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Social-Emotional Learning in Rural Zambia: A Qualitative Study of Educator Perspectives in the Zambezi District

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ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) and psychosocial support (PSS) are increasingly recognized as foundational to holistic student development, yet research from rural sub-Saharan African contexts remains critically underrepresented in the global literature. This qualitative case study investigated how PK–12 educators in Zambezi, Zambia, understood, practiced, and experienced SEL and PSS. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document review with 46 participants, including classroom teachers, guidance counsellors, head teachers, and district leaders across four schools in the Zambezi School District. Findings revealed that while Zambian students experience significant psychosocial stressors, including poverty, exhaustion, hunger, and lack of basic resources, educators showed limited formal knowledge of SEL and PSS frameworks, with nearly all participants reporting no meaningful professional development in these areas. Despite this gap, educators were actively supporting student well-being through culturally embedded practices rooted in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, family engagement, religious community, and a collective belief in education as a pathway out of poverty. These indigenous factors represent theoretically significant contributions to the global SEL literature, challenging Western-dominated frameworks and offering a culturally grounded model of student resilience. The study recommends that the Zambian Ministry of Education, international organizations, such as Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSI), teacher training institutions, and district leaders take immediate, coordinated,

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and culturally responsive action to formalize SEL and PSS training, improve technology infrastructure, and integrate Ubuntu-based frameworks into national education policy.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning; Psychosocial Support; Zambia; Ubuntu; Educator Training; Rural Education; Africa; Student Well-Being

1. Introduction

This study investigated how social-emotional learning (SEL) in PK–12 schools is developed, understood, and practiced by educators in Zambezi, Zambia. More specifically, the study looked to discover what SEL issues Zambian students experience and display, what type of teacher training exists, how Zambian educators support their students' SEL, and what educators from around the world learn from this context.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a process through which individuals develop and apply a set of core competencies to manage emotions, build relationships, and make responsible decisions. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) names five key domains of SEL: (1) Self-awareness, (2) Self-management, (3) Social awareness, (4) Relationship skills, and (5) Responsible decision-making, making ethical, constructive choices^[1]. SEL goes beyond academic instruction, recognizing that emotional, social, and cognitive skills in children must be cultivated for meaningful development. Research consistently shows that SEL has wide-ranging benefits for students, including academic benefits, psychological and emotional benefits, social benefits, and long-term life benefits^[1].

A meta-analysis by Taylor et al.^[2] found consistent positive effects of SEL interventions with students from diverse racial and socioeconomic demographics. However, more than 40% of the studies they examined did not report any specific percentages of student ethnicity, with only a third reporting the percentage of students in poverty. They suggested a future study to assess if students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups respond differently to SEL interventions on a variety of outcomes. Knowing implementation elements are important for the effectiveness of all curriculum subjects, they are crucial with any program that touches on “learning to be and learning to live”^[2]. This study does not question the benefits of SEL content but looks to discover how context may maximize positive outcomes

for students with diverse needs and from diverse cultures. Dobia and Roffey^[3] confirmed in their work with Aboriginal and Indigenous Australians that strong cultural and ethnic identity is associated with emotional well-being. Zambia was chosen for this study because the student ethnicity is known, and that portion of the region's population is living in poverty. Therefore, this study seeks to address the gap in the literature to formally assess if students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups have differing SEL stressors, responses, and support interventions.

1.1. Zambia

Officially known as the Republic of Zambia, it is a south-central African nation, environmentally beautiful yet educationally complex, a sub-Saharan landlocked country with a population of 17 million. In 1964, Zambia, known as Northern Rhodesia, became independent of the United Kingdom. The population is spread among 10 provinces and includes approximately 73 ethnic groups, with most Zambians speaking more than one language: the official language, English, and the most spoken language in the town or area where they live. All Zambians belong to nine main ethno-linguistic groups, with Zambia exporting millions of dollars based on the copper mining industry. About 70% of Zambians live below the recognized national poverty line, placing the country among the world's poorest. Rural poverty rates sit higher than urban rates, and unemployment or underemployment is a fundamental problem with rural Zambians^[4].

1.2. Education and Teacher Preparation in Zambia

After achieving independence, Zambia's formal PK–12 education system has undergone multiple transformations. Education has experienced separate systems for African and non-African schools, having to follow British educational structures, low female enrollment, numerous national developmental and policy plans, the implementation of a fee

structure for families, and several changes in governmental leadership. Since 2016, two ministries of education have existed in Zambia. The Ministry of General Education (MoGE), headed by the Minister of General Education, oversees all issues related to Zambian early childhood, primary, and secondary schools, and youth and adult literacy education. The Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) oversees tertiary and vocational education. While teacher education, both pre-service and in-service, falls under the responsibility of the MoGE, institutions of higher education are critical providers of teacher training^[5].

The structure of PK–12 education for Zambian students currently includes completing four years of early childhood and development, seven years of basic education, and five years of high school. In 2014, the MoGE reviewed its curriculum to redefine the teaching context to incorporate relevant knowledge, skills, and values, and introduced a two-tiered curriculum for grades 8–12, ensuring students can pursue academic or vocational pathways at the secondary school level. Similarly, teacher certification has undergone multiple changes and challenges. Zambian independence in 1964 brought about a huge expansion of primary and secondary education, necessitating expansive teacher training to support the influx of students and new schools built.

In 2013, the first professional body was established for teachers. The Teaching Council of Zambia (TCZ) aims “to develop, maintain, and improve appropriate qualifications and promote continuous professional development as well as ensure that in-service training is mandatory for all registered teachers”^[6]. The TCZ is a corporate body set up to regulate the professional conduct for teachers, the teaching profession through the registration of teachers, and manages the accreditation of all colleges of education^[6]. According to the *2020–2021 College of Education Accreditation Register*, there are 100 colleges providing teacher education throughout Zambia’s ten provinces. Teachers’ colleges are classified as public, private, grant-aided, or faith-based^[7]. Interestingly, a mixed-methods study by Banja provided evidence from 219 newly qualified secondary teachers in Zambia that they faced challenges in their work and were often inadequately trained. While induction and orientations are provided, meaningful support is usually limited. The paper calls for the enhancement of support programs through the introduction of mentorship programs for newly qualified teachers^[8].

1.3. Social-Emotional Learning for Zambia

Like CASEL in the United States, the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) is an African organization providing psychosocial care and support for youth since 2002. With programs across 13 countries, they respond to the psychosocial, mental health, and social protection needs of African students affected by illness, conflict, poverty, and social strife. Programs are delivered through partnerships with regional, national governments, and non-governmental organizations. REPSSI has developed high-quality, evidence-informed, psychosocial support tools and resources, used with and for students, educators, families, and communities. They believe that students employing psychosocial skills can thrive, respond to challenges, and find opportunities in the complex and changing world^[9]. REPSSI describes psychosocial skills (PSS) as helping children, families, and communities improve their well-being and encouraging better relationships to build a stronger sense of self through relationships that communicate understanding, tolerance, and acceptance. It is about promoting consistent care and support every day at school, home, and in their community^[9]. REPSSI, in their Well-Being pamphlet, lists the following issues for children and youth in Zambia:

- Child marriage;
- Loss of caregivers/orphanhood;
- High school dropout;
- Child labor;
- Alcohol and substance abuse;
- Limited access to adolescent sexual and reproductive health services;
- Underage patronage of bars;
- Child/grandparent-headed households;
- Limited access to social protection;
- Disease burden—Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Malaria, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs);
- Limited access to food and nutrition^[8].

These align with many of the risk factors and psychosocial distresses identified in a quantitative study by Siziya and Mazaba^[10], in which they analyzed data from 2,257 high school students in Zambia. Their aim was to determine the pervasiveness of psychosocial concerns among adolescents to contribute to the knowledge base on PSS and to design

interventions to reduce psychosocial problems^[10]. Further psychosocial issues impacting students' learning and well-being found in the literature are:

- Bullying;
- Divorce and/or separation of parents;
- Poverty;
- Child abuse experience of loss;
- Relationships between male teachers and female learners;
- Child neglect;
- Exposure to frightening experiences;
- Substance abuse;
- Child-headed households;
- Gang-related violence;
- Sexuality;
- Conflicts in the home;
- HIV and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and other chronic illnesses;
- Sugar daddies;
- Domestic violence;
- Issues facing out-of-school youth;
- Teenage pregnancy;
- Discrimination and stigma;
- Sexual harassment and rape;
- Xenophobia.

While SEL is universally beneficial, it could carry a particular contextual significance for *Zambian* students, given the country's unique social, cultural, and developmental landscape. For example, addressing poverty and adversity, because *Zambia* faces significant challenges with poverty, food insecurity, and limited resources. Many students come to school carrying the emotional burden of difficult home environments. SEL equips students with coping strategies, resilience, and emotional regulation skills needed to persist in school despite hardship. Next, *Zambia* has an HIV/AIDS and orphan crisis with one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world, leaving many children orphaned or in vulnerable family situations. SEL fosters connectedness, compassion, and community support, which are critical for children navigating grief and instability. SEL can promote peace and social bonding because *Zambia* is ethnically and linguistically diverse, with over 70 ethnic groups. SEL, particularly skills like empathy, respect, and appreciating differences, helps

nurture community and national unity, reducing the risk of tribalism or social division. Next, SEL could strengthen community values because *Zambian* culture is deeply rooted in the concept of *Ubuntu* ("I am because we are"), which emphasizes communal identity, interdependence, and collective well-being^[11].

SEL naturally aligns with and reinforces *Ubuntu* values, making it culturally relevant and meaningful. Moreover, it could prepare students for the future by having one of the youngest and fastest-growing populations in the world. Equipping young *Zambians* with SEL skills prepares them to be future-ready citizens capable of contributing to governance, economic development, and peaceful coexistence. SEL could reduce gender-based violence and inequality because SEL promotes respect, empathy, and healthy relationships, which can play a key role in challenging harmful gender norms and reducing gender-based violence, which remains a significant issue in *Zambia*. Social-emotional learning is a foundational pillar of holistic education. For *Zambian* students, SEL is especially vital because it addresses the real-world emotional and social challenges they face, while building the skills needed for thriving individuals, communities, and a resilient nation^[11].

1.4. SEL Theory of Action

This study sought to answer the question, How do students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups display SEL needs, and how are educators supporting them? *Zambia* was chosen as a location other than the United States, where the student ethnicity is mostly known, and much of the region's population lives in poverty. CASEL defines SEL as:

An evidence-based approach that helps kids be successful in and out of the classroom and a process through which people obtain and use the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions^[1].

Comparatively, REPSSI states PSS is the relationship between a child and their family, community, society, and how the child feels about themselves and life. Further, it is

about physical, material, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual holistic development^[9].

While multiple theories are found in studies on SEL, a qualitative study by Marsay et al.^[12] provided findings on educator perceptions of the value of SEL skills in four African countries. Their study described the SEL skills educators should use to effectively instruct their students and the SEL skills educators believe students should use to be effective learners and successfully transition into the world of work. Their results indicated SEL themes shared across

African countries were consistent with the CASEL framework. Importantly, findings indicated that specific SEL skills varied based on the unique history and context of each country^[12]. Their study shared perspectives of African educator participants, summarizing a SEL model that reflects African contexts, as its students and educators may face different challenges requiring different SEL skills. Marsay et al.^[12] named SEL themes as a start for creating a SEL theory of action (**Figure 1**) that reflects the sociocultural contexts of the represented African countries.

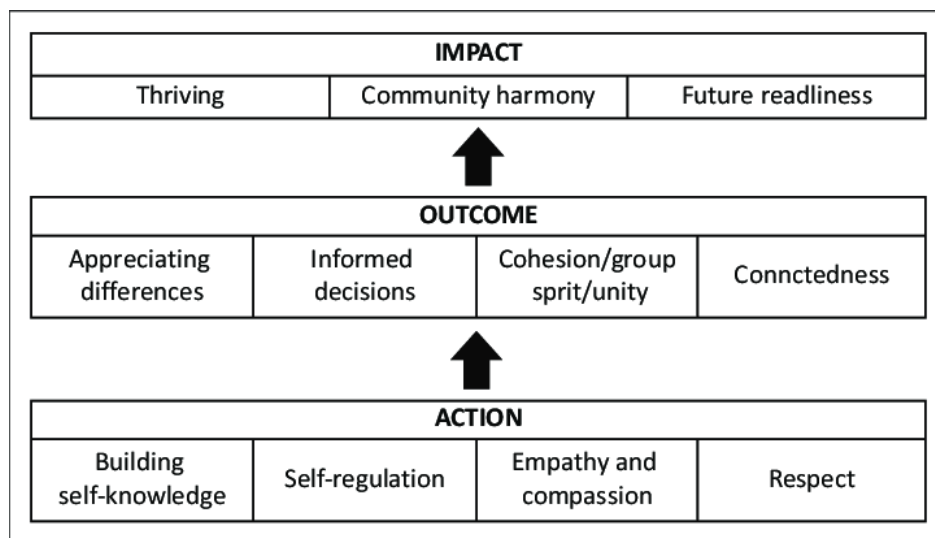


Figure 1. SEL Theory of Action^[12].

This theory of action lists the strategies to use when implementing SEL education in Africa, with diversity and decision-making being outcomes that would develop from foundational SEL skills, leading to development and impact on society that may create thriving, harmony, and future preparedness for African youth^[9]. Specifically, the figure presents a three-tiered hierarchical framework showing how individual actions lead to potential societal impact. At the foundation, actions such as building self-knowledge, self-regulation, empathy and compassion, and respect feed upward into outcomes, which include appreciating differences, making informed decisions, fostering group cohesion and unity, and connectedness. These outcomes, in turn, drive impact: thriving individuals, community harmony, and future readiness. The upward arrows emphasize a clear cause-and-effect progression, suggesting that cultivating personal and people skills at the individual level is the foundation for achieving positive community-wide results.

Therefore, when students are equipped with the actions and skills, the outcomes and impacts can be transformative, not just for individuals but for society. Marsay et al. explored SEL by focusing on educators and themes in four African nations^[12]. Given the complexities of culture and politics in Africa, we can refine the SEL theory of action to understand how it applies to different contexts. This study can contribute to efforts to put studies into practice by examining educators’ perceptions to identify ways to get SEL into more classrooms, schools, and communities^[12].

1.5. Ubuntu

REPSI defines “psychosocial wellbeing” as how a child feels and thinks about themselves and about life (psycho) and the relationships between the child, their family, community, and society (social)^[13]. Often linked to the African philosophy of Ubuntu, well-being includes many

distinct aspects of the child's life: physical, material, psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual. This can be referred to as "holistic" development. The focus of psychosocial wellbeing is not just on an individual, but on families and communities^[9]. Ubuntu is defined in the *African Journal of Social Work* (AJSW) as:

A collection of values and practices that people of Africa or of African origin view as making people authentic human beings. While the nuances of these values and practices vary across different ethnic groups, they all point to one thing: an authentic individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental, and spiritual world^[14].

Further, Ubuntu means "humanity to others," "a person is a person through other persons," and "I am because you are." It embraces "well-meaning cooperation and participation within and among human individuals, and within a certain culture in relation to other cultures"^[14]. Ubuntu education principles highlight the knowledge, skills, attitudes, capacities, and values needed to achieve individual well-being and skills for a united life. An Ubuntu education promotes virtues and relationships as being vital to what it means to be human. Ubuntu places the individual in relation to their community and where they live, highlighting caring, compassion, teamwork, and sharing. In Africa, there are several layers of social structures: ethnic group, clan, community, and nation, so the adage of "it takes a whole village to educate a child" is truly a principle of the Ubuntu philosophy^[14-18].

Comparing SEL, PSS, and Ubuntu, one is psychological, one sociological, and one philosophical, but all want the same thing: to foster healthy human connections and more resilient communities. While they overlap in their focus on empathy and relationship-building, they operate from diverse cultural foundations. They agree that a person's well-being is dependent on their environment and their ability to interact healthily with others. Together, they aim to build emotional intelligence and empathy and believe that improving the individual's core leads to a more stable, harmonious society. A powerful triad of using modern skills (SEL) and support systems (PSS) to live out eternal insight (Ubuntu)^[1, 13, 16].

1.6. Professional Learning for Zambian Educators

In 2013, REPSSI, in collaboration with the University of Cape Town and other African academic institutions, established the Teachers' Diploma Program (TDP) as part of the *Mainstreaming Psychosocial Care and Support into Education Systems*^[13]. It is a long-distance 15-month program focused on providing educators with the knowledge and skills to enhance their school environments, foster psychosocial support, and help school-community relationships. The diploma consists of six modules with topics listed as: 1) concepts of psychosocial support; 2) enriching and creating a safe school environment; 3) gender equity; 4) classroom management; 5) addressing bullying and sexual harassment; and 6) sharing new knowledge and skills with peers and developing school-family and school-community relations. TDP participants are expected to review the modules independently and, once a month, take part in "Community of Practice" sessions held in school districts with opportunities to discuss the modules with their peers and find ways of transferring the knowledge into action steps in school settings^[13].

A qualitative study in the first ten months of the TDP by Kaljee et al. indicated that participants reported positive changes in emotional self-care, use of teaching resources, classroom and school safety, school physical environment, social support, gender equity, school respect, and response to abuse and bullying behaviors^[19]. Further, the MoE indicated that the PSS support curriculum is integrated into pre-service training for teachers at colleges in Zambia, consisting of eight training modules: Guidance, Counselling, Social Work, Behaviour Modification, Gender Sensitivity, Guidance and Counselling Programme Development, Adolescent Reproductive Health, and Workshop Administration and Conduct Guidelines^[20]. Moreover, a qualitative study by Zulu et al. of the implementation of the PSS programs in Zambia found that through teacher interviews, a review of documents, and focus groups, the program contributed to improved school culture and learning, leading to a reduction of school dropouts^[21].

Importantly, the study by Zulu et al. found that some regional integration of the PSS program resulted in multiple challenges, including (1) limited involvement from school districts in developing a monitoring process, (2) commu-

nity of practice sessions located far from schools affecting the participation of teachers, and (3) teacher perception of those who were trained without a diploma qualification discouraged many from participating. While the psychosocial program has several benefits, including improved inclusive education, positive school culture, reduction in absenteeism, and creativity among teachers, structural barriers to integration, such as platforms for sharing, support from leadership, and access to materials, need to be addressed for solid integration into the education system^[21].

1.7. Research Questions

This study aimed to discover how Zambian educators understand PSS, what stressors their students show, and what educators around the world learn from the Zambian context. The goal was to obtain data on educators’ use of SEL in Zambian schools, clarify Zambian educators’ understanding of SEL, and develop a list of PK–12 students’ social-emotional issues. Specifically, how do students from diverse socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups display SEL needs, and how are educators supporting them? These sub-questions further guided the data collection and study: (1) How do Zambian educators define PSS? (2) What PSS issues do Zambian students display? (3) How do Zambian educators support students’ PSS? (4) What professional learning, support, and/or resources do Zambian educators need to improve their students’ PSS?

2. Materials and Methods

This study used a qualitative method with phenomenological and case study qualities valuing cultural context, participant voice, and the co-construction of meaning. Its strength lies in its triangulation of data sources, cultural sensitivity, and willingness to center indigenous African frameworks as theoretical lenses for understanding student well-being. At the same time, the author acknowledges limitations, including the researcher’s positionality, language bar-

rier, small sample size, and the absence of student and family voices, which provides a clearer methodological approach for future studies.

2.1. Study Site and Participants

The author volunteered to chaperone Gonzaga University study-abroad students for five weeks in Zambezi, Zambia, during May and June 2022. Zambezi is a town in the North-Western province of Zambia visited annually by Gonzaga faculty and students. The author took this opportunity to collect field data because the student’s ethnicity is known, and a significant part of the region’s population lives in poverty, aligning with the goals of the researcher to investigate how context may maximize positive SEL outcomes for students with diverse needs and from diverse cultures.

According to the 2010 census, Zambezi consists of an area of 14,000 km², a population of 80,300, and 87.2% of its residents living in rural settings, which is 17% higher than the country’s statistic. Over 60% of its residents are between the ages of 0 and 19 years old and most residents identify ethnically as Lunda and Lovale people^[22]. The Zambezi school district consists of 111 schools forming public, community, and independent sectors, showing 73 primary schools, 9 secondary, and 23 unknown rural institutes^[23]. Within the school district, the researcher randomly visited four schools in person to gather educator interview data.

Specifically, the researcher visited four schools that were within a short distance of the researcher’s housing location due to the need to walk without consistent access to a vehicle. Once arriving at a local school, the head teacher was approached by the researcher, and it was confirmed that the administration had been advised of the researcher’s intent by district message. The head teachers were asked to randomly select educators to be individually interviewed, so the head teachers chose teachers who were on their break and had 45 min to meet with the researcher (convenience sampling). **Table 1** displays details of the four schools involved in the study.

Table 1. Basic details of the 4 schools visited by the researcher.

School Number	Type of School	Number of Students	Number of Teachers	Administrators	Number of Guidance Counsellors
School #1	K–6	350	29	3	2
School #2	K–6	1,700	80	4	3

Table 1. Cont.

School Number	Type of School	Number of Students	Number of Teachers	Administrators	Number of Guidance Counsellors
School #3	7–12	270	25	2	2
School #4	7–12	300	22	1	2

Table 2 presents basic details of the 46 Zambian educators interviewed, including educational backgrounds, PSS training, and teaching credentials. Study participants (N = 46) who agreed to participate included: PK–12 classroom teachers in government primary and secondary schools elected by

the head teacher at each school, corresponding to convenience sampling^[24]; PK–12 school guidance counsellors invited by the district leader (purposeful sampling)^[24]. PK–12 head teachers (principals) and district leaders from the Ministry of Education office in the Zambezi School District.

Table 2. Zambian participants’ demographics.

Role in Education	Number of Participants	Average # of Years in Education?	Teaching Credentials?	Formally Trained in PSS?
District Office Leadership	2	20	Degree: 1 Master’s degree: 1	None
Head Teacher (principal)	2	12	Diploma: 1 Degree: 1 Master’s degree: 1	None
Guidance or School Counsellor	16	10	Diploma: 9 Degree: 4 Master’s degree: 1	1
Classroom Teacher (7 math, 3 science, 2 History, 2 phys-ed, 11 English)	25	6	Certificate: 12 Diploma: 10 Degree: 2 Master’s degree: 1	None
Teacher candidate	1	<1	(obtaining) Diploma: 1	None

2.2. Ethics

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Gonzaga University, and written permission was granted by the District Education Standards Officer (DESO), Zambezi, Zambia, who was provided an information, consent, and interview protocol package for their educators. Moreover, the study adhered to the requirements found in the *International Compilation of Human Study Standards*^[25]. Furthermore, the author acknowledges that she is a white, Canadian woman, English speaker, and Westerner studying an African setting through the eyes of mostly other Western scholars. While Gonzaga University has an extensive, supportive, and Jesuitical relationship with Zambia, and African scholars are cited in the study, the author acknowledges potential weaknesses in the work because the researcher is a foreigner, which may have affected the study.

2.3. Procedure

To collect and represent educator perceptions of SEL, the researcher, upon arrival in Zambezi, attended the MoGE to meet with district office educators and confirmed study and ethics approvals. All schools in the Zambezi School District were advised by the DESO using the phone application WhatsApp of the researcher’s presence for three weeks in May/June 2022, and that they may be visited to interview educators. The Department of Education’s standards officer (DESO) asked that the researcher provide a half-day “seminar” with local school guidance counsellors on PSS and sent a WhatsApp invite to all guidance counsellors in the district. To begin, the researcher attended a local school the following week, where 14 guidance counsellors were present, and a PowerPoint presentation was delivered by the researcher, followed by a focus group using the questions in **Appendix A**.

The seminar and focus group were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the author. Next, the researcher personally visited four schools that were within a short distance of the researcher's housing location due to the need to walk without access to a vehicle.

Once arriving at a local school, the head teacher was approached, and it was confirmed that they were advised of the researcher's intent from the district message. They were asked to randomly select educators to be individually interviewed. The head teacher chose teachers who were on their break and had 45 min to meet with the researcher (convenience sampling). Zambian educator participants were advised of or provided a written list of social-emotional issues of PK–12 students (**Appendix B**) gathered from earlier studies and literature, then asked to name those shown by their students. Then, the teachers were engaged in a face-to-face interview, using a semi-structured style in English that was audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher about their knowledge, skills, experiences, and needs to support their students' social-emotional issues and learning using questions in **Appendix A**. A total of 32 semi-structured, face-to-face, and audio-recorded conversations took place at four schools within the Zambezi school district, with the author personally conducting the interviews and transcribing the audio-recorded data.

2.4. Data Collection

Field data were collected during May/June 2022, and participants ($N = 46$) were included in in-person, audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with twenty-five PK–12 classroom teachers, seventeen guidance counsellors, two head teachers, and two district leaders from Zambezi's MoE. More specifically, the four methods of data collection were: (1) two department of Education's standards officers; (2) 25 teachers in four Zambezi schools; (3) 17 guidance counsellors via focus group; and (4) the collection of any school, teacher, or district resources referenced during the interviews or focus group such as the teacher training program on PSS, course outline, counselling seminar chapter, list of teaching acronyms, and the Zambia college accreditation document.

Participants reflected on their background, educational experiences, and their students' PSS. Resources referred to during the interviews were collected, photographed, or later obtained electronically. Data were coded and analyzed to dis-

play themes and subthemes, then categorized to show unique components of PSS in Zambia. Participants shared their educational backgrounds and teaching experiences, provided their definition and understanding of PSS, and then named specific training or resources to understand PSS. Once shown and discussed their understanding of a list of distresses found in **Appendix B**, participants were asked to find which ones their students display in and out of the classroom.

With a definition and examples clarified for the participants, they were asked to share their observations, experiences, and knowledge about PSS shown by their students and the training or resources available to support students. Next, participants engaged in a conversation about issues displayed by their students and what unique Zambian factors contribute to PSS. With the study guiding questions as prompts (**Appendix A**), participants provided insight into their rationale, and further CASEL/REPSSI resources were shown and discussed. Once all the interviews were completed, the researcher began collecting resources referenced in the interviews. Teachers, district leaders, and the school administrators were asked to share any books, tools, or documents that align with the study goals, SEL, or teacher education. Documents were in the district office, the head teacher's office, or found through a search of the internet.

2.5. Data Analysis

Data analysis took place upon the researcher's return from Zambia to the United States. The coding employed Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's hybrid approach, combining both inductive coding (IC) and deductive coding (DC) elements, allowing the researcher to remain open to unexpected findings while also supporting alignment with the study's guiding questions and conceptual foundations^[26]. For example, IC codes emerged from the raw data, allowing themes to form organically, such as lack of suicide, Ubuntu, and the role of the church. DC codes were based on the literature or research questions, such as how poverty affects, gender differences, and exhaustion.

All the in-person interview and focus group data collected were transcribed by the author, with all participants assigned a unique identification letter and number depending on their role to allow for anonymity, i.e., T1 (teacher 1), T2, or DL1 (district leader 1), P1 (principal 1), DL2, GC1 (guidance counsellor), GC2, etc., then a five-step coding pro-

cess took place. The researcher read each transcript multiple times, making annotations, initial impressions, questions, and observations on the transcription document. Next, the researcher found text that had a word, idea, or experience relevant to the research questions with a highlighter. Then, the researcher assigned descriptive codes that captured the participants’ comments on a surface level into a table (see **Table 3**). Fourth, in-vivo coding^[27] was used to capture the participant’s own words to ensure cultural and context-

based vocabulary. Lastly, the codes were constructed into themes, which provided the development of the results section, and documents were added to enhance the analysis. The analysis relied on interpretation by the same researcher who conducted the interviews, so it is acknowledged as a methodological limitation. Any resources or documents referred to during the interviews were collected by photocopying, photography, or later obtained electronically via the internet.

Table 3. Participant Quotes Code.

Participant Quote	Initial Code Applied
<i>“That is done in guidance, with counsellors.”</i>	PSS as a counsellor role; limited teacher ownership of SEL
<i>“PSS are issues that may comfort learners, which are outside their normal learning program.”</i>	Narrow definition of PSS; SEL as supplementary, not central
<i>“They can’t learn if they are hungry, and we do not have a nutrition program.”</i>	Hunger as a learning barrier; unmet basic needs; absence of school nutrition support
<i>“They come to school from 7:00 am till 4:00 pm and have 8 or 9 subjects.”</i>	Academic overload; student exhaustion; structural demands
<i>“Must walk 3 or 4 km to and from school.”</i>	Physical exhaustion; geographic barriers; transport inequity
<i>“Zambia is a Christian nation.”</i>	Religious identity; faith as a protective factor; cultural context
<i>“Ubuntu in education means the teacher is regarded as someone who is very good and won’t do harm; we are safe.”</i>	Ubuntu philosophy; teacher-student trust; psychological safety
<i>“It is now a computer world; we are not computer literate.”</i>	Technology gap; digital exclusion; professional development needs
<i>“We are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually strong people.”</i>	Cultural resilience; collective identity; strength-based framing
<i>“The sharing of problems.”</i>	Ubuntu as communal support; collective coping; community PSS

2.5.1. Document Review

Locating and obtaining Zambian education policy documents, educator training curriculum, district procedures, and publications proved difficult due to a lack of electronic sources and outdated versions not being available. If resources existed for schools, such as books, professionals, and resource documents, they were all found in the head teacher’s office and minimally shared with educators. A total of 12 documents were gathered, such as a pre-2000 Counselling document, 2000 UNESCO *Counselling Handbook* document, 2009 *REPSSI Psychosocial Well-Being Series* booklet, 2020–2021 *Colleges of Education Accreditation Register*, and Teaching Council of Zambia Continuing Education promotional flyer, list of acronyms, and an historical paper written by a head teacher. Photos and some documents were obtained by the researcher while in Zambia because few

documents exist on the Internet. A review of some attained district and country educational documents illustrated two important publications detailing the expectations of counselling in Zambian schools. The documents provided evidence of the fact that teachers’ resources are limited, outdated, but contributed to data triangulation, and impacted on the recommendations section.

2.5.2. Triangulation

Triangulation was achieved through multiple data sources rather than multiple methods, as all data were gathered within a qualitative, interview-based framework. Specifically, the study drew on four sources: individual semi-structured interviews with 25 classroom teachers across four schools, a focus group with 17 guidance counsellors was conducted during the district seminar, interviews with leadership, including two head teachers and two district office leaders,

and document review of physical and policy materials collected during fieldwork, such as the Zambian Ministry of Education's guidance documents, UNESCO counselling materials, teacher training curricula, and other school and district resources referenced by participants. By cross-referencing what participants said in interviews and the focus group against what existing policy and what training documents contained, the study corroborated findings. For example, if a counsellor described feeling undertrained, the document review could confirm whether formal training expectations existed on paper.

3. Results

Analysis of the data revealed several themes that reflect both the challenges and strengths present in Zambezi schools as they relate to SEL and PSS. Participants consistently showed limited knowledge of SEL and PSS but were actively supporting their students' well-being through culturally embedded practices. Key stressors affecting students, including poverty, exhaustion, and unmet basic needs, appeared as significant barriers to learning and emotional well-being. At the same time, powerful protective factors, including deeply held religious beliefs, the Ubuntu philosophy of communal identity and shared responsibility, and a collective cultural belief in education as a pathway out of poverty, were identified as mitigating the impact of these stressors. A clear and urgent need for formal SEL and PSS training, resources, and infrastructure was expressed across all participant groups. Together, these themes provide a picture of a resilient educational community that is doing meaningful work in the absence of formal systems, while expressing a strong readiness and desire to do more. The following subsections explore each of these themes in greater depth.

3.1. Study Question 1: How Do You Define Social-Emotional Learning and Development?

P1 framed their response by saying “*SEL is how students handle challenges*”. T16 stated, “*The basic meaning could be issues that maybe affecting learners that are outside their normal learning program*”. A participant said, “*That is done in guidance, with counsellors*.” T13 stated, “*PSS are issues that may comfort learners which are outside their*

normal learning program.” T16 indicated that, “*Teachers need to realize a child needs help, they may be distracted or not at the same level as their peers, they can't learn if hungry and we do not have a nutrition program*.”

Most participants had not heard of, seen, or been formally taught about PSS, but were very willing to discuss how they support their students socially and emotionally. P1 said that they can meet a lot of the students' basic needs with support from a non-governmental organization (NGO), such as installing new toilets. Interestingly, during the interviews with the two district leaders, they had not heard of SEL or PSS, but after discussing their benefits, they immediately asked if the researcher could provide a seminar for all the district guidance counsellors. D1 said they have a building that can hold 100 people for the seminar, and they will invite everyone for 2-h the next Friday to meet the researcher, have a seminar on SEL/PSS, and answer the study questions.

3.2. Study Question 2: What Are the Psychosocial Issues or Distresses Your Students Display?

Most participants paused to think when trying to answer this question, then said, “*Very little, our students are generally happy*.” Or, when asked this question, T21 immediately stated, “*Some students are neglected at home and bullied at school*.” T16 shared that the major ones he has experienced are: “*With those children from broken homes, because the girls are being kept at home by a male parent and their needs are not being met*.” T18 stated, “*Zambian students' lives are complicated because their parents are depressed and most people are experiencing violence*.” T3 said: “*Students' biggest worries are how they will live, especially when it depends on how they are treated at home and school. Mostly, it is how to survive because some children don't have parents who can take care of them*.” T4 shared, “*The only problem we have here is teenage pregnancy*.” T5 recounted a story of one of his students who was bullied because they had gained weight but referred them to guidance for support. They observed the counsellor talking to the student and the bully and following up daily. T6 stated, “*Some students are sad because of economic things at home or lack of necessities*.” T9 highlighted divorce, stated: “*It is a very influential factor that is causing some of the children to draw back and to have problems with us because they*

are mentally affected by being groomed by different kinds of parents, you get a stepmother or stepfather with different principles and conditions.”

Differently, T8 beautifully shared why their students do not display the same issues or stressors as those in the West and have a sense of resilience.

What helps us is the background where we are coming from. Our relationships. We live in a nuclear family so usually we are used to share problems, we like sharing things, with big issues, as you are growing up, you know that this thing is part of me I should do A, B, C,

D, our traditional culture that prepares us for the future, most of the time we spend time with our parents our extended families, so that we share the problems in our families, so we attend school, they get their books and stay on their mind, as they grow they know that these challenges, I can tackle these problems.

Tracking all the issues or stressors mentioned by the participants in the interviews are found in **Figure 2** below. Following the figure, the section specifically focuses on poverty 34.6% and exhaustion, 15.4%, as they had the highest presentation in the participants’ comments.

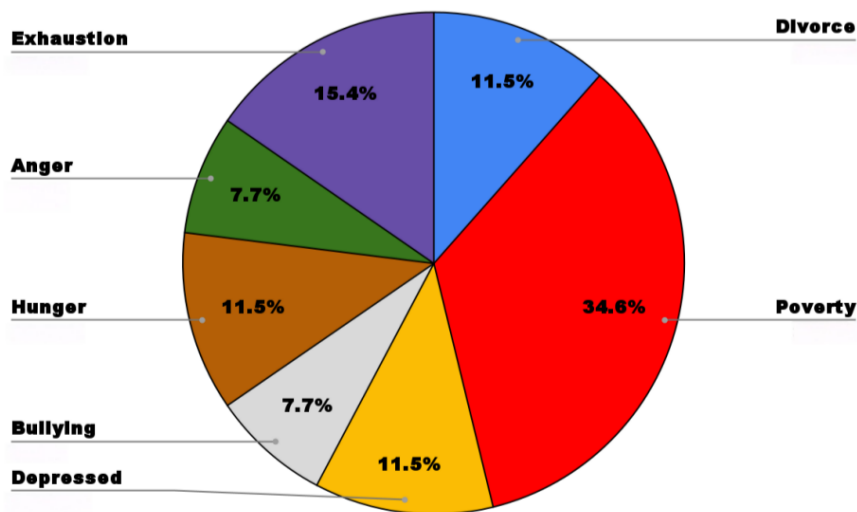


Figure 2. Psychosocial issues or distresses are named by the participants of their students.

The remainder of this section further explores and analyzes the key issues that participants identified in **Figure 2**.

3.2.1. Poverty

To understand poverty, T16 shared that during exams, they see students not able to concentrate because they are hungry or are not adequately prepared, so they are anxious, not sleeping, crying, think they have failed, and become angrier and frustrated. Further, participants shared that students’ basic needs are not being met because they do not have money to buy a school uniform, food during mealtimes, or books to study with. T9 says, “We should make sure to impart knowledge that will help them to know how to socialize with people, impart the skills that can help the child sustain his/her living even when he does not acquire a white-collar job.”

Girls were mentioned as having more issues than boys

and are affected because of the lack of hygiene and menstruation materials and shoes, but schools receive monthly funds from the government to provide items for any student who has basic needs, including a place to stay, such as boarding and meals. This aligns with T3, who indicated that their students’ fears come from survival. T6 says that the students know they are living below the middle class and live day to day.

3.2.2. Exhaustion

To understand exhaustion, participants shared, “They come to school from 7:00 am till 4:00 pm and have 8 or 9 subjects. Have many chores of washing and sweeping before and after school, and they must walk 3 or 4 kms to and from school.” T16 shared that distance is an issue, “The distance they cover, a long walk, we have children here walking 4 or 5 km, we realize that when they are in school, they are

not themselves, they are dozing.” Interestingly, participants often said that even though students displayed a few issues, they had high attendance because of the social teaching that school is a way out of poverty. Furthermore, *“It raises the standard of living for them and their village, we are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually strong people; education is the equalizer, and if more kids graduate to have better jobs, we develop as a country.”*

The participants said that their students face some PSS challenges associated with poverty and exhaustion but display fewer complex issues because of the shared belief that education is a way out of poverty. T1 and T2 mentioned that with the changes coming to education in Zambia (school will be free), students who are working to pay for school may begin to do better without being so tired.

3.2.3. Suicide Not Prevalent

When the participants were asked the specific question of, “Why is suicide not mentioned as an issue?” T4 stated, *“Because we actually talk to our students and we do not have guns.”* 35 of the participants mentioned the role of God and the church in student lives. Participants explained that because it is widely known that Zambia is a “Christian State”, and the positive influence the concept of Ubuntu plays on students’ PSS, fewer issues are seen or displayed. They declared that Zambia is a Christian nation and that the church plays very big role the church has in supporting students. For example, when asked if suicide is prevalent in schools, participants said suicide is frowned upon, and rates are low because the Church has a significant role in directing their way of living. Participants expressed: *“It is evil and taboo, you will go to hell, suicide is a sin, teaching the bible daily is helping our students, and God is in charge of life and the only one to take and give life.”* T3, who has been teaching for 20 years said, *“I cannot remember us losing a child during my services to suicide.”*

3.3. Study Question 3: What Has Been the Most Helpful Professional Learning, Support, or Training You Have Received to Support Your Students’ PSS? When, Where, How, with Whom?

The participants, except for four teachers and one guidance counsellor shared they had no formal training in

PSS/SEL. Some remember one course during their teacher training in psychology. None were able to share what they remembered or learned about PSS/SEL but acknowledged that it is a particularly important topic to understand and learn. Once it was discovered that little to no training, professional development, or understanding of PSS/SEL was acknowledged by the participants, they could not name any specific programs, tools, interventions, resources, or kits to support PSS. Most participants indicated that if a student is displaying any mental health or emotional concern, they send them to the guidance counsellor.

Schools have at least two guidance counsellors because they recognize girls need to speak to a female counsellor and boys collaborating with a male. Some proudly shared that their schools do provide clubs, sports, inspirational movies, and guest speakers to strengthen and inspire their students and develop relationships outside of school hours. Further, when asked “How does the church play a role in having emotionally healthy children?” T18 and T19 both mentioned that the church is a great support for children and families because of the sense of community they develop. T2 agreed because the church offers Sunday School, which teaches children the way of God and morals.

Ubuntu Philosophy

The participants shared experiences when asked, “How are you involving families and/or your community in supporting your students’ PSS?” The African philosophy of Ubuntu was mentioned by most participants as contributing to PSS health, supports social-emotional development, as participants described the concept as: *“The sharing of problems, culture preparing us for the future, time with parents and extended family, we co-learn in our culture, and we love life.”* One participant declared, *“Ubuntu in education means the teacher is regarded as someone who is very good and won’t do harm, and we are safe.”* Proudly, participants expressed that families are supportive of collaborating with schools when issues are named, and unity is promoted because everyone is considered family, hence the use of the words mama or auntie to describe women in a student’s life. T20 beautifully stated one thing that has helped us: *“For example, in our culture, when I see the daughter or the child of my neighbor is misbehaving, also it is my responsibility, we co-exist in the community.”*

3.4. Study Question 4: What Professional Learning, Support, and/or Resources Do Zambian Educators Need to Improve Their Students' PSS?

Participants named numerous ideas for their understanding and improvement, supporting their students' PSS. The participants specifically requested more computers and technology, teaching resources, and more collegial training time to learn how to support PSS. For example, T1 shared, "It is now a computer world, [we] are not computer literate." T6 said, "We are below par in technology." T7, a science teacher, saw that they do not have the equipment needed for certain subjects. P1 was proud to share that because so many of their students come from far distance to school, they are working on funding for beds and mattresses so students can sleep at school and not have to travel daily. He also indicated that funding changes across Zambia to provide free schooling will increase their need for more teachers due to the increase in enrollment. P7 wished they had more facilities for practical subjects, had more computers and science equipment, and to increase our educational standards.

During the guidance counsellor focus group, they shared that they wished they had received more formal training in PSS during their studies and a certificate of completion for the 'seminar' training the author provided. A certificate of completing a program is important to the counsellors as it can be included in their teacher evaluations and proof that they are continuing to learn. They requested more regular gatherings as colleagues, technology to access resources, and the ability to have more time to engage with students. They also acknowledged that they did not have a solid tracking system for students they have supported, as everything is through pen and paper, with documentation going missing or lost due to a lack of space or shared offices.

3.5. Results of Document Review

A review of some attained district and country educational documents illustrated two important publications detailing the expectations of counselling in Zambian schools. First, there is one entitled *Module 6: Workshop Administration and Conduct Guidelines; Zambia*^[20], and a second produced by UNESCO entitled *Module 2: Counselling; Zambia*^[23]. When looking at what guidance services are avail-

able in Zambia, the documents indicate that it is divided into four services: educational, vocational, personal, and counselling. Specifically, it says, "The guidance teacher has an obligation to school and to the pupils in development of self-actualization, lifting of self-esteem, setting of realistic life goals, and in the development of wise decision-making skills"^[23]. This aligns with the participant statements about sending students to the guidance office or a counsellor when a student needs any sort of support. The documents outline modules to use as a training package for guidance and counselling, prepared by African specialists in the counselling field. They used the term "personal/social counselling"^[23] to support individuals dealing with emotional distress and behavioral difficulties that arise from developmental stages such as anxiety, anger, depression, grief, and loneliness^[23].

A photo of a professional development opportunity flyer obtained by the researcher illuminated that professional development (PD) opportunities for teachers in Zambia exist, but the photo also contributes to the lack of effective communication for teachers. The flyer was found on the wall in the head teacher's office and when asked, no participants indicated they knew of this PD. This "Continuing Professional Development" is hosted by the Teaching Council of Zambia, and the flyer further explains that for teachers to renew their license, they require 50 hours of PD. A positive aspect of the teaching profession in Zambia, similarly, it is common in the United States for teachers to acquire annual "clock hours" of PD.

4. Discussion

This study explored how context may contribute to positive outcomes of SEL in PK–12 schools by educators with students from diverse cultures and potentially diverse needs. The most prominent finding to emerge from the participant interviews and the educational documentation is that PK–12 students in Zambezi display multiple SEL issues as seen by educators related to a lack of personal hygiene resources, exhaustion, nutrition, lack of school clothes and supplies stemming from socioeconomic situations within their families. However, despite formal training, resources, and a clear understanding, educators were actively supporting student well-being through culturally embedded practices rooted in the African philosophy of Ubuntu, family engagement, their

religious community, and a collective belief in education as a pathway out of poverty.

4.1. Role of Guidance Counselling

Many of the educator participants relied on their guidance and counselling departments at their school if they saw a student struggling. Guidance counsellors said they were proud of their role supporting students' SEL but wished for more time and opportunities to discuss with their colleagues' issues happening in their schools to share ideas. Further, while there appear to be resources and training for guidance counsellors, most participants had not seen, heard of, or participated in professional learning associated with PSS. The counsellors stated that they spend a lot of time talking with students and listening to their fears. While parents and family members are not always contacted after a student has been referred for support by guidance counsellors, the teachers shared that they reach out while multiple issues are happening.

4.2. Role of Family, Church, and the Ubuntu Philosophy

While PK–12 educators in Zambia have seen distress among their students, the participants shared that their students are resilient and that some traditional cultural factors enhance their ability to overcome concerns. Most participants acknowledged the role of family and the church as critical aspects of Zambia, which leads students not to contemplate suicide at the rates of their worldwide peers. Moreover, the Ubuntu philosophy guides and promotes African education, and decolonizes it from Western educational philosophies. It promotes family, community, society, environment, and spirituality as sources of knowledge, but also as teaching and learning options. The spirit of education in the schools and educators who participated in the study reinforced family, community, society, and environmental well-being. This primary data from an underrepresented rural African context challenges the Western bias that often characterizes the literature. Ubuntu as a culturally grounded protective framework for student wellbeing stands for a critical conceptual contribution and can be viewed as a theoretical innovation. This has great, genuine potential to enrich the global literature on SEL.

4.3. Educator Training and the Need for Technology

While the Zambian Teacher's Diploma Program (TDP) exists and there are some free online PSS teaching resources, the interviewed participants were not aware, nor have they taken part in regular or meaningful professional development to enhance their support for student SEL due to the lack of computers, technology training, and consistent Wi-Fi. Further, Zambia uses the train-the-trainer model for some professional learning, so a minimal number of educators are trained or provided resources and then are expected to transfer their learning back to schools and educators. Participants shared that only one colleague is chosen to attend some training at locations far from their schools and homes, with some travel costs limiting opportunities.

Lack of technology products, training, and infrastructure throughout the country further limits communication methods among educators for sharing and learning. Only four working computers existed at the schools visited by the researcher, and there were no Wi-Fi capabilities to obtain resources, sign up for training, access other professionals found in other parts of the country, or use a secure email system for formal messages and sharing.

Zambians and educators communicate mostly using WhatsApp to interact with colleagues and families, but at the present time, the sharing of large documents or opportunities for training is not efficient using that platform. Therefore, the data encourages support for ongoing study, further development, implementation, and evaluation of PSS in Zambia, but the development of a country-wide technology infrastructure that puts computers in schools, allowances for individual purchases of a computer, training in technology basics, and country-wide email addresses to access resources.

4.4. Recommendations and Further Study

The following recommendations emerge from themes identified throughout this study, such as the psychosocial challenges facing students in the Zambezi district, the limitations of guidance counselling supports, culturally grounded community strengths, and barriers posed by inadequate educator training and technology access. Together, these themes paint a picture of a school system navigating significant resource constraints while drawing on deep community re-

silience. Addressing student well-being in this context requires solutions that are not only practical and low-cost, but that are also rooted in the cultural values and existing social structures that Zambian educators and families already trust.

4.4.1. Addressing Psychosocial Issues

The research found poverty, poor nutrition, lack of hygiene resources, and exhaustion as key stressors for students. The district could address these through establishing school-based basic needs closets or resource rooms stocked with hygiene products (soap, sanitary pads, toothbrushes), school uniforms, shoes, and basic school supplies, funded through partnerships with local businesses or international donors. Further, partnering with agricultural co-ops to launch or expand school feeding programs, ensuring students receive at least one nutritious meal per day. Or, creating a standardized student needs screening tool that teachers administer at the start of each term to find which students are lacking basic resources, allowing counsellors and administrators to proactively connect families with available government. Moreover, advocating with MoE to ensure that the monthly government funds already distributed for students' basic needs are consistently distributed, transparently tracked, and that all teachers are made aware of how to access these funds on behalf of students. And, reducing student travel burdens by lobbying district offices to explore community-based transportation solutions, such as bicycle programs or community volunteer walking groups, particularly for students traveling 3–4 kms daily.

4.4.2. Strengthening Guidance Counselling

The research found that guidance counsellors are overburdened, isolated, and lack formal training and documentation systems. The Zambezi district could establish monthly district-wide guidance counsellor networks, where counsellors from across the Zambezi district gather either in person to share strategies and resources, fostering collegial learning and reducing professional isolation. Create a simple student tracking system using binders and follow-up sheets that are low-cost and do not require technology, ensuring documentation is not lost, and student progress can be monitored over time. Allocate dedicated, private office space for guidance counsellors in school infrastructure planning so students feel safe disclosing sensitive concerns without fear of being overheard. Advocate to the MoE for formal recognition

of guidance counsellor professional development, including issuing government-stamped certificates for completed training that can be included in teacher performance evaluations, and increasing motivation to participate. Increase the counsellor-to-student ratio by collaborating with teacher training colleges to encourage more educators to specialize in guidance and counselling and lobbying the MoE to mandate a minimum number of trained counsellors per school.

4.4.3. Integrating Family, Church, and Ubuntu Philosophy

The research found Ubuntu and the church as important culturally grounded factors. Influence these strengths by formalizing school-community partnership agreements between schools and local churches or community organizations, outlining how each will share responsibility for student well-being, such as the church hosting mental health awareness sessions or youth groups that reinforce positive coping strategies. Incorporating Ubuntu-based SEL curriculum into classroom instruction with relevant SEL lessons that use African storytelling, proverbs, and communal problem-solving activities rather than adopting Western SEL frameworks. Establishing family engagement evenings at schools where families and community elders are invited to take part in discussions about student well-being, reinforcing the Ubuntu principle that raising a child is a shared responsibility. Training community and religious leaders as “ambassadors” who can identify students in distress within their congregations or communities and refer them back to school guidance counsellors, creating a community-to-school pipeline of support. Documenting and publishing Ubuntu-based best practices from Zambian schools to contribute to SEL literature, potentially through partnerships with African universities or organizations, positioning Zambian educators as knowledge producers rather than solely recipients of Western educational frameworks.

4.4.4. Improving Educator Training and Technology Access

The research named the lack of technology, infrastructure, and meaningful professional development as a barrier. This could be addressed through partnering with technology companies such as Microsoft's *Education for Africa* initiative or Google's *Equipping Africa* program to donate computer labs in Zambezi schools, prioritizing schools currently using

with zero or minimal computers. Establishing school-based technology hubs where one or two computers with solar-powered charging capabilities are installed in a central location, ensuring consistent access even in areas with unreliable electricity, so teachers can access online resources during preparation periods. Registering all Zambian educators with government-issued email addresses through a coordinated initiative between the MoE and an email provider. Redesigning the train-the-trainer model so that, rather than one educator attending distant training and being expected to transfer knowledge, cohorts of educators per school attend training together, increasing the knowledge transfer and reducing the burden on an individual. And, embedding PSS and SEL content into the existing Teacher's Diploma Program (TDP) by collaborating with Zambian teacher training colleges to add coursework on psychosocial support, so that all newly graduating teachers enter classrooms with foundational SEL knowledge from the start of their careers.

While the challenges are many, these recommendations are achievable through action across schools to use existing community strengths like Ubuntu and the church, to district administrators formalizing counsellor networks, to national and international bodies investing in technology infrastructure and policy reform. The key is moving from awareness to structured, resourced, and culturally grounded action.

4.5. Limitations and Future Research

Since the researcher is a Western-trained academic conducting research in a rural African context, there is a risk of researcher positionality bias: (1) The researcher's own cultural framework, assumptions about what constitutes psychosocial distress, and interpretation of participant responses may have been influenced by Western educational and psychological paradigms. (2) Participants may have responded in ways they believed were expected or favorable to the researcher, particularly given the power dynamics at play when an outside researcher is potentially perceived as a figure of authority or as someone connected to resources. (3) The interviews were conducted in English, and English is not the first language of the participants, which may have led to meanings being lost or ideas being incompletely expressed. (4) While qualitative research does not aim for statistical generalizability, the study's sample size is a limitation because participants were from only four schools in

one district, which may not reflect the diversity of context. (5) The absence of student and family perspectives is a gap because students are the primary recipients of SEL support and may perceive and experience psychosocial distress very differently from how their teachers describe it, or families were not involved in the understanding of PSS or their capacity to support their children's SEL needs. (6) The difficulty obtaining documents is a methodological limitation because a reliance on a small number of items means the document review may not fully reflect the current state of SEL/PSS policy.

The findings provide room for future research. The recommendations call for research that is more inclusive of student and family voices, more geographically diverse, more culturally grounded in African philosophy, more interventionist and evaluative in nature, and methodologically innovative. Most importantly, future research should be conducted in respectful partnership with Zambian educators, communities, and scholars, ensuring that the knowledge produced serves the needs of those it wants to support, rather than simply adding to a Western-dominated academic literature.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate how social-emotional learning and psychosocial support are understood, practiced, and experienced within schools of Zambezi, Zambia. What appeared from the voices of 46 Zambian educators was resilience, deeply rooted cultural wisdom, and a need for formal support. The findings of this study are both proof of what Zambian educators are already doing and a clear call for the systemic investment, training, and infrastructure they deserve. Zambian students face real and significant psychosocial stressors, such as poverty, hunger, exhaustion, lack of basic materials, and unmet hygiene needs that profoundly affect their ability to learn, engage, and thrive in school. These are daily realities that teachers see in their classrooms every single day. As T16 shared, students cannot learn if they are hungry, anxious, or consumed by the weight of survival. Acknowledging and responding to these stressors is not a peripheral concern; it is central to the educational mission itself.

Despite the absence of formal SEL or PSS training, Zambian educators are doing meaningful, intuitive, and culturally grounded work to support their students' well-being. They are building relationships, creating safe spaces,

running clubs and sports programs, connecting students with guidance counsellors, and drawing on the deep community ties that Ubuntu philosophy fosters. This is not work that should be invisible or taken for granted; it is work that should be recognized and formalized so that it can be strengthened.

Zambia has indigenous protective factors, the Ubuntu philosophy, the role of the church and family, and a collective cultural belief in education as a pathway out of poverty that Western SEL frameworks have not accounted for and cannot imitate. These are not cultural interests but significant, powerful, and deserving of integration into how Zambia designs, delivers, and evaluates SEL programming. Ubuntu is not merely a supplement to Western SEL models; it is a sophisticated, holistic, and community-centered framework for thriving that has much to teach the global educational community.

A critical gap exists between the PSS and SEL resources that exist on paper and what educators are accessing in schools. Programs like REPSSI's Teachers' Diploma Program, the MoE's guidance and counselling frameworks, and UNESCO's counselling modules are meaningful investments in Zambian educator capacity, yet many participants had never heard of them, accessed them, or been offered the opportunity to take part. A resource that exists but is not accessible is not a resource. The psychosocial and social-emotional needs of Zambian students are real, significant, and some are not being adequately addressed through current systems and structures. This is not a criticism of Zambian educators who are doing astonishing work with much dedication under extraordinary constraints, but a challenge to every person who holds power, resources, and the responsibility to do more.

Lastly, a call to action for those involved in all aspects of Zambezi, Zambia education. (1) Whether educators are formally trained or not, they deserve training, tools, and support that equip them to respond to students' psychosocial needs with confidence and competence. Begin documenting the strategies used and sharing them widely. (2) Advocate for what is needed. Connect schools, districts, and networks for formal training, certificates of completion, and better documentation systems. (3) Make SEL and PSS visible and valued parts of schools. Allocate time, ensure guidance counsellors have private, functional spaces to work with technology, resources, and training. Model the Ubuntu principle

that every adult in a school community shares responsibility for every child and create structures that make that principle real. (4) Organizations that have invested in developing high-quality, evidence-informed, culturally relevant PSS tools and resources for the African context have a responsibility to ensure that those resources reach the educators who need them most, including those in the most remote and under-resourced districts. Future program design must tackle infrastructure barriers, such as a lack of internet and computers that prevent rural Zambian educators from accessing online resources, and must invest in mobile-friendly, low-data, and offline-compatible formats that can reach educators where they are.

This study is an important but modest start. The global SEL research literature has been influenced by Western contexts, Western frameworks, and Western assumptions. The Ubuntu philosophy, the community-centered resilience of Zambian students and educators, and the culturally grounded factors found in this study represent a theoretical contribution that challenges our understanding of what social-emotional learning can and should look like beyond the Western world. Future researchers are called to build on this work not by simply replicating Western studies in African settings, but by entering genuine, fair, and sustained research partnerships with Zambian scholars, educators, and communities to co-create knowledge that serves African students. The Zambezi School District has much to teach about resilience, community, and the meaning of education, and the academic community is encouraged to get involved.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The Gonzaga Institutional Review Board (IRB) evaluated the information and materials submitted for the study titled "How are Zambian educators using social emotional

learning (SEL) to improve their students’ wellbeing and mental health?” (Protocol #2205ZEIDELA, Zeisner) and has determined that the study satisfies the criteria for an exempt study under category 45 CFR 46.101(b) (1). Written permission was granted by the District Education Standards Officer (DESO) of Zambezi, Zambia, who was provided with an information, consent, and interview protocol package for their educators. Moreover, the study adhered to the requirements found in the International Compilation of Human Study Standards (2021).

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

Data can be requested from the author.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that they have no known competing monetary interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used Claude.ai solely for language refinement. No AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of scientific content. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the author. The author takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

Appendix A. Interview Protocol for Educational Directors, Teachers and Guidance Counsellors

1. What is your role in education? Teacher/district leader/administrator?
2. How long have you been involved professionally in PK–12 education?
3. Thinking of your experiences as an educator, how

4. do you define social-emotional learning and development?
4. What are the psychosocial distresses your students suffer from?
5. Are you trained in “Psychosocial Support” methods? Which ones? Read to Succeed? JTOD? Tree of Life?
6. Tell me about that training. When, Where, How, with Whom?
7. Do you use any specific programs, tools, interventions, resources, or kits to support SEL or PSS?
8. How are you involving families and/or your community in supporting your students’ SEL or PSS?
9. What has been the most impactful in developing your students’ SEL or PSS? Why? How?
10. What has not worked in developing your students’ SEL or PSS?
11. Which (SEL) competencies do you think are the most important for your students?
12. Which (SEL) competencies do you think are NOT important for your students?
13. In your experience, is there a relationship between a specific support used and a specific SEL competency?
14. What has been the most helpful professional development, support, or training you have received to support your students’ SEL or PSS?
15. What professional development, support, or training would you like to receive to better implement and support your students’ SEL or PSS?
16. Do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B. Psychosocial Distresses Were Provided to the Interviewed Participants

Trauma	Lonely	Angry
Hunger	Depressed	Anxious
Abuse	Hyperactive	Sad
Neglect	Suicidal	Scared
Sleep Problems	Divorce	Violence
Bullying	Mental Health	No Friends
Addiction	Worries	Death
No Parents	Fighting	Poverty
Health Condition	Non-Active	Homeless

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