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Pathways to Partnership: Cultivating Educator Agency and Self-Efficacy for Indigenous Student Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous communities have taught their children to be in good relations with themselves, their land, and their people. These goals may diverge from the U.S. public education system, where teachers must meet Western-based state standards. To address this, an innovative professional development (PD) and coaching program called Pathways to Partnership (P2P) was developed for teachers to support their social-emotional learning (SEL). Five teachers received school-based virtual coaching. Thematic analysis of transcripts of the coaching sessions and post-coaching interviews revealed two primary themes highlighting their experiences: 1) Coaching fostered educators' self-efficacy in supporting students' positive behavior; and 2) Coaching enhanced educators' personal agency in supporting Indigenous students. Implications for transformative SEL and school-based coaching are discussed.

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Through time immemorial, Indigenous¹ communities have taught their children to be in good relations with themselves, their land, and their people. Education has been—and continues to be—deeply intertwined with their culture and values, supporting tribal autonomy, sovereignty, and identity (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021). Across generations, these values were passed on, even when encountering systemic oppression from settler colonizers and the U.S. federal government within the colonizing education system. Survivance, or active resistance to oppression (Vizenor, 2008), has been particularly important within the education system, in which settler colonizers used harmful methods, such as residential boarding schools, to strip away Indigenous values and cultures.

Indigenous communities' survivance and promotion of their culture and values across generations have been vital, yet the goals of the U.S. public education system may diverge from the communities' goals for their children. Public schools are often bound by state or federal curricula and standards, and teachers

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¹We define Indigenous as the first peoples of the Land (in this case, of what is now called the United States). We use the name of the Tribal Nation whenever possible.

strive to guide their students' learning to meet those standards. The Western-based curricula are designed to address academic and social-emotional learning; yet, for some Indigenous students, these curricula and standards may not align with their community's culture (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021). In particular, the history of assimilationist efforts within the federal government often conflicts with the deep desire of Indigenous communities to ensure that Indigenous language, culture, and values endure. That is, despite federal policies seeking to eradicate Indigenous culture and language (e.g., banning Indigenous languages within residential schools), Indigenous families have resisted and prevailed, sharing their stories and history with their children (Sabzalian, 2019).

Teachers working within public schools that primarily serve Indigenous students are consequently in a complex and challenging situation. On the one hand, teachers are required to meet the scope and sequences as outlined for both academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) standards (Frye et al., 2024). On the other hand, they are expected to understand the unique cultural backgrounds of their Indigenous students and recognize that their pedagogy, classroom management practices, and general approaches may need to be modified to meet their students' needs. Given these expectations, teachers must be equipped with high-quality SEL curricula that align closely with the community needs.

To address this tension and enhance teachers' skills in supporting their students' SEL and their own SEL, we developed an innovative professional development (PD) and coaching program called Pathways to Partnership (P2P). P2P is a component of a multiyear research-practice partnership between the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Nation, Arlee School District, and the University of Montana. The aim of P2P was to complement a child SEL program (see Sun et al., 2022) and provide a parallel process for establishing a school-wide systemic approach to SEL, whereby teachers learned how to support the SEL of their students as well as enhance their own SEL skills (see Goforth et al., 2022). P2P was designed to focus not only on educators' well-being, but also on their understanding of the cultural and contextual factors that may contribute to the challenges they encounter in classroom management. Thus, the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand educators' experiences participating in a SEL PD and coaching program in a school that primarily serves Indigenous students.

Transformative SEL for Indigenous students

To support the education of Indigenous students, Indigenous scholars, such as Bryan McKinley Jones Brayboy, have underscored the importance of culturally sustaining and revitalizing pedagogies within Tribal Critical Race Theory (TribalCrit; Brayboy, 2005). Public education in the United States has often used assimilationist approaches that erase the history, experiences, and

perspectives of Indigenous peoples through its texts (e.g., emphasizing the westward expansion and ignoring the genocide of Indigenous Peoples; Holter et al., 2020). Contemporary public education similarly does not integrate the values of Indigenous communities and does not adequately support culturally responsive academic achievement or SEL (Brayboy & Maaka, 2015).

To affirm Indigenous students' identities, language, and values within schools, TribalCrit emphasized Tribal sovereignty as the bedrock for understanding Indigenous education (Brayboy, 2005). Education for Indigenous students must acknowledge the importance of Tribal sovereignty, ensuring that their identity and language are integrated within schools and connected to their communities. Teachers within schools similarly must focus on their pedagogy and curriculum, affirming students' identities. These culturally sustaining pedagogies are about "recognizing and cultivating the individual, collective, and community strengths they bring to learning and teaching" (McCarty & Brayboy, 2021, pp. 439–440), ultimately supporting Indigenous students' academic and SEL.

These strengths, which affirm Indigenous students' values and identities, are also emphasized within transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2019). SEL as a broad framework refers to children and adults building competencies in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, as well as having authentic school–family–community partnerships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020). SEL programs for students have been shown to be effective, with numerous meta-analyses showing that SEL leads to better academic performance and long-term mental health for students (e.g., Cipriano et al., 2023).

Yet, Jagers et al. (2019) suggested that SEL programs may not align with the values and cultures of minoritized children. They proposed transformative SEL (t-SEL), which centers justice, culture, agency, and belonging. Their framework focuses on constructs that are more salient for minoritized youth, such as belonging and engagement, agency and self-efficacy, and expressions of intersectionality. As a specific example, Jagers and colleagues considered that self-management and relationship skills (key aspects of the SEL framework) should also integrate agency and self-efficacy for minoritized students. In addition to the ability to regulate one's emotions, they argued, agency in participating and actively changing the educational context is also relevant in transformative SEL. Agency as an approach to guide and motivate action, as well as self-reflectiveness in one's personal efficacy, becomes especially relevant in promoting equitable educational environments (Jagers et al., 2019).

Thus, the intersection of TribalCrit and transformative SEL provides a guiding theoretical foundation for our current study. Acknowledging that contemporary public education systems are not designed to support Indigenous students' identities or values, we argue that professional

development that is co-designed with Indigenous communities to honor Tribal sovereignty while supporting educators' agency is much needed for educators in schools that serve predominantly Indigenous students.

Transformative SEL for educators through professional development and coaching

Transformative SEL (Jagers et al., 2019) as a framework focuses on supporting educational equity for all students. Within this framework, educators' professional development and training are key components to promote both student and educator SEL. Implementing SEL with an equity lens allows educators to create an inclusive learning environment that affirms the identities, strengths, and cultures of all students. At the same time, adults examine their own social and emotional competencies as well as the school-related policies to understand how systemic inequities and individual biases may impact the lives of their students (CASEL, 2024). Adults reflect on their own identities, assets, and biases while also delivering culturally responsive practices to promote equity with their students. This process also helps foster a sense of belonging, elevate the voices of students, and cultivate collaborative problem-solving. For optimal SEL implementation, teachers must be fully committed to communicating and modeling SEL behaviors as a way to manage stress and frustration, and show empathy (Mahoney et al., 2021). By doing this, students are more likely to respond empathically and resolve conflicts with peers peacefully (Mahoney et al., 2021).

Additionally, there has been increased attention on developing programs that focus on SEL for adults. For example, programs such as Second Step SEL for Adults (Committee for Children, 2021) use research-based approaches to help educators build trust, manage stress, focus on equity and belonging, and build efficacy. Similarly, other pilot programs, such as the SEL Adult Learning Series, developed by CASEL, are rooted in the five constructs of transformative SEL (Williams et al., 2024). This six-session program showed that a collective, unifying vision for equity is crucial for educators to critically engage in self-reflection, increase their sense of agency, and address inequities within their schools. A collective vision among educators was associated with a stronger sense of preparedness to create spaces of belonging within the classroom as well as a stronger sense of individual agency. Further, participants of this program expressed the importance of trust and a sense of safety to enhance their agency and disrupt inequitable practices within schools. The perception of organizational trust impacted both individual and collective agency of educators.

These SEL interventions for teachers have been developed and tested, but they are often school-wide or focus on individual teachers' skills through specific interventions (e.g., mindfulness, Ancona & Mendelson, 2014). Few studies have

examined individualized coaching for educators to attend to their own SEL as well as the SEL of their students, particularly within the unique context of a public school serving Indigenous students. Thus, there is a need to understand whether school-based consultation and coaching can be an effective and preferred means to support educators in teaching students' social, emotional, and behavioral skills.

School-based consultation is an indirect service in which a consultant (e.g., school psychologist) provides their expertise in student behavior or academic skills to a consultee (e.g., general education teacher) through a problem-solving, data-based process (Erchul & Sheridan, 2014). School-based coaching is similar in that it is an indirect service to an educator, but it differs in that it is an on-going, long-term professional development training in which the educator learns new practices and skills (Erchul, 2023).

School-based coaching has been found to be effective for student academic and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Pianta et al., 2022; Reddy et al., 2022), yet few studies have examined this approach within school contexts supporting minoritized students. A recent meta-analysis has shown positive effects of indirect service delivery on teacher generalization outcomes, including specific subtypes of outcomes (i.e., behavior-specific praise, behavior analytic procedures, and instructional practices) (LaBrot et al., 2024). However, to our knowledge, school-based coaching as a delivery model of SEL for educators, particularly for educators serving Indigenous students, has not been investigated. There is a clear gap in the literature examining how professional development using school-based coaching can foster the SEL of teachers of Indigenous students.

Given the lack of research focusing on adult SEL through school-based coaching, particularly for educators who teach and support Indigenous students, the aim of the current study was to examine educators' experiences participating in a professional development and coaching program with the goal of enhancing adult SEL and understanding their students' SEL. That is, this was a parallel process by which the goal was to help educators learn skills to support their own SEL and understand the connection between their SEL and the SEL of their students in the classroom. We explored the following research question: *What are educators' experiences participating in a SEL PD and coaching program in a school that serves Indigenous students?*

Method

Context of the study

We used community-based participatory research (CPBR), a decolonizing research process where community members are equal partners (Ahmed & Palermo, 2010) to make meaningful social changes (Huffman, 2018). Honoring Tribal sovereignty and self-determination in education, our work was governed by a Community Advisory Board (CAB) made up of key leaders from the Tribal Nation, school, and community. As a collaboration, we

ensured that support from the local community (Goforth et al., 2021), as well as formal approval, were obtained from the Salish Culture Committee (Sun et al., 2022), the Tribal IRB, and the Tribal Research Review Board (TRRB). The TRRB also reviewed and approved this article for dissemination so others can learn how to support Indigenous students in schools.

The public school in this study comprises 75% Indigenous students. It is on the Flathead Nation at the base of the Mission Mountains south of Glacier National Park. The town is a close-knit, rural community that has fewer than 700 people. About 18% of families receive food benefits, 36% have at least some college, and 34% have a bachelor's degree or higher (Institute for Educational Science, 2023).

Researcher positionalities

We believe that the term “researcher” is composed of those who seek and share knowledge with others for the betterment of a community. The researchers in this article included university-based faculty, graduate students in school psychology, and Tribal community members who co-created the child SEL program. As the first two authors of this study (Goforth et al., 2022, Sun et al., 2022), our values in community-based research are to ensure that we are held accountable to the community. To help the community accomplish its vision, we sought grants for this project when the community and Elders envisioned more children and communities benefiting from this place-based and culturally responsive approach to co-developing and implementing SEL programs.

Researchers also included six graduate students who were deeply involved in conceptualizing the research aims and data analyses. Two were international students who recognized the importance of affirming and supporting Indigenous students' identities and their educators while ensuring that their perspectives were meaningfully represented. Further, another two were White females and former educators whose work was shaped by serving students in low-income and marginalized communities. These researchers recognized the importance of self-reflection, cultural humility, and accountability to the research participants. Another White cisgender female graduate student, through her work on this project, recognized the gaps in her understanding of the historical context of Indigenous culture and shifted her perspective through reflecting, reading, and listening more critically to the perspective of Indigenous students and their identities to ensure their values are represented in this work. The final graduate student researcher identified as mixed race and was working as a student clinician at Tribal Health and Tribal Education, where she provided direct mental health counseling and consultation services. Working closely with individuals on the reservation broadened her understanding of the culture and the impact of culturally responsive research methods.

Participants

All educators from kindergarten through sixth grade (K-6) were invited to participate in the study. Fourteen educators participated in the initial Professional Development (PD), including six general education teachers, three special education teachers, one administrator, and four other staff. Among them, five teachers continued in monthly coaching sessions and a post-coaching interview. All participants in the monthly coaching sessions ($n = 5$) were female general education K-6 teachers. One identified as White/Indigenous, while the others identified as White. The average age of these participants was 43.2 years ($SD = 5.9$), and the average number of years of teaching was 13.6 ($SD = 7.0$). Three of them held a master's degree, and two held bachelor's degrees.

Procedure

Professional development on educator and student SEL

During the fall of 2023, the principal investigators (PIs) and university graduate research assistants provided a half-day PD for K-6 educators on culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices within classrooms. The PD focused on student-teacher relationships as the foundation for supporting positive classroom behaviors. The first component of the PD focused on providing context to children's behavior, especially Indigenous children learning within a system that has historically harmed their communities. The PD also summarized some of the children's SEL (e.g., learning about reciprocity, by giving back to the land, their peers, and their elders; see Sun et al., 2022) that was being implemented by the school counselor, and how they could use those lessons to support their students.

The second component of the PD focused on changing educators' views of disruptive student behaviors to viewing those behaviors as students expressing their needs. Specifically, strategies were taught on how to support these students when they experienced behavior escalation. Educators also learned to consider the students' exposure to traumatic stress, intergenerational trauma, and the importance of positive relationships as they engaged in classroom management with their students, which is particularly relevant given that most students were Indigenous. During this PD, 14 participants completed informed consent surveys, including measures of their SEL, and provided demographic information (e.g., age, education level, years of teaching experience). They were also invited to participate in monthly follow-up coaching sessions over Zoom.

School-based coaching on SEL

Teachers who signed up for coaching met with the PI over Zoom for 30 minutes monthly during their prep period or after school. During these coaching sessions, teachers discussed their own SEL and well-being, as well as the challenges they encountered with students in their classrooms. The content of the sessions included critical reflections of both student and educator strengths, challenges, and histories, and how these characteristics and histories impact both student and educator behaviors and relationships within the classroom. Educators set personalized goals related to their interactions with their students and meeting their own SEL needs. In subsequent sessions, educators followed up on their progress toward these goals with the coach.

During coaching sessions, a range of content and skills were explored to support both classroom effectiveness and personal well-being. The sessions varied by topic, depending on what the educator brought to the session. Given that the focus was on coaching the educators, rather than providing individual therapeutic treatment, the coach provided specific strategies and approaches to the educators. Further, since there was no formalized program and each educator's personal goals directed the session, the approach for coaching varied. Classroom behavior management strategies were a central focus, including techniques such as setting clear expectations, using praise and reinforcement, implementing visual schedules and timers, offering student choices, and assigning classroom jobs. Teachers also discussed the importance of modeling desired behaviors, building strong student–teacher relationships, and integrating SEL throughout the day. Recognizing the historical, cultural, and familial contexts of student behavior was emphasized, along with strategies for validating student emotions and addressing basic needs.

In parallel, self-care practices were addressed to help educators manage stress and maintain resilience. These included boundary setting, activity planning, engaging in personal hobbies, cognitive restructuring, and mindfulness. Teachers were encouraged to build supportive relationships and normalize emotional challenges. One session also focused on guiding and navigating difficult conversations with colleagues. Together, these sessions aimed to strengthen both instructional practices and educator well-being through reflective, culturally responsive, and relational approaches.

Coaching sessions began in November 2023 (one month following the PD) and continued through May 2024. Attendance for the sessions was approximately 78%, suggesting consistent attendance at the sessions; among the five teachers who attended the coaching sessions, one attended all five sessions, one attended only one session, and three attended four sessions each. Educators stated that a common reason for missing the coaching were often last-minute schedule conflicts. After the last coaching session, these teachers were interviewed individually to understand their perspectives of the PD and the coaching experience.

Data analytic process

Transcripts of the SEL coaching sessions were analyzed using thematic analysis within a grounded theory framework (Charmaz, 2014). This is an inductive approach focused on developing a deeper theoretical understanding of the meaning underlying the themes identified in the data. During the first phase of analysis, researchers read the transcripts to become fully immersed in the content.

Next, two researchers read each transcript and independently began open coding (Phase 2). During open coding, data were broken down and analyzed to identify concepts, categories, or themes. This involved generating initial codes that captured the main ideas or concepts found in the data. Open coding allowed for exploration and discovery, as the researchers remained open to emerging patterns and concepts without predetermined categories. Researchers kept reflexive notes documenting their reactions in the process.

Researchers then met to discuss the themes and identify preliminary relationships between the initial codes. Axial coding (Phase 3) was used to systematically examine the data to identify relationships between the themes identified during the open coding phase. This process involved two researchers (different from those in Phase 2) independently reading each transcript and re-categorizing the codes based on their relationships. Axial coding helped identify key themes and the underlying structure or framework that emerged from the data. Finally, all researchers met to finalize the findings, and then researchers returned to the transcripts to identify representative quotes that reflected the identified themes (teacher self-efficacy and agency). These themes and quotes were then validated by those researchers who were not involved in the initial coding process to strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings. Throughout the thematic analyses, the researchers examined the data for themes and, if needed, subthemes. Two themes ultimately resulted from the data analyses.

Trustworthiness was further established through triangulation, peer debriefings, and external audits. Analyst triangulation allowed for richer and more robust data analyses. Peer debriefings were also helpful in reflexivity and probing each other's reactions. Finally, Indigenous community members (also coauthors in this manuscript) who were active in the research and program implementation reviewed the themes as external auditors.

Results

The focus of this study was to examine educators' experiences as they participated in a professional development training on SEL and subsequent

school-based individual coaching sessions. Data analyses revealed two primary themes highlighting the educators' experiences: 1) Coaching fostered educators' self-efficacy in supporting students' positive behavior; and 2) Coaching enhanced educators' personal agency in supporting Indigenous students.

Fostering self-efficacy in supporting students' positive behavior

The first theme that we identified involved how the PD training and school-based coaching fostered educators' self-efficacy in supporting students' positive behavior. The initial training was designed to enhance educators' skills in positive behavior intervention supports, and the subsequent virtual coaching sessions were often focused on educators' thoughts and feelings on using those strategies in managing classroom behavior. Most often, though, educators were aware of the strategies they could use but perhaps did not have a strong sense of self-efficacy in implementing those skills prior to the coaching.

Educators in this study noted that the stressors they encountered in the classroom were often associated with students' "big behaviors" (i.e., behaviors that disrupted the classroom routine or distracted peers), and they experienced uncertainties about how to appropriately address those behaviors. They shared that they felt apprehensive about their ability to redirect those behaviors in effective ways. One participant, for example, shared that classroom management was particularly difficult in her small class with "such a high percentage of high need and behavioral stuff going on." Like the other educators, she noted that her class of fewer than 20 students had a disproportionately high number of students with behavioral challenges, and she often felt overwhelmed.

Ultimately, educators who participated in the school-based coaching used those sessions to devise plans to better provide behavioral support. The coaching sessions were an opening for teachers to rethink their current strategies and receive both resources and affirmation to support students. Educators reflected on instances in the classroom where they felt mastery, with one participant reflecting on how the coaching strategies they implemented facilitated more positive peer relationships: "He did start to actually reach out to play with other kids, which I thought was really good [instead of] just isolating." Similarly, another participant stated, "I think I'm managing now better than I was the last time we talked."

Additionally, during the coaching sessions, educators sought consultation and subsequently put forth effort in figuring out how to support students' positive behaviors themselves, reflecting their increasing self-efficacy. For example, one teacher shared,

I think all of the ideas that you had come up with . . . oh, yeah, I'm gonna try this, you know. Like meeting with him every day and just listening. Some of the social things like the role playing . . . and taking those moments, I think, sometimes helped.

Notably, the school-based coaching also provided opportunities for the teachers to obtain perspectives beyond those shared by staff and administrators within the school itself. Given that the coach was a school psychology university trainer who was not embedded within the school system, teachers who received the coaching shared that they appreciated the opportunities to seek support from an outside expert and widen their perspectives. These coaching sessions brought an “outside perspective” that prompted teachers to think creatively and analyze problems more holistically. For example, a teacher shared, “. . . Sometimes we just get so locked into what we do. Sometimes it's hard to think outside the box.”

By the conclusion of the coaching sessions, teachers shared that the individual coaching on classroom management promoted their self-efficacy in supporting students. One teacher described that “[coaching session] helps just to kinda have a new perspective on my buddy and try some new things and different things.” Thus, the teachers ultimately recognized that they indeed had the skills and capacity to support their students' behavior.

Enhancing personal agency in supporting Indigenous students

While the first theme focused on the teachers' self-efficacy in supporting positive behavior in their students, the second theme focused on their personal agency in supporting Indigenous students specifically. This school is composed mostly of non-Indigenous teachers, including participants in this study, with a larger proportion of Indigenous students from local and nearby Tribal communities. Data analyses revealed that the coaching sessions guided educators to critically reflect on the values and beliefs they hold in their professional practices, and how they may not align with those of their students. Such reflections allowed these non-Indigenous educators to deepen their understanding of the complexities of the sociocultural and ecological contexts of the school and the community they serve. Understanding these contexts helped educators perceive student behavior through a different lens and encouraged them to think more intentionally and effortfully to create a more equitable learning environment.

This effort toward understanding how to make an equitable learning environment was also reflected in how they came to understand the factors outside the school context that shaped their sense of agency in supporting their students. One educator shared, “Half of my class [are] not living with their parents, you know. Then they're successful in academics. But, you know, like social emotionally, they really aren't very

present.” They recognized the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma on their students and shared the challenges in supporting their students to the degree that they desired. Upon identifying these challenges, teachers used the coaching sessions to conceptualize strategies to advocate for students’ needs, such as having an observer in the classroom. For example, a teacher shared,

I think some kids get overlooked, you know, like they might be struggling, or they’re really well at hiding it. And then it manifests in other ways. And so you know, I was thinking it’d be really cool to have just an outside set of eyes come in and just like be an observer and sometimes when it’s not a big behavior.

The coaching sessions also served as a safe space for teachers to discuss the complex interplay between individual capacity and collective factors outside school. The history of oppression and genocide has led to intergenerational trauma, leading to higher rates of poverty, substance use, and mental health issues for many Indigenous peoples (Office of Minority Health, 2025). This historical impact has been seen within this community, affecting the students directly in the school. While teachers acknowledged their limited capacities to address factors outside the schools, they believed they could set and act on priorities in their classrooms to support students. For example, one teacher shared, “. . . We have morning work to do, but just being mindful that he’s not going to be able to do his learning until his basic needs are being met. So, I’m just really trying to stay focused on that even when there’s some misbehavior or different problems that we need to deal with.” Another teacher mentioned that the coaching sessions gave them inputs to make informed decisions when choosing strategies in classrooms, “You know, but that was enough to help me continue to do more like oh, what to do right, and why.” Through coaching, the teachers were able to understand the ecological contexts contributing to their students’ circumstances, and although they recognized that they may not have control of those circumstances outside the classroom, they *could* make a difference in their students through their support in the classroom.

Indeed, understanding the broader context of their students’ lives also gave the educators a sense of personal agency in how they could support their students. Understanding that the ecological factors contributed to their students’ behaviors encouraged educators not to take their students’ disruptive behaviors personally. Teachers recognized that other factors may have led a student to exhibit disruptive behaviors. As a result, they reflected on their efforts and demonstrated persistence in tackling these issues, commenting that

I noticed, like, you know, you can end up getting stressed out about any of those number of things, and then it definitely can affect the way you are more with the kids or whatever too. But I mean, I feel like overall I have a pretty good handle on that. I try to stay pretty

much the same with the kids, because most of the time, at the end of the day, it's not them, you know?

Similarly, when obtaining feedback from a colleague about a student requiring more behavioral support, one of the participants did not take it personally or feel discouraged. Instead, she reflected on the coaching she received and said, "But then I just have to remind myself of like they're not saying like I did it bad. They're just saying 'we're still working on this.'" The participant recognized that recommendations from fellow staff were provided with good intent and with a true understanding of the unique context of that school. In sum, the coaching sessions fostered educators' personal agency by acknowledging the culturally specific and unique context of their students.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand educators' experiences during an innovative coaching program co-created with an Indigenous community named Pathways to Partnership. Guided by the TribalCrit and transformative SEL frameworks, we identified two primary themes from analyzing transcripts of the coaching sessions and the post-coaching interviews, including coaching fostered teachers' self-efficacy in supporting students' positive behavior, and coaching fostered teachers' agency in supporting Indigenous students. Overall, our study highlighted the importance of supporting educators through transformative SEL school-based coaching.

The first theme revealed that the PD training and individualized coaching enhanced educators' self-efficacy in implementing SEL skills to support or change individual student behavior. Following coaching, educators experienced success in supporting their students' positive behavior, which further enhanced their self-efficacy. This finding is in line with Bandura's (2002) social-cognitive development models, where the most significant source to enhance self-efficacy is through mastery. Further, self-efficacy is most easily changed in the pre-service years and becomes harder to change in more experienced teachers (Reyhing & Perren, 2021). The fact that the coaching program has fostered in many of these in-service teachers' self-efficacy underlies the significance of school-based SEL coaching provided by an outside expert. Educators expressed the benefits of SEL coaching to support their own agency and efficacy, which are critical in promoting students' well-being and learning. For example, Guo et al. (2012) found a positive correlation between teacher efficacy and a warm classroom climate that is beneficial for students. As educators develop greater efficacy in their own SEL competence, they also become better able to support and model SEL skill development in students (Jones et al., 2013).

The second theme revealed how school-based coaching with a transformative lens further prompted educators to more deeply consider that the students' behaviors must be reconceptualized beyond the students' functional behavior (e.g., antecedents and consequences) lens to a cultural, historical, and ecological lens. Our findings demonstrated that despite having the best intentions, non-Indigenous educators serving Indigenous students often lack a thorough understanding of the cultural contexts of their students, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicting behavioral expectations that interfere with teacher–student relationships and increase educator stress (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020). Thus, SEL for educators serving Indigenous students should include culturally humble self-reflections about teachers' own biases and how their culture interacts with the student cultures in the classroom (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020).

This theme also reflects the importance of supporting the social-emotional development of minoritized students. Educators need opportunities to cultivate their own agency and self-efficacy. Agency empowers educators to create changes in the learning community through purposeful actions based on their values, goals, and knowledge (Beaumont, 2010; Toom et al., 2015). Agentic educators critically engage in self-reflection and demonstrate proactive behavior to act toward change (Bandura, 2002). Meanwhile, self-efficacy, educators' belief in their ability to influence students' learning at the desired level, helps educators persist in the face of challenges (Bandura, 2002; Ross et al., 2016). Efficacious educators have more positive attitudes toward cultural diversity in their classrooms, which is essential to create an affirming learning environment for minoritized children (Zee & Koomen, 2016).

Transformative SEL and Tribal Critical Race Theory have both profoundly influenced how the P2P coaching program was developed. Our experience in co-developing the P2P program with the Indigenous community and implementing it has showed that school-based coaching can be a productive way to implement SEL for educators with an equity lens. It allows educators the opportunity to work with an expert coach to widen their perspectives, deeply reflect on both their personal experiences as well as their students' experiences, and gain a more well-rounded understanding to create an inclusive learning environment that affirms the identities, strengths, and cultures of all students.

Perhaps unique in our own study is the intimate nature of the coaching that we provided to the educators. The findings revealed that through the year-long program, the school-based coach (also the first author), was able to build a trusting space for the five educators where they felt comfortable in navigating the most challenging aspects of their professional lives. The educators viewed the coach as an outside expert, but more so as a confidant where they were willing to take a risk and explore how colonialism has influenced the education system and the broader context of their students. Because of the bonding and

trust, these coaching sessions supported educators' cultural humility and strengthened their agency in supporting the students.

School-based coaching, therefore, provided an alternative and innovative avenue to enhance both the educators' agency and skills in supporting Indigenous students. Coaching, as an indirect service delivery method, can be used beyond consultation to support educators (Erchul, 2023). Although the intent of this study on school-based coaching was not to generalize outcomes, the virtual method we used for coaching as well as the distinct context suggests some broader implications relevant to school-based coaching for educators who serve other minoritized children with backgrounds different from their own. The enhanced cultural humility that educators obtain from such safe space is a powerful driving force to support educators' continued learning for their own social-emotional well-being and for their students (Sun et al., 2025).

We would also be remiss to consider the current sociopolitical context when discussing the professional development and school-based coaching in the current study. Discussions of how educators can best support minoritized students' social-emotional learning are fraught with both topics: equity and SEL. There is a great need for addressing student SEL as well as educator SEL programs, given high occupational stress, decreased work performance, and high turnover, as well as the more recent impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educators (Iancu et al., 2018; Marshall et al., 2024). Response and advocacy are required to ensure SEL is provided for both students and educators (e.g., Mitchel, et al., 2024). To layer upon this controversy, there is also controversy on diversity, equity, and inclusion within public schools, such as the policies established by President Donald J. Trump (*Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling*, 2025). Although the PD and school-based coaching in this study focused specifically on supporting Indigenous students, given the public school setting and demographics, the broader implication is that such PD and, in particular, the virtual, individualized coaching, are possible ways to foster agency and self-efficacy for educators serving all students. Future researchers and school-based practitioners may want to consider other approaches to providing the PD and coaching, such as virtual group-based coaching or in vivo coaching within the classroom.

Limitations

This study contributes to the broader field of educational and psychological consultation and coaching, with some important limitations to consider. First, the study has a relatively small sample size with educators who volunteered to continue the monthly coaching after the initial PD. Although we were still able to work with a group from the K-6 grades, we may not have been able to catch the educators with different perspectives from those who participated in the study.

Second, we worked with one particular Indigenous community in the study. Indigenous communities in the United States are diverse in their culture, languages, shared values, histories, and contemporary efforts in supporting their children's well-being. Although we believe there are broader implications from our study, we wanted to recognize such diversity and be cautious in believing the same results or the process of community engagement would look the same when supporting educators in those communities through coaching.

Finally, although the educators shared that their enhanced self-efficacy and agency allowed them to better support children in their classrooms, we did not collect data from the children directly or have our coach observe changes in these educators' interactions with students. Thus, it is important that future studies collect data beyond educator interviews to include a wider variety of data to provide further triangulation of the findings.

Conclusion

Indigenous communities have passed on their values, culture, and language to their children through generations. Public education may be bound by other systems, but this study highlights that there may be innovative and creative approaches to supporting educators who teach Indigenous students. Our study extends the current knowledge on school-based coaching as an essential strategy to support non-Indigenous educators in facilitating Indigenous students' social, emotional, and behavioral skills. It also sheds light on the importance of school-based coaching to enhance educators' well-being and self-efficacy in supporting their students, particularly for educators who share different backgrounds from their students.

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