

# Focusing on Uptake: The Evolution of an Evidence-Informed Classroom Resource for Student Mental Health



## Highlights

- *Skills for Life (S4L)* is a classroom resource created to support the development of social emotional learning (SEL) skills of high school students in Ontario.
- The *S4L* resource consists of eight classroom-ready lessons:
  1. *S4L* in Career Studies
  2. Mental Health and Mental Illness
  3. Exploring Identity and Acknowledging Strengths
  4. Strategies for Personal Wellness
  5. Identifying Thoughts and Managing Emotions
  6. Communication and Conflict Resolution
  7. Managing Controllable and Uncontrollable Stressors
  8. Road to Resilience

## What is this article about?

Although many youth in Canada are experiencing higher rates of distress and mental health problems, most do not seek or are unable to access the mental health services they need. When accessing care, marginalized youth experiencing mental health problems also face more barriers, such as discrimination in the healthcare system.

This article describes the process of developing and refining a classroom resource called *Skills for Life (S4L)* to support the development of social emotional learning (SEL) skills among high school students in Ontario.

## SEL

Supporting development of SEL skills is one way to promote and protect youth mental health and well-being by building life-long coping skills such as stress management and coping; healthy relationships; positive motivation and perseverance; identification and management of emotions; self-awareness and sense of identity; and critical and creative thinking. Schools are an ideal setting for supporting the development of SEL skills, given their capacity to identify students in need and their role in service delivery and health promotion. Another important consideration is the integration of culturally safe and responsive approaches to SEL skill-building. Enhancing culturally responsive SEL education presents a significant opportunity to improve all students' well-being, sense of identity, and resilience.

## Development and evaluation of the *S4L* school-based intervention to support SEL

The core *S4L* leadership team is made up of representatives of School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) and researchers from the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), but over time, has also included representatives from the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF), the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), the Ontario Ministry of Education, and Mind your Mind.

### *S4L*

The *S4L* resource consists of eight lessons designed to be delivered by high school teachers during regular class time. The *S4L* leadership team decided to align the *S4L* resource with the Grade 10 Career Studies course because this course curriculum focused on the concept of

transitions, and as a mandatory course, it was an opportunity to reach all students. The *S4L* leadership team recognized that SEL was initially conceptualized with a Eurocentric perspective. In 2021, a diverse team of teachers and mental health professionals was hired to review the *S4L* resource through a culturally responsive lens. The research team has also reviewed the resource based on the most recent evidence regarding SEL programming for late adolescent and SEL skills measurement. The intention behind these revisions was to support a safe SEL skill-building experience for all students.

### Enhancing familiarity and comfort with SEL

Over the course of developing *S4L*, teachers pointed out that for uptake to be effective, they needed resources, training, and support to feel comfortable and confident to deliver SEL content in their classrooms. In response to this feedback, the *S4L* lessons were re-designed to be classroom-ready. The *S4L* leadership team also revised the teacher training approach so that mental health literacy content is now incorporated into the *S4L* resource as supplementary learning for teachers. Although these changes offer an opportunity to reach a much larger number of teachers across Ontario, teacher training has yet to be evaluated to determine if this approach increases teachers' comfort and confidence in delivering the *S4L* resource.

### Adjusting evaluation plans

Conducting a rigorous outcomes study to evaluate the effectiveness of the *S4L* resource is a top priority for the *S4L* leadership team. However, external factors such as labour unrest and a global pandemic have affected the evaluation design and delivery plan of *S4L* at different times.

## Lessons learned

The main lessons learned throughout the almost 10-year span of *S4L* resource development are the importance of effective partnerships, flexible funding, and the commitment to adapt to contextual conditions. Solid professional relationships with partners and funders based on trust and collaboration allowed the *S4L* leadership team to quickly adjust and turn delays into opportunities even when faced with unforeseen situations such as two labour actions and a global pandemic.

## Implications for practice

This article offers insight into what it takes to move SEL research into practice. It unpacks the complexity of developing and implementing effective student mental health resources solidly grounded in theory, evidence, and practice. Although more research needs to be done to inform all stages of the process of adopting and implementing SEL programs, in sharing the story of *S4L*'s development, this article is intended to support other researchers and practitioners with the shared goal of moving evidence-based programs into practice, including SEL programming for youth in school-based settings.

## About this snapshot

### Original research article

This summary was prepared based on the following article:

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