OST sites with whom we partner in the state, as we have learned from site administrators that staff turnover in OST programs can be high, and many practitioners have less than three years of experience at their OST site (University of Nebraska Medical Center Munroe-Meyer Institute, 2025). Second, Cris has a master's degree

in education with an emphasis in Curriculum and Instruction, an Elementary Education Teaching Certificate, and is currently enrolled in an SEL Instructional Specialist program which, again, may not be representative of the greater pool of OST practitioners, many of whom report a high school diploma, some college credit (no degree), or a bachelor's degree as their highest level of education (University of Nebraska Medical Center Munroe-Meyer Institute, 2025). Her lengthy classroom experience and higher education likely inform her approach to working with children, and the specific strategies that she uses in the classroom. Third, Cris regularly delivers Kernels with another OST practitioner; one person typically leads the activity while the other person supports implementation. Lastly, her site benefits from a leadership team that is highly engaged with and supportive of SEL and Kernels. Site leaders set the expectation that Kernels are meant to be a part of daily OST programming, encourage practitioners to submit data, and offer guidance in troubleshooting issues. These supportive classroom-level and site-level factors likely enable time and resources that permit Cris flexibility in her Kernels implementation, and may not be reflective of the leadership approach to SEL in other OST sites. However, despite these characteristics, which might distinguish Cris (and her classroom and site) from her peers, we see value in disseminating to a wider audience the adaptations she has made to SEL Kernels, as we consider her adaptations relatively replicable by the average OST practitioner, despite their length of experience in the classroom, education level, or classroom or site support.

Finally, there are many aspects of positive teaching practices that can serve to highlight innovation and learning for the fields of OST and SEL. In this paper, we choose to focus on adaptations made to SEL Kernels for two reasons. First, the wealth of data Cris shared via KERNELSfolio gave us especially rich insight into the unique challenges facing OST practitioners, and how those challenges can be addressed using SEL materials (namely, but likely not limited to, SEL Kernels). Second, we consider Cris' adaptations a model example of how practitioners in under-resourced contexts make changes to learning materials in ways that are both deeply rooted in their knowledge of their learners' assets, and highly responsive to their learners' specific needs. Additionally, as many of Cris' adaptations also demonstrated practices associated with high-quality SEL implementation and OST programming, we found them especially important to highlight for the field, in the hopes that they may serve other practitioners teaching SEL in OST, researchers studying SEL in OST, or anyone facing challenges supporting children's social emotional development in non-formal or formal learning spaces.

3. Three Types of Integrity-Centered Adaptations to SEL Kernels in OST: Promoting Engagement, Fostering Emotional Safety, and Building Relationships

Our analysis of Cris' KERNELSfolio data highlighted a variety of common classroom challenges that OST practitioners face. For example, working with large groups of children at varying stages of development, managing challenging behaviors, helping children articulate their feelings, meeting learning goals despite a lack of lesson preparation time and face time with learners, and building relationships with children with irregular attendance were challenges that surfaced often. In this section, we begin each sub-section by presenting one of these common teaching challenges.

We then highlight the ways that Cris met each teaching challenge by making adaptations to SEL Kernels. Cris regularly adapted Kernels to better meet children's needs, and most frequently, her adaptations accomplished three primary goals: (1) the adaptations enhanced the activity's developmental-appropriateness, relevance, or level of engagement; (2) the adaptations cultivated a safe and supportive learning environment; or (3) the adap-

tations supported the development of high-quality relationships between Cris and her learners and/or among learners.

We will also illustrate how, through her adaptations, Cris demonstrated a variety of high-quality practices, which research shows are important for effective SEL implementation and supportive OST programming. Despite the connection between these practices and positive learner outcomes, practitioners often struggle to exercise these practices due to limitations on both external (e.g., time) or internal (e.g., knowledge) resources. Cris' adaptations illustrate how these practices can be tailored to OST settings, where many such resource limitations exist. We highlight the connection between each adaptation and effective practice to emphasize how others might learn from these adaptations to promote more successful SEL implementation in their settings.

3.1. Navigating Large, Mixed Groups: Adaptations for Engagement, Developmental-Appropriateness, and Relevance

First, in Cris' KERNELSfolio responses, she commented that it is not unusual for her to work with relatively large groups of learners. Additionally, OST partners often share that group sizes can fluctuate weekly—or even daily—due to unexpected staffing or schedule changes, which can force the remaining staff to combine or divide groups and/or improvise learning goals and activities suitable for a group that may differ from the original group in size, age, and/or skill level. Our team's research suggests that a particular challenge when implementing Kernels with large, developmentally diverse groups is engaging all children in the activity (Hatch et al., 2025).

To respond to this particular challenge, Cris most frequently adapted the Kernels content to be more meaningful for children and more responsive to their developmental needs. Cris teaches a large group of K-5 students and thus often needed to tailor her Kernels lessons to be more suitable for a wide range of ages and skill levels. As such, her adaptations often served to make the Kernels easier or more challenging for her group. In doing so, she provided instruction that both engaged children across a large developmental spectrum and proactively prevented challenging behaviors (another common challenge in OST settings), as research suggests that children who are engaged and excited about learning engage in fewer disruptive behaviors (Hatch et al., 2025; Wells, 2012).

One example of this type of adaptation was Cris' implementation of the Kernel "Meaningful Compliments." "Meaningful Compliments" uses a game to help children understand and practice giving compliments that reach beyond another's appearance or possessions: children act out a person they appreciate, like their favorite teacher or cartoon character, and then receive meaningful compliments for that person. This activity is designed to foster children's ability to care about and celebrate others. Cris adapted the Kernel by using existing classroom materials to facilitate learner participation, thus making the activity easier for her learners. She shared the following about the adaptation:

> *Best activity yet!! With a few modifications, kids. . .gave each other some wonderful. . . compliments. We modified the game by giving each child a piece of colored tape to stick on the floor in front of them. We then used a ball as our "talking stick" and placed our tape on the ball as we shared our compliment, rolling the ball to the receiver for their turn. Everyone. . .participated and did a terrific job!!*

Cris made a similar type of adaptation to the Kernel "Hocus Pocus, Everybody Focus," increasing learner engagement by making the activity more challenging. In its simplest form, "Hocus Pocus, Everybody Focus" helps children practice their focus skills by challenging them to say or do the correct thing at the correct time. Standing in a circle, each child says one number until they reach ten. After the tenth person says "ten," the next person must say "Hocus Pocus, Everybody Focus." When children are ready, they can also

replace the number five with a clapping motion. Cris adapted this activity by increasing the number and complexity of the movements the group was asked to do. She reported the following about this adaptation:

> *Today we. . .[played] what turned out to be a much more complex version of Hocus Pocus, making it a Kids Choice activity. Students decided that we would use a ball, passing it from person to person as they were counting and/or doing the actions. We began with the standard one to ten [counting practice]. . .then. . .[the last person]. . .had the opportunity to pick a number and an action that person would do if they landed on that number, and I would write the action down next to the number on a piece of chart paper. This continued until almost all the numbers were assigned an action, making it VERY complicated—even for me! During our [debrief] we decided that if we were to do this again that we should use image cards of different motions. . .we all knew and were capable of. Everything from jump, turn around, run in place, to "flossing" (the dance), the Gritty, and "dabbing" were part of today's iteration. . .*

To adapt Kernels to large groups of learners and varying skill levels, Cris sometimes used objects to illustrate and simplify learning expectations. In her adaptation of "Meaningful Compliments," Cris' use of the ball—which acted as the group's Talking Stick—provided a concrete way for the children to more easily understand whose turn it was to share a compliment. This Indigenous practice supports children's social and emotional skill development, as the object clearly illustrates that the person holding the Talking Stick is the speaker and other group members are the listeners, helping them focus and harness their self-regulation skills (Philibert, 2022). Additionally, Cris' use of the tape provided the children with a way to visually track who had already given a compliment, thus making it clearer who they might pass the ball to next.

Conversely, Cris sometimes added instructions or learning objectives to games to compound the challenge. In her adaptation of "Hocus Pocus, Everybody Focus," Cris' choice to increase the number of movements the children were asked to do built engagement by incrementally making the activity more challenging. McClelland et al. (2017) suggest that one component of effective SEL practice is to build the complexity of an activity over time. Whether this happens over the course of a lesson or longer, appropriately increasing the number of challenging elements within the children's zone of proximal development (or the range of tasks that the child is able to accomplish with help) (Vygotsky, 2011) can sustain children's attention as they exert effort to meet the challenge. Ultimately, Cris met her large group's developmental needs and promoted engagement by adapting the Kernels to incorporate active learning and visuals, promoting participation among young children and curbing challenging behaviors. When needing to sustain learner attention or strengthen skill-building, she also identified opportunities to create additional challenges by increasing the complexity of learning goals or activity instructions.

3.2. Surmounting Lack of Time: Adaptations for Safe and Supportive Environments

Second, we often hear OST practitioners report that talking about feelings with children in OST programs can be challenging. Many children associate OST with more active forms of learning than those typically utilized in activities focused on feelings, and the topic of feelings can sometimes be perceived as too academic for OST (Hatch et al., 2025). Additionally, OST settings frequently have little time dedicated to the implementation of social and emotional learning programming, which often includes activities focused on feelings. This lack of time can exacerbate children's resistance to conversations about feelings, as they may not have had the opportunity to develop the trusting relationships with adults or peers that are often necessary for the discussion of topics that can make some children feel vulnerable. Additionally, practitioners may feel pressured to use their scheduled time

with children to prioritize other programmed activities, and may themselves feel that they lack the time, tools, or support needed to encourage children to talk about feelings.

Cris often adapted Kernels to create extra time to encourage children's emotional development, which served to promote a safe and supportive learning environment for children. Cris acknowledged that emotion expression was difficult for many of her learners, and she frequently observed children insulting one another or struggling to refrain from physical altercations as they failed to express their feelings verbally. Her observations motivated her to foster children's emotional expression while making sure that learners felt safe and encouraged to do so. One example of this type of adaptation is Cris' extension of the Kernel "Feelings Tree." "Feelings Tree" is designed to help children strengthen their ability to understand and express emotions by naming different feelings words, reflect on the fact that feelings words help us talk about our wants and needs, and express their feelings by writing them on a leaf on a "Feelings Tree." Practitioners frequently complete this activity during one lesson; however, Cris recognized that the children in her group needed more time to practice their skills and made the decision to extend the activity to the following day. By implementing "Feelings Tree" over the course of two lessons, she fostered a sense of comfort for children as they engaged in what can be a difficult topic for some; created the opportunity for all children to participate in the activity; and ensured that each learner, despite their initial skill level, walked away from the lesson with a greater grasp of the learning objective. She shared the following about this adaptation:

> *Feelings Tree, Part 1: Such a cute activity but some of the students struggled with finding words for their leaves. We did the [first of two parts of the activity] today, allowing the students to create their feelings leaves, but we will finish the meat of the activity tomorrow.*
>
> *Feelings Tree, Part 2: After starting this activity yesterday, we picked up today with the addition of some new words added to the tree. I challenged them to find words that were not already there, and after a few minutes, we brought the group together to review some of the words. (I let the students choose which they wanted to demonstrate…) A good activity overall!*

Cris made a similar adaptation to the Kernel "Creating a Positive Learning Community," implementing the activity (typically implemented in one lesson) in two lessons over the course of two days. This Kernel fosters respect by helping students identify and practice different ways to promote a positive learning environment for everyone. This activity can be useful for setting classroom expectations, which often need to be reinforced with young learners over the course of many days (or weeks). She reported the following about this adaptation:

> *Creating a Positive Learning Community, Part 1: Changed this up a bit so we could have a review of program expectations in small groups. Students were provided with an "Expectation Word Bank" poster that we reviewed with them including words that we often use when talking about expectations. From there we chose eight program areas (i.e., Homework, Gym/Playground Time, Centers, Rest Rooms, Snack, Clean Up, Group Activities, Hallway Lines) asking the students to work with their table group to think, talk, and fill in at least five expectations for their chosen area. We worked on four of the posters today and will complete the final four on Monday, after a quick review of the ones completed today. The students worked well on their posters, and for the most part each group did a great job of sharing responsibilities and working together. I look forward to our review, completing our posters, and discussing the importance of how these expectations help to create a positive learning community for us all.*

> *Creating a Positive Learning Community, Part 2: Today we continued our poster work and reviewed each of the Program Expectations our groups completed Friday and today. Again, students did a good job working in table teams. When going back through the completed posters there was some group editing, but most did a good job overall. In our [debrief], we talked about why we have these expectations and why they are important. We also discussed how following these helps us create a positive environment for everyone to feel safe, have fun, and learn to make choices that work for everyone. [The] posters will become a permanent part of our learning space—perhaps in a version that's easier to read but using the students' own words to create any new version.*

By extending these Kernels across multiple days, Cris transformed them into a series of scaffolded, feelings-related activities that promoted safety, comprehension, skill practice, and reflection. Her extension of "Feelings Tree" allowed her learners to take their time examining and naming how they felt. Cris' choice to dedicate additional time to this sensitive topic likely underscored the importance of talking about feelings, while helping children feel comfortable and more able to meaningfully contribute to the discussion. The extension also likely supported children in reaching the activity's learning goal and may have increased their comfort in engaging in similar conversations in the future.

In her adaptation of "Creating a Positive Learning Community," Cris was thoughtful about how she set up the lesson prior to implementation so that she and the children could think through the expectations they wanted to create for the areas in which they are in community with one another. She recognized that the breadth of the activity warranted an additional day of instruction, which again, sent the message to the children that they could comfortably engage in their discussions and take their time generating ideas. When Cris took the time to have the group edit the posters, she reinforced the value of the children's feedback on the final product. Lastly, hanging up the posters in the classroom emphasized the value of the children's work, and solidified the expectation that the learners follow the guidance on the posters to create a safe and supportive learning environment for all. This combination of adaptations likely concretized the learning goal for "Creating a Positive Learning Community" and helped the children feel safe in Cris' care. Importantly, this adaptation also represents a way that Cris integrated SEL into an existing teaching approach (in this case, setting classroom expectations). In traditionally time-constrained settings like OST, folding SEL into already existing plans or routines can make it easier to implement SEL, or refer back to SEL objectives once an activity is complete.

3.3. Overcoming Irregular Child Attendance: Adaptations for High-Quality, Connected Relationships

Lastly, evidence suggests that strong relationships, particularly between practitioners and children, are critical in OST settings and are an essential component of programs that thrive (Jordan, 2014). Strong relationships are also shown to boost children's academic growth and school engagement (Afterschool Alliance, 2014).

However, building strong relationships with and among children in the context of OST programming can be challenging, as practitioners do not always have a consistent group of children for a set time each day like their classroom teacher counterparts. While the expectation for children to attend *school day* programming every day from morning through dismissal exists, there is *not* a comparable expectation for children to attend OST programming each day for a specific period of time. Some children attend OST programming on different days each week. Some children attend OST programming on a given day for only 15 min, while others attend for 2 h or more. Moreover, children's attendance in OST programming is often inconsistent from week to week. Nevertheless, OST practitioners (ideally) aim to foster connectedness with and among children despite

how infrequently those children may interact with practitioners, and each other. This challenge has clear implications for the depth of relationships that children might expect to form with practitioners and one another, especially if practitioners do not intentionally create opportunities for togetherness.

To respond to the challenge of irregular child attendance, Cris centered relationship-building in her Kernels implementation. In fact, a throughline in Cris' KERNELSfolio responses was her emphasis on the importance of getting to know the children in her group. For example, in her response to the KERNELSfolio question "What advice would you give someone who is starting to implement. . .Kernels [for the first time]?" Cris said:

> *First and foremost, know your kids. If you are starting out fresh with no knowledge of their likes, dislikes, energy level, things they do best at, and where they struggle, ask someone. Parents, classroom teachers, or another program employee that has worked with. . .the kids will be your best resources. Having an idea of where they are. . .gives you great insight as to how, what, and when implementing Kernels will work best for you and your students. . .*

Cris demonstrated a variety of practices that highlighted her intentional approach to cultivating caring, supportive relationships with learners during Kernels play: she communicated high expectations for children when playing Kernels; empowered children to make decisions about which activity to play or how; and consistently and fairly recognized and praised children's efforts during play. Furthermore, Cris also seems to understand the importance of peer-to-peer relationships, and that key to a supportive environment is the children getting to know *each other*. To that end, Cris made a number of novel adaptations to Kernels that centered strategies to foster strong relationships *among* her group of learners, despite the irregular, unpredictable attendance of some of the children in OST programming.

One example of Cris' adaptations for relationship-building is the way she built on children's local knowledge during the Kernel "Stand Up/Sit Down." This Kernel is designed to help children build empathy and friendships by noticing when others have similar or different experiences and thoughts, using prompts such as "Stand up if you speak more than one language." The Kernel offers example prompts, but Cris tailored the prompts she used to her group's interests and recent experiences. Cris shared the following about this adaptation:

> *Stand Up/Sit Down: As it was the first day back from a long weekend, it was important to me to have a community building activity on deck [and] ready. I chose [Stand Up/Sit Down] because of its flexibility, and something that would get the kids moving [and] talking within a limited space. Initially I started with a list of things they might have done over the long weekend; egg hunt, go to a movie, travel outside [the city], play at a friend's house, etc. I also gave the opportunity for those who stood the most on any topic. . .to share with the group, noting similarities among them. From there I moved to opinions; Burger King vs. McDonalds, Runza [a local fast-food chain], Wendy's, Raising Cane's vs. Chick-fil-A, Slim Chickens, etc. This caused much more momentum and controversy, and some interesting discussion! In the end it was great to see students talking and sharing with others they wouldn't typically interact with, and even more interesting to see when small groups of people stuck to their choice—even when a few or even no one stood with them!*

Cris made a similar adaptation to the Kernel "Simon Says." Based on the traditional game, this Kernel helps children practice self-control by listening for a key phrase (i.e., "Simon Says") before doing a certain action (e.g., touch their head). To encourage relationship-building in this activity, Cris created a new version and tagged on an additional game,

calling upon learners to use their communication and collaboration skills to help each other succeed. Cris reported the following about this adaptation:

> *Simon Says—Opposite Style: Today we used the "Simon Says" game with the "opposites" option. It was a great way to really test the students' Stop and Think skills, and great to see the older students helping the younger ones. We didn't choose to have anyone go "out," instead choosing to have everyone continue as a team to play the game. From there, we moved into a game of "Head-Catch," where students have a soft foam ball tossed at them, and the word "head" or "catch" is said before the ball is thrown. When the ball arrives, students are to do the opposite (i.e., when the thrower says "head," the student catches the ball and vice versa). This was also a great way to test our Stop and Think skills, and as a bonus it was great to hear the students encouraging and cheering for each other as the game progressed. . .it was truly a success!*

Cris centered relationship-building in her implementation of Kernels by giving children opportunities to express their opinions and interests, listen to those of their peers, and collaborate with others. In her adaptation of "Stand Up/Sit Down," she made the prompts more relatable for children, promoting interaction among them and supporting them to make connections with new classmates. Cris mentioned in her feedback that she intentionally used this Kernel after a long weekend to build community.

In her adaptation of the traditional game "Simon Says," Cris created an opposites version and later added the "Head-Catch" element. We learn that not only did the older children help the younger children in their attempts to master the game, but that the children ended up supporting one another during the game as well, thereby fostering closer connections among the group as they tackled new challenges together. Research demonstrates that encouraging children to communicate and work together towards a shared goal is an effective way to promote meaningful contact between diverse individuals, building connections and strengthening inclusion (Shriver et al., 2023). By adapting Kernels to promote intentional communication and collaboration among learners and between practitioners and learners, Cris centers the aspects of relationship-building that research shows is an essential component of belonging in high-quality OST spaces.

Throughout the year, Cris made consistent adaptations to SEL Kernels to respond thoughtfully to the teaching challenges that she faced in her OST setting. Often, the adaptations better positioned the Kernel to support children's developmental needs, or supported children's ability to relate to or engage in the activity; sometimes, the adaptations helped to create a warm and welcoming environment for the children; and many times, the adaptations fortified relationships among Cris and her group. Through her adaptations, Cris frequently demonstrated the characteristics of high-quality SEL practices and OST programming, creating a unique opportunity for the research team—and the field—to learn from her adaptation strategies.

4. Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Directions

Among those who study SEL and child outcomes, there is little reason to doubt the importance of social emotional skills and the urgent need for SEL across learning contexts, from classrooms to OST settings. Yet the resources needed to implement traditional SEL programming—which is often complex, time-intensive, and costly—means that it will likely not serve all practitioners or learners. In OST settings, practitioners face unique challenges: limited daily teaching time, fluctuating groups of (mixed-age, mixed-skill level) learners, and few resources from which to pull OST-tailored SEL programming. Not least of all, a severe lack of OST program funding sharpens the precarity of staff positions, often obliging staff to work multiple jobs and undermining their opportunities for professional development while contributing to high staff turnover rates—all of which ultimately affect

teaching and learning, at both the individual level and OST site level. These challenges do not detract from the importance of SEL in OST (or for that matter, formal) learning settings. They *do*, however, detract from practitioners' ability to implement SEL with fidelity and integrity.

As such, low-cost, strategy-based, flexible SEL Kernels are particularly well-situated to sustainably integrate SEL into OST learning settings. Importantly, OST spaces and OST practitioners possess many unique characteristics that make them especially well-suited to effective SEL implementation: OST spaces encourage playful learning, belonging, and learner expression; and OST practitioners often support broad developmental goals and prioritize the cultivation of meaningful relationships. We have learned much from OST practitioners about how to adapt Kernels to promote high-quality, connected relationships and safe and supportive environments. In service of their learners, we have also seen OST practitioners make myriad adaptations to SEL Kernels that enhance developmental-appropriateness, relevance, and engagement. Even without being abreast of the latest research on SEL and OST (although many likely are), OST practitioners are often highly skilled in adapting SEL Kernels in ways that are responsive to their learners' needs, *while* demonstrating effective SEL practice and OST programming. We believe that this skill arises from, in many cases, a profound knowledge of the children in their care, and a deeply rooted drive to help them succeed. Furthermore, OST practitioners' responsive adaptations *are in and of themselves demonstrative of SEL*: practitioners empathize with learners to understand how to adapt activities to be a better fit; they are attuned to their learners' emotion-related skills and needs; they collaborate with learners to co-construct meaningful learning; and they are open to releasing some of their control as the "teacher" in order to let children take the lead.

Fundamentally, we believe that SEL is adaptive. Given the many adaptations that Cris ideated and implemented over time, she effectively "redesigned" the SEL Kernels for her group, all while safeguarding the elements tied to evidence-based effective practice and impact. In other words, through Cris' case, we present SEL Kernels adaptations *as a method through which* OST practitioners implement high-quality SEL practices in OST settings. As such, we believe that this case illustration supports the field's understanding of how practitioners seek to achieve harmony between fidelity and adaptation of SEL activities in OST settings, and we hope that these findings highlight the fundamental importance of integrity-centered adaptations in the field's collective continuing discussion of fidelity, integrity, and adaptation.

However, it is important to note that this case illustration presents the work of a single OST practitioner using a specific SEL intervention. Her adaptations may not be representative of the types of adaptations that have been successful for other OST practitioners using different SEL materials in other OST settings, and it is impossible to generalize the applicability of these findings. Additionally, although we have found value in the way her experience illustrates integrity-centered adaptations to SEL Kernels in the OST space, there are surely individual and social- and community-wide factors that enable (or hinder) her work. Unfortunately, a full discussion of those factors is outside the scope of this paper, so any direct transferability of these findings to other settings (OST or otherwise) could be limited in its success. As with any SEL approach, we recommend considering these findings in the context of one's specific learning setting and learners.

In the future, we hope to gather a wider range of data on effective adaptation of SEL Kernels in OST settings, which will allow us to continue to code, synthesize, and ultimately better understand the ways in which OST practitioners achieve integrity-based SEL implementation. We believe this information could serve to make SEL implementation

a more effective, feasible, and enjoyable endeavor for practitioners in a wide range of settings, to the benefit of their learners.

It has been our privilege to partner with OST practitioners, and although the ultimate goal of this paper may be to highlight one set of adaptations so that others may learn from them, a complementary and equally important goal is to center the voice of a practitioner who has been foundational to our work. We are deeply appreciative of her and of the many other OST practitioners who have shared their knowledge and experience with us, and from whom we continue to learn.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

SEL	Social Emotional Learning
OST	Out-of-School Time

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