

Abstract

This qualitative case study analysis examined teachers' and students' experiences implementing BASE Education, an electronic learning (e-learning) platform for social and emotional learning (SEL), in an urban charter middle school in Paterson, New Jersey. Convenient purposeful sampling was used to recruit seven students and three character-education (Ched.) teachers from the target population of 300 students from grades 6–8. The sample size was determined based on the teachers, students, and parents or guardians' consent. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. For additional support, the students' BASEline (Learn Individual Needs and Evaluate) pre- and post-assessment scores were examined by measuring the students' SEL competencies. Findings indicate that using BASE Education positively impacted students' well-being, mindfulness, behavior, or academic development. However, the challenges revealed excessive use of PowerPoint slides and the need for engaging lesson activities. These findings suggest further research to personalize SEL instruction and address external factors affecting students' responses to SEL lessons. The study highlights the potential of e-learning platforms in promoting SEL and underscores prioritizing student well-being and academic development in urban school districts. The study results contribute to the knowledge of SEL and e-learning and provide valuable insight for urban educators and policymakers globally looking to implement similar SEL e-learning platforms in schools.

Keywords: Academic development, BASE Education, electronic learning, mindfulness, social and emotional learning, urban charter school, urban school districts

Introduction

There has been a growing emphasis within the field of education addressing the increased incidence and severity of depression and anxiety among students. With the shift from traditional classroom settings to online learning and back to in-person instruction, stress and anxiety levels have heightened, resulting in decreased motivation and concerns regarding students' mental health and well-being (Ergas, 2019). Therefore, it is vital to incorporate mindfulness practices and social and emotional learning (SEL) to promote students' well-being in the post-COVID-19 era. SEL is the process by which children understand and put forth the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions, practice positive goal setting, demonstrate empathy for others, establish and maintain positive peer relationships, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2005).

SEL helps fill the gap that academics may overlook by focusing on the child as a whole person. This whole-person approach benefits children well into adulthood, as they become well-rounded and socially and emotionally developed. Students with social and emotional skills can maintain healthy relations with peers and adults and develop coping strategies to manage stressful situations (Taylor et al., 2017). Researchers suggest that by incorporating evidence-based SEL programs into curricula, schools can create a supportive and positive culture and climate for student development (Browning & Romer, 2020). A great deal of responsibility falls on the shoulders of the school system to provide school-based SEL programs to fill the area of need (Downey, 2017). Annie E. Casey Foundation (2019) noted that educational companies have created innovative SEL electronic learning (e-learning) platforms such as Second Step, Positive Action, The PATHS® curriculum, EduMotion, and BASE Education to improve and sustain social and emotional skills in schools globally.

However, SEL platforms need to be improved for middle schools in urban school districts. Additional research on SEL e-learning platforms for urban school districts is also required. Thus, a formal evaluation was conducted on one SEL e-learning platform, BASE Education, in an urban charter middle school for grades 6-8 in Paterson, New Jersey. This case study analysis centers on middle school students and teachers' experiences utilizing BASE Education, an SEL e-learning platform. The study provides valuable insight for future global mindfulness and SEL e-learning practices in urban school districts.

Literature Analysis

A descriptive analysis of middle school teachers and students' experiences implementing BASE Education, a SEL e-learning platform, was examined. BASE Education is an e-learning platform that uses a learn, connect, and respond (LCR) SEL model to promote well-being and mental health. Its middle and high school e-learning SEL curriculum focuses on connecting with emotions and helping students and their families respond positively to each other and themselves (Edmentum, 2021). The SEL platform can be used in full remote, in-person, or hybrid learning environments, catering to various learning needs, including self-guided student learning, instructional learning for the classroom, and parent and guardian learning for families (BASE Education, 2021). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) recommends BASE Education's e-learning SEL platform as a top SEL program for middle and high school students. BASE Education is also included in CASEL's "Guide to Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs" (BASE Education, 2022).

The CASEL wheel encompasses five distinct areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These competencies can be taught and applied at various developmental stages, from childhood to

adulthood, and across diverse cultural contexts (CASEL, 2022). The CASEL standards outline what students should know and be able to do to achieve academic success, engage in positive routines, promote health and well-being, and prepare for fulfilling careers. According to CASEL (2005), SEL is separated into five distinct components: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) responsible decision making, (d) social awareness, and (e) relationship skills.

The case study examined in-person interviews with three character education teachers and seven students from grades 6-8. The participants' narrative experiences using BASE Education were reviewed to determine if students' well-being was impacted positively due to implementing the SEL e-learning platform. The students' BASEline (Learn Individual Needs and Evaluate) pre- and post-assessment scores were studied as support data on whether the students' SEL competencies increased due to implementing BASE Education. The research was conducted for six months. The researcher focused on three primary questions:

RQ1. What are teachers' and students' perceptions of BASE Education?

RQ2. What strengths and challenges have teachers and students experienced implementing BASE Education?

RQ3. How did using BASE Education affect students' well-being?

The study's findings revealed that BASE Education positively impacted student well-being and improved some SEL competencies. However, there were mixed thoughts from the participating middle school teachers and students regarding the program's effectiveness as an SEL e-learning platform. Table 1 below reveals the three participating character education teachers' themed responses.

Table 1.*Teacher Participant's Codes, Themes, and Examples*

Codes	Themes	Examples
Lesson Plans Long Lessons Curriculum Student Activities More Engaging Activities	Lengthiness of Lesson Plans and Power Point Slides	<p>“I just don't like having the kids have to click through 150 slides. I don't think that's a good way to learn something, at least not at this age.”</p> <p>“If we could just make it more, I don't want to say gamify, but if we can make it more engaging for the kids because if it's like the way the questions are set up, after a while you become numb to it.”</p> <p>“I would have 10 or 15 minutes where you're introducing a concept like anxiety, for example. But then, with the rest of the class period, you have an activity that goes with it, or you have a discussion that goes with it, or a writing prompt that goes with the base platform, it takes usually pretty much the whole period, because the modules are so long.”</p> <p>“The shortcoming is the lengthiness of the modules. I feel like if we could take the good elements of set of BASE and make it more tailored towards individual grade levels, instead of broadly making it from grades six to eight, I think it would be much more effective.”</p> <p>“The last module I talked about with students was managing anxiety. I supplemented a part of the lesson from BASE with an activity I found on YouTube and then a Padlet game so we actually could have a discussion that's more organic.”</p>
Lesson Plan Content Modules SEL Strategies and Skills Grade Level Appropriate Lessons Accommodations	Comprehensive and Rigorous Lesson Plan Content	<p>“BASE offers a lot of strategies to use for SEL. It provides a lot in terms, examples, and the meaning behind them for students to understand.”</p> <p>“What's nice about the program is that it comes with prepackaged modules. So far with my class, I've done anxiety, character traits, coping strategies, healthy relationships, learned helplessness, mindfulness, resilience, and stress management.”</p> <p>“Let's say we're learning about depression. Okay, I feel like BASE Education gives the students a very good textbook answer of depression, how to analyze if you're being having some form of depression, and ways to solve the problem.”</p> <p>“I like how there's accommodations for Spanish, in the half text speech, I think that's very effective.”</p> <p>“I think the program is really good. In terms of fact, like, they go into depth about certain topics that are very appropriate for middle and high school kids. I feel like as Character Education teachers, this SEL program's modules help students focus on topics and use the skills they learned at school and at home.”</p> <p>“The one thing I do really love about BASE is the fact that it provides us with the ability to look at the students answers, it notifies us of students at risk because some students will not tell you.”</p>
Supports SEL SEL Competency Development SEL Awareness	Importance of Social Emotional Learning	<p>“SEL introduces them as eighth graders to things that they probably have not heard or talked about before, or introduces, like a new way of thinking that they haven't considered.”</p> <p>“It takes a community to raise the social and emotional well-being of student and it is SEL programs like BASE Education that helps spread awareness.”</p>

Codes	Themes	Examples
		<p>“SEL helps students with knowing the difference between anxious moments and like the feeling before tests versus clinical anxiety, and knowing the differences.”</p> <p>“We want kids to be comfortable talking about their mental health and have it normalized because a lot of cultures from different backgrounds do not talk about mental health. It's kind of like, suck it up and just internalize it. SEL is so important in schools to normalize mental health awareness.”</p>

The teachers appreciated the rigorous SEL content, while the students liked the easy-to-use platform, self-paced learning, and relatable SEL lessons. The study also identified some challenges such as excessive PowerPoint slides, too much questioning, and unengaging lessons. Table 2 below reveals the participating seven students' themed responses.

Table 2.

Student Participants' Codes, Themes, and Examples

Codes	Themes	Examples
Lesson Topics Real-Life Examples SEL Strategies and Skills Lessons in Spanish BASE Education Platform PowerPoint Slides Organization Time Management	SEL Learning Experience	<p>“My experience with BASE Education has been great because the lessons have different slides and examples for everything we learn.”</p> <p>“It helps me talk about how I feel and sort of get my feelings out. You can write the information down to express yourself.”</p> <p>“The lessons on bullying and cyberbullying helped a lot because students in middle school get bullied because of things they see on social media. The examples and lessons helped me learn how to stay aware from people like that.”</p> <p>"The most I got from the program is reading because the lessons are in English and Spanish, and I like reading; it is important because you need it in your life."</p> <p>"I learned many lessons about myself that I can do this; I can trust myself and never give up. I need to keep learning and keep pushing myself until I figure it out."</p> <p>"It's not difficult to use and is good for your age."</p> <p>“It is kind of hard in the beginning because sometimes I don't understand because of my English, I cannot understand almost all the questions, but I learned that there is Spanish way too, and I was so happy.”</p> <p>"I didn't really read all of the slides, so I don't really know about all the strategies from the lessons."</p> <p>"I now know when boys are so annoying, I just don't pay attention to them. I sometimes just close my eyes, breathe, and walk away."</p> <p>“I really experienced a lot, and it took me very far. I learned how to control my temper, and it helped me to understand others feelings as well.”</p>

Codes	Themes	Examples
		<p>“I've definitely learned to show sympathy now. Because just a few years ago, there was this one kid that I really didn't know how to help him and I didn't know what he was going through. So, I kind of just like made him come into our games in recess to make happy and forget things.”</p> <p>“I know it definitely has helped me academically. Last marking period, when we weren't using BASE, I actually failed three classes. But this marking period, I have been much better. I learned to be organized and get my work done on time.”</p>
<p>Long Lessons</p> <p>Excessive PowerPoint Slides</p> <p>Questioning</p> <p>Too Many Questions</p> <p>Lack of Engaging Activities/Games</p>	<p>Weaknesses of BASE Education</p>	<p>“The PowerPoints are a little bit too long and sometimes they ask a lot of questions at the end of the lesson.”</p> <p>“They have questions between like every five slides.”</p> <p>“I sometimes click through the PowerPoint slides on easy topics like keeping organized because they have so many questions to answer.”</p> <p>“If I could change something, I would make the questions a little less longer.”</p> <p>“Let me be honest. Honestly, I just skipped all the questions. I don't have time to read 85 to 90 slides and answer all those questions. I'd just skip all the questions using the next button.”</p> <p>“The questions are so general, and there are so many of them. Some questions are open-ended and general, like how do you feel? How's your friendships going? Rate your self-esteem and stuff like that, and you don't have to look at the slides to answer those questions.”</p> <p>“I think only like one or two or three students actually finish the whole thing in one period because it takes so long.”</p> <p>“The lessons could have more fun activities or games to play.”</p>
<p>Own Pace</p> <p>Comfort</p> <p>SEL Examples and Strategies</p> <p>Relatable Topics</p> <p>Helped with Grades</p> <p>Lesson Content</p> <p>No Homework</p> <p>Helped with Reading</p> <p>English to Spanish Translation</p> <p>Expressing Emotions</p> <p>Quick Teacher Support</p> <p>Coping with Stress</p> <p>Student Music Choices</p> <p>Platform is Easy to Use</p>	<p>Strengths of BASE Education</p>	<p>“BASE Education's strengths are that the program allows you to go at your own pace when reviewing the PowerPoint slides and answering the open-ended questions.”</p> <p>“With BASE I've learned to open up and talk with my teacher about situations I am going through.”</p> <p>“I feel like BASE has given me the tools that I need, like, really good examples of like real-life situations, instead of just like fantasy things.”</p> <p>“It's so important to relate to something, you know, like having something that is actually happening in your life otherwise we will not connect because the example would not make sense.”</p> <p>“I feel like the strategies I learned, like time management and expressing my feelings, helped with my grades because typically, what I used to do was like, if I got like a bad grade, I wouldn't ask the teacher about it, but after BASE, I feel more comfortable knowing I could talk to my teachers and ask for help.”</p> <p>“I feel more comfortable using BASE Education than other websites I used in my other school, like Second Step, because the wording is more understandable.”</p> <p>“I would not change anything about the program because it helped me learn more about bullying and being less stressed in school.”</p> <p>“BASE Education is good because you learn a lot from the lessons and they don't give you a lot of homework because you do it in class.”</p>

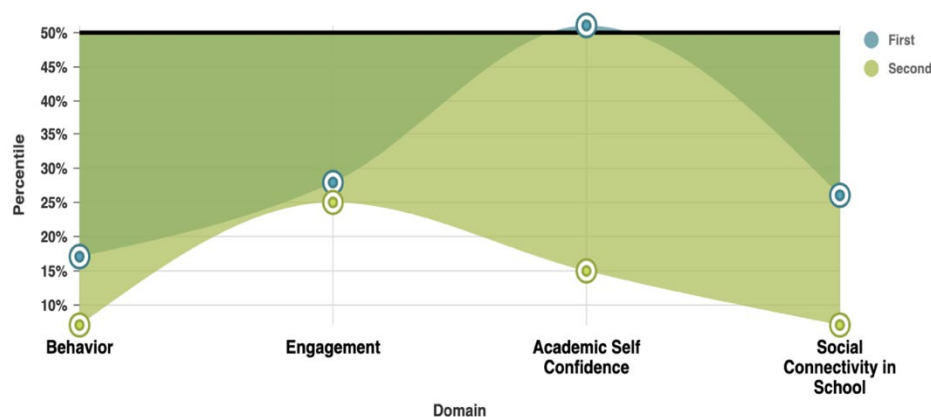
Codes	Themes	Examples
		<p>“BASE Education gave a lot of good definitions for words I didn't know and helped me learn a lot because the lessons are in English and Spanish. It helped me a lot with the questions.”</p> <p>“The strength is like you can write about how you feel because sometimes it is hard to say what you feel.”</p> <p>“I like that my teacher can see what I write right away because sometimes I don't want to talk about my feelings.”</p> <p>"The good part is that I can express myself."</p> <p>“I used strategies from lessons like coping, anxiety, and friendship. ”</p> <p>“The strength of the lessons is that I learned how to cope and manage my stress a little better. I learned about bullying and cyberbullying. It helped me a lot because now I know what stresses me and how to stay away from bullies.”</p> <p>“We don't get homework like we do in my other classes.”</p> <p>“I think it's very helpful because sometimes we get nervous to talk, and writing what I want to say helps because the teacher could always go back and see what it is and can meet with me.”</p> <p>"It tries to make a low profile so that no one else knows what's happening, so you got to express yourself, and the teacher can see it."</p> <p>“It lets you play different songs whenever you want to listen to music.”</p> <p>“I'd say there really are no weaknesses; BASE is a very strong webpage. It gives us a lot of information to process that we really don't get into our mind.”</p>
<p>Real-Life Examples and Skills</p> <p>Learning and Expressing Oneself</p> <p>Useful SEL Strategies</p> <p>Helping Oneself and Others</p> <p>Easily Accessible</p>	<p>BASE Education Recommendation</p>	<p>“I would recommend BASE Education because it can demonstrate a lot of things to other schools like bullying, friendship, and time-management.”</p> <p>“I love this program because it helped me make friends more easily from the friendship lesson and helped me express myself to others.”</p> <p>“I would recommend BASE Education to other schools because it helps you learn how to be a better person and helps you grow while learning more about yourself.”</p> <p>"Yeah, I would recommend BASE Education to students and schools because it helps people learn more about each other. It helps us have good skills like being kind to each other. "</p> <p>"I would say that people should use it because it teaches about a lot of different subjects. You can access them easily and work on the questions by yourself. Yeah, it's just good is easy."</p> <p>"Yes, because it can help students share their feelings. They can express themselves not only to somebody else, but they can also just write it. It feels like a little diary."</p> <p>"I don't know because I don't pay attention to the lessons or questions anymore."</p> <p>"We're always learning from ourselves and growing. Every year we become stronger mentally and emotionally, you learn from your mistakes, and then you take these strategies and try using them as a kind of trial and error to become a better person."</p>

The BASEline pre- and post-assessment measured the participating students' SEL growth from August to January using the CASEL five main competency groups of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. The BASEline full-scale research-validated assessment comprised 41 multiple-choice and true-or-false questions spanning four SEL domains of behavior, engagement, academic self-confidence, and social connectivity in school. The questions asked in the assessment addressed thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors that only occur in school. The evaluation did not report on students' home life or alternate settings (BASE, 2021). Students took the same assessment (written verbatim) two times to ensure test validity and reliability.

The students' BASEline pre-and post-assessment scores varied, indicating that all seven students can still benefit from utilizing BASE Education for SEL competency. No student showed an increase in all four SEL competencies. Figure 1 below displays an example of one participating student's competency percentile in the four SEL domains of behavior, engagement, academic self-confidence, and social connectivity in school. The participating student took the BASEline pre-assessment (first) on September 21, 2022, and the BASEline post-assessment (second) on January 3, 2023. The pre-assessment (first) percentile score is indicated in blue. The post-assessment (second) percentile score is marked in green.

Figure 1.

Student Example BASEline Pre-and Post-Assessment Scores



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Table 3 below displays the sample student's BASEline pre-and-post assessment SEL competency breakdown in the four SEL domains

Table 3.

Student Example BASEline Pre-and Post-Assessment SEL Competency Breakdown

BASEline assessment date	Academic self-confidence	Engagement	Social connectivity in school	Behavior
Pre-assessment 9/21/22	51%	28%	26%	17%
Post-assessment 1/3/23	15%	25%	7%	7%

Note. Scores represent SEL competency percentiles from September to January.

The themes that emerged from the teacher and student interview responses directly correlated with the three main research questions. The teacher and student themes addressed the strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations of the SEL e-learning platform, BASE Education. The participating teachers and students felt BASE Education's weaknesses included having too many PowerPoint slides and questions for each SEL lesson. However, the SEL e-learning platform's strengths were its rich lesson plan content in various languages and accessibility. The participating teachers and students would recommend BASE Education to urban school districts globally after shortening the PowerPoint slides, revising the lesson questioning segments, and including engaging activities or games for each SEL competency.

Implications

Children have experienced many changes within the education system in the past few years due to COVID-19. The pandemic's aftermath continues to illustrate various concerns in

education globally. Educational organizations and policymakers continue to enforce innovative SEL e-learning platforms that use CASEL's SEL approach, such as Second Step, Positive Action, The PATHS® Curriculum, EduMotion, and BASE Education, to improve and sustain social and emotional competencies. This case study analysis reveals that BASE Education was a successful SEL e-learning platform for an urban charter middle school in Paterson, New Jersey. The in-person teacher and student interview responses depicted the research study's findings with the support of the students' pre-and-post BASEline assessment scores from September-January. The participating student scores helped support the study's findings that students' well-being was positively affected due to implementing BASE Education and added to the literature and implications for future research.

Additional research is needed to address the challenges with the program's implementation, personalized SEL instruction, and ensuring the validity and reliability of BASEline's assessment results. Future research should examine ways to personalize SEL instruction for students. Some examples include more SEL modules, engaging activities, or games explicitly designed to improve areas of need. Even though supplemental modules were provided to the students founded on their BASEline assessment scores in each of the four SEL domains of engagement, behavior, academic self-confidence, and social connectivity, a more targeted focus on the SEL competencies is needed. The SEL lessons were generalized under a broad scope and should be segmented into shorter and more targeted lessons. The findings of this research study provide valuable insights into implementing SEL e-learning platforms in urban schools and the potential for improving student well-being and academic development. The study highlights the potential benefits of e-learning platforms in promoting SEL instruction. The study also emphasizes added research to prove these findings and explore the potential for

additional SEL e-learning platforms in urban schools. This study is particularly relevant in the Covid-19 pandemic, emphasizing the global importance of SEL for student well-being and development in urban school districts.

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