The Impact of Differentiated Affective Curriculum on the Asynchronous Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Elementary Students

Michelle Koehle

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THE IMPACT OF DIFFERENTIATED AFFECTIVE CURRICULUM ON THE ASYNCHRONOUS SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GIFTED ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, though words are not enough to show my appreciation for his support during this journey, this dissertation is dedicated to my loving husband, Will. Darling, it has always meant so much to have you by my side in every part of life, but you have truly blown me away these past few years. Thank you so much for the comfort, coffee, Jolly Ranchers, and for keeping our plants (and children) alive during these past few years.

To our children, Cooper, Kennedy, and Chloe, I hope this process shows you that, no matter the obstacles, you can reach the top of any mountain you climb. I am so proud of and thankful for you for supporting me every step of the way. Mommy loves you “a bushel and a peck”.

To Jan Jacobsen, my high school gifted teacher --- thank you for instilling in me the love of teaching and learning and inspiring me to do the same for future generations. It is because of you that I am a teacher, and I am thankful for the lasting impact that you have had on my personal and professional life.

Last but not least, this dissertation is dedicated to my past, present, and future gifted students. May you never stop growing and reaching for the moon.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this mixed-method action research study was to support the asynchronous development of third-grade gifted students at GWE by identifying their key social and emotional needs and determining the outcomes of a differentiated SEL curriculum. The four most significant affective areas of social and emotional need as self-reported by the participants on a quantitative pre-survey were emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship skills. Qualitative observations and exit tickets were collected to understand participants’ perceptions of the differentiated affective curriculum on their social and emotional development. Quantitative data was collected at the end of the study and used as a post-measure to analyze the effects of the differentiated SEL on the competency levels of the third-grade gifted students. Results of this study indicate that individualized SEL has a positive impact on the asynchronous social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

GTE.............................................................Gifted and Talented Education

SEL.............................................................Social Emotional Learning

WCSD-SECA...................... The Washoe County School District Social and Emotional Competency Assessment
A certain group of students is often prematurely determined to be the easiest of all groups to teach -- the most manageable with behavior, the most motivated to learn, and the quickest to absorb content. Gifted and talented education (GTE) students are either grouped in a homogeneous class or distributed among their general education peers. In either case, as is quickly seen among teachers and schools, these students come to school with a predisposed set of discrepancies that are unique to the gifted population.

During my first year as a newly minted third-grade GTE teacher at Green Willow Elementary School (pseudonym, GWE), I attributed many of the observed difficulties with my class to the ongoing COVID pandemic. Students, I mused, must be adjusting to life back in the brick-and-mortar classroom setting. As classes across the school settled into routines and procedures, however, my group of gifted students did not. They demonstrated increased anxiety levels, social awkwardness, and immense amounts of fear both individually and collectively -- more than any of my previous groups of general and special education students in my decade of teaching experience.
I had bought into the myth that gifted students operate just fine in all areas of development, academically, socially, and emotionally, without any student populations have barriers and needs, research indicates that gifted students may face adversities in school due to asynchronous development (Cavilla, 2019). There may be disconnects with gifted students’ social and emotional development because they have advanced academic abilities. These discrepancies include anxiety, perfectionism, and a lack of coping mechanisms regarding failure (Kaya & Tortop, 2020).

GWE is in the initial stages of implementing a program to support students in their social and emotional development, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS provides tiered support to all students (Kittelman et al., 2019). GWE homeroom teachers deliver social and emotional learning (SEL) lessons to all students at the Tier 1 level using the Second Step program. These lessons are implemented once weekly and spiraled throughout the rest of the school year. However, no further interventions are provided. Using the exact process which offers tiered services for students with behavioral and academic concerns at GWE, the Second Step curriculum can be differentiated for use with third-grade gifted students.
Problem of Practice

Gifted students are defined as individuals who learn faster than their peers; are prominent in creativity, art, and leadership; have special academic ability; can understand abstract ideas; love to act independently in their interests; and show high performance (Nacaroğlu & Kızkapan, 2021). Since these students often meet or exceed educational expectations, educators and schools can overlook the developmental and emotional needs of gifted students (Fisher & Kennedy, 2016). While current research does not support or refute the concept that gifted children need less social and emotional attention compared to their peers, this group does have unique social and emotional needs (Subotnik et al., 2011). These issues include inadequate accommodations for gifted students’ sophisticated talents, age-appropriate social maturity that is disconnected from the students’ advanced academic development, and asynchronous development challenges (Lockhart, 2020). The problem of practice for this study is that gifted third-grade students at GWE are not receiving specific interventions to support their asynchronous social-emotional development.

*Asynchronous development* is a term that means exactly what one would think: out-of-sync. An individual with asynchronous development has cognitive abilities, social awareness, and physical development which develop inconsistently in comparison to the general population (Lockhart, 2020). My
observation of third-grade gifted students at GWE has revealed increased levels of anxiety along with a lack of development regarding self-management and self-awareness. Conversations with these students have revealed a further need for coping skills in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, perfectionism, and anxiety.

These broad and interrelated areas of affective competence are part of the guidelines set by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) which provide a framework to “foster knowledge, skills, and attitudes across five main areas of social and emotional competence” (Williams et al., 2020, p. 2). In spite of the once-weekly Second Step lessons with the class, concerns continue to be evident through observations and conversations. Rather than waiting for students to fail in these areas, teachers should proactively plan opportunities of support for students’ social and emotional health. These affective skills need to be specifically identified using the CASEL framework of social and emotional competencies followed by use of the Second Step program; additionally, they need to be taught at a more frequent and intensive rate to the third-grade gifted students at GWE.

The estimated three million gifted students in the US create distinctive challenges and opportunities for social and emotional education (Bates-Krakoff et al., 2016). Both historically and still today, the primary focus in gifted
education has been directed at academic involvement (Subotnik et al., 2011). The focus on gifted students’ cognitive abilities means that their social and emotional needs are being ignored (Stankovska & Rusi, 2014). However, this issue can no longer be overlooked. Gifted students experience many of the same social and emotional concerns as their peers, often more intensely, such as anxiety, self-esteem issues, and even depression. Even though teachers consider gifted students as well-adjusted and less likely to have behavioral or emotional problems compared to non-gifted students, gifted students rate themselves as feeling sadder and less satisfied with their social support than their non-gifted counterparts (Ogurlu et al., 2018). Teachers must be cognizant of the social, emotional, or developmental needs of gifted students and be aware this part of their development may be overlooked, especially if the students are performing well academically (Kennedy, 2018).

**Theoretical Framework**

This mixed-methods action research study was grounded in social cognitive theory as well as the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners. Together, using the social and emotional domains as determined by CASEL, these created the framework that supported the study. A brief description of each is provided below.
Social cognitive theory, proposed by Albert Bandura (1997), is a transaction between cognition, behavior, and environment; the theory proposes several crucial factors that influence an individual’s behavior. Bandura emphasizes the importance of observing, modelling, and imitating the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others in a supportive environment. As Bandura (1986) suggests, "Unless people believe that they can produce desired effects and forestall undesired ones by their actions, they have little incentive to act; they are motivated that one has the power to produce the desired results" (p. 228).

Social cognitive theory suggests that learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of a person, environment, and behavior; the reciprocal interaction is assumed to influence the students' personality, behavior, and environment that they are in (Khudzari et al., 2019). In short, the theory argues that individuals learn both behaviors and cognitive strategies by observing the behavior of others, and these acquisitions can be learned (Nabavi, 2012).

A vast majority of gifted students’ social and emotional growth is being overlooked altogether or at best “only supported through fragmented attempts at character education that limit their ability to optimize their overall development” (Cavilla, 2019, p. 137). Derek Cavilla’s Taxonomy of Affective
Curriculum for Gifted Learners was developed in 2011 to provide a framework that “reduces the disparity in focus between cognitive and social and emotional development for gifted students” (Cavilla, 2019, p. 136). It provides developmentally appropriate SEL areas based on the five components of the CASEL framework which are critical to reduce the social-emotional gap in the GWE third-grade gifted students’ development.

While the literature indicates the positive effects of SEL for all students, gifted learners have an acute need for the inclusion of individualized SEL in their school experience (Cavilla, 2019). Due to their asynchronous development where their intellectual capacity far exceeds their chronological age, many gifted students display high levels of emotional intensity and robust levels of moral justice (Silverman, 1997). This mismatched development of third-grade gifted students requires a differentiated support system to be added to the PBIS program using the Second Step curriculum at GWE.

PBIS supports the framework of the social cognitive theory in that students are surrounded with support from their teacher(s), families, and other stakeholders. The cycle of observation, conversation, and modeling that was conducted throughout this study upholds the ideas of social cognitive theory. In addition, the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners bridges the effects of the mismatched development of gifted students by focusing on gaps in
groups of skills as defined through the CASEL framework (Williams et al., 2020). It supports the asynchronous social and emotional development of gifted students by providing specific developmental disparities for schools to focus. Gifted and talented children typically do not follow the developmental spectrum at the same pace or in the same way, and together, the social cognitive theory and Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners create a framework that supports the study on the impact of differentiated SEL on third-grade gifted students at GWE.

**Purpose of the Study, Research Questions and Rationale**

While there is a plethora of research on SEL, studies conducted on the effects of using Second Step lessons as part of a differentiated affective curriculum with elementary gifted students are scarce. Therefore, further research is needed on the effects of providing tiered interventions of SEL to gifted students that are matched to their individual self-reported needs. The purpose of this mixed-methods action research study was to identify key social and emotional needs among third-grade GTE students and to determine the outcomes of a differentiated SEL curriculum. The sample of 22 third-grade gifted students at GWE receive an academic curriculum in a self-contained classroom with a teacher specially trained to meet their unique needs. This study supported the entire development of the third-grade gifted children by exploring the self-
reported social and emotional needs of the group of 22 students at GWE and the
effects of a differentiated affective curriculum (Second Step) in supporting these
issues.

All students at GWE receive behavioral support through a PBIS program. However, through observations and conversations it was clear third-grade gifted
students needed further individualized social and emotional support. While
these students received individualized instruction in academics, no further
differentiation was provided in other developmental areas. This study sought to
answer how the Second Step curriculum, as a part of the schoolwide PBIS
program, could provide differentiated support for the specific social and
emotional disparities of third-grade gifted students in my class at GWE. The
effects of an affective curriculum, specifically an increased and individualized
use of Second Step lessons, were monitored as it pertains to third-grade GTE
students' social and emotional development.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional
development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?

2. How does a differentiated SEL curriculum impact third-grade gifted
students' social and emotional needs?
3. What is the effectiveness of a differentiated SEL curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade students at GWE?

Rationale

The entire development of the gifted student should be supported. Compared to their peers, gifted and talented education (GTE) students have unique social and emotional needs (Phelan, 2018) that are currently being underserved; therefore, it is important to develop an SEL support system that is differentiated to meet their needs (Moon, 2007). There is a variety of research on perfectionism and asynchronous development, but little research is found on implementing an all-encompassing social and emotional curriculum that is differentiated for GTE programs (Phelan, 2018). This mixed-methods action research study sought to discover the key self-reported social and emotional discrepancies among the third-grade gifted students at GWE and then measured the impact of differentiated support using the Second Step program. This study also determined the perceptions of the third-grade gifted students regarding the differentiated Second Step lessons on their social and emotional development. These research questions address the contextual problem.
Positionality

Few things are more difficult than to see outside the bounds of our own perspective — to “be able to identify assumptions that we take as universal truths, but that instead have been crafted by our own unique identity and experiences in the world” (Takacs, 2002, p. 169). As a researcher exploring the disparities among gifted students regarding their behavior and academic achievement, I have multiple positionalities. As an adult studying an adolescent group of gifted students, I am an outsider. However, as this group’s teacher and confidant who also has the identity of giftedness, I am an insider. Are there motives (true or assumed) that relate to my positionality? Addressing questions of motivation with participants and reflecting on my own positionality in this study has the potential to “foster greater openness between participants and myself” (Bourke, 2014, p. 7).

I was identified as a gifted student in the fourth grade in an average-sized district in the southeastern US. As a gifted student I struggled greatly with anxiety and perfectionism, which resulted in low self-esteem. I also had an increased emotional intensity and demonstrated moments of overexcitability. However, I often felt I did not have an outlet to discuss these issues. There was no schoolwide affective curriculum to support the specific social and emotional needs of my gifted peers and myself. The focus during my schooling was
primarily around academic achievement, so I felt immense pressure to excel academically. It was only when participating in my teacher preparation courses in college that I realized the importance of supporting the full development of a child. After concluding my initial training as a teacher, and now entering my second decade in this profession, it seems my childhood experiences are not unique. Teachers have witnessed signs of gifted students not exhibiting healthy levels of social and emotional development; however, since these issues are not on a report card it is easy for teachers to focus solely on academic curriculum (Rinn et al., 2009).

Since my participants were my own gifted students, I reflected on my positionality as a GTE teacher. My social and emotional struggles as a gifted student coupled with similar disparities I am seeing as a gifted teacher meant I had to be cognizant of ensuring I interpreted the data in a way that accurately represented reality rather than any preconceived notions. Although my problem of practice focused on the unique social and emotional concerns of third-grade gifted students and how a differentiated affective curriculum could support them, I needed to also look for data to support alternative explanations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This meant I had to cautiously embark on this action research process and strive to be reflective and objective while ever mindful of my subjectivities; this is positionality (Bourke, 2014).
When reflecting on my positionality as a gifted student who is now a gifted teacher and how those perspectives are most relevant to my context, potential participants, and the problem itself, I realized that I am a reflective practitioner. I strive to “learn to learn” about my practice and become a better practitioner; one way I dealt with bias was to acknowledge my presence in the study and to build in methods of self-reflection (Herr & Anderson, p. 87). This was done throughout the study using previously mentioned methods in addition to other strategies mentioned in subsequent chapters.

**Research Design**

A mixed-method action research approach was used to determine my third-grade gifted students’ areas of asynchronous development and investigate the effects of a differentiated affective curriculum on their social and emotional development. Action research allows educators to study their own schools, classrooms, and personal practice to better understand them and to improve instructional quality or effectiveness; additionally, it is relevant, collaborative, and practical (Mertler, 2014). Knowledge is viewed as an action that is pragmatic, contextually based, and relational (Mertler, 2019). Action research is a reflective process of inquiry teacher-researchers use as they explore areas of interest that resolve social problems as part of change initiatives (Beaulieu, 2015). Unlike other modes of research, this type of research design is done by or with insiders to
an organization or community (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Much like learning, action research cannot (and should not) fit into a one-size-fits-all box.

This mixed-methods study connected qualitative and quantitative research methods into a single study (Efron & Ravid, 2020). To further investigate the effects of differentiated Second Step lessons on the unique social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students at GWE, I utilized surveys, observations, and exit tickets. A mixed-methods design was justified because it allowed information to be collected in phases regarding students’ perceptions of their social and emotional wellbeing. The quantitative data collected before and after the intervention of the study was combined with qualitative measures to support the explanations drawn from the results of the statistical analyses (Mertler, 2014). Qualitative and quantitative research benefits the field of gifted education by generating findings using multiple methodologies, which was advantageous to this action research study (Mendaglio, 2003; Ivankova & Wingo, 2018).

While there are 43 third-grade gifted students at GWE that comprise a third-grade general population of about 200, the 22 third-grade gifted students in my class were purposefully chosen to participate. All the students in this sample are identified as GTE and are conveniently grouped together in my homogeneous third-grade class. The sample for this study is a purposive
convenience sample; I intentionally chose these students because they were representative of the issue under investigation and were easily accessible according to a predetermined purpose (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

I obtained permission from the district before seeking consent from parents. Once parent permission was obtained from all students, these third-grade gifted students participated in informing the data collection methods throughout the study aimed at determining the effects of differentiated SEL on the asynchronous development of third-grade gifted students, as well as their perceptions of the individualized affective instruction. Since the ultimate goal of this study was to improve the social and emotional health of these third-grade gifted students, a mixed-methods action research study design was justified.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection instruments included student pre- and post-surveys, observations, and exit tickets. Data provided insight into the research questions, which focused on determining the specific areas of asynchronous social and emotional development self-reported by third-grade GTE students, the effects of differentiated SEL on those same self-reported areas, and student perceptions of a differentiated affective curriculum.
Surveys

A quantitative survey was used both before and after the intervention “for the specific purpose of learning more about a situation, person, or event being investigated,” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 174). The predetermined items on the Washoe County School District Social and Emotional Competency Assessment (WCSD-SECA) were developed through a collaboration between Washoe County School District, CASEL, and the University of Illinois at Chicago as part of a 4-year iterative process. Reliability and validity analyses focused on improving the item bank and ensuring that items covered the full range of each affective construct (Davidson et al., 2017). The paper assessment used a Likert scale and each of the 40 items were sorted by the social and emotional domains according to the CASEL framework. The data provided by the pre-survey was used to answer the first research question by determining the specific self-reported social and emotional discrepancies and to determine the differentiated lessons provided during the intervention. At the end of the study, the post-survey provided data that was compared to the pre-survey results to answer the third research question.

Observations

Observations provided qualitative data because the kind of information I sought could be collected through studying the third-grade gifted students in
their natural setting. Throughout the four-week intervention, I used an observation protocol to record notes during and after the school day in a researcher journal. The structure of this protocol included specific information such as the purpose of the observation, details of the setting, and also included an open-ended section for descriptive and reflective notes. As an active participant in the intervention treatment, I spent time at the end of each school day adding reflective notes to the written observations beside pertinent observation notes. Consequently, I considered them as a unit in data analysis and presentation. Utilizing observations throughout the study was beneficial because many of the third-grade gifted students at GWE were hesitant to be vulnerable with me; observation was instrumental in providing an authentic view of the topic being investigated (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

**Reflective Exit Tickets**

One of the goals of this mixed-methods action research study was to better understand the unique experiences of this group of third-grade gifted students. Utilizing participant exit tickets as a qualitative data collection tool provided additional insight to the study because it broadened the scope of self-awareness, self-consciousness, and cognitive processing that occurs when any topic is probed from a participant’s unique experiences (Billups, 2021; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018). Third-grade gifted participants took part in the reflective
process at the end of each week during the study’s intervention by completing a Google form posted in the students’ Google Classroom. The same open-ended exit ticket was utilized throughout the intervention but had students focus on the interactions, conversations, and implemented lessons that were part of the intervention process from that week.

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Data analysis is a critical stage in the action research process (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The pre-survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics to find the measures of central tendencies (average, median, and mode) and measures of dispersion (standard deviation). Using tables and graphs helped simplify, organize, and summarize the quantitative data. The results of the initial survey were presented visually through a graph I created that revealed the most significant areas of need for affective instruction, thus answering the first research question (Efron & Ravid, 2013). At the end of the study, the survey was administered again and analyzed using the same statistical process described above. Comparisons between the pre- and post-survey revealed any change, thus determining the effects of the differentiated affective curriculum on the students’ social and emotional health and answering the third research question.

I utilized observations, reflective notes, and exit tickets during the four-week intervention. These tools provided insight into the perceptions of students
surrounding the differentiated SEL as well as the effects of the individualized instruction. Unlike quantitative data, which was collected and analyzed separately using descriptive statistics, the process for these qualitative pieces was much more of an ongoing, iterative process (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As observations were made and reflective exit tickets were collected, the data was analyzed by coding, sorting, and finding themes among the information (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This concurrent process allowed me to consider plausible explanations and conclusions about each of my research questions (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

After analyzing the quantitative and qualitative data separately, I made comparisons to determine whether they yielded similar results (Creswell, 2011). By utilizing a mixed-methods action research methodology, I was able to synthesize and triangulate both quantitative and qualitative data among the multiple data collection sources to strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings and recommendations in the research study and integrate interpretations and conclusions (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

**Significance and Limitations of Study**

Previous studies have been published regarding the social and emotional health of gifted students. Even though teachers considered gifted students as being well-adjusted and less likely to have behavioral or emotional problems
than non-gifted students, the gifted students rated themselves as feeling sadder and less satisfied with their social support than their non-gifted counterparts (Ogurlu et al., 2018). This study builds on previous studies and further explores the effects of specific SEL lessons tailored to the unique needs of GTE students. The results of this study may be of interest to others who teach or support gifted students. Teachers and families will have a more vested interest due to the possible implications for their gifted student(s). Schools striving to support the whole development of each student who walks through their doors should also take note. After all, if the mission of schools is to provide an education for all students, the needs of the gifted student cannot be discarded.

**Limitations**

The sampling analyzed as a part of this study is 22 third-grade gifted students at GWE. This study was limited because of the small sample size. In addition, because these students were preselected into the gifted program and were in my classroom, another limitation to this study was the lack of diversity among the population of the convenience sample. While the sample was representative of the third-grade gifted students at GWE, there was a lack of overall diversity in this study. Other limitations included the subjective nature of the surveys due to self-reporting. I also had to be reflective of my multiple
positionalities and took them into account so that I did not make claims that were not substantiated by the evidence (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

I also acknowledged limitations with the data collection methods utilized in this study. The student self-report surveys were sensitive to misinformation and may not have been completed with fidelity (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The systematic observations conducted during the intervention represented only observable behaviors and needed additional tools to determine observed intentions (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Determining the limitations of the data collection tools was useful when reflecting on the ultimate purpose of the study.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This research study sought to understand what specific social and emotional discrepancies were being experienced by third grade gifted students, as well as how to best meet those needs through a differentiated affective curriculum. A review of the literature regarding the social and emotional development of gifted students, along with an overview of asynchronous development, differentiation, SEL, PBIS, and the Second Step program will be detailed in Chapter Two. Chapter Three will provide an overview of the methodology as well as the data collection process. In Chapter Four, I will present the data collected from student surveys, observations, and reflective exit tickets. My analysis and commentary on the data will be summarized in Chapter
Five, along with conclusions, implications, and further recommendations for future research.

**Definition of Terms**

To thoroughly understand the ideas discussed throughout this study, there are a handful of key terms that should be clarified. The following terms are important to the study:

*Asynchronous*: s cognitive abilities, social awareness, and physical development which differ from one another within an individual with inconsistent areas of development (Lockhart, 2020).

*Differentiation*: a pedagogical approach in which teaching is adjusted to meet the needs of individual learners (Roiha & Polso, 2021).

*GTE: Gifted and Talented Education*

*Gifted students*: Students with gifts and talents who perform-- or have the capability to perform-- at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential (*What is Giftedness?, 2013*).

*Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)*: PBIS is a three-tiered preventive framework (primary prevention, secondary prevention, and tertiary...
prevention) associated with improved student behavior and academic outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2012).

*Response to Intervention (RTI):* RTI integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems. With RTI, schools use data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student’s responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities (Gage et al., 2020).

*Second Step program:* Second Step is a comprehensive, classroom-based curriculum aimed at inculcating skills in the areas of empathy, perspective taking, problem solving, self-control or self-regulation, and anger management or emotion regulation for preschool through 8th grade (Committee for Children, 2011).

*Social Emotional Learning (SEL):* Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (Social Emotional Learning, n.d.).
SEL competencies: Five broad areas of social and emotional competence (Williams et al., 2020).
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Educators tend to focus on the intellectual growth of gifted students; yet giftedness has a complex emotional component that also needs to be addressed (Sisk, 2021). Third-grade gifted students at GWE demonstrate disconnects in social and emotional development. The advanced academic abilities of this group of students do not align with their unique affective needs. Asynchronous development is common among gifted students; this is seen when children are highly advanced in one or more areas and average or lower in other areas (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2018). Cognitive abilities, physical development, and social awareness can misalign, resulting in the need for further support in the weaker areas.

The problem of practice is that gifted third-grade students at GWE are not receiving specific interventions to support their asynchronous social and emotional development. Despite weekly Second Step lessons conducted with this group of students, there are observed concerns. These include increased levels of anxiety which further reveal the need for instruction regarding coping skills in the areas of social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making,
and perfectionism. In addition, third-grade gifted students at GWE demonstrate a lack of development in self-management and self-awareness. The purpose of this mixed-methods action research study was to investigate the effects and perceptions of a differentiated affective curriculum on the self-reported social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students at GWE.

This action research study used a quantitative survey to identify and support the individual affective needs of the third-grade gifted students using a differentiated affective curriculum. The intervention took place over four weeks and used the Second Step curriculum to deliver both whole-group and small-group instruction based on the quantitative pre-survey data. Qualitative observations and exit tickets provided further insight into the perceptions of third-grade students on the differentiated affective curriculum as well as the effects.

**Purpose of the Literature Review**

A research process starts by “identifying the topic of your choice and becoming knowledgeable about it” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 13). The literature review provides the context and background about the current knowledge of a topic through an organized way to research a topic (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). For action researchers, the aim is to link theory to practice and connect what happens in their educational settings with the broader knowledge about teaching and
learning (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The knowledge gained through developing the
literature review helps to formulate specific research questions that guide a
study (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The literature review, much like action research, is a
cyclical process that is not complete until the study is finished (Efron & Ravid,
2013).

The research utilized in this chapter serves to support the problem of
practice and theories previously described, giving me a knowledge base upon
which to build my study. My literature review strategies included using
databases such as ERIC, the University of South Carolina online library, and
JSTOR using search terms such as asynchronous development of gifted students,
elementary gifted, and social and emotional development of gifted students. This
literature review incorporates the use of textbooks, peer-reviewed journals, and
websites. The research synthesized on giftedness, social and emotional learning
(SEL), and the other topics which guide this action research study informed the
study’s intervention.

Research Questions

This study explored the following research questions:

1. What are the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional
development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?
2. How does a differentiated SEL curriculum impact third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional needs?

3. What is the effectiveness of a differentiated SEL curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade students at GWE?

The process of gathering knowledge helped me better understand the topic and problem of practice. Becoming informed about current research, theoretical positions, and potential methods of data collection helped me clarify and revise my own mixed-methods action research study (Corbin & Strauss, 2013). The literature review allowed me to gather and synthesize current knowledge, which is then used to build a convincing case (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). I engaged in multiple literature scans through tracing conceptual threads, situating the study within a historical context and theoretical perspective, identifying the need for my research, choosing possible procedures and methods to use, and further refining my research questions (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The keywords I included as part of my research inquiry included social and emotional development of gifted students, social and emotional learning, PBIS, RTI, differentiation for gifted learners, and asynchronous development. This process allowed quick examination of works that contributed to understanding the theory and constructs that underpin the study on supporting and better understanding third
grade gifted students’ asynchronous social and emotional development (Machi & McEvoy, 2016).

**Organization of the Chapter**

This chapter begins with a background of the problem of practice. It follows with the theoretical framework that guided this study, focusing on social cognitive theory and the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners. The chapter then discusses the historical perspectives to provide context for the problem of practice. Next, it provides a detailed overview of giftedness, social and emotional development, and the systems of support for gifted students such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). It then transitions into a discussion of the social and emotional discrepancies among gifted students, including anxiety, perfectionism, self-concept, and self-efficacy. Finally, it concludes with reviewing the research literature surrounding giftedness, including the gifted identification process.

**Theoretical Framework**

Many theories from developmental psychology have been put to use over the years in the study of the social and emotional development of gifted children (Neihart et al., 2016). This action research study is grounded in Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory as well as Derek Cavilla’s Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners. These were purposefully chosen to reflect the
goals of the study and support the problem statement, purpose, significance, and research questions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). An in-depth description of each theory is provided below.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Social cognitive theory, an expanded version of social learning theory, was developed by psychologist Albert Bandura in the 1960s (Bandura, 1977). Social cognitive theory suggests that learning occurs in a social context with a dynamic and reciprocal interaction of a person, environment, and behavior; the reciprocal interaction is assumed to influence the students’ personality, behavior, and environment that they are in (Khudzari et al., 2019). Bandura’s theory focuses on the importance of reinforcement as four different processes. Observations, assimilations, and modeling support the importance of cognition and that learning can occur in the absence of behavior (Bandura, 1965). In addition to these processes, Bandura established other conditions that must be met: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Bandura, 1977).

The purpose of relating the theory to gifted education is to examine the implications of the theoretical extensions for planning appropriate curricular and instructional experiences for advanced learners (Burney, 2008). Self-efficacy is one area of asynchronous development for gifted students. Bandura describes *self-efficacy* as a differentiated system dependent on multiple variables (Bandura,
The simultaneous relationship of the gifted third graders at GWE with environment and behavior will support students as they increase their learning of social and emotional concepts.

**Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners**

As the demand for adequate social and emotional learning grows globally, in the US there has been an emphasis on the power of affective education (Cavilla, 2020). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has revealed the power of affective development for gifted students and contends that, without it, these students are limited in their ability to reach their full potential (Cavilla, 2019). Derek Cavilla’s Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners was developed to provide a framework to reduce the disparity between cognitive, social, and emotional development of gifted students. This population “requires affective support in response to the effects of asynchronous development as well as an inherent proclivity for heightened capacity for emotional intelligence and moral development” (Cavilla, 2019, p. 136). Affective components are incorporated into the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) gifted program standards at a Tier One universal level of instruction for students through Grade 12: however, they are not being fully implemented (Ferguson, 2006). Numerous rationales provide reasoning to why the affective domain is not fully included as part of the curriculum, including a
lack of clarity, tools, and understanding surrounding healthy emotional development (Ferguson, 2006).

The Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners framework provides developmentally appropriate areas of instruction which are critical to reduce the social and emotional development gap among third-grade gifted students. It further supports the asynchronous development of gifted students, with a focus on emotional and moral development (Cavilla, 2020). This framework enhances the whole student with affective components as part of the curriculum; this is more conclusive than focusing solely on cognitive development (Ferguson, 2006). Ultimately, when affective issues and social and emotional concerns are addressed, teachers can promote success for gifted students in reaching their personal potential (Ferguson, 2006). Cavilla purports that through the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners framework “gifted children learn a willingness to view failure as opportunity and the ability to set meaningful goals” (2019, p. 3).

Overview of Theoretical Framework

Together, the social cognitive theory and Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners are the theoretical framework for understanding the asynchronous social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students. Each emphasizes the importance of planning appropriate instructional
experiences for advanced learners. When combined and applied together, the theories support this study which sought to determine the effects of a differentiated social and emotional curriculum on the asynchronous affective needs of third-grade gifted students.

**Historical Perspective**

Systematic thought and research devoted to giftedness is a relatively recent event, although broadly defined conceptions of this topic date back as early as Plato (Pfeiffer, 2018). It was not until the Soviet Union launched Sputnik in 1957 that Americans began to embrace the idea of identifying and challenging its most capable students (VanTassel-Baska, 2018). Schools across the nation launched advanced course offerings, gave high-ability students the option of condensing coursework for early entry into college, and began to integrate more science, foreign language, and technology content into curricula (Rimm et al., 2018). High-ability learners were now included in educational discussions. Recommendations from a task force put forth by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968 included the further development of talent and the creation of both a center and an advisory council for gifted and talented people (Pfeiffer, 2018).

As time progressed, authentic task performance as evidence of giftedness made room for motivation to play a role (Pfeiffer, 2018). The introduction of the Marland report in 1972 served as a catalyst for further plans and policies to be
enacted regarding gifted education (VanTassel-Baska, 2018). This landmark report established the basis of giftedness, including six outlined areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor ability (Lockhart, 2020). The Office of Gifted and Talented was created at the US Department of Education by President Gerald Ford in 1974 as a part of educational legislation (Pfeiffer, 2018). These amendments provided funding for training, research, and model programs in gifted education (Pfeiffer, 2018). Other initiatives, such as the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1988 and the National Excellence report in 1993 led to the eventual implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Pfeiffer, 2018). ESSA marks the first-time federal education law addressed the needs of gifted and talented students explicitly (Pfeiffer, 2018).

Though the US government can establish parameters that guide state educational policy, each state has “considerable leeway in setting their own policies that directly impact the education of gifted students” (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 168). According to the Georgia Department of Education, information to determine eligibility for gifted education services is collected in each of four areas: mental ability, achievement, creativity, and motivation (Banter & Hackney, 2022). These mandates, put forth by the state in 2012, include types of gifted
services to be provided, such as cognitive and metacognitive, but do not mention any services pertaining to the affective domain.

One of the most prominent changes over the past decade has been a change in views of the natures of both giftedness and education (Neihart et al., 2016). Although progress has been made, the “policy picture for gifted education in the US remains a ‘patchwork quilt’, stitched together by states and local-district efforts to provide support for gifted learners while other states and locals remain tepid in their response” (VanTassel-Baska, 2018, p. 99). Gifted education policy at the state level is “tied to the rules, statutes, codes, and regulations adopted by state legislatures, interpreted by state school boards of education and state departments of education, and implemented by local school districts” (VanTassel-Baska, 2018, p. 99). As the discourse on giftedness is deeply rooted in educational context, shifting understanding of human potential can make more compelling, socially more equitable and more productive gifted and talented programs (Pfeiffer, 2018).

**Supporting the Asynchronous Development of Gifted Students**

The need for an affective curriculum that encompasses social and emotional learning is more acute for gifted learners (Cavilla, 2019). A lack of support for affective growth can lead to poor impulse control, an inability to control emotions, lower self-esteem, underachievement, and over time more
serious mental issues (Cavilla, 2019). This study seeks to determine the effects of a differentiated affective curriculum on the perceptions of third-grade gifted students as well as on the changes in developmental need. Successful social and emotional programs target specific skills such as anger management, perspective taking, or empathy (Medina, 2018). Surveys, observations, and student reflections have been found to have a positive effect on the affective level of students (Cavilla, 2017). An affective curriculum is the key to a gifted student’s ability to thrive; therefore, it is an extraordinary necessity to have social and emotional learning infused into the school day (Medina, 2018).

**Inequities in Gifted Education**

The potential for transformative SEL can serve as a lever for equity for gifted students (Williams & Jagers, 2020). Addressing the social, emotional, and academic needs of gifted youth from historically marginalized groups is a pressing matter (Jagers et al., 2018). While SEL recognizes the importance of students having a positive sense of self, it tends to look at identity more generally. Furthermore, the conceptions of giftedness in different cultures, scientific conceptions of and research on giftedness generally reflect a Western and, in particular, Anglo-American bias (Pfeiffer, 2018). It is vital for students’ social and emotional development to participate in culturally responsive SEL surrounding critical consciousness and oppression, as well as the ability to reflect
on their personal views and respective cultures (Warner & Browning, 2021).
When educators acknowledge the roles that race and ethnicity play in identity development, including for gifted students, they actively affirm the value of students’ cultures (Warner & Browning, 2021).

Related Research

Lewis Terman was the first to challenge the fragile social and emotional health of gifted and talented individuals. Schools were structured much differently during his time of research, and advanced individuals were moved sometimes two grade levels ahead of their same-age peers. Terman (1931) located the brightest students for his study more accurately by selecting the youngest child in a class than by relying on the teacher’s judgment. In his longitudinal study, he found that among more than 1500 children with high intelligence, most exhibited characteristics of average social adjustment and emotional stability (Pfeiffer, 2018). However, there are multiple critics of Terman’s study: the lack of diversity, and positive adjustment which influenced those in the study could have affected the overall results (Pfeiffer, 2018). Nonetheless, this research revealed the importance of regarding gifted and talented students’ social and emotional development in addition to their academic achievement.

Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1942) also contributed to studying the social and emotional development of individuals through her research on peer
relationships of gifted children with differing ranges of intellectual talent (as cited in Pfeiffer, 2018). Hollingworth (1942) frequently remarked that gifted children received "daily practice in habits of idleness and daydreaming" because only a small portion of their abilities was needed for their schoolwork (Hollingworth, 1942, p. 258). Hollingworth’s research noted the largest affective discrepancies among the highly gifted children as compared to their moderately gifted peers. However, all gifted students in Hollingworth’s study were determined to exhibit little to no social and emotional concerns when around their intellectual peers (Hollingworth, 1942). Gifted children need exactly the kind of curriculum, programming, and appreciation for their social and emotional development that Leta Hollingworth provided almost 70 years ago (Silverman, 1990).

Turner (2018) conducted a recent study, a qualitative case study that investigated the use of universal SEL curricula as a primary means for supporting the social and emotional developmental needs of gifted students in a large school district in the western US. Turner collected data through semi-structured interviews with teachers and district administrators, document analysis, and evaluation of universal SEL curricula using a rubric. The results of Turner’s study revealed further need of training for teachers involving the affective needs of gifted students and included recommendations for future
research to further evaluate SEL curricula in meeting the unique social and emotional needs of gifted students.

Another action research study conducted in 2018 by Andrea Trujillo aimed to gain academic, social, and emotional perceptions of six gifted and talented students in a self-contained elementary classroom. Trujillo used multiple methods to determine the social perceptions of gifted boys and girls and the gifted teacher. Data collection included student perception surveys, student and teacher interviews, and researcher observations of the six students. To analyze the data, Trujillo created codes to distinguish among parent, student, and teacher categories. The researcher found students have the social perception of either being an "insider" or "outsider" when it comes to their social life at school (Trujillo, 2018, p. 4). Trujillo indicated that some students try to cover up their gifted identity by using negative coping strategies such as displaying negative behavior to avoid an outsider status.

The related research shows a strong correlation between giftedness and asynchronous social and emotional development. Through the study of gifted students, researchers conclude that supporting the unique needs of these students is imperative to fostering their successes (Silverman, 1990). While there are numerous studies about the unique affective challenges of gifted students, few directly address the use of a differentiated social and emotional curriculum
to support their specific needs. This study aimed to determine the most significant areas of asynchronous development and measured the effects of a differentiated affective curriculum on the overall social and emotional health of third-grade gifted students.

**Giftedness**

Being gifted has been difficult for researchers and scientists to define (Akar & Ahi, 2020). Definitions of giftedness vary greatly from state to state and from nation to nation and reflect the many conceptions of giftedness that abound (Suldo et al., 2018). However, when discussing intellectual giftedness, general intelligence or cognitive ability likely plays a central role in any definition (Wai et al., 2022). The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act defines gifted and talented students as students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (as cited in National Association of Gifted Children, 2022)

Along with the above descriptors, there are other supporting definitions. In addition to the characteristics they possess, gifted students are also considered
to have advanced communication skills, as well as are curious, intuitive, emotionally sensitive, and have a very sharp awareness (Akar & Ahi, 2020). Though this description of gifted students is not all-encompassing, it makes clear the multi-faceted nature of giftedness.

The important role of motivation in achievement has been recognized in many models, concepts and definitions of giftedness (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). Of the types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic are the main components. In general, intrinsic motivation is at work where learning is for its own sake or for internal, personal satisfaction, while extrinsic motivation is driven essentially by external factors such as rewards or threats of punishment (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). A lack of achievement motivation among gifted students has been a concern of educators, parents, and researchers for decades, partly because many gifted students are able to achieve academically without the use of motivation-related skills to be successful (Desmet & Pereira, 2021).

Creativity has been identified by many as an important indicator of giftedness (Pfeiffer, 2018). Like giftedness itself, the definition of creativity is broad and varied. A synthesized definition, based on several elements, contends creativity is “the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and
useful as defined within a social context” (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 82). Simply put, creative students exhibit intelligence in areas outside of traditional intelligence.

Giftedness has historically been defined by cognitive functioning and abilities, with an added dose of creativity and motivation, leaving open questions of how being gifted might impact the emotional abilities of a child (Pfeiffer, 2018). In Georgia, the definition of giftedness includes achievement, motivation, and creativity and use both the words gifted and talented in their description of students identified for gifted programs (Georgia Department of Education, 2023). Gagné (2016) emphasized the fact that gifted and talented are often interchangeable and suggested that giftedness is nothing more than the existing potential within a person which can be turned into talent. The National Association of Gifted Children (2022) emphasizes that embracing the multifaceted definitions of giftedness requires effort and should result in gifted education services that support a range of diverse needs including social and emotional development.

**Social and Emotional Development**

To understand development in the affective domain, it is necessary to study both aspects closely: emotional competence and social competence (Edwards, 2018). Social competence refers to a broad set of qualities and traits that are successfully applied in social situations, including communication skills and
reasoning among diverse situations and circumstances (Efthymia & Konstantinos, 2018). Emotional competence, then, is the capacity to regulate one’s emotions and behavior (Ahmed et al., 2020). Social development and emotional development are intertwined and are often referred to collectively. The social and emotional world of the gifted “encompasses both an exploration of their unique social and emotional characteristics and experiences, and the psychosocial skills necessary to develop their talents” (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 49).

Traditionally, the general belief was that highly intelligent individuals lived lives of social isolation, emotional instability, and psychopathology (Pfeiffer, 2018).

**Asynchronous Development of Gifted Students**

Being gifted in schools today is not necessarily a positive experience (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2018). Social and emotional developmental trajectories, experiences, and needs among gifted individuals can shift due to advanced intellectual development (Pfeiffer, 2018). Unfortunately, educators and counselors can overlook the developmental and emotional needs of gifted students, because these students are often meeting or exceeding educational expectations (Farley & Kennedy, 2018). The gifted label itself sends mixed messages to students. Labeling a child as gifted has a social and emotional impact as it sends negative messages, including assumptions and stereotypes (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018). To best meet the needs of gifted students, an understanding
of individual strengths and areas of concern is needed so that a range of services can be offered (Nobbe & Davis, 2018).

Students are recognized as gifted if they have exceptional abilities in any area of learning that significantly exceed grade-level expectations, and they can understand the content designed for students two years or older than them (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2018). Oftentimes, this academic advancement leads to an underdeveloped area of development. Asynchronous development is defined as cognitive abilities, social awareness, and physical development which differ from one another within an individual with inconsistent areas of development (Lockhart, 2020). Gifted students have an intellectual capacity far exceeding their chronological age (Cavilla, 2019). Educators should be familiar with the idea of asynchrony, not to predict social or emotional differences in gifted individuals, but to aid their understanding when those differences present themselves (Neihart, Pfeiffer, & Cross, 2016). A child’s chronological age may not necessarily align neatly with the child’s developmental age across domains (Edwards, 2018).

There are several areas of disconnect in which gifted students, in large part due to the very nature of their giftedness, may need increased support for their social and emotional development. These include anxiety, perfectionism, underachievement, among others (Fisher & Kennedy, 2016). Additionally, twice-exceptional students are at a greater risk of both misidentification and a lack of
support for their particular social and emotional needs. Gifted students whose learning needs are not met in school might resist doing schoolwork, perform below their potential, become frustrated, bossy, and adopt a slew of other behaviors as a response to not feeling fulfilled in the classroom (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2018).

**Anxiety**

The lived experience of gifted individuals contains anxiety-producing stressors (Gaesser, 2018). Emotional states which interfere with learning include stress, especially that generated by anxiety; a small degree of anxiety can be an aid to learning but too much can be inhibiting (Phillips & Lindsay, 2006). Anxiety prevents students from focusing, concentrating, feeling safe, grounded, and at ease. A gifted student may have fears or anxiety regarding factors or issues that his or her peers are unaware, such as when gifted students’ interest and ability leads them to read books that are designed for students who are older and more emotionally mature (Fisher & Kennedy, 2016). What may appear as “a lack of motivation, cooperation, or self-discipline could actually be the result of the gifted child’s unmanaged anxiety” (Gaesser, 2018, p. 186).

**Perfectionism**

Achieving personal goals and high standards of performance are deemed desirable for many gifted students (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018). *Perfectionism*
is described as “setting unrealistically high standards, rigidly adhering to them, and defining self-worth in terms of achieving these standards” (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 51). Perfectionism is associated with giftedness as gifted students are often capable of achieving high standards of excellence, even perfection (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018). In fact, it is even included in the National Society for the Gifted and Talented characteristics of gifted students (Pfeiffer, 2018). While perfectionism can lead to positive outcomes if handled in a healthy way, it is often viewed as a double-edged sword for gifted learners because of both desirable and undesirable traits (Pfeiffer, 2018).

There are two major concerns about perfectionism for gifted students: underachievement and emotional turmoil (Farley & Kennedy, 2018).

*Underachievement* is often defined as “a significant discrepancy between an individual’s ability and actual achievement” (Desmet & Pereira, 2021, p. 130). For example, fear of failure can cause a gifted student with perfectionist tendencies to avoid a task altogether and develop self-destructive failure (Pfeiffer, 2018). This can further manifest through procrastination, avoidance, or withdrawal, which have been linked to anxiety, depression, suicide, and other forms of psychopathology (Pfeiffer, 2018). Therefore, in studying the relationship between underachievement and perfectionism, it is necessary to differentiate between *overt* (easily recognizable underachievement in the form of lower grades) and
covert (masked underachievement evidenced through avoiding challenges) underachievers (Hébert, 2021). While one gifted individual might flourish in one environment and underachieve in another, and vice versa, the influences of beliefs, lifestyles, material resources, and others are vital for their success in gifted education (Pfeiffer, 2018).

Self-Concept

Academic self-perception or self-concept involves the beliefs we hold about our academic abilities, behavior, and competence and is an important prerequisite for academic achievement (Desmet & Pereira, 2021). Gifted students are valued for their high performance, often equating self-worth with performance (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018). However, due to greater failure expectancies and low self-esteem, these individuals may engage in more self-defeating behaviors, such as not studying for tests or completing homework assignments (Gaesser, 2018), which can exacerbate other social and emotional discrepancies. Supporting gifted students’ academic self-perception is critical to their long-term achievement and motivation-related skills, including engaging in college and career paths as well as developing resilience, perseverance, and help-seeking behavior (Desmet & Pereira, 2021).


**Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy focuses on an individual’s beliefs about existing ability when faced with a task or a set goal (Nichols et al., 2020). Academic self-efficacy is a judgement of the confidence one has in academic abilities and has been repeatedly related to variables such as overall achievement and career aspirations (Pfeiffer, 2018). Motivation, a decision to engage with a task and continue even when encountering failure or difficulties, can be intrinsic or extrinsic and influence the overall belief of an individual (Pfeiffer, 2018). Affective curriculum can support students in gaining self-efficacy by instructing ways to make tasks manageable and using strategies such as positive self-talk (Desmet & Pereira, 2021).

**Twice-Exceptional**

Multiple instances of misdiagnosis occur in education, especially when many of the characteristics and behaviors of gifted students mirror those of special education students (Al-Hroub & Krayem, 2018). One marked characteristic of giftedness is what Polish psychiatrist and psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski coined as “overexcitabilities” (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2018, p. 11). Students who are deemed gifted often experience emotions much more intensely and also have a more enhanced response to stimuli than other children.
It was not until the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) that federal attention was pointed towards students who are both gifted and have a disability (Josephson et al., 2018). Twice-exceptional students are defined as students who demonstrate the potential for high achievement or creative productivity in one or more domains such as math, science, technology, the social arts, the visual, spatial, or performing arts, or other areas of human productivity and who manifest one or more disabilities as defined by federal or state eligibility criteria. (Gierczyk & Hornby, 2021)

Despite the increase of research on twice-exceptional students over the past few decades, the needs of this group of students are not fully being met in schools (Josephson et al., 2018). Gifted students tend to experience greater areas of disconnect in their social and emotional development than their neurotypical age-peers, and this is experienced even greater by twice-exceptional students (Josephson et al., 2018). Students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), for example, engage in similar behaviors as gifted children causing misdiagnosis (Al-Hroub & Krayem, 2018). When twice-exceptional students are not meeting academic expectations, they may be misidentified as gifted underachievers, or not identified for gifted services at all (Josephson et al., 2018).
Social and Emotional Discrepancies of Gifted Students

Simply put, the social, emotional, and behavioral contexts of children’s lives influence their ability to learn (Minor & Duchac, 2020). Acknowledging gifted students have unique social-emotional needs and finding ways to help them navigate social situations in the school setting is critical for their long-term success (Josephson et al., 2018).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Children learn best when they are treated as human beings with social and emotional as well as academic needs (NCSEAD, 2019, as cited in Knobbe, 2021, p. 23). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is defined as, “processes of acquiring and implementing knowledge and skills necessary for children and adults to understand their own feelings, set realistic goals and reach them, feel empathy for others, and make responsible decisions by establishing positive relationships” (Kasikci & Metmet, 2021, p. 3). There has been tremendous growth in SEL over the past two decades (Williams & Jagers, 2020).

The implementation of SEL programs in school settings is a promising approach to foster affective, cognitive, and behavioral skills among all children (Lawson et al., 2018). SEL works to “enhance students’ innate abilities to improve coping, regulate emotions, problem solve, take on leadership roles, focus on control, mindfulness, optimism, gratitude, communication, and empowerment”
Furthermore, it supports the notion of what Carol Dweck (2017) introduced as the term *growth mindset*, which is the idea that intelligence and abilities can be changed through effort and deliberate practice. While many gifted students hold a growth mindset about their ability to increase their intelligence and domain-specific skills, many hold a more fixed view of their giftedness (Pfeiffer, 2018). SEL can support gifted students in adopting a healthy mindset to overcome the social and emotional discrepancies that come as a result of advanced academic achievement.

**CASEL**

CASEL was created in the US in 1994 and has become the dominant framework informing state SEL standards (Frye et al., 2022). According to CASEL, students who possess prosocial skills are more resilient, capable of overcoming adversity, and persevere until they achieve their goals (2019). There are five core components to the SEL model as proposed by CASEL. The five areas that comprise the model include affective skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. Overall, CASEL provides fundamental SEL skills students need to possess in order to excel academically, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally (Paolini, 2022).
**Systems of Support**

To respond to increased academic and behavior challenges, schools sometimes combine programs into multitiered systems of support (MTSS). Levels of service within MTSS frameworks include universal, targeted, and intensive supports designed to address a scope of academic, behavioral, and affective concerns (Eklund et al., 2018). Instruction is first provided on a school-wide level, known as the Tier One level, then narrowed into more targeted Tier Two small-group remediation as needed. Successful programs, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), provide organized tiered structures to ensure success for all children (Haraway, 2012). Increasingly, schools are embedding SEL programs as part of MTSS to provide students with a continuum of services designed to meet their varying needs (Eklund et al., 2018).

**PBIS**

A school-wide positive behavior management system is a preventative approach that can be used to increase expected behaviors while decreasing student misbehaviors (McKellar, 2017). One of the most widely adopted evidence-based frameworks in schools and districts is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS (Kittelman et al., 2019). *Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)* is a multi-tiered framework of support designed
to increase academic and social behavior outcomes for every student in the
school (Gage et al., 2020). PBIS is considered a Response to Intervention, or RTI,
approach for social and emotional behavior. RTI is a school-wide, validated
approach that requires educators and counselors to offer universal interventions
on the Tier One level to all students while identifying and delivering more
intensive Tier Two interventions and support to students who need specific
services (Ziomek-Daigle & Heckman, 2019). Both the PBIS and RTI frameworks
use three prevention tiers to organize effective social skills instruction and
behavioral interventions along a continuum of increasing intensity (Freeman et
al., 2015).

Schools must teach expected behavior; it cannot be assumed students
arrive at school with required behaviors. The tiered framework of the PBIS
program allows teachers to quickly identify problem areas and adjust instruction
of those behaviors accordingly. Overall, PBIS programs have been shown to
reduce behavior problems (Buckley, 2019). Teachers first collect data from all
students, through observations and other modes, to identify problem behaviors.
Then, teachers use the data to identify students who need further support and
develop intervention plans with instructional strategies, including more
intensive instruction and reinforcement of consequences for the alternative
desired behavior (Abou-Rjaily & Stoddard, 2017).
In a PBIS framework, positive behaviors and behavior expectations are taught to students, much like math, reading, and other core subjects (Durlak et al., 2011). The foundation of PBIS and its practices is that social behaviors and academic achievement are connected (Guillory, 2015). This program, much like RTI, is data-driven and includes progress monitoring and tiered evidence-based interventions. Schools have recognized the effectiveness of a preventative method where school-wide positive behavior expectations are taught, and behavioral interventions are in place (McKellar, 2017).

**Second Step**

Students need explicit SEL instruction to recognize, understand, label, express and regulate emotions (Ahmed et al., 2020). The Second Step curriculum is designed to reduce the risk of aggressive behavior in elementary school children by increasing their level of social skills and competence to respond in nonviolent ways (Committee for Children, 1991, as cited in Neace & Muñoz, 2012). The Second Step program teaches skills in three key areas:

The first targeted area in the Second Step program is empathy, which is designed to promote greater understanding of others’ feeling; impulse control and problem solving, designed to teach children to calm down and use a problem-solving strategy with specific behavioral skill
steps; and emotion/anger management which is designed to promote self-control in anger-provoking situations. (Neace & Muñoz, 2012)

Early childhood is a key time in the development of these self-regulatory skills (Wenz-Gross et. al., 2018). Social-emotional skills are also promoted through “directly teaching about emotions, emotion management strategies, and social problem-solving skills, as well as instructional teaching methods that foster child learning engagement” (Neace & Muñoz, 2012, p. 3). Although not scripted into daily instruction, teachers are also encouraged to reinforce skills throughout the day/week using strategies; in addition, the Second Step Program includes a weekly handout for families to provide information about what children are learning that week and how they can reinforce the learned concepts at home (Neace & Muñoz, 2012).

**Differentiation**

Instruction is not one-size-fits-all. Individual differences create obstacles to teaching and developing learning activities at school but is not adequate justification to teach according to one uniform plan (Altintas & Ozdemir, 2015). However, too many schools are providing little differentiation of curriculum and instruction for gifted students (Tomlinson & Reis, 2004). Simply put, this is because giftedness has never been understood for what it really is -- a manifestation of the degree to which one is different from same-age peers.
(Smutny et al., 2007). A misconception held by schools and families hindering the growth of gifted students is that this group of students needs no differentiated support because of the assumption that for them, learning (and subsequently life) comes easy (VanTassel-Baska, 2018).

Through his differential theory, theorist Virgil Ward advocated for a type of curriculum with features directly pertinent to the distinctive traits of the gifted (Ward, 1961). He articulated a vision for gifted education that was individualized in content, process, abstraction, depth, breadth, and pace of learning experiences (Pfeiffer, 2018). Carol Tomlinson’s model of differentiation expounds on Ward’s theory and involves modification of content, process, and product, as well as the learning environment (Tomlinson, 1999). Overall, curriculum for the gifted should emphasize advanced content, challenging tasks, and interdisciplinary learning opportunities that differ from opportunities afforded to learners not identified as gifted (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 149).

Teachers with gifted students in their classrooms need to teach them according to their individual characteristics by promoting different approaches to integrating cognitive and affective factors (Altintas & Ozdemir, 2015). Differentiated learning opportunities make modifications to instruction and curriculum to ensure content is more challenging and advanced (Reis et al., 2021). Using preassessments to determine what students already know can help
determine the starting point for instruction. Ultimately, using strategies that are tailored to gifted students’ unique needs positively affects their social and emotional development and ensures their learning capacities are being used to the maximum degree (Reis et al., 2021; Altintas & Ozdemir, 2015).

**Differentiated SEL Accommodations**

Broader conceptualizations of differentiation also address the unique social and emotional needs of gifted learners (Pfeiffer, 2018). However, copious amounts of data support that gifted students are not being instructed in such a way as to meet their potential; furthermore, external support is needed for gifted students to flourish (Subotnik et al., 2011). Differentiation is vital for all learners, and gifted students must not be excluded. Teachers should use differentiation strategies because “gifted learners prefer and benefit from instruction that includes a faster pace of learning, greater independence in study and thought, and increased complexity and depth in subject content” (Rosenberg, 2012, p. 47). To do this, teachers may modify learning to provide experiences which provide higher-level questioning and exploration at an appropriately tailored level (Pfeiffer, 2018).

**Supporting Gifted Students**

Growing up as a gifted child in the twenty-first century can be a complex experience with unique opportunities for growth and might also result in unique
challenges for the parents, teachers, and others who guide these individuals from childhood into adulthood (Pfeiffer, 2018). Working with gifted students requires understanding and accommodating some of the significant social and emotional idiosyncrasies that often occur in this population (Zakreski, 2018). Numerous factors can impact the social development of gifted individuals, including families, who are very influential with regard to both the intellectual and social and emotional development of gifted children (Pfeiffer, 2018). Family dynamics, and the multiple facets that compose such a complex system, contribute to the development of high achievement and creativity (Pfeiffer, 2018). However, for gifted children who do not have supportive home environments, or who are academically mismatched, social and emotional maladjustment is compounded (Pfeiffer, 2018).

Teachers also play a role in impacting the affective domain of gifted students and should understand their innately different learning needs to develop their capabilities. Those working with or who have an influence on gifted students need to be aware of variables that thwart a child from achieving his or her potential (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2018). Systematically addressing emotional issues in gifted education could help gifted students develop adaptive emotional competencies, boost self-image, relieve social stress and anxiety and help the gifted create more meaningful lives (Pfeiffer, 2018). Although research
provides clues to the nature of an optimal family and school environment for talent development, there are many who have achieved high levels without one or both or even despite negative family or school environments (Pfeiffer, 2018).

**Gifted Identification**

The original purpose for the assessment of giftedness, to understand children who develop atypically in either direction, is still the most important reason for comprehensive evaluation (Pfeiffer, 2018). Correctly identifying gifted students is particularly complicated in the US, as there are no national criteria for giftedness, and students are identified as gifted in varying ways across the 50 States (Fisher & Kennedy, 2016). Moreover, giftedness is exhibited in more than just achievement. Creative thinkers are not often identified as gifted because their behavior tends to annoy teachers, and their apparent “fooling around” often results in incomplete work. It is often the nonconformists who are the problem-solvers, artists, dreamers, and inventors, thinking “outside the box” in ways that profoundly affect our lives (Winebrenner & Brulles, 2018, p. 20). Identification is further complicated when assessing twice-exceptional children. The assessor must separate strengths from weaknesses and determine which characteristics are supportive of which diagnosis (Pfeiffer, 2018).

Giving attention to social and emotional development is an important component to the healthy functioning of individuals and the development of
their gifts and talents (Pfeiffer, 2018). Advanced intellectual abilities often yield unique social and emotional characteristics, such as anxiety, perfectionism, and beliefs of self, which result in asynchronous development. The developmental challenges and asynchronous development of gifted children and adolescents is “cause for action on the part of parent, teachers, and school counselors” (Pfeiffer, 2018, p. 274). RTI, PBIS, and Second Step programs, implemented as a part of MTSS, create a collaborative model of support for gifted learners’ whole development.

**Equity in Gifted Education**

The ebbs and flows of equity and excellence have significantly impacted the evolution of gifted education in the United States (Brown & Wishney, 2017). This has affected both the diversity of gifted education as well as the support provided to these learners. Although the demographics of public schools in the United States is changing significantly, those changes are not being reflected in gifted programs. Disproportionality rates of diverse students in gifted programs continue to be a critical issue in the field of gifted education for numerous reasons (Hodges & Gentry, 2020). School discipline, test scores, hiring practices, college enrollment, and a host of other important student outcomes reflect disproportionality within gifted programs and others (Peters et al., 2019).
Misidentification has devastating consequences, as gifted children not placed in gifted programs often struggle in school; they underachieve academically, and negative behaviors manifest (Morgan, 2019). Furthermore, as behaviors increase from unidentified gifted learners, the chance of being referred decreases. Gifted minority students who have a learning disability can be even harder to identify, resulting in a lack of the services they need. Instead of using limited measures of students’ ability and sorting students accordingly -- separating the gifted from the “giftless” -- schools must recognize, validate, and cultivate potential, talent, and ability in all students in general, and students of color in particular (Wright et al., 2017).

In addition to the disproportionate representation within gifted programs, the gifted program itself is not receiving the support it needs. Excellence should not be perceived as a group norm because it precludes the needs of the ablest learners in the school population (Brown & Wishney, 2017). True educational equity cannot disallow opportunities to pursue excellence at appropriate levels, areas, and interests for the individual learner (Brown & Wishney, 2017).

Summary

This chapter reviewed the relevant literature that guided the action research and informed the researcher of the unique characteristics of gifted students, including asynchronous areas of social and emotional development
due to high achievement. In addition, the analysis of literature identifies effects of mismatched development including a manifestation of anxiety and lack of self-management, as well as supportive strategies such as differentiation Social cognitive theory and the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners established a strong foundation for this study related to using a differentiated affective curriculum to support the whole development of a gifted child. Chapter Three will provide an overview of the methodology as well as the data collection process for this study. In Chapter Four, I will present the data collected from student surveys, observations, and reflective exit tickets. My analysis and commentary on the data will be summarized in Chapter Five, along with conclusions, implications, and further recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGY

Gifted students are distinguished in creativity, art, and leadership; love to act independently in their interests; and show high performance (Nacaroğlu & Kızkapan, 2021). Since these students often meet or exceed educational expectations, educators and schools can overlook their developmental and emotional needs (Fisher & Kennedy, 2016). Third-grade gifted students at Green Willow Elementary (GWE) demonstrated increased anxiety levels and a lack of affective development regarding self-management and self-awareness. Despite the weekly Second Step lessons conducted with these third-grade gifted students, observations and conversations revealed a need for further instruction to teach coping skills to support perfectionism and anxiety. These social and emotional skills needed to be explicitly taught to these students using specific interventions to support their asynchronous affective development. This study was grounded in Albert Bandura’s (1977) social cognitive theory and Derek Cavilla’s (2019) Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners and formed the foundation for this study. The purpose of this mixed-methods action research study was to investigate the effects and perceptions of a differentiated
affective curriculum on the self-reported social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students at GWE. Quantitative data was collected first to determine the most significant areas of asynchronous social and emotional development needs as self-reported by the students. Then, a combination of qualitative methods, observations and exit tickets, helped me to better understand the third graders’ self-reported unique affective characteristics and perceptions of a differentiated SEL program. The following research questions underpinned the study:

1. What are the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?

2. How does a differentiated SEL curriculum impact third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional needs?

3. What is the effectiveness of a differentiated SEL curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade students at GWE?

These research questions stemmed from the local problem of practice and allowed me as the teacher-researcher to use different phases and forms of data collection to improve my practice while better understanding my third-grade gifted students’ unique social and emotional development (Efron & Ravid, 2013). These questions were constructed to support the combination of qualitative and
quantitative measures of the mixed-methods approach for this action research study.

This chapter will discuss the mixed-methods action research study and why the design is most appropriate for the study and review details of the context and setting. In addition, the chapter will present a thorough and detailed description of the intervention for this study, including discussion of the researcher’s positionality, participants, and data collection methods. This chapter will conclude with the criteria in this study that is reflective of quality action research.

**Research Design and Intervention**

Much like learning, action research cannot (and should not) fit into a one-size-fits-all box. Action research is a cyclical process that allows teacher-researchers to study their own schools, classrooms, and personal practice to build understanding and improve their quality or effectiveness in a way that is relevant, collaborative, and practical (Mertler, 2014). This mixed methods study drew upon the strengths of two forms of data to further address the problem of practice across multiple phases (Efron & Ravid, 2020). A quantitative component in the first and last phase measured specific areas of social and emotional need and the effectiveness of a differentiated affective curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous development of third-grade gifted students. To better
understand third-grade students’ perspectives of differentiated SEL, qualitative data was gathered during the second phases. The mixed-methods design of this action research study yielded additional insight into the problem of practice by providing valid and rich data to develop successful action strategies.

The school district where this study took place, located in the southeastern United States, is comprised of 31 elementary schools in multiple cities and towns. According to the most recent United States Census, slightly more than one-quarter of people in this county are school-age (Senate, 2020). GWE has a student population of 521 third, fourth, and fifth-grade students. GWE is in the top 20% of all schools in Georgia for overall test scores. Of the 168 students in third grade, 42 are identified as GTE by the state of Georgia and are part of the Georgia Department of Education’s Gifted and Talented Education Program. These students demonstrate a high degree of intellectual and/or creative ability, exhibit an exceptionally high degree of motivation, and excel in specific academic fields (Georgia Department of Education, 2023).

To improve the social and emotional health of third-grade gifted students at GWE, I measured the effects of a differentiated SEL curriculum by supplementing the school’s Second Step Elementary curriculum as part of a schoolwide PBIS program. As part of the intervention for the study, I
administered whole-group and small-group instruction to GWE third-grade gifted students using Second Step lesson plans.

Second Step lessons are taught once a week to all students at GWE; however, this whole-group implementation of the affective curriculum was not working for the third-grade gifted students in my class at GWE. Consequently, I delivered both whole and small-group instruction that was differentiated in content and process to meet their unique needs at an increased frequency by providing lessons every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Based on student responses to the pre-survey, I determined specific Second Step lessons based on the four most significant social and emotional domains self-reported by the students. I used the Second Step Grade Three Scope and Sequence to align the needed affective skills with the appropriate lessons (see Appendix B). Overall, the intervention took place over four weeks.

Each of the four social and emotional areas with the most significant gaps were taught in isolation to the third-grade gifted class. Components of each Second Step lesson included clearly identified objectives, concepts, teaching notes, and a lesson script, all of which were used at various points throughout the week. On Mondays, I used the lesson script and teaching notes to provide each gifted student an opportunity to learn, model, and practice the skill in a supportive environment. The objectives and concepts guided me in explicitly
explaining and connecting the skill to the students’ lives. For the remainder of each Monday and all of every Tuesday, I recorded observations in a researcher journal which allowed me to determine any effects of the lesson on the third-grade gifted students.

On Wednesday of each intervention week, I reviewed the targeted skill with the whole class and pulled a small group of students who, based on the pre-survey, showed the greatest need for support. During the small-group intervention, I first reviewed what was taught during the whole-group lesson on Monday and then used the Second Step Following Through cards to reinforce the concept and provide further application. The Weekly Skill Check provided students with the opportunity to collaboratively discuss what was learned, as well as how to practice it in various environments (both at home and school). This small-group collaboration fostered authentic conversation and allowed students to further focus on the affective skill in an encouraging and more intimate environment.

Before, during, and after the small-group lesson, I continued to observe the class and to record observations about those who received further support. Students ended each intervention week by completing an exit ticket each Friday that provided them an opportunity to reflect on the targeted affective skill while allowing me to see the impact of the weekly events. All
student participants in my third-grade class completed the weekly exit tickets, but when analyzing the data, I especially focused on the forms from students who received targeted small-group instruction. Data collection and analysis were conducted concurrently during the four-week intervention period to synthesize the sources and increase the validity of the findings.

By placing their unique social and emotional development as a priority in this group of third-grade gifted students’ lives, the framework of this study supported this intervention. Using an affective curriculum in a supportive learning environment helped students understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

**Week 1: Self-Management: Emotion Regulation**

The most significant gap in the participants’ social and emotional development was emotion regulation, which falls under the self-management domain of the CASEL framework. To provide targeted support during in this area during the intervention, I first used the Second Step Scope and Sequence in conjunction with the CASEL Alignment chart to determine the specific SEL competencies that needed to be taught. From there, I isolated the Second Step lessons pertaining to emotion regulation and used them to plan the first week of the intervention for this study. This process allowed me to determine the exact
Second Step lessons that were needed to support the participants’ affective development surrounding emotion regulation.

On Monday of the first week of the intervention, I used Second Step Lesson 11, *Introducing Emotion Management*. This lesson focused on teaching students how to identify physical clues that can help them label their own feelings. Teacher materials for the Second Step program included a suggested lesson script which included key concepts, a sequence of the lessons, a warm-up activity, an audio-visual media presentation, and worksheet activities (Moy & Hazen, 2018). Each lesson also included a rationale of the affective skill to ensure those administering the lesson have a foundation of knowledge about the skill being taught.

Using the Lesson 11 script, students learned an overview of intense emotions, such as anger, and how these feelings can affect thinking and healthy decision-making. Students were taught strategies to help them recognize emotions that need to be managed, such as focusing attention on their bodies, gaining back control when feeling a strong feeling, and facilitating problem-solving, self-management, and social competence. Throughout the first week of intervention, the key concepts *nervous, anxious, manage, handle*, and *recognize* were introduced to students during the initial lesson and reviewed throughout the week. These terms were also spiraled throughout each whole and small-group
lesson during the week. After the initial lesson, all students in my third-grade class participated in activities such as the *Calm It Down Dance* and song and *Weekly Skill Check* (Second Step, 2011). Throughout each school day, we also practiced strategies such as naming our feelings and belly breathing to calm ourselves down.

I provided additional instruction in a more intimate environment for the students whose low pre-survey scores revealed the need for further support in this domain. Oliver, Sophia, Nathaniel, Olivia, Hillary, and Stephanie (all student names are pseudonyms) received the lowest scores in emotion regulation as self-reported on the WCSD-SECA pre-survey. These low scores revealed low levels of knowledge and skills in this affective domain, supporting the need for more intensive support. Throughout the first week of the intervention, I pulled these students to provide additional reinforcement around regulating emotions. I used the resources provided in the *Following Through* portion of the Second Step curriculum. For Lesson 11, students in the small group participated in skill-specific activities such as *Frozen Feelings Factory*, which supported the students in identifying their emotions, reinforcing their ability to notice what was happening, and reflecting on their thinking (Second Step, 2011). These activities were in addition to the whole-group activities mentioned previously.
Week 2: Self-Management: Goal Management

As students learn to accept their roles and duties as learners, they grow in managing time and setting goals to work toward effect self-regulation—a skill immensely powerful in supporting successful development (Cavilla, 2019). Because students also reported low levels of competency in goal management on the pre-survey, the second week of the study’s intervention focused on supporting this core competency.

The fourth lesson of the Second Step curriculum focuses on the planning aspect of learning and was taught during the second week of the intervention to support knowledge and skills surrounding goal management. Students were introduced to the lesson using a photograph (provided within the lesson media) of a boy and his teacher. The boy, Cheng, had forgotten his homework, and students were prompted to discuss how he might be feeling based on cues from the picture. Elise raised her hand and shared that Cheng looked frustrated, and Rebecca agreed. This conversation segued into the introduction of the Good Plan Checklist, which provided easy-to-follow steps for creating a plan. Students practiced making a school plan and collaborated about areas in a plan that might be needed.

I also taught Lesson 3, which focuses on assertiveness, during the second week of the intervention. Knowing how to ask for help is an important skill for
learning; the ability to communicate assertively contributes to academic success, solving problems, and standing up for oneself or others (Second Step, 2011). For this lesson, I started by reviewing self-talk as a strategy to ignore distractions. We then used the Lesson Brain Builder, Doodle Dance, to practice focusing our attention, listening, and using self-talk to remember the dance moves. I then showed a photograph of a girl named Naomi and provided the class context as to what they were viewing. I modeled various scenarios for Naomi, including ways she communicates to others passively, aggressively, and assertively. At the end of the lesson, I reiterated the objective and reminded students how assertiveness can help the third graders as learners and children.

On Wednesday, I pulled a small group of students who, based on low pre-survey scores, had the most significant need for further instruction in the goal management domain. Oliver, Liam, Stephanie, Mary, and Scott had the lowest percentage in this domain and comprised the students who received more intensive small-group support. Our small group completed activities from the Second Step lessons 3 and 4, such as Sentence Switcheroo and Doodle Dance. We also spent extra time reflecting on what we had learned in the whole-group lessons and made connections between the skills and our lives.

Throughout this second week of the intervention, I spiraled concepts learned from Lessons 3 and 4 throughout our instructional days. The whole-
group weekly skill check, which focused on making applications to real life, supported the third graders in connecting social and emotional concepts to their daily lives. Various ways students made connections to when and where to make them was when preparing for school or when writing an opinion essay.

**Week 3: Self-Awareness: Emotional Knowledge**

Using the CASEL correlation chart, Second Step Lesson 6, *Understanding Perspectives*, supported students’ perspective-taking abilities during the third week of the intervention to increase success in working groups, making friends, and successfully resolving interpersonal conflicts by examining scenarios where people have different feelings about the same thing (Second Step, 2011). This lesson emphasized feelings that others have and how we can have empathy for what someone else is feeling. To warm up, students sketched an object from two different perspectives. I laid a letter between each partnership for them to draw. Students were shocked how the same object could have so many interpretations: depending on their location, students had sketched an M or W. Both were correct, depending on their point of view.

I then led the students in discussing the media portion of this lesson, which was a video. As they watched, I prompted students to think about how the student’s choice changed everyone’s feelings about the situation. After the class viewed the video a couple of times, we discussed the characters’ feelings in
the video and what caused them. In the video, the character Meg’s feelings changed because she realized she had jumped to conclusions. She realized Kyle did not spill the milk on purpose but rather that it was an accident. The lesson concluded with a focus on empathy: feeling or understanding what someone else is feeling.

This week, Nathaniel, Hillary, Connor, Amanda, and Sophia received small-group instruction due to low pre-survey scores in the emotional knowledge domain. During our small group, we practiced identifying feelings by looking at each other’s faces and bodies for clues, thinking about each other’s points of view, and thinking of how we could respond. In addition, we discussed different emotions and how feelings would vary based on the situation. Ultimately, students concluded that we often feel multiple feelings simultaneously, and these feelings are often changing. We also discussed how different situations would result in differing emotions.

**Week 4: Relationship Skills**

Another affective domain that received the lowest scores and was therefore the fourth most significant area of social and emotional need was relationship skills. According to the CASEL framework, when students can establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships to communicate, listen, and cooperate effectively, and seek and offer help when needed, they are
demonstrating strong relationship skills (Gordon et al., 2022). As students learn to develop healthy interpersonal relationships, they refine their decision-making and actions based on their peers’ consideration (Cavilla, 2019).

This week, Lesson 8, Accepting Differences, had students practice finding things they have in common with others to develop empathy. Using the lesson script, I taught students that when we have empathy, we can understand and accept how others are the same and different from us and how we can be respectful of these differences. During the lesson, students worked in partners to write down three similarities, two differences, and one thing they would like to learn from their partner. This collaborative activity supported the notion that we are often more alike than different and that our differences make us unique.

Lesson 10, Making Friends, continued the learning from Lesson 8 by showing students how to initiate, continue, and end a conversation in a friendly way. The class was guided through the lesson and played a game to practice making conversation with others. A “chat chain” was created among partners to allow students the opportunity to practice the conversation process. After the lesson, I reminded students that talking to others can be challenging, but focusing attention, listening, and asking questions are strategies to make conversations.
In our small group on Wednesday, those with the lowest relationship skills pre-survey scores students participated in Common Ground, an activity that provided students the opportunity to develop empathy and appreciation by finding similarities and differences. Oliver, Nathaniel, Hillary, Sophia, and Amanda participated in this activity in a more private setting at the back table. We also used the photograph from Lesson 10 media to discuss friendly ways to start a conversation.

Participants

The 22 GWE third-grade gifted students in my classroom comprised the sample for this mixed-methods action research study. Participants were chosen based on the relevancy of their experiences regarding the topic of the study, their ability to provide valuable information about the issue being investigated, and the convenience of already being a student in my third-grade gifted classroom. The sample for this study is a purposive convenience sample (Efron & Ravid, 2013); I intentionally chose these students according to a predetermined purpose since they were already grouped within my classroom. Criteria to be included in the study include being a third-grade gifted student at GWE in my class whose parent had consented for participation. All of the students’ parents consented for their child to participate.
This group of 11 boys and 11 girls was chosen to take part in both quantitative and qualitative measures which sought to understand a phenomenon (Gall et al., 2003). The participants were comprised of 19 White students, 1 African-American student, and 2 multi-racial students. Academic abilities varied among the participants, and the personalities of the students were as varied as giftedness itself. While some students were uncharacteristically boisterous, others were extremely shy and introverted. Ultimately, the findings from this mixed-methods action research study were directly applied to improve the educational experience for these third-grade gifted students.

**Positionality**

This action research study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection, and it was important I understood the unique role I played while gathering information from observations. Qualitative researchers are often known as the instrument in a qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). During observations, I was fully immersed; I took on the role of complete participant as a member of the group being studied (Billups, 2021). In all instances of observation, I reported what I observed but also, just as importantly, what I did not observe (Billups, 2021). The overt and covert reporting of information using my observation protocol provided more insight into the overall problem being studied.
I was the sole researcher for this study; no other teachers or administrators assisted in the implementation. However, I invited individuals from faculty and staff, specifically other gifted teachers, to analyze data and partake in peer debriefing, which provided opportunities to verify findings to ensure internal validity or credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Ultimately, my role as the teacher-researcher was to collect and analyze the data correctly, provide differentiated instruction as part of the intervention, and present unbiased findings to initiate actionable steps to improve the lives of third-grade gifted students.

**Data Collection Measures, Instruments and Tools**

The data collection process for this mixed-methods action research study was deliberate, organized, and systematic (Efron & Ravid, 2013). In order to gain a better understanding of how the additional differentiated Second Step lessons affected students’ social and emotional competencies, it was necessary to gather multiple sources of data. As a teacher-researcher, I purposefully selected quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, as seen in Table 3.1, which were valuable and relevant to the research questions and purpose of this study.

Pre- and post-surveys provided quantitative data to answer the first research question by measuring the degree of association between phenomena, which for this study were areas of asynchronous social and emotional
development (Efron & Ravid, 2013). This survey is a field-tested document “designed for the specific purpose of learning more about a situation, person, or event being investigated” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 174). To answer the second research question, systematic observations and reflective exit tickets were utilized as qualitative tools during the four-week intervention period to determine student perceptions of differentiated SEL as well as any effects of an affective curriculum on their asynchronous development. I used the same quantitative survey after the intervention as a post-assessment to measure the effects of offering differentiated lessons to meet individual students’ social and emotional needs. Doing so provided information to answer the third research question. The main goal of this mixed-methods action research study was “to invoke the voices of stakeholders to inform the next action steps in the research to improve their quality of life” (Beaulieu, 2015, p. 30).

**Surveys**

Surveys are an efficient way to identify and assess needs and were utilized in this mixed-methods study (Efron & Ravid, 2013). To identify specific discrepancies in the third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional development, and then measure the effectiveness of differentiated SEL, a quantitative survey was administered digitally to all participants both before and
after the intervention. Quantitative data from the pre- and post-survey addressed the first and third research questions.

The primary intended use of the survey was to assess a broad range of student social and emotional ability levels using a measure closely aligned with local SEL standards and the CASEL framework so that early instructional support can occur (Crowder et al., 2019). The Likert scale self-report measure was created as part of a researcher-practitioner collaboration with Washoe County School District (WCSD), CASEL, and the University of Illinois at Chicago (Crowder et al., 2019). The items on the WCSD-SECA are grouped by domain and asked students about general social and emotional topics such as stress levels at school. Third-grade students ranked each skill from lowest to the highest area of need, choosing one of the following response options: 1=very difficult, 2=difficult, 3=easy, 4=very easy (Davidson et al., 2017). The assessment was developed through a four-year process that included mapping of items against developmental pacing guides, focus group testing, and multi-level regressions (Crowder et al., 2019). Reliability and validity were measured based on the improvement of items, ensuring items covered the full range of each affective construct and allowed the selection of item subsets to be used among grade levels using an Item Response Theory approach (Davidson et al., 2017). This structured instrument measures students’ self-reported social and emotional
competencies through grade 12 (School Climate / Social & Emotional Assessment, 2022) and is open to the public for use. The WCSD-SECA was used in this study both before and after the intervention to provide quantitative data. Using the same assessment measure at the beginning and end of the study allowed me to answer the first and third research questions by identifying areas of affective need and then determining the effects, if any, of the weekly interventions.

**Observations**

Observations throughout the four weeks of intervention provided insight on students’ affective characteristics pertaining to each weekly skill. This qualitative research instrument was appropriate when studying the perceptions of students because it allowed me to be aware of students’ nonverbal behaviors, gestures, and body language (Good & Brophy, 2007). The observations allowed me to view the students through the lens of the research questions while also being cognizant of the general context of the setting (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

The systematic observations during the intervention followed a semi-structured protocol that included two types of field notes: descriptive and reflective (see Appendix C for observation protocol form) (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Descriptive notes provided objective details about the setting, participants, and events; conversations were recorded verbatim in writing. Observations started
with “a broad sweep and gradually narrowed” in focus as I studied students with the most significant need for social and emotional support as determined by the pre-survey (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 91). At the conclusion of each school day, I made meaning of what was observed that day by recording reflections and insights about what was observed. These reflective notes provided an additional qualitative piece of information of student perceptions regarding differentiated SEL. To ensure the data collected was viable, I piloted the observation tool prior to its administration with a different third-grade gifted class of similar numbers and criteria (Billups, 2021).

**Reflective Exit Tickets**

Action research is inquiry that is done *by or with* insiders in an organization, and thus is a reflective process (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Reflection is also an important element in the practice of qualitative research, because it broadens the scope of self-awareness, self-consciousness, and cognitive processing that occurs when any topic is probed from a researcher’s or participant’s unique experience (Billups, 2021; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

Throughout this study, reflection played an important role for both me and my participants. While I used my observation protocol to reflect, participants took part in the process by completing exit tickets that provided an opportunity for reflection. Not much information exists regarding the role of participant
reflection in studies (Billups, 2021). However, this method of qualitative data was justified because one aim of this mixed-methods study was to determine the perceptions of the third-grade gifted students about differentiated SEL, which answered the second research question.

Since the goal of study was to better understand the unique experiences of this third-grade group of gifted students, generalizability was not the ultimate aim. Therefore, reflective exit tickets provided a safe space for the participants to consider their feelings, perspectives, and biases regarding their experience with the phenomenon (Billups, 2021). Third-grade participants completed exit tickets digitally using Google Classroom at the end of each week of the intervention. The teacher-created reflective tool focused on the weekly affective skill and had students consider the interactions, conversations, and implemented Second Step lessons as part of the intervention process. To ensure the data collected was viable, I piloted the exit ticket prior to its administration; I identified five third-grade gifted students not involved in this study to test the tool (Billups, 2021). Overall, the reflective exit tickets provided additional value to the study through allowing the students to process their life experiences through their perspective (O’Cathain & Thomas, 2004).
Research Procedure

This study utilized a mixed-methods design to compare multiple types of data to yield substantiated conclusions. As the foundation of the study, I administered the WCSD-SECA as a quantitative pre-and post-assessment to evaluate the third graders’ self-reported social and emotional development levels. My third-grade gifted students participated in Second Step lessons as a whole group three times a week; these lessons were specific to the most significant areas of need as reported from the pre-survey. Throughout the intervention portion of the study, these lessons were conducted three times weekly in both a whole-group and small-group manner. I recorded students’ observations and collected exit tickets from the students throughout the intervention using the previously discussed protocol to provide qualitative data to provide a comprehensive analysis.

Phase 1- Student Pre-Survey

The first phase of this study was investigative. Using quantitative data collected from the pre-survey, phase 1 took place a week before the intervention. The WCSD-SECA was given digitally to the participants as a pre-survey to determine the critical social and emotional discrepancies among third-grade gifted students at GWE. Students utilize the Google Classroom platform daily for instructional tasks and are comfortable with how to access and navigate it;
therefore, they used it to complete the pre-survey. The pre-survey provided quantitative data to determine the specific Second Step lessons used as part of the intervention. The large scope of this initial survey provided broad insight into specific areas of social and emotional asynchrony, supporting the contextual background to the study.

**Figure 3.1 Alignment Chart: CASEL Core SEL Competencies and Second Step Program**

*Note.* The chart illustrates how evidence-based Second Step elements align with CASEL’s core social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies. The considerable overlap across the competencies reflects how self-regulation and SEL skills are built across the curriculum. From “Second Step: Skills for Social and Academic Success,” by Committee for Children, 2011.
I analyzed quantitative data from student pre-surveys to determine specific areas of social and emotional discrepancies within the third-grade gifted class. Using statistical procedures allowed me to study the findings by looking for trends, presenting the data visually, examining the variables, and comparing groups on selected characteristics (Efron & Ravid, 2020). A graph presented the findings in a summary organized according to the CASEL framework. This visual allowed me to determine the four most significant social and emotional areas of need to make informed decisions about the intervention (Efron & Ravid, 2013). In doing so, this pre-survey supported both the first research question and second phase of the study.

**Phase 2- Intervention**

The purpose of the second phase in this mixed-methods study, the intervention, was to extend the results from the first by providing an intervention that is differentiated to support students’ specific social and emotional needs (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Data analysis of the quantitative pre-survey built this phase by determining specific Second Step lessons used during the intervention. The four most significant social and emotional areas, as determined from the pre-survey, were taught in isolation to the third-grade class over four weeks.
During the intervention, I conducted the collection and analysis of qualitative data simultaneously. This concurrent process assisted in measuring the effectiveness of SEL on the third-grade gifted students, which answered the second research question. I delivered whole group instruction on the skill each Monday to the class of third-grade students. Using the appropriate Second Step lesson, I explicitly explained the skill and provided real-world connections of the skill to the students’ lives. Together, students had the opportunity to collaborate on ways they could use the skill, both in and out of school. After the lesson, the instructional day unfolded as typically scheduled, but I conducted observations for the remainder of that day and Tuesday. Observing students both during and after the intervention lesson allowed me to determine the effects of the lesson on the third-grade gifted students.

Observations continued throughout the school week. Systematic observations throughout the study, especially during the intervention, were beneficial because many of the students at GWE were hesitant to be vulnerable with me (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I used a journal to record observations to address the effects of the intervention on the social and emotional development of students at GWE. While I observed all my students, observations mostly focused on those whose self-reported data revealed a more intensive need for
support. This small group of students varied throughout the intervention and was dependent on information self-reported on the initial surveys.

On Wednesday of each intervention week, I conducted a small group with students whose pre-survey results reflected a greater need for additional differentiated support. This more intimate collaboration provided an opportunity for more authentic conversation between these students and me. Using Second Step materials, I reviewed the weekly skill and provided an additional application. I also used any additional lesson materials offered by Second Step to further reinforce what was taught during the whole-group lesson on Monday in a more intensive way. Additional materials varied, and availability was determined after the lessons were chosen in the first phase.

Observations continued for the remainder of the week using the same systematic protocol. My field notes recorded information about all students but included a section to focus on those who received further small-group support. At the end of each intervention week, students completed an exit ticket that provided participants an opportunity for self-reflection while also allowing me to see the impact of the week’s events. Data collected from these and other sources was compiled and analyzed concurrently throughout the intervention period.
Phase 3- Post Surveys

I also used the WCSD-SECA at the conclusion of the study as a post-survey with participants. Given digitally in Google Classroom, it provided quantitative data that was used to measure the effects of differentiated SEL on third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional development. While the pre-survey supported the first research question by identifying most needed areas of asynchronous development, the post-survey provided comparison data to determine the effects of differentiated SEL on meeting the students’ needs, thus answering the third research question. Results from the pre- and post-survey were evaluated and then compared to the qualitative data collection tools to create the most comprehensive analysis of students’ perceptions and effects of a differentiated SEL to answer the second research question.

Ethical Guidelines

Although this study was conducted within my third-grade gifted classroom, it is still research that needed to be “monitored and conducted by following ethical guidelines” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 182). Prior to moving forward with my study, I first received approval from the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB). I then obtained permission from my school district, which has a systematic process for employees to follow to conduct research within the district. As an employee of GCSD, I completed an
application that included this study’s purpose, scope, and process for ensuring the research I conducted upheld ethical guidelines.

In addition, I electronically submitted parental consent forms, student assent forms, the IRB approval form, and all data collection tools to the GCSD Director of Professional Learning. I also drafted and shared a letter guaranteeing the confidentiality of all members of the GCSD and a letter that showed approval of the research from my supervisor. To conduct this research in GCSD, I also agreed to submit a copy of all completed research findings to the Office of Professional Learning upon request.

Once district approval was given, I reached out to the families of the third-grade student I teach. In a letter of introduction, I identified the purpose of my study, provided an outline of the third-grade research participants’ involvement, and explained the withdrawal process (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Parents or guardians also received informed consent forms providing them the option to allow their child to participate in this study. Families were reassured that participation was entirely voluntary, and no penalty was given to their child if they chose not to participate.

To protect the identities of those involved in the study, I was sensitive to the safety, confidentiality, and well-being of participants and those affected (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Pseudonyms replaced the school district, elementary
school, and student names throughout the study, guaranteeing confidentiality. Participants were also able to withdraw at any moment during the study with no consequence. I treated the district, school, my class, and their families with respect. In addition, I kept open communication, invited their feedback, and expressed my gratitude for their part in contributing to my study (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

**Data Analysis and Interpretation**

Understanding the data from my action research was a cyclical process of reflection aided by strategies specific to each type of data (Pelton, 2010). To gain a balanced understanding surrounding the effects on and perceptions of differentiated SEL for the third-grade gifted students in my classroom, a mixed-methods approach was used. The analysis and interpretation of the quantitative and qualitative data occurred using processes that supported the different approaches. I looked across the different methods and assessed how the information addressed the research questions (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

Just as each data collection approach is unique, so was the process I used to analyze them. However, the analysis and interpretation of each method was strengthened when synthesized into a comprehensive analysis. This study employed the use of quantitative surveys, qualitative exit tickets, and qualitative observations to further examine the effects of differentiated SEL on the
perceptions of third-grade gifted students at GWE. Data analysis methods are presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1
Data Collection and Analysis Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Analysis Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What are the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?</td>
<td>• Pre-Survey</td>
<td>• Descriptive Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How does a differentiated SEL curriculum impact third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional needs?</td>
<td>• Observations and Exit Tickets</td>
<td>• Inductive analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What is the effectiveness of a differentiated SEL curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade students at GWE?</td>
<td>• Post-Survey</td>
<td>• Descriptive Statistics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The goal of the WCSD-SECA survey was to provide quantitative data to answer the first and third research questions posed before the start of the study. The surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics, which included charts that helped simplify, organize, and summarize the data (Mertler, 2019). Questions on the survey were sorted by the main social and emotional domains according to the CASEL framework. The average and standard deviation (SD) of each domain was calculated to answer the first research question. At the
conclusion of the study, to determine the effects of the differentiated SEL on the third-grade students’ social and emotional health, the WCSD-SECA was readministered as a post-survey and the average was calculated, thus providing information to answer the third research question.

In qualitative studies, analysis often goes hand in hand with data collection; I began analyzing the data as it was collected, and used it to shape, revise, and refine the investigation throughout the data collection process (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Throughout the synthesis and interpretation of this study’s data, I practiced the use of reflexivity, which means I considered the potential impact of my values, worldview, and life experience as I synthesized and interpreted the qualitative data (Efron & Ravid, 2013). I know my observations that led to this research have made me passionate about this topic, and I was aware my preconceptions may enter into the data collection, analysis, and interpretation process and therefore took measures to monitor my bias and subjectivity.

I used multiple phases, including coding, sorting, and finding themes, to analyze the qualitative data collected during this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Raw data from the observation notes and reflective exit tickets were converted into meaningful information using immersion (Billups, 2021). To interpret data using the immersion process, I read and reread the information from my written observations and student exit tickets to ensure data was
meaningful to the problem of practice, purpose, research questions, and theoretical framework. As I studied the data, I looked for concepts or understandings that I might not have developed initially. Repeated terms and phrases among the data sources were identified and used to create a set of codes which assisted in interpreting and managing the qualitative data from observations and exit tickets. These codes were used to cluster data with similar qualities together which allowed me to make sense of the information in a way that was consistent, reliable, and systematic (Billups, 2021; Efron & Ravid, 2013). These clusters of data from the qualitative observations and reflective exit tickets created central themes that described similar ideas, points of view, or experiences (Shank, 2006).

Studying the data in this way allowed me to consider plausible explanations and conclusions about each of my research questions (Efron & Ravid, 2013). I took my generated answers and communicated my insights by summarizing what I gleaned from the data analysis process (Wolcott, 2008). Issues revealed from the data were examined from all angles in order to demonstrate the most credible explanations - this is an indication of quality analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

To assess the validity of the qualitative components of my research, it is essential to understand that my interpretations of reality were accessed directly
through my observations, reflections, and analysis of the exit tickets (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I cross-checked information across sources of qualitative data to check for different perspectives and to ensure what was being reported was reality. I went through the triangulation process as I sorted, coded, and made themes from multiple qualitative sources of data and used cross-examination to ensure what was being reported was reality. I then compared and contrasted the qualitative findings with the quantitative data to determine whether they yielded similar results (Creswell, 2011). By utilizing a mixed methods action research methodology, I was able to synthesize and triangulate both quantitative and qualitative data among the multiple data collection sources to strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings and recommendations in the research study and integrate interpretations and conclusions (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

Additional strategies for ensuring internal validity and credibility included peer debriefing and member checks; these provided participants an opportunity to verify findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Member-checking involved sharing findings with the participants to assess whether the findings reflect what they expressed during my own analysis of the data. Peer debriefing, or discussing the findings with other professionals, can also reinforce the study’s credibility (Billups, 2021). In addition, once data was
analyzed, I provided each participant with a reflection to ensure that the findings align with the participants’ viewpoints. A critical friend reviewed my system to ensure the analysis system was clearly communicated. Throughout the process, I strived to maintain the highest standards and be honest and accurate with interpreting my study’s data. I presented my insights as part of a holistic understanding that were based on the analyzed data as they relate to my research questions.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter described, in detail, the mixed-method action research design and methodology that was used to address the asynchronous social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students using a differentiated affective curriculum. The sample, criteria for selection, and my role as the researcher were examined in this chapter. A thorough explanation was also included in this chapter about the qualitative and quantitative methods, instruments, and tools that I used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data. This study utilized surveys, observations, and exit tickets. Specifics related to the research procedures and the process for organizing, analyzing, and interpreting both the quantitative and qualitative data were also noted in this chapter. An explanation for the rigor, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations was
provided. Chapter Four will provide the findings of the study along with an analysis of the data.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Gifted learners often have asynchronous development, which means their intellectual capacity far exceeds their chronological age, leading to developmental disconnects. Due to their asynchronous development, gifted learners have an acute need to include Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in their school experience (Cavilla, 2019). Third-grade gifted students at Green Willow Elementary (GWE) presented with observed concerns such as increased anxiety levels, social awkwardness, and perfectionism. These students exceed academic expectations but needed further accommodations to support their unique developmental needs. The problem of practice for this study was that gifted third-grade students at GWE need to receive specific interventions to support their asynchronous social and emotional development.

This study sought to explore how the Second Step curriculum can provide differentiated support for the specific developmental needs of third-grade gifted students in my classroom. The effects of the Second Step curriculum, particularly through the increased and individualized use of the lessons, were monitored through the lens of the third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional...
development. A purposeful sample of 22 gifted-identified students in my class participated in the four-week intervention, which provided targeted affective instruction based on the most significant self-reported areas of need.

The Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners bridges the effects of the mismatched development of gifted students by focusing on gaps in groups of skills as defined through the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework (Williams et al., 2020). This model of SEL instruction, seen in the Second Step curriculum, supports students in acquiring social and emotional skills by providing well-designed and evidence-based opportunities to practice those skills and reinforcement for exhibiting those skills (Cook et al., 2018; Lawson et al., 2018). Together with the social cognitive theory, which supports the cycle of observation, conversation, and modeling that took place in this study, these are the framework that uphold this study on the impact of differentiated SEL on third-grade gifted students at GWE.

I analyzed quantitative data gathered through pre- and post-surveys using the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners and determined the participants’ most significant affective gaps to measure the effects of the differentiated Second Step lessons on the social and emotional development of the participants. The observations and exit tickets provided qualitative data during the intervention by providing insight into the student participants’
perceptions of the differentiated instruction on their affective health. These qualitative measures were analyzed to create themes for data analysis. The qualitative and quantitative data established a more comprehensive understanding of the impact and effectiveness of differentiated Second Step lessons on the social and emotional development of the participants.

This study used both qualitative and quantitative data collection measures to discover the key self-reported social and emotional discrepancies among the third-grade gifted students at GWE and then measured the impact of the differentiated support using the Second Step program to answer the first and third research questions. This study also determined the perceptions of the third-grade gifted students regarding the differentiated Second Step lessons on their social and emotional development, providing information that answered the second research question.

The following research questions each called for a different form of data collection and addressed the contextual problem of this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018):

1. What are the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?

2. How does a differentiated SEL curriculum impact third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional needs?
3. What is the effectiveness of a differentiated SEL curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade students at GWE?

Data analysis is a crucial part of the action research process (Efron & Ravid, 2020). In this chapter I present the data and interpretations from this mixed-methods study. Tables and graphs show the data broken down for ease of interpretation. I employed a mixed-methods research design with qualitative data collection embedded within a quantitative pre- and post-test so that during the intervention the personal experiences of participants could be included (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By utilizing a mixed-methods action research methodology, I was able to synthesize and triangulate quantitative and qualitative data among the multiple data collection sources to strengthen the rigor and trustworthiness of the findings and recommendations in the research study and integrate interpretations and interpretations conclusions (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018).

Data Presentation

Description of Data Collection

This study was conducted over six weeks in multiple phases. The mixed-methods design allowed the quantitative data analysis from the first phase to build the second phase of qualitative data collection (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The
qualitative data was used to support the quantitative data in determining the effectiveness of the intervention as well as providing further insight into the perceptions of participants regarding the differentiated Second Step lessons. Together, the quantitative and qualitative instruments were used to measure and assess the effects of a differentiated affective curriculum on the perceptions of the participants regarding the impact of the individualized Second Step lessons on their social and emotional development.

Although qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation were conducted concurrently during the four-week intervention period to synthesize the sources and increase the validity of the findings, the analysis and interpretation are presented separately in this chapter to increase readability and understanding. Other methods that enhanced trustworthiness of this study included triangulation, disciplined subjectivity, thick description, and member checking (Efron & Ravid, 2013). To conduct member checking, I reviewed the results of the study with participants to ensure what was recorded was consistent with their lived experiences.

**Pre-Survey Quantitative Data Analysis**

The first phase of the study included quantitative data collection to determine the specific areas of self-reported affective need to answer the first research question and guide the intervention. Participants took The Washoe
County School District Social and Emotional Competency Assessment (WCSD-SECA) (see Appendix A) as a pre-survey in the Spring of 2023. The 40-item instrument measured eight domains of social and emotional competence as defined through the CASEL framework: self-awareness of self-concept, self-awareness of emotions, self-management of emotions, self-management of goals, self-management of schoolwork, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. Social and emotional competencies are the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to be personally and socially competent (Jones et al., 2015). Students ranked each item on the survey using a scale of 1, Very Difficult, to 4, Very Easy, to rate the level of ease or difficulty of each affective skill.

The most common approach to quantitative data analysis is descriptive statistics (Ivankova, 2015). The specific methods of this type of analysis were used to calculate, describe, and summarize the quantitative data collected in this study; tables and graphs present the data in a logical and efficient manner (Vetter, 2017; Ivankova, 2015). I used descriptive statistics to analyze the quantitative data from the pre-survey to find the measures of central tendencies (average, median, and mode) and measures of dispersion (standard deviation). I calculated the average by adding the scores within each domain and dividing by the number of participants.
An analysis of the results from the WCSD-SECA pre-survey in Figure 4.1 reveals the self-reported levels of social and emotional competencies of the sample of third-grade gifted students. The average proficiency levels, as reported in Figure 4.1, are broken into the eight domains as prescribed through the CASEL framework. The data from the pre-survey, administered prior to the intervention, indicated low competency levels in all eight CASEL domains. While the need for more intensive affective support was apparent in all areas, the four most significant social and emotional domains requiring intervention, those receiving the lowest collective average of scores, include emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship skills.

I used the most significant self-reported social and emotional competencies (as identified from the four lowest average scores on the pre-survey) to design and develop interventions specific to the problem: the asynchronous affective development of third-grade gifted students. Emotion regulation and goal management, which fall under the same umbrella of self-management social and emotional skills, were isolated and targeted along with emotion knowledge and relationship skills during the intervention. These four affective areas received the lowest overall responses on the pre-survey, reflecting lower levels of social and emotional ability. Therefore, these domains are the most-significant self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional
development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE, answering the first research question and providing information to guide the four-week intervention of this study. The data pertaining to each social and emotional domain, as measured by the WCSD-SECA pre-survey, is detailed below.

**Figure 4.1 WCSD-SECA Pre-Survey Results**

**Self-Management: Emotion Regulation.** With a collective average score of 52% (14.95), the CASEL domain which received the lowest average as self-
reported by the student participants was emotion regulation. This means that on the pre-survey students reported the lowest levels of social and emotional knowledge and skills in this area. Emotion regulation falls under the self-management umbrella of social and emotional skills. According to CASEL, in which the WCSD-SECA survey is aligned, *self-management* is the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations (2019). Items in this area of the WCSD-SECA assessment asked students about their awareness of their emotions and ways to make themselves feel better when they are sad. By rating each item in this domain on a scale of 1, *Very Difficult*, to 4, *Very Easy*, student participants gauged their understanding of how their feelings affected their moods as well as how their moods affected how they treat others. In addition, students were asked to rate themselves on their ability to calm themselves down. Overall, the pre-survey average for emotion regulation, as noted in Figure 4.1, revealed the lowest collective social and emotional competency.

**Self-Management: Goal Management.** Goal management also falls under the self-management category of the CASEL social and emotional competencies. Student-participants rated items on the WCSD-SECA pre-survey focusing on goal management at an average of 9.19 out of 14, or 58%. This means that, collectively, students self-reported low levels of knowledge and skills pertaining
to managing stress, monitoring and achieving success, and regulating emotions (CASEL, 2019). Indicators of a healthy competence in goal management include demonstrating the ability to understand honesty and integrity, as well as to set and achieve goals for success. The low collective average for this domain, as presented with the pre-survey data in Figure 4.1, revealed a need for further support regarding goal management.

**Self-Awareness: Emotional Knowledge.** Students also reported low levels of emotional knowledge, a social and emotional competency that is a component of self-awareness. According to CASEL (2019), self-awareness is the ability to accurately recognize your emotions and thoughts and know how they influence behavior. The pre-survey data, as shown in Figure 4.1, reveals a collective average score of 14.95 out of 24 in this domain. This means that student-participants rated themselves as having 62% knowledge and skills in the areas of self-concept and self-efficacy (CASEL, 2019). The data from the pre-survey revealed emotional knowledge as the third lowest social and emotional competency and therefore an area that was supported during the intervention for this study.

**Relationship Skills.** On the WCSD-SECA pre-survey, 6 questions assessed relationship skills. Participants reported a collective average of 63% competency in this domain, putting relationship skills as the fourth most-
significant area of affective need and the last to be taught as part of the intervention. Relationship skills are defined as the skills that enable a person to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups (CASEL, 2019). Specific Second Step lessons pertaining to relationship skills were taught during the intervention and focused on developing communication skills and teaching students how to build and maintain relationships with diverse groups and individuals.

The quantitative data collected during the first phase provided crucial information and served as the foundation for the evaluation phase’s data. The pre-survey data unveiled the four lowest areas of social and emotional competency as self-reported by the student participants; consequently, emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship skills made up the four most significant areas of affective need that informed the intervention of the action research cycle.

**Table 4.1 Pre-WCSD-SECA Survey Descriptive Statistics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N Valid</th>
<th>Average</th>
<th>Std. Error of Average</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Variance</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.36</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Knowledge</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14.95</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>12.65</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Awareness</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11.52</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study’s intervention utilized Second Step lessons specific to each of the four most significant areas of affective need as self-reported on the pre-survey. The data from the pre-survey indicated low competency levels in all eight CASEL domains. I isolated the four lowest affective domains -- emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship skills -- and taught one each week over the four-week intervention period of the study. Second Step lessons that addressed these four areas were used weekly as part of whole and small-group instruction to provide explicit targeted instruction regarding the participants’ unique social and emotional needs. During this study’s evaluation phase, I collected qualitative data through observations and student exit tickets that were completed throughout the four-week intervention.

I conducted observations throughout the intervention, and at the end of each week students completed an exit ticket that provided the opportunity to reflect on the skill that was targeted while allowing me to see the impact of the
weekly events. As I looked through the qualitative data from both measures, my goal was to bring meaning and order to it so that I could gain further insight and understanding to answer the research questions that guide this study. Information from both observations and reflective exit tickets provided qualitative “thick description” of the students’ perceptions and experiences. I used thematic inductive analysis as a method to transform the recurring patterns from the data collected in the second phase of this study into overarching themes (Lochmiller, 2021).

The first phase of analysis was an ongoing process that included checking the data for repeated words and terms and seeing where the information led me (Grbich, 2013). I immersed myself in the data in its entirety to get an overall sense of the information and become familiar with the ideas and views being expressed (Efron & Ravid, 2013). I managed the data by reviewing my notes and reading and rereading them, all while making notes on a separate page; this process allowed me to become fully immersed (Billups, 2021). The reflection notes I made as I reviewed observation data later in the day gave additional insight into what had been observed. Because I analyzed the observation data at the end of each school day, and the exit tickets as they were collected each week, as the study progressed the identification of repeated items, patterns of behavior, and events became clearer (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).
According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), coding is nothing more than assigned short hand to various aspects of data so that pieces can be easily retrieved. To determine codes, I looked at the data through the lens of my research questions and purpose of the study; after all, the data analysis process was used to answer the research questions (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As I carefully read the data and identified a segment to be coded, I assigned a coding label, such as SS” (Second Step), “TS” (Teacher Support), and “PS” (Peer Support), to it in the margin of the page (Efron & Ravid, 2013). By some of the codes, I added notes of insight to later assist in combining codes if needed.

I reduced the data by clustering codes into chunks that shared similar qualities (Billups, 2021). For example, as I examined the codes more closely, I realized that “TS” (Teacher Support) and “E” (Display of Emotions) were similar in that they both involved the teacher in some way. The overall process of organizing and coding allowed me to see the emergent concepts from the qualitative data that told a story related to the study (Billups, 2021). As I sorted codes into groups, I was able to better understand and make meaning of the data to locate significant themes (Toyon, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Efron and Ravid, themes are ideas, points of view, or experiences that appear from the data (2020). Several themes emerged from the qualitative data: reliance
on the teacher for support to solve problems, mutual support among peers, application of the affective skill to other areas, and a commitment to growth.

**Reliance on Teacher.** Over the weeks I observed the student participants, I repeatedly made note of students putting concepts learned from the Second Step lessons into practice. For example, during an observation of one lesson that taught students how to be assertive, Elise came to me noticeably flustered; her typically calm demeanor seemed shaken. Her face was red, and her fists were clenched. Not wanting to steer the conversation, I waited for Elise to speak first. When she did, she told me, “My brain can’t think because I am OVER IT!” She further explained, very quickly, “I had no one to sit with on the bus, and I forgot my treat money on the counter, and I don’t see this logic you’re having us do!”

During another lesson focused on assertiveness, students were completing an independent math task when Mary held up a “1” in the air, signaling the need to use the restroom. When I nodded at her, giving permission, instead of heading towards the door, she came straight to my desk. “Mrs. Koehle,” she started off timidly, “I do not really need to use the restroom.” She seemed flustered by this seemingly dishonest admittance, looking down at the ground to avoid eye contact with me, but continued speaking. “I am stuck on the math you gave us, and earlier we talked about how we can take a brain break if we feel a strong feeling. Could I walk to the library and back?”
I had first introduced nonverbal signals at the beginning of the school year for students to use to communicate during silent instructional moments. There has never been a specific code for needing a “brain break,” but the previous dialogue with Mary led to a whole-group conversation which later resulted in the creation of a new signal for students to use when needing a brain break.

Before sending Mary off for her brain break, I called the class to the front carpet for an impromptu family meeting. I shared with them what Mary had just told me, and asked if anyone had any thoughts or questions. Brandon’s hand immediately shot in the air, but he started speaking before waiting to be called on to do so. “Yea,” he said in his deep voice, “we need a way to get out.” “Thank you, Brandon,” I replied, and then called on Olivia, whose hand was patiently being held up waiting for an opportunity to speak. “Sometimes I can’t think but don’t want other kids looking at me -- that’s embarrassing.” At this point, I had Mary share her thinking and then held a class vote; the unanimous result led to the creation of a new nonverbal signal, chosen by Mary, who was assertive enough to first broach this topic.

Responses on the exit tickets also revealed dependence on the teacher. When asked to name strategies to use when needing help, Isabella made a note that “Mrs. Koehle will help me.” Similarly, other students remarked I can go to Mrs. K., and Mama K. helps me think through things. These comments overlapped
with events recorded in the observations, such as when I assisted Elise through her strong feelings or when Mary came to me feeling overwhelmed. Another exit ticket response that reflected reliance on the teacher stated, “You have to tell your teacher -- they can’t read your mind!”

**Mutual Support Among Peers.** Throughout the data there was a common theme of students supporting each other. Documentation from observations and reflection notes of events in the classroom, on the playground, in the hallway, and even in the library reflected examples of cooperation among peers. For example, Scott came to me concerned about his classmate: “Something’s wrong with Nicholas,” he told me. “I think he is crying but he has his head down and won’t show me.” When I asked what he thought should be done, Scott’s demeanor transformed as he responded in a way that showed excitement: he broke into a smile; his speech changed from low and monotone to speaking at a typical volume with expression; he quickly and exuberantly shared: “What if I go with Nicholas to get water but really we just walk around?” I didn’t speak, remained neutral, and just listened until he continued, “This morning, Nicholas liked the exercise strategy for strong feelings you talked about, so I thought that could help him now.” Scott remembered his peer’s words from earlier in the day and thought that walking with Nicholas around the school might help alleviate
whatever he might be feeling. I agreed, and when the boys returned about five minutes later, both were smiling.

Another day during the intervention, I found a note under my keyboard (a common way of communication when students wanted to share something with me privately) from Rebecca and Bobby. In it, they shared an incident from recess where classmate Cole was not being treated fairly, and they were not sure what to do. Each of them added their thoughts to the letter. Rebecca started out by writing, “Boys from Mrs. Mueller’s class were being mean to Cole near the swings.” The note switched to Bobby’s handwriting and added, “I heard him being called weird and dumb.” Rebecca’s handwriting continued: “Cole was crying, and we don’t know what to do.”

When I pulled them to discuss the situation, I was even more intrigued that they used terms from our Second Step lesson that focused on empathy. Rebecca updated me of when she first noticed there was a problem: “Cole was looking down at the pebbles and his face was scrunched up, like the face and body clues we talked about.” Bobby added, “I put myself in Cole’s shoes and knew he must be being picked on and I know how bad that stinks.” I praised the students’ assertiveness (another Second Step term) and, after brainstorming ways they could help Cole and others in similar situations, I reassured them I would handle the matter.
Other participants cited using classmates as a resource on the reflective exit tickets. “I can phone a friend!” Noah stated on his form in the second week of the intervention. The phrase *phone a friend* is one I use in class if students are not able to come to me for help but rather can seek assistance from a peer. Noah further noted examples of peer help “if I need help on a math mystery” or “the really hard morning work.” On his exit ticket, Oliver wrote about using a term discussed in a Second Step lesson about the social and emotional skill *empathy* known as *body clues*. He stated, “I can use body clues to see how my friend is feeling. That way I help them how they need.” The theme of mutual support among peers was also evident on Liam’s exit ticket. In response to the question *How do you think you might use what you learned this week in Second Step?*, he shared: “I don’t always have to always play with the same people. I can play with other who aren’t like me.”

**Application of Affective Skill to Other Areas.** Data collected from observations and student exit tickets included various settings outside of the classroom. At times, I used my phone to record study-related conversations I overheard or observations I made outside of the classroom, which I reviewed as I added reflective notes at the end of the day.

One afternoon at the playground, I overheard a conversation between Olivia and a peer. Based on the conversation, it seemed that other students were
calling this peer mean names. Olivia was advising the friend to “be assertive and tell Ms. Williams.” Ms. Williams was sitting by me and was also listening in to the conversation. Olivia offered to walk with the child so that she could tell Ms. Williams what was going on and proceeded to do so by taking her to the picnic table. She stood silently by the student and nudged her by gently pushing her shoulder against the student’s shoulder. Throughout the student’s reporting of the incident Olivia was smiling broadly and nodding her head, seemingly in affirmation of the student’s actions. Once the situation had been reported to Ms. Williams and was handled, as the girls walked away, I heard Olivia say, “See?!?! That was easy!”

In the lunchroom on another day during the intervention, two students in a different third-grade class were having a conflict when Bobby interjected. He asked each child what they were feeling and then told each of them to “put yourself in each other’s shoes.” They looked confused, and Bobby proceeded to informally explain the concept of empathy to them. “You have to THINK about how he is FEELING!” Although lunch, and therefore the conversation, dissipated before I could observe any real solution being offered, both boys seemed content to move on from the conflict as they put away their trays and lined up with their class.
Just as I observed instances of student participants applying the newly learned social and emotional concepts outside of the classroom, student exit tickets also revealed evidence of application. Responding to the question *Do you think what you learned this week in Second Step could help you in other areas of life?*, Cameron said, “It helped me last night at soccer practice.” Noah answered the same question by stating, “I won’t yell at my brother when he pinches me.”

**Commitment to Growth.** A fourth theme that emerged from the qualitative data was a common commitment of students to growing in their social and emotional development. Students’ responses, both verbal and written, exemplified a positive response to the differentiated affective lessons. For example, I observed the following interaction:

Rebecca: The sheep picture was super funny.

Stephanie: I know right?

Rebecca: I wonder what we will use in our next lesson.

Stephanie: Maybe it will be dogs?!? (Both girls laugh)

Rebecca: I liked how we talked about serious stuff in a way that wasn’t so serious…

Stephanie: I kinda hope we keep doing.

When asked on the exit ticket if they liked the extra Second Step lessons, some students, such as Olivia and Cole, wrote “Yes,” while others, like Sophia,
embellished with more: “I LOVE it! Yes!! 😊.” Additionally, other students requested even more affective help. Nicholas wrote, “Can we keep doing this?” while Nathaniel made a comment that the lessons were fun and added, “I want more!!!” Elise shared the following: “I don’t like feeling feelings, but this helps me get through. Can you do this in 4th grade?” During this part of the intervention, students had just found out I would be moving to fourth grade GTE for the 2023-2024 school year.

Another explicit example representing a commitment to growth was evident based on responses on the third item of the exit ticket. This question asked Did the extra Second Step lessons help you? Why or Why not? Hillary was one of the participants who received more intensive small-group instruction during the intervention. On her exit ticket from the week of her small-group support, she answered this question by saying, “They help me a lot. I finished the SCAMPER yesterday for the first time ever b/c I tried what you taught us. I like our new morning meetings better.” I have always started our days together in third grade with what I call a “morning meeting” to set the tone for the day and to build community. These meetings typically address any schedule changes and include a daily joke and puzzle, but during the study these gatherings focused on the weekly social and emotional competency. Connor, another student who received small-group support, practiced his short-constructed-response writing
skills by using the A.C.E. strategy he had learned (A-Answer the Question, C-Cite Evidence, E-Explain) when answering the third item on the exit ticket. When asked if the Second Step lessons helped him, he organized his response accordingly:

“A- Yes, the Second Step lessons helped me.

C- I think this because I have learned how to calm down when I have to strain my brain and Mama K said she is gonna teach us more.

E- This explains why the Second Step lessons help me.”

Summary of Qualitative Findings

Together, the themes represented in the qualitative data from the observations and student exit tickets yield a narrative of the third-grade student participants’ perceptions of the differentiated Second Step lessons. Segments from both measures provided evidence to support the positive effects of the differentiated Second Step lessons on the perceptions of the third-grade gifted students (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Data from the student exit tickets reinforced my observation and reflection notes that were part of the observation protocol. The semi-structured qualitative observations shed significant light on the participants through the lens of the second research question and the purpose of the study. The themes that emerged from the qualitative data included a reliance on the teacher in times of need, mutual support among peers, applications of the skills
to other areas of life, and a commitment to growing. Overall, the themes from the exit tickets substantiate the observations I conducted throughout the intervention and provide evidence of social and emotional growth among the participants.

Post-Survey Quantitative Data Analysis

Gathering quantitative data from the pre-survey yielded precise measures to determine exact areas of social and emotional disconnect to answer the first research question. After the four-week intervention, the WCSD-SECA survey was again administered and used as a post-assessment to measure the effects, if any, of the differentiated Second Step lessons on the self-reported social and emotional competencies of the third-grade gifted students and answer the third research question. Students again ranked each of the 40 items on the survey based on the ease or difficulty of each of the eight social and emotional competencies.

In analyzing the data from the post-survey, my goal was to understand the relationships within the data and then to connect the relationships to the research context. The same process was utilized to analyze the post-survey as the pre-survey. I used descriptive statistics to analyze the quantitative data from the pre- and post-surveys to find the measures of central tendencies (average, median, and mode) and measures of dispersion (standard deviation). The descriptive statistical analysis process helped describe and summarize the quantitative data to identify trends, patterns, and relationships among variables.
to understand individual and collective performance (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The pre- and post-survey average scores and overall results are presented in Table 4.2. The data was used to evaluate whether participation in the differentiated Second Step lessons had affected participants’ perceptions of their social and emotional competencies to answer the third research question.

![WCSD-SECA Pre-Post Survey Results](image)

*Figure 4.2 Pre-Post Survey Comparison*

Of the eight CASEL domains included on the WCSD-SECA survey, emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship
skills were the domains that made up the four most significant areas of affective need from the pre-survey and informed the intervention for this study. After the intervention, the average levels of competency in each of these four domains increased. This means that collectively, the social and emotional knowledge and skills in emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship skills increased for the third-grade participants.

Further analysis of the data in Table 4.2 showed a decrease in the range of scores in each of these CASEL domains from the pre-test to the post-test. The large range for the pre-test domains reflected significant variability, while the smaller range on the post-test demonstrated limited variability. The standard deviation for each of the pre-test and post-test domains that were targeted during the intervention also showed a decreased variability among scores; the smaller standard deviation on the post-test domains showed the post-test scores were closer and had less variability. The quantitative data collected for the differentiated Second Step lessons of the intervention suggest there was an impact on all four CASEL domains.

An analysis and comparison of the pre- and post-survey data reveals an increase in the average levels of participants’ self-reported competencies in each of the four domains targeted after the intervention. In addition, the other four domains also revealed increases, therefore showing growth in all eight SEL
competencies. These increases, as seen in Table 4.2, indicate that students perceived the differentiated Second Step lessons positively.

**Table 4.2**
*Pre-Post WCSD-SECA Survey Comparison by Domain Descriptive Statistics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Domain</th>
<th>Pre-Test Average (N=22)</th>
<th>Post-Test Average (N=22)</th>
<th>Pre-Test Mode (N=22)</th>
<th>Post-Test Mode (N=22)</th>
<th>Pre-Test Variance</th>
<th>Post-Test Variance</th>
<th>Pre-Test Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Post-Test Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>10.36</td>
<td>13.73</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.59</td>
<td>1.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Knowledge</td>
<td>14.95</td>
<td>21.59</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>12.65</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>2.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Awareness</td>
<td>11.52</td>
<td>17.77</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion Regulation</td>
<td>8.33</td>
<td>14.14</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>2.60</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Management</td>
<td>9.19</td>
<td>15.14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.32</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Work</td>
<td>15.14</td>
<td>22.68</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.73</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>1.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Skills</td>
<td>15.19</td>
<td>22.77</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.56</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>2.14</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible Decisions</td>
<td>12.76</td>
<td>18.73</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td>1.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With an increase of 37%, the most significant change from the pre- to post-survey occurred in the goal management domain, which was one of the areas targeted during the study’s intervention. The four questions that assessed this competency on the WCSD-SECA survey are shown in Figure 4.3. The survey item *I reach goals that I set for myself* reflected the lowest pre-survey scores and highest post-survey scores, and therefore shows the area of most growth for
participants in this domain. All 22 participants rated three of the four goal management questions as *Easy* or *Very Easy* on the post-survey. Before the intervention, students reported difficulty in following through with goals. The post-survey findings reflect astounding growth in this component of goal management, with 100% of participants reporting after the intervention that they reach the goals they set. The graph in Figure 4.3 illustrates the growth from before and after the intervention.

**Figure 4.3 Growth in Goal Management Competency**
Emotion regulation was the next highest area of social and emotional growth as analyzed from the pre-post survey. This was also one of the four most significant self-reported areas of social and emotional need that was targeted during the intervention. On the pre-survey, participants reported an average of 52% competency. After the four-week intervention, the post-survey average score in this domain was 88%. The data revealed a 36% increase in participants' self-reported emotion regulation competency (see Figure 4.2). A further disaggregation of the data in this domain, as shown in Figure 4.4, shows the growth by each survey item. All four items show significant pre-post growth,
with the statement, *I work on things even when I don’t like them* receiving the largest gains.

![Emotion Knowledge](image)

**Figure 4.5 Growth in Emotion Knowledge Competency**

The other affective domains that were targeted during the intervention also showed growth in the post-survey results. Student participants reported a 28% increase in the emotion knowledge social and emotional competency after the intervention. Figure 4.2 details the growth in this domain by presenting the difference in average scores from the pre- to post-survey. A further disaggregation of the data for this domain, as shown in Figure 4.6, reveals the responses for the statement, *I know the emotions I feel.* For this particular question, 100% of participants rated this statement as “Easy” or “Very Easy” on the post-
survey as compared to the 18% that was self-reported on the pre-survey, resulting in an 82% increase. All participants rated all items on the emotion knowledge domain of the survey as “Easy” or “Very Easy” on the post-survey. Figure 4.5 provides an illustration of the pre-post growth of the items in this domain.

Figure 4.5 provides an illustration of the pre-post growth of the items in this domain.

Figure 4.6 Breakdown of Emotion Knowledge Item

The fourth social and emotional domain that was targeted during the intervention is relationship skills. An analysis of the data, as seen in Figure 4.7, reveals growth from the pre-survey to the post-survey in each of the six
questions pertaining to this social and emotional area. Overall, the post-survey average (22.77) is significantly higher than the pre-survey average (15.19), revealing a 32% increase in this domain. This means that the differentiated affective instruction offered during the intervention was effective in improving the relationship skills of the third-grade gifted students.

**Figure 4.7 Relationship Skills**

**Findings**

The quantitative and qualitative data in this study were analyzed separately and then integrated (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Mixing the data allowed for a more comprehensive and enhanced understanding into the research questions in a way that allowed each data collection method to
complement the other (Dossett et al., 2020). I first used quantitative data from the pre-survey to identify the most significant social and emotional areas of need. At the conclusion of the study, I readministered the survey to determine the effects of the differentiated Second Step lessons on the social and emotional competencies as self-reported by the participants. The qualitative data helped enhance the study by providing further insight into the participants’ experiences surrounding the intervention. The concrete, numerical quantitative results, together with the qualitative findings, allowed for a deeper understanding of the investigated problem (Creswell, 2011).

My observation notes and reflection notes were used in conjunction with the student exit tickets and surveys to substantiate the findings through triangulation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data from the intervention phase identified four themes related to the research questions: reliance on the teacher, support among peers, application of affective skill to other areas, and commitment to growth. The study’s findings reveal that the third-grade gifted participants had positive perceptions on the differentiated affective lessons, answering the second research question. The findings also suggest that differentiated affective curriculum has positive implications on the social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students, answering the third research question. Triangulating the qualitative and quantitative data from the
multiple data sources provided evidence to support the positive effects that differentiated affective lessons have on third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional development.

The purpose of this mixed-methods action research study was to identify key social and emotional needs among third-grade GTE students at GWE and to determine the outcomes of a differentiated SEL curriculum. The data analysis, as reported in this chapter, broke down the information into elements in order to discover essential features, while the interpretation process that follows was dictated by the research questions and the nature of the data (Efron & Ravid, 2020).

The qualitative and quantitative data culminated in providing information that answered all three research questions. The first research asked, “What are the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?” The pre-survey provided quantitative data that gave information about the self-reported social and emotional competencies of the participants to answer this question. Of the eight affective domains assessed on the pre-survey, emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship skills received the lowest scores and therefore revealed the most significant social and emotional need to guide the intervention and answer the first research question.
The second research question asked, “How does a differentiated SEL curriculum impact third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional needs?” My observation notes and reflection notes and the student exit tickets were the sources of qualitative data that helped answer this question. The statements on student exit tickets mirror the observations in that they showed that teachers can represent an important reference point for students. In addition, peer support and a commitment to growth were also substantiated from the data. Throughout the intervention, students also showed a commitment to continuing to grow socially and emotionally. Qualitative data overwhelmingly contributed to these major themes.

The qualitative data gathered about student perceptions of the differentiated Second Step lessons suggested a relationship between teacher support and the quantitative growth students made. The observations and exit tickets reveal numerous examples of participants utilizing the teacher as a way to solve social and emotional issues. If this had not been the case, and students had sought solutions in isolation or among peers, students may not have experienced the same amount of affective growth. The role of the teacher in the learning process cannot be overlooked.

Qualitative data also revealed that students applied the affective skills they were learning in the classroom as well as outside the classroom walls. While
it was not surprising to see students retaining information taught from Second Step lessons, it was eye-opening to observe multiple instances of students applying their newfound knowledge in areas other than the classroom. Overall, the qualitative data collected from observations and student exit tickets, combined with the quantitative pre- and post-survey growth, demonstrate a belief that social and emotional growth can continue to occur with further affective instruction that is differentiated to meet student needs.

The third research question for this study asked, “What is the effectiveness of a differentiated SEL curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?” The post-survey provided quantitative data that when, compared to the pre-survey information collected at the beginning of the study, answered this question. Based on the growth from the pre- and post-intervention surveys, it appears that the student participants did increase their social emotional competencies, and therefore development, in the affective areas of emotion regulation, goal management, emotional knowledge, and relationship skills.

Additionally, although not explicitly supported through the study’ intervention, the other CASEL domains assessed on the survey showed increases in competency as well. Self-concept, social awareness, schoolwork, and
responsible decisions were areas not explicitly targeted during the intervention but also showed growth in pre-post survey scores. I can infer that direct instruction in certain social and emotional areas can have an indirect effect on other affective areas of competency as well.

Summary

This chapter first provided a review of this mixed-methods action research study. The data was presented, analyzed, and interpreted through the lens of each research question to find that differentiated Second Step lessons have a positive effect on the perceptions and competencies of third-grade gifted students at GWE regarding social and emotional development. Chapter five reveals the larger conclusions drawn from the study and includes recommendations for practice and future research. In addition, the study itself is considered in a reflection about its methodology and limitations followed by a detailed plan of action.
CHAPTER 5

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Social and emotional development provides individuals with the skills to experience, cope with, and efficiently manage personal and social challenges (Papadopoulos, 2020). The asynchronous development of gifted students often renders them more vulnerable to discrepancies in social and emotional development due to advanced cognitive abilities as well as heightened intensity and sensitivity (Worrell et al., 2019). Third-grade gifted students at Green Willow Elementary (GWE) demonstrated increased anxiety levels, social awkwardness, and immense amounts of fear both individually and collectively when compared to general education students. The problem of practice for this study was that gifted third-grade students at GWE were not receiving specific interventions to support their asynchronous social and emotional development.

The purpose of this study was to identify key social and emotional needs among third-grade gifted students in my class at GWE and to determine the outcomes of a differentiated SEL curriculum. The four-week intervention was designed to provide more intensive affective instruction around the four most significant areas of social and emotional discrepancy. Qualitative observations
were conducted, and student exit tickets were collected throughout the intervention to determine the impact of the differentiated social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum on the participants’ social and emotional needs.

Social cognitive theory combined with the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners made up the framework that informed this study. Data collected during this mixed-methods research study answered the following questions:

1. What are the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade gifted students at GWE?

2. How does a differentiated SEL curriculum impact third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional needs?

3. What is the effectiveness of a differentiated SEL curriculum on the self-reported areas of asynchronous social and emotional development for the third-grade students at GWE?

The data clearly illustrated that providing social and emotional instruction that is differentiated to meet gifted learners’ unique needs is effective and has a positive impact on their affective development. The evidence collected from the quantitative pre- and post-surveys demonstrated the benefit of an individualized affective curriculum on the whole development of gifted students. In addition,
the qualitative observations and exit tickets reveal that providing targeted social and emotional instruction also results in positive student perceptions.

In this chapter I will discuss the results of this study in connection to the literature review conducted before the study, indicating how the data supports or adds to the literature. Based on this study’s findings, recommendations will be presented in educational practices and implementations based on the data. I will also reflect on the research process and indicate any limitations or suggestions for improvement. Finally, I will provide ideas for future research related to this study’s findings.

**Results Related to Literature Review**

This study was grounded in social cognitive theory and Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners to further study the asynchronous social and emotional development of the third-grade gifted students. I conducted a review of the literature on this framework and the research topic in association with the findings from my study. In doing so, I was able to see not only how my study was fueled by the existing literature but also how the study now fits with and contributes to the body of literature (Mertler, 2014). Gifted children’s social and emotional growth is as important as their intellectual development and should be supported just as much to provide skills needed to experience, cope with, and efficiently manage the unique challenges they face due to
asynchronous development (Papadopoulos, 2021; Neihart et al., 2016). The disconnect in affective growth makes the need for social and emotional support even more crucial for gifted students’ overall development (Cavilla, 2019). This study’s findings are consistent with the existing literature pertaining to the mismatched development of gifted children.

When gifted students are not supported socially and emotionally, problems such as the one that inspired this study can ensue. If concepts such as empathy, resiliency, and motivation are not nurtured, students have an increased chance of developing unhealthy perfectionism, anxiety, and difficulties with peer interactions (Fonseca, 2016). However, the potentially beneficial impact of recognizing the unique affective needs of gifted learners is great, and Derek Cavilla’s Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners framework provides developmentally appropriate SEL using the CASEL components (2019). The findings of this study reinforce the unique affective needs of gifted students as well as the positive implications of using the CASEL competencies as part of SEL.

The themes that emerged from this study included reliance on the teacher in times of need, mutual support among peers, applications of the skills to other areas of life, and a commitment to growing. Overall, the themes from the exit tickets substantiate the observations I conducted throughout the intervention.
Together with the quantitative data, the results of the study affirmed the importance of providing differentiated affective lessons to improve the asynchronous social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students.

**Importance of Teacher and Environment**

An element most critical to a high-quality program for gifted students is staff who are prepared to meet these students’ needs (Heacox & Cash, 2020). In order to support students both socially and academically, and to provide high-quality instruction, teachers should be well educated about the distinctive characteristics of gifted students (Dombro, et al., 2011; Heacox & Cash, 2020). If a gifted student’s needs are being ignored, the child’s social or emotional interactions with his or her peers can be impacted (Reis et al., 2021). It is vital that educators have a full understanding of the nature of giftedness when working with these particular students. This understanding provides the framework necessary to enact a teaching philosophy that enables the child to not only acquire the knowledge needed to be successful in the class, but the skills needed to generalize that knowledge and mature into a more fulfilled human being (Fonseca, 2016). By having a more comprehensive understanding of gifted students, teachers can make more informed decisions regarding curriculum and instruction (Fonseca, 2016). Teachers should have an enhanced understanding...
not only of the intricacies of giftedness but also of SEL and how best to support students’ unique social and emotional needs (Dombro et al., 2011).

Studies, including this one, have shown that gifted students are particularly influenced by their teachers’ attitudes and actions, especially when there is a supportive relationship between the teacher and student (Van-Tassel Baska, 2018). Creating a nurturing environment where gifted students can flourish is the key for many gifted students to develop socially and emotionally (Fonseca, 2016). Teachers who continually model the appropriate and effective social and emotional strategies, through practice and rehearsal, are more likely to see their students grow (Phelan, 2018). This study, which was grounded in social cognitive theory, is consistent with the notion that individuals learn behaviors by observing others and that through dynamic and reciprocal interactions these skills can be learned (Khudzari et al., 2019). Teachers can motivate gifted students through building warm and supportive relationships with students and emphasizing effort and mastery rather than competition (Neihart et al., 2016). The differentiated Second Step lessons in this study provided in an environment that was supportive and nurturing, yielded positive outcomes for both the self-perceptions of student participants as well as on the effects of the individualized affective curriculum.
One of the roles of teachers of gifted students is to help students develop a growth mindset, or a mastery approach orientation toward learning (Heacox & Cash, 2020). A growth mindset is particularly important for gifted students because they are at risk for both under-achievement and perfectionism, which may hinder them from reaching their potential (Esparza et al., 2014). Through hard work gifted children can, as this study shows, positively influence their thinking and retrain their brains away from unhealthy social and emotional characteristics (Fonseca, 2016). This study improves the existing knowledge base in this area by reinforcing that, with explicit instruction, gifted students can use their natural cognitive abilities to positively influence their social and emotional growth (Fonseca, 2016).

**Nurturing Peer Relationships**

The nature of giftedness is at the root of some of the more typical problems gifted children face regarding development of healthy peer relationships (Fonseca, 2016). Asynchronous development, which can cause gifted students to have rigid thinking patterns and overly sensitive emotions, often hinders the development of healthy friendships (Neihart et al., 2016; Fonseca, 2016). This study upholds that asynchronous development does not have to be a barrier for gifted students in forming positive peer relationships (Neihart et al., 2016). The pre-survey findings of this study identified relationship
skills as a significant area of social and emotional discrepancy, supporting the research previously established on this topic. In the right setting, and with effective social and emotional instruction, this study upholds that asynchronous development will not be a barrier for gifted students in forming positive peer relationships (Neihart et al., 2016).

**Differentiation to Support Gifted Development**

The problem that guided this study was that universal affective instruction was not meeting the unique needs of the third-grade gifted students at GWE. Through identifying these deficits, I was able to provide further support through intensive interventions that matched the individualized affective needs of the participants. The positive effects of the interventions on the social and emotional development of the third-grade gifted students are consistent with the literature that using a tiered framework, such as RTI, is a way to ensure the unique academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted students are being met (Heacox & Cash, 2020).

Similar to academic data, RTI can be used to monitor student social and emotional data, promote informed decision-making, emphasize prevention, and provide evidence-based supports to students needing further support (Ziomek-Daigle & Heckman, 2019). The findings from this study emphasize the need for individualized instruction to meet the unique social and emotional needs of
gifted learners. Tiered models, such as RTI and PBIS, can be used to deliver more intensive differentiated interventions and support to students who need specific services (Ziomek-Daigle & Heckman, 2019). The PBIS approach used in this study focused on providing tiered social and emotional learning to students through creating an environment that makes problem behaviors irrelevant (Ziomek-Daigle & Heckman, 2019; Edwards, 2018).

Within a tiered framework that provides a proactive approach in schools, the Second Step program provides direct instruction to address the social and emotional needs of even the most accomplished gifted students (Moy & Hazen, 2018; Neihart et al., 2016). Gifted students should be coached on how to develop healthy social relationships and appropriate emotional responses (Heacox & Cash, 2020). This study’s findings improve the existing literature and knowledge base about the effects of using Second Step lessons to meet the unique social and emotional needs of third-grade gifted students. However, this study adds to the existing literature regarding the use of Second Step lessons as part of a targeted program to support the affective needs of gifted learners.

Conclusions

Gifted students have different social and emotional needs than their peers, and often have gaps in growth due to asynchronous development. These disconnects in development, if not addressed, can have adverse effects on the
overall development of gifted students and result in unhealthy levels of perfectionism, anxiety, low self-esteem, and under-achievement. The results of this study make it clear that programs aimed to improve social and emotional learning of gifted students have a positive impact on their social and emotional competencies and should be implemented.

SEL competencies such as self-efficacy, self-control and growth mindset are powerful predictors of social, emotional, and even academic outcomes for gifted students and are included in affective curriculums such as the Second Step program used in this study (Allbright et al., 2019). To curb the frequency of the above concerns, it is important for schools to provide affective support consistently to gifted students. Differentiation in itself does not respond to the distinctive learning characteristics of gifted students, if the specific areas of asynchronous development are identified and then supported through targeted instruction, the gaps in development can be narrowed. This study has shown that the unique social and emotional development of this group can be supported through an individualized affective curriculum (Heacox & Cash, 2020).

**Practice Recommendations**

Since the goal of this study was to better understand the unique experiences of this third-grade group of gifted students, generalizability was not
the ultimate aim. However, although the problem of practice for this study focused on my own students, the findings from this study have implications for improving the social and emotional development of all gifted students. Districts should take steps to ensure whole-development support is being provided to gifted learners through affective instruction designed to meet their unique social and emotional needs.

Although many schools have classrooms designated for homogeneous gifted instruction, unidentified gifted students still remain in other settings. For this reason, classroom teachers should take the initiative to stay current on the trends in gifted education to support the gifted learners in their classroom. Supporting the social and emotional growth as part of a healthy whole development for students is typically a schoolwide initiative, and these recommendations pertain to administration as well. This study’s findings have implications for all who teach and reach students.

Giftedness occurs in all socioeconomic and ethnic groups, and it is imperative that the increasingly diverse student population gain equal access to programs for gifted students (Silverman & Gilman, 2020). This study’s findings are relevant for schools and districts aiming to provide equitable opportunities for students who are marginalized. Going forward, schools and districts should
assess their own understanding of the asynchronous development of gifted students and how it might present differently across various groups.

Based on the results from this study, I recommend for schools to adopt or continue using an affective curriculum such as the Second Step program. Ideally, all students would have access to SEL, but this study’s findings reveal that gifted students especially need targeted affective support. While the adoption or continuation of an affective program such as Second Step is important, it alone is not enough. Many schools and districts are still struggling in how best to use programs and teach strategies that meaningfully develop gifted students’ social and emotional skills (Allbright et al., 2019).

Outcomes of the study suggest that the same process educators use to tailor their academic instruction, differentiation, can also be applied to SEL. It is important for teachers to differentiate affective instruction just as they do when guiding students with unique learning styles and readiness levels towards meeting learning goals. This process of differentiation results in the identification of students’ abilities and instruction that matches these needs. This research study revealed significant instructional implications that necessitate sharing the findings within the larger school district and beyond.

The pre-survey was a means of determining the exact social and emotional gaps in development. Used similar as a pre-assessment in the
academic realm of instruction, the pre-survey determined what affective knowledge and skills students already knew and which areas of competency still needed to be taught. To give the desired outcomes in social and emotional growth, it is important for teachers to first identify the SEL competencies in which students need support to ensure proper alignment of the social and emotional lessons.

The study emphasized the crucial role the teacher plays in supporting student development. Another pressing issue facing the education of gifted students is the lack of professional development opportunities offered to teachers. It is a myth that virtually everybody in the field of gifted education is an expert on the social and emotional development of gifted students (Cross, 2005). Teachers of gifted students have less professional development than ever before, and more of these students are now being served only in the regular classroom (Neihart et al., 2016). Because of this, it is imperative for all teachers to receive training to expand their content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and professional dispositions of gifted curriculum and instruction (Brazzolotto & Phelps, 2022). Further training in this area is needed for those in the realm of support for this group of students.
Implementation Plan

The central idea of action research is using action or intervention in a spiral of research cycles to develop, implement, and evaluate plans for practice improvement (Ivankova & Wingo, 2018). Analyzing and interpreting the data from this study helped me to consider the implications of my findings and achieve a coherent understanding to guide my next steps (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The ultimate purpose of this action research was to take action in my own classroom and school to advance my professional development and improve student outcomes (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The findings of this study suggest several important implications for my practice and for the affective support provided to gifted students in my school and district. One of my desires is to continue to work to improve myself to be a more culturally and linguistically responsive teacher and advocate for all students, including but not limited to those who are identified as gifted.

As one of the school’s lead teachers for gifted and talented education, and as a member of the school leadership team, I feel it is important to share the results of this study with the other gifted and talented teachers at my school. The third, fourth, and fifth grade GTE teachers at GWE work hard to meet the academic needs of students, and I will ensure these teachers also have a solid understanding of asynchronous social and emotional development.
Giftedness can especially look different in students with asynchronous development, and so presenting my findings would be beneficial for all teachers. In addition to meeting with teachers, I will also meet with my school’s administration team to develop a plan for sharing my results along with the relevant literature with the faculty and staff of my school. It is important for all teachers and support staff to understand the characteristics of giftedness and how it might be presented in the general education classroom. Furthermore, I would facilitate a discussion of how individualized social and emotional lessons would be beneficial in supporting the whole development of all students, not just gifted.

It is my responsibility to share what I have learned from this study with other teachers of gifted students in my school and across the district so that they can use in their own gifted classrooms to meet the unique needs of their students. I will share information from this study with the gifted department of my district. The results of this study could also be of interest to other schools and districts. To advocate for gifted students in a wider scope, I will also present at conferences tailored to those who teach and reach gifted students.

Reflection on Action Research and my Selected Methodology

Action research is a process of inquiry; an educator takes the researcher’s role to study an event, problem, or professional interest within their school
Reflective practice is a huge theme that undergirds the action research process and perfectly describes the process I went through as I chose a problem of practice, pored over relevant material, and implemented this study to determine how best to resolve specific social and emotional discrepancies of third-grade gifted students. Although at first skeptical to action research when compared to traditional research, as I grew more familiar with the continuous cycles of inquiry, I realized I had already been practicing action research as I sought to understand problems of practice and improve my instructional practices (Ivankova, 2015). Furthermore, the indicators of credibility, validity, and quality in action research are not only evident but make this type of research much more appealing for me as a teacher-researcher (Herr and Anderson, 2014).

This action research examined the social and emotional development of a third-grade gifted class. The study aimed to further support the specific areas of asynchronous development and then measured the growth in each social and emotional competency. The findings revealed a strong correlation between the differentiated affective lessons and third-grade students’ social and emotional growth. The results also affirmed the theoretical framework comprised of social cognitive theory and the Taxonomy of Affective Curriculum for Gifted Learners that served as the foundation for this research study. While I certainly hoped to
find a positive correlation between the differentiated Second Step lessons and the participants’ social and emotional growth, I was in no way prepared for the results of this study. The drastic increases across all eight CASEL competencies were shocking to me, especially since these results occurred after only a six-week timeframe.

Ultimately, action research is transformative, and this study’s completion and findings have provided enormous personal and professional value and knowledge that will serve me in myriad of ways throughout my life. Personally, the completion of this study supported my understanding of my own journey as a gifted person. Professionally, the knowledge gained during this study has catapulted my confidence forward as I speak with schools and districts about ways to support gifted students. I look forward to continuing this journey that has enhanced my ability to grow professionally and has enormous potential to give immediate results to improve the need (Efron & David, 2013). As a gifted teacher, I strive to better understand how they think and develop differently in order to best support their needs. While the findings and proposed implementation plan will positively impact the whole development of gifted students, there are some design and results limitations of this study that should be considered when reviewing the results.
Limitations or Suggestions

The small convenient sample of this study is the same limitation that plagues other studies on social and emotional development of gifted students (Neihart et al., 2016). This action research study was confined to the third-grade gifted students in my classroom and will therefore not be generalizable to other elementary schools. However, although lacking generalizability, this study was useful in improving my practice and could be of interest for schools with similar demographics (Efron & Ravid, 2020). Furthermore, the majority of participants are not from historically underrepresented, minority, or financially impoverished backgrounds (Neihart et al., 2016).

The six-week timeframe for this study impeded the potential social and emotional growth that could have occurred over a larger period of time. An extended amount of time would have allowed for additional follow-up questions about the data. The study’s small timeframe also limited the amount of individual growth and development that could have occurred; if replicated, this action research study would perhaps yield different results if conducted over a full school year. There was also the limitation of an inability to identify other factors that may have affected social and emotional growth over the same six-week period. For example, the failure to identify other sources that participants
might have accessed to support affective growth during the action research study may have skewed findings.

Furthermore, because states have such varied definitions of giftedness, if replicated students from other settings may have differing experiences. I worked exclusively with students identified as gifted learners using the criteria for my middle-sized school district only. Students from larger, metropolitan, or smaller, rural districts may also have different experiences. The varied levels of social and emotional curriculum already implemented within other school districts could also yield different results. Another possible limitation, known as the Hawthorne effect, could have resulted in the students modifying their behavior when they knew they were being watched (Oswald et al., 2014). There is a great potential for participants to behave differently or to say different things if they know that they are being watched carefully (Mertler, 2014). I took measures to eliminate this, such as immersing myself in the setting and gaining trust with my students. However, it is still important to note as a possible limitation of the study.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The insights from this study suggest plausible explanations about the research questions and help guide future actions based on lessons learned from the study (Efron & Ravid, 2020). However, there is still more to be learned about my topic and problem. First, although my study with a sample of primarily
White, third-grade gifted students showed significant benefits for these participants, this study needs to be replicated with more diverse populations. Further research is also needed to investigate differentiated Second Step lessons with gifted students of different ages. In addition, because this study was conducted with a small, purposeful sample group, further research on the use of differentiated affective curriculum on the social and emotional development of gifted students is needed among a much larger population. This type of research may indicate different areas of opportunity across school districts or states. The results of a larger study could also be more widely generalized, leading to a larger impact on the gifted community.

Additionally, further investigation of the students’ classroom environment would facilitate the exploration of other factors impacting their experiences surrounding a differentiated affective curriculum. For example, this exploration might include information about their classroom routines, more specifics regarding class-wide academic and SEL instruction, and the routines and procedures already in place by the teacher to nurture students’ development. After completing this action research study, I also believe research is needed on the impact of differentiation practices on gifted students.

Data from sources outside the school environment could also provide further insight into the social and emotional development of gifted students.
Specifically, input from students’ families through interviews or surveys would provide additional information about the transfer of skills to home and any other observed effects of the intervention. Having families involved would also promote family engagement in the students’ SEL instruction and possibly an increase in retention of the affective skills learned.

**Summary**

Although often recognized by their advanced intelligence, gifted students have unique social and emotional needs that, due to asynchronous development, are often at a disconnect with other aspects of their growth. This action research study sought to better understand and improve the gaps in third-grade gifted students’ social and emotional development. Using a mixed methods design, specific areas of asynchronous growth were first identified and then supported through differentiated Second Step lessons. Reliance on the teacher for support to solve problems, mutual support among peers, application of the affective skill to other areas, and a commitment to growth were recurring themes from the qualitative data. While the pre-survey determined specific areas of social and emotional need, the post-survey measured the effects of the intervention on the sample’s affective development. The analysis of all data sources revealed that differentiated Second Step lessons had a positive effect on the perceptions and social and emotional competencies of third-grade gifted students at GWE.
regarding social and emotional development. The implementation of an affective curriculum, that is differentiated to meet each student’s needs, can provide a more comprehensive educational experience for gifted learners.
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APPENDIX A: SURVEY FOR STUDENTS

January 2018

**WCSD Social and Emotional Competency Long-Form Assessment**

Items highlighted (17-item) indicate items that comprise the briefer, composite SEC assessment. Directions: Please tell us how easy or difficult each of the following are for you. Response Options: 1 = Very Difficult; 2 = Difficult; 3 = Easy; 4 = Very Easy

**Self-Awareness: Self-Concept**

1. Knowing what my strengths are. (17-item)
2. Knowing how to get better at things that are hard for me to do at school.
3. Knowing when I am wrong about something.
4. Knowing when I can’t control something.

**Self-Awareness: Emotion Knowledge**

5. Knowing when my feelings are making it hard for me to focus. (17-item)
6. Knowing the emotions I feel. (17-item)
7. Knowing ways to make myself feel better when I’m sad.
8. Noticing what my body does when I am nervous.
9. Knowing when my mood affects how I treat others.
10. Knowing ways I calm myself down. (17-item)

**Social Awareness**

11. Learning from people with different opinions than me. (17-item)
12. Knowing what people may be feeling by the look on their face. (17-item)
13. Knowing when someone needs help. (17-item)
14. Knowing how to get help when I’m having trouble with a classmate.
15. Knowing how my actions impact my classmates.

**Self-Management: Emotion Regulation**

16. Getting through something even when I feel frustrated. (17-item)
17. Being patient even when I am really excited. (17-item)
18. Staying calm when I feel stressed.
19. Working on things even when I don’t like them.

**Self-Management: Goal Management**

20. Finishing tasks even if they are hard for me. (17-item)
21. Setting goals for myself. (17-item)
22. Reaching goals that I set for myself.
23. Thinking through the steps it will take to reach my goal.

**Self-Management: School Work**

24. Doing my schoolwork even when I do not feel like it. (17-item)
25. Being prepared for tests. (17-item)
26. Working on assignments even when they are hard.
27. Planning ahead so I can turn a project in on time.
28. Finishing my schoolwork without reminders.
29. Staying focused in class even when there are distractions.
Relationship Skills

30. Respecting a classmate’s opinions during a disagreement. (17-item)
31. Getting along with my classmates. (17-item)
32. Sharing what I am feeling with others.
33. Talking to an adult when I have problems at school.
34. Being welcoming to someone I don’t usually eat lunch with.
35. Getting along with my teachers.

Responsible Decision-Making

36. Thinking about what might happen before making a decision. (17-item)
37. Knowing what is right or wrong. (17-item)
38. Thinking of different ways to solve a problem.
39. Saying “no” to a friend who wants to break the rules.
40. Helping to make my school a better place.
# APPENDIX B: SCOPE AND SEQUENCE OF SECOND STEP LESSON PLANS

## Grade 3 - Scope and Sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Objectives — Students will be able to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Being Respectful Learners</td>
<td>• Focusing your attention and listening help you be a better learner. • Focusing your attention and listening show respect.</td>
<td>• Apply focusing-attention and listening skills in response to scenarios.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Using Self-Talk</td>
<td>• <em>Self-talk</em> means talking to yourself in a quiet voice or in your head. • Self-talk can help you focus, stay on task, and handle distractions.</td>
<td>• Identify classroom distractions • Demonstrate the use of self-talk in response to scenarios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Being Assertive</td>
<td>• Being <em>assertive</em> means asking for what you want or need in a calm and firm voice. • Being assertive is a respectful way to get what you want or need.</td>
<td>• Demonstrate assertive communication skills in response to scenarios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Planning to Learn</td>
<td>• Making a plan can help you be a better learner. • A plan is good if the order makes sense, it's simple, and you can do it.</td>
<td>• Evaluate three-step plans for different scenarios using the Good Plan Checklist criteria • Create a simple, three-step plan that meets the Good Plan Checklist criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Identifying Others’ Feelings</td>
<td>• Looking for clues on a person’s face or body and in the situation helps you notice and understand how that person is feeling. • People can have different feelings about the same situation. • All feelings are natural.</td>
<td>• Name a variety of feelings • Determine others’ feelings using physical, verbal, and situational clues • Label their own feelings as the same as or different from others’ feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Understanding Perspectives</td>
<td>• People can have different feelings about the same situation, and their feelings can change. • <em>Empathy</em> is feeling or understanding what someone else is feeling. • Thinking about others’ perspectives helps you have empathy for them.</td>
<td>• Identify others’ feelings using physical, verbal, and situational clues • Determine whether others’ feelings have changed, in response to scenarios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Conflicting Feelings</td>
<td>• You can have conflicting feelings about a situation. • Having empathy helps you notice when others’ feelings are the same as or different from yours.</td>
<td>• Identify two conflicting feelings a person could have in response to scenarios • Explain possible reasons for someone’s conflicting feelings in response to scenarios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Accepting Differences</td>
<td>• Having empathy helps you understand and accept how others are the same as or different from you. • Accepting and appreciating others’ differences is respectful.</td>
<td>• Name similarities and differences between people • Predict how others will feel when teased for being different</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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*Second Step: Skills for Social and Academic Success*
APPENDIX C: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL FORM

Observation Field Notes

Adapted from Efron & Ravid, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of Observation:</td>
<td>Time Frame:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities:</td>
<td>Location:</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Foci:</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Descriptive Field Notes</th>
<th>Reflective Field Notes</th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Indications of Importance</th>
<th>Modifications/Adjustments for Next Session</th>
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</table>
APPENDIX D: REFLECTIVE EXIT TICKET

Social and Emotional Development of Third-Grade Students

I would like to ask you a few more questions to follow up on this week.

Question 1- Did you enjoy the Second Step lesson this week?

Question 2- What is something you remember learning this week in Second Step?

Question 3- Did the extra Second Step lessons help you? Why or why not? Please be as detailed as possible.

Question 4- How do you think you might use what you learned this week in Second Step?

Question 5- Do you think what you learned this week in Second Step could help you in other areas of life?

Question 6- How do you feel after completing the Second Step lessons this week?
APPENDIX E: PARENT LETTER OF INTRODUCTION

I am currently working toward my Doctoral Degree from the University of South Carolina. For my research, I am conducting a study on the social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students. I invite your child to participate in this research. Your child was selected as a possible participant because he or she is in the self-contained class selected for use in this study. Please read this form and ask any questions you have before allowing your child to be in this study.

**Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to determine the specific areas of social and emotional development that third-grade gifted students need further support. I am doing research to discover the impact on differentiated social and emotional learning (SEL) to support the students’ overall growth. This study is done with the Houston County School District’s permission.

Bonaire Elementary uses the Second Step program to teach affective skills. This study will determine the effects of increased Second Step lessons that are tailored to student needs: if your child participates, the study will involve completing surveys and reflections about the Second Step lessons. Just like when supporting academics, both whole group and small group methods of instruction help support the child.

**Procedures**

All students, regardless of participation in study, will receive the same instructional processes. If you allow your child to be in this study, I will ask him or her to complete an initial survey on social and emotional learning in February. This survey data will be used to facilitate whole group and small group interventions using Second Step lessons three times a week, during our Morning Meeting portion of the day. This time is already allotted in our daily schedule and will not inhibit our instructional day. If your child participates in this study, he or she will take part in small groups that provide individualized social and emotional support.
Overview of the Study

The study includes the following:

1. Pre- and post-surveys related to social and emotional development
2. Small group support with the teacher
3. Observations of students during Second Step lessons
4. Completion of reflection related to each Second Step lesson

Confidentiality

Participation is confidential and voluntary. Data collected from this research study will be used to inform the educational field of curriculum and instruction. Study information will be kept in a secure location that is protected by passwords. Your privacy and anonymity will be respected and protected throughout the process; no names or identifying information will be included in my final research report. At any time, if you are not comfortable with your child participating in this study, you may withdraw.

Thank you in advance for your support. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the study. You may contact me at mkoehle@email.sc.edu.

Sincerely,

Michelle Koehle
APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I _______________________________(name) agree to have my child participate in a research study regarding the social and emotional development of third-grade gifted students by using a differentiated curriculum. I understand that if I give this consent, my child will be observed during Second Step lessons and participate in all pre-and post-surveys and reflections.

I understand that participation in this study is voluntary; I can withdraw my child at any time from this study without any negative consequences.

I further understand that both my family and my child will be anonymous. All identities will be protected, and the name of the district, school, or teachers will not be revealed when reporting the results of this study.

Please sign and return this form:

I give permission for my child to participate in this research study.

Child name: ____________________________________________________________

Parent Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________