Skills for Life (S4L) Classroom Resource

Development & Research Case Study

Heather Smith-Fowler, Geneviève Mák,
Social Research and Demonstration Corporation

Alexandra Fortier, Kathy Short
School Mental Health Ontario

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Knowledge into Action

Action into Knowledge

School Mental Health Ontario · Santé mentale en milieu scolaire Ontario · Western · Centre for School Mental Health

Contents

Executive Summary

Skills for Life (S4L) is an eight module resource that provides opportunities for grade 10 Ontario students to develop social-emotional learning skills (SEL) that will help them transition to post-secondary pathways. S4L was co-created with practicing teachers and school mental health professionals. It is aligned with Ontario's grade 10 Careers Studies curriculum and can be offered through regular course delivery.

Resource development. Development of the S4L resource originated from the adaptation of the *Healthy Transitions* program. Healthy Transitions is a comprehensive school program for grade 7 students, designed to address health inequities, promote positive mental health, reduce stigma associated with mental illness, and connect students with appropriate supports. In the first adaptation, the developers adjusted the content to meet the needs of Grade 10 students. This adapted resource was called *Healthy Transitions from High School (HTFHS)*.

In late 2018, School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) collaborated with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) to engage a team of Career Studies teachers and school mental health professionals to update and revise the HTFHS resource. SMH-ON also gathered feedback from their student advisory members (THRIVE SMH) about proposed student handouts. Youth reviewed the proposed tools and provided their insights and suggestions related to the clarity and relevance of the concepts, the age-appropriateness of the vocabulary, and the extent to which they found the handouts engaging.

Following extensive revisions, the resource was renamed: ***Skills for Life (S4L)*** in English and ***Habiletés de vie (H2V)*** in French.

Resource research. The *Leadership Team* took responsibility for project governance and operational decision-making. The team comprised the Director of School Mental Health Ontario (formerly School Mental Health ASSIST); two SMH-ON Implementation Coaches; representatives from the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO), the Ministry of Education (Special Education & Program Policy Branch), and Mind your Mind; as well as researchers from Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC).

The main findings from the pilot showed very good engagement of students and families. All stakeholders indicated that modules:
- Were relevant and appropriately designed
- Fit well within the Grade 10 Careers Studies course
- Were practical to deliver in the classroom
- Engaged students effectively

Feedback from students and teachers helped inform the evaluation activities, establish appropriate timing of activities, and refine expected short term outcomes. SRDC incorporated their suggestions by formatting the resources to be more consistent with other lesson planning materials, editing the language to be more accessible (especially

for those whose first language is not English), and emphasizing the universal applicability of the content.

Lessons learned about supports to promote the uptake of the resource
- Provide information about the resource to teachers in various formats to accommodate different learning styles and offer opportunities to interact with the resource.
- Budget and plan proactively for costs and release time for teachers to familiarize themselves with the resource.

Lessons learned about implementation
- Leverage stakeholders' knowledge of the education system and related initiatives, their understanding of the school environment, and their engagement in the project (including credible and influential champions) to ensure successful implementation of school-based interventions.
- Ensure evaluation planning continuously evolves to take into account new learnings; for example, consider implications of the semester system and the timing of teacher assignments.
- Provide enough flexibility for delivery in each school while ensuring core program components' consistency to enhance students' knowledge, understanding, and skill development.
- Adapt to operational details to ensure school boards and teachers' buy-in, but make sure to preserve research rigour.

Lessons learned about partnerships
- Collaborate with informed and committed partners for greatest success.
- Honour stakeholders' expertise and priorities (building research evidence isn't everyone's priority) to balance research activities with the lived reality of schools and teachers.
- Engage stakeholders—especially funders—by being patient and mindful of timing.
- Offer options to accommodate everybody's needs and recognize additional planning may be needed for unpredictable circumstances, requiring both partners' and funders' patience.

Next Steps:
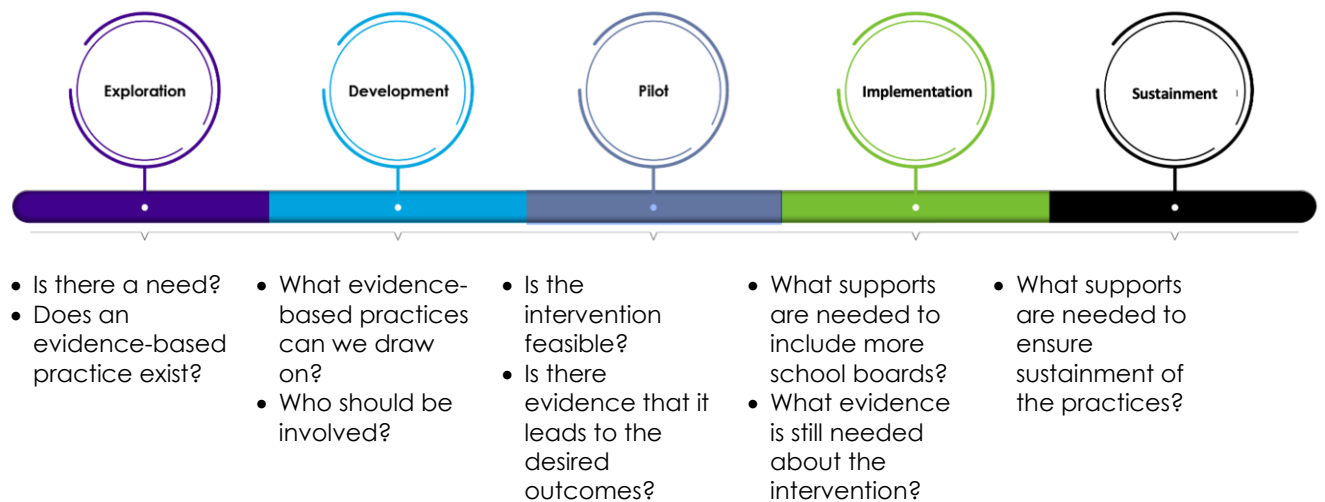The activities planned for the academic year 2020/2021 are:
- Refining the S4L lessons
- Developing a new evaluation plan in uncertain times
- Keeping school boards and schools engaged
- Planning an effectiveness study

Skills for Life (S4L)

Skills for Life (S4L) is an eight module resource that provides opportunities for grade 10 Ontario students to develop social-emotional learning skills (SEL) that will help them transition to post-secondary pathways. S4L was co-created with practicing teachers and school mental health professionals. It is aligned with Ontario's grade 10 Careers Studies curriculum and can be offered through regular course delivery.
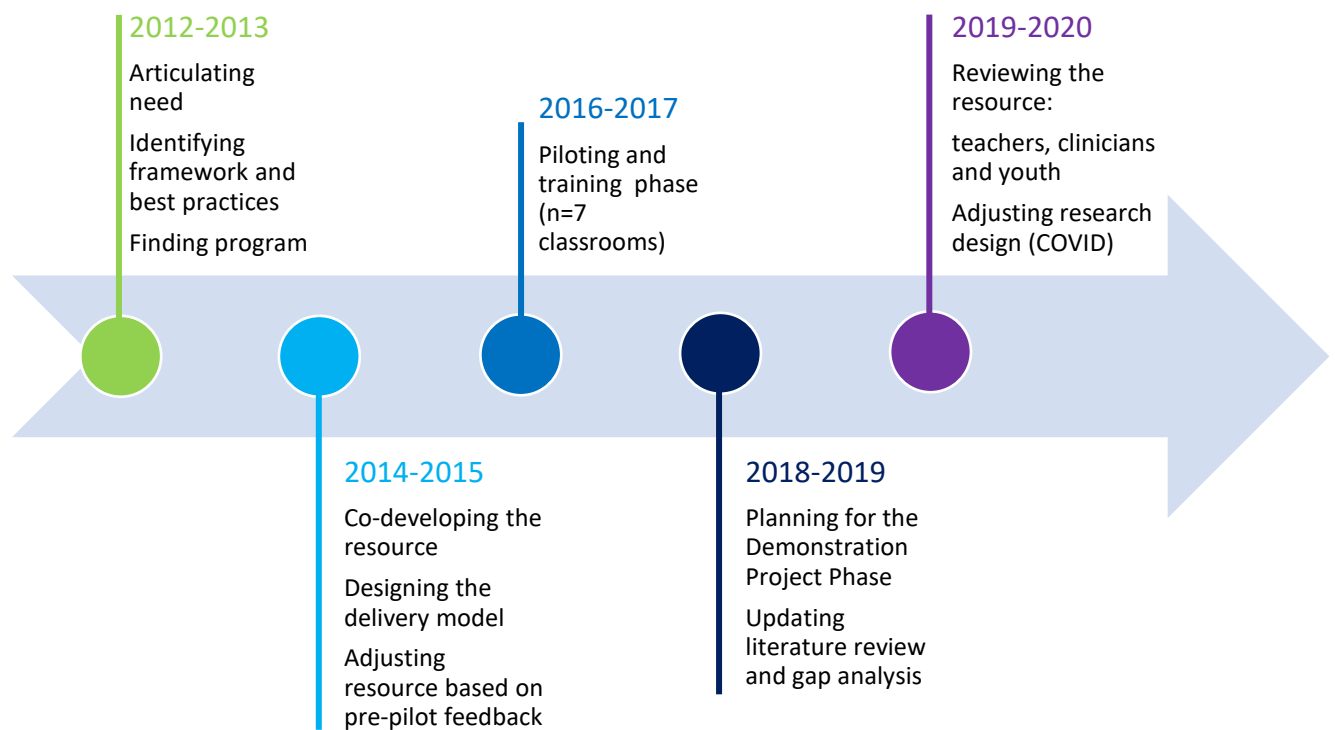
Phases of Development and Research

This case study, which was led by a team from the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC), explains how the Skills for Life (S4L) resource was developed. Specifically, the project considers the following five phases:

Exploration	Development	Pilot	Implementation	Sustainment
• Is there a need? • Does an evidence-based practice exist?	• What evidence-based practices can we draw on? • Who should be involved?	• Is the intervention feasible? • Is there evidence that it leads to the desired outcomes?	• What supports are needed to include more school boards? • What evidence is still needed about the intervention?	• What supports are needed to ensure sustainment of the practices?

While these phases are represented as linear, in practice the processes are iterative; feedback received and lessons learned over time influence the sequence of events. We are currently in the project's implementation phase, and recognize the need to generate evidence of the effectiveness of the S4L resource.

Throughout resource development, the developers took *Sustainment* into account. Questions, considerations, and criteria for sustainability were included early and repeatedly to ensure the resource can be adopted in a feasible and sustained manner in real-life settings.

Timeline

2012-2013

Articulating need

Identifying framework and best practices

Finding program

2016-2017

Piloting and training phase (n=7 classrooms)

2019-2020

Reviewing the resource:

teachers, clinicians and youth

Adjusting research design (COVID)

2014-2015

Co-developing the resource

Designing the delivery model

Adjusting resource based on pre-pilot feedback

2018-2019

Planning for the Demonstration Project Phase

Updating literature review and gap analysis

Phase 1: Exploration

Articulating the need

Adolescence is a period of increased vulnerability to developing mental health problems, particularly during transitions between developmental stages such as from adolescence into adulthood and from high school to work or post-secondary education. In 2012, youth mental health and well-being was becoming—and continues to be—a policy priority in Canada. In fact, many post-secondary institutions described challenges keeping up with increasing demand for mental health services from students (for example, see Watkins, Hunt, & Eisenberg, 2012).

To address these issues proactively, the project team identified that helping high school students build the skills necessary to support their mental health needs *before* they graduated was a key opportunity, regardless of their post-secondary pathway. Schools were the optimal setting to access this target audience and to support this lofty goal.

Identifying a conceptual framework and best practices

With assistance from a private foundation interested in supporting young people's emotional wellbeing, Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC)

researchers began identifying and exploring the evidence on universal mental health promotion for high school students. In 2012-2013, SRDC conducted a literature review of relevant conceptual frameworks and an environmental scan of empirically-based, universal, school-based programs for older students that promoted positive mental health.

The Social Emotional Learning (SEL) model was found to be the most useful because of its focus on flourishing, social determinants, skill development, and an integrated view of health.

SEL provides a "common language and framework" (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004, p. 88) for coordinating various academic, prevention, health, and youth development activities within a school. The framework of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in the US—identified as one the most promising frameworks for school-based SEL programming—has five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making.

SRDC discovered that most SEL programs are based on social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and use cognitive-behavioural methods for skill development (Tobler et al., 2000, cited in Sklad et al., 2012). These programs assume that fostering the development of core competencies will coincide with attitudinal changes and lead to increased positive social behaviours, decreased problematic behaviours and emotional distress, and improved grades and test scores. In turn, these changes are expected to support better adjustment and academic performance through the creation of a better learning environment and greater attachment to school. As SEL increases positive development, it also leads to optimal development over the life course.

A review of the impact of 213 universal SEL programs across a range of student outcomes found that participants demonstrated significant and even large improvements in social-emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance. Moreover, effects remained statistically significant for a minimum of six months (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). A review of more recent programs found similarly positive effects across seven categories of outcomes: social skills, antisocial behaviour, substance abuse, positive self-image, academic achievement, mental health, and prosocial behaviour (Sklad, Diekstra, de Ritter, Ben, & Gravelstein, 2012).

In this phase, SRDC identified the following evidence-based practices for implementing SEL programming:

- Programs should be integrated with the curriculum and sustained over time; however, information about the optimal duration of delivery is limited.
- A whole school approach to program implementation can be particularly effective, especially when families are engaged. However, simpler initiatives (as opposed to multifaceted initiatives) may have a better chance of avoiding implementation problems and thereby demonstrating success.

- Programs delivered by teachers have equal or greater success to those delivered by researchers or mental health professionals. Peer delivery may also be effective and succeed in engaging youth.
- Program design should incorporate learning strategies that are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE principles) to increase effectiveness in multiple outcome areas (Weare & Nind, 2011).

> **Key Point**: Anchor decision-making in research and evidence.

Finding a program

SRDC also explored SEL programs to test, but found few examples. First, SEL programs in Canada tend to be for elementary and middle school students (e.g., *MindUp, PATHS, Right from the Start, Second Step, Zippy's Friends, I'm Thumbody,* and *YODA)*, rather than high school students. Second, the focus of programming in high school appears to be primarily on identifying mental health problems and seeking appropriate help, i.e., mental health literacy. There were several potentially relevant international programs, but none that focused specifically on the transition from high school.

After this initial review, a subsequent scan of online resources revealed the **Healthy Transitions** program, which was developed by the Child and Youth Health Network of Eastern Ontario with support from the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO). This comprehensive school program for students in Grade 7 was designed to address health inequities by identifying youth in need of services and linking them to appropriate supports. At the same time, the program promotes positive mental health and reduces the stigma associated with mental illness among all students. This program aligned well with many of the desirable characteristics that SRDC identified for promising SEL interventions, although it targeted a different age group.

Phase 2a: Resource co-development

Obtaining guidance

At the end of 2013, SRDC developed a Memorandum of Understanding to engage a point person from CHEO to adapt the *Healthy Transitions* program to meet the needs of Grade 10 students. This person also organized and coordinated a national *Reference Group* of teachers and mental health experts to provide advice on the adaptation of the resource and SRDC's plan to test the feasibility of its implementation in schools.

A *Leadership Team* was also created at that time. The team was responsible for project governance and operational decision-making. Initially, the team comprised the Director of School Mental Health Ontario (formerly School Mental Health ASSIST), two School Mental Health Ontario (SMH-ON) Implementation Coaches, Corinne Langill from

CHEO, representatives of the Ministry of Education (Special Education & Program Policy Branch), Mind your Mind representatives, and SRDC researchers. Dr. Kathy Short, SMH-ON Director, was especially helpful in providing overall guidance on the project and offering information about her team's related activities, as well as acting as a liaison with the Ontario Ministry of Education.

Throughout the project, the Leadership Team met monthly via teleconference. These meetings provided a forum for updates, feedback, and decisions on resource content as well as development of an evaluation plan for a subsequent pilot. In early 2014, the Reference Group meetings were less frequent but they still helped the Leadership Team to identify Ontario as the most promising jurisdiction for the pilot. They also identified Grade 10 Civics and Careers as the most suitable context for the pilot, given the alignment of its curriculum, students' developmental stage, and potential sample size.

Designing the model

In the Fall of 2014, the consultation processes led the Leadership Team to the conclusion that ***Healthy Transitions* materials should be embedded into existing high school curricula rather than as a stand-alone program,** particularly because stand-alone programs are increasingly seen by teachers and funders as an uncoordinated and unsustainable approach. In turn, the Leadership Team and Reference Group concluded that there should be a **focus on teachers as the primary means of delivering the resources** (rather than guidance counsellors, near-peers, or external professionals such as public health nurses) as the most feasible and cost-effective model for any potential large-scale implementation. Indeed, evidence suggests that SEL programs can be effectively delivered by teachers at all educational levels, including high school (Sklad et al., 2012). Compared to programming delivered by outside personnel, students improved in twice as many outcome categories when school staff delivered the SEL program (Durlak et al., 2011).

In this respect, SRDC benefitted considerably from the partnership with SMH-ON, since this team supports teachers and school boards to develop and implement school mental health and addictions strategies and action plans, including training and support for teachers. Consequently, the Leadership Team could design materials, and implementation and evaluation plans, which complemented efforts already underway in Ontario's education system.

SRDC also developed evaluation plans for the pilot phase of the project. These plans were the result of considerable consultation with members of the Reference Group and SRDC's collaborators at CHEO and SMH-ON, especially regarding the feasibility of implementing the pilot phase in Ontario during the current and subsequent academic year (2015-2016).

> **Key Point**: Consult with different stakeholders to increase the feasibility of program implementation and the relevancy of program design for end-users.

Finalizing resource content

Adapting the resources for older students involved searching for updated and age-appropriate source materials and reviewing the Ontario curriculum for the Grade 10 Civics and Careers course. The adapted materials were called *Healthy Transitions from High School (HTFHS)* to differentiate them from the original program. Development of content, teachers' training, and assessment tools was completed by Fall 2014.

The Reference Group helped ensure program materials were relevant and appropriate and included links to relevant parts of the Grade 10 Civics and Careers course curriculum. They also helped engage with a few young people—participants of MindYourMind—to review the developing content. Over nine modules, the resources addressed the following topics:

1. Introducing mental health skills for everyday life- Taking care of our mental health
2. Taking care of you - Ways of thinking that can reduce stress and conflict
3. Bouncing back - Handling everyday struggles, feelings, worries, and stress
4. Taking charge of thoughts - How thoughts, feelings, actions, and social support can help us to overcome personal struggles
5. Catching flies with honey - Communicating more effectively with others
6. Handling conflict - Understanding and handling conflicts
7. Padding into rough waters: Emotional pain and physical pain, reflect on various coping strategies, and consider their impact
8. Problem solving – Assumptions that can get in the way of solving problems, problem-solving strategies
9. Getting pulled to shore when you're in over your head - Getting help when needed and resources to support youth

Modules were designed to be delivered in one period of about 60-75 minutes. Each module has a similar structure, i.e., they provide information on key concepts, have prompting questions for discussion, and offer examples that relate to real-life scenarios and contexts.

In spring 2015, with school board approval, teachers and administrators at Glendale Secondary School in Hamilton, Ontario, helped conduct a pre-pilot of the first two modules of the *HTFHS* resources in two Civics and Careers classes. The purpose of this phase was to assess the initial design and focus of the resources, particularly their perceived appropriateness and usefulness to both teachers and students. The two teachers in the pilot provided feedback through interviews and a sub-group of students who received the first two modules participated in a focus group.

Feedback was generally very positive, with teachers and students indicating that the topic areas were relevant and useful. They also suggested making the resources' format more consistent with other lesson planning materials. SRDC incorporated their suggestions by editing for accessible language (especially for those whose first language is not English), and emphasizing the universal applicability of the content.

In summary, feedback from the consultations and pilot informed revisions to resource content, as well as the evaluation plan. Specifically, student and teacher feedback helped inform the types of evaluation activities (e.g., selecting appropriate measures for the evaluation), establish appropriate timing of activities, and refine expected short term outcomes.

Phase 3a: Pilot

Designing the pilot study

Objectives

The pilot study was designed to identify and resolve potential implementation problems, assess design issues, prepare for a more rigorous outcomes evaluation, and consider the influence of different school contexts (see Chen, 2005; Durlak & DuPre, 2008) on implementation success. Evaluation questions focussed on the following three areas:

- **Design** (To what extent are the *HTFHS* modules relevant, useful, appropriate, engaging, etc.?)
- **Delivery** (What are potential challenges with delivery, fidelity, etc.?) and
- **Preliminary outcomes evaluation** (Did students experience any changes following participation in the resources? Are the evaluation measures sufficient, feasible, and appropriate?)

Above all, the aim was to determine if the resource fit well within the context of the Ontario education system prior to being made more widely available to Ontario high school students and teachers.

Audience

Mental Health Leads (MHL)—senior clinicians with responsibility for the development and implementation of their boards' mental health and addictions strategy—helped to identify potential pilot schools who would be ready and keen to take part in this study. Once identified, MHLs helped engage administrators and teachers during school recruitment. A total of seven schools and school boards participated in the pilot project, one during the initial pilot stage and the remaining six during the main pilot phase.

Together, participating schools represented a broad range of geographic locations, community contexts, board types, and students' demographics and educational pathways.

Training and supports

From the outset, the training model for *HTFHS* tried to balance scalability with teachers' need for timely, personalized training and support. Teachers received training on resource content and delivery through three online webinars, which were developed with input from the teachers who had reviewed and used the resources in the pre-pilot.

Throughout training and delivery, teachers were supported by MHLs, who themselves were supported by Implementation Coaches from SMH-ON and the Leadership Team. The plan was to facilitate a community of practice (CoP) among participating teachers and their boards' MHLs.

In addition, MHLs supported the evaluation process by distributing and collecting consent forms, teachers' feedback forms and implementation checklists, and passcodes for student surveys. In specific locations, they also helped organize on-site focus groups and interviews.

> **Key Point**: Partner with individuals and organizations who possess **both** topic-related knowledge and experience of the targeted setting/context to increase engagement and maximize implementation success.

Main findings

The main findings from the pilot showed very good engagement of students and families, with 78 percent of students in targeted classes (and their parents/legal guardians) consenting to participate. All stakeholders indicated that modules were relevant and appropriately designed. The modules fit well within the Grade 10 Careers Studies course, were practical to deliver in the classroom, and effectively engaged students.

Teachers generally felt they were able to deliver the modules as designed, although they occasionally felt rushed. They were also interested in receiving ongoing support and additional resources. Both students and teachers added suggestions about the activities conducted, the content (e.g., some students would have liked more in-depth information), as well as the French translation.

While not the primary purpose of the pilot, preliminary results indicated the modules also had a positive influence on many student outcomes, such as students' self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, willingness to seek help, and attitudes toward mental health. Quantitative measures showed limited changes in relationship skills, but qualitative evidence suggested some students felt more empathic toward their peers and appreciated the class climate during module delivery.

"I realized that although everyone has their own problems, a lot of people have similar feelings about the same things. So, when I was talking about it afterwards, I know that people understood me." (From Student focus group)

As the pilot measures indicated positive outcomes in several areas, SRDC decided to keep those measures for the outcome evaluation.

Spotlight on the measurement of SEL competencies:

No available measures in the literature matched perfectly with the SEL competencies identified in the HTFHS resources. As a result, the team chose to pilot both a comprehensive SEL measure as well as measures of specific related concepts such as resilience.

The survey was developed collaboratively; both the program developer and SMH-ON Team provided guidance on anticipated short-term outcomes and the feasibility of implementing this tool in a school-based mental health program context.

Most of these scales were sourced from established and tested measures with good psychometric properties. However, some survey items were developed specifically for the HTFHS pilot project, either to link more directly with the content or due to a lack of existing measures.

Lessons learned from the initial pilot study

The Leadership Team learned many lessons from the first pilot study. For instance, we recognized the need to respect teachers' context and be flexible about the timing of the study. Specifically, the Leadership Team had originally intended to pilot the HTFHS resource in the 2015/2016 academic year and engage participating teachers and MHLs in co-designing the training materials. However, because of labour unrest in the province, the pilot was delayed by a year. Instead of delivering the pilot, the team took the pause as an opportunity to refine the evaluation tools.

Second, using multiple data collection methods with all stakeholders in the pilot—teachers, administrators, MHLs, and students—was key to identifying implications for a subsequent effectiveness study. For instance, we used surveys, interviews, and focus groups (in two schools), as well as delivery feedback forms to document the project.

Finally, MHLs identified potential pilot schools, engaged administrators and teachers during school recruitment, and supported participating teachers. They supported the evaluation process in terms of supporting applications to school board Research Ethics

Boards, and with consent and data collection. In other words, working closely with MHLs was essential.

> **Key Point**: Engage key stakeholders to support the study. Be sensitive and responsive to the context in which the study will take place

Phase 2b) Re-design

Refreshing Knowledge

Although the findings of the *HTFHS* pilot were generally positive, the pilot identified a few areas for enhancement, such as structuring the modules to align more closely with teachers' lesson plans and representing a greater diversity of youth in the modules. Also, the training model was deemed too labour-intensive to be practical at scale. Other factors led to a collective decision to substantially review and revise *HTFHS* content:

a. Need to update the literature review: more than five years had elapsed since the initial literature review on SEL, in which time other frameworks had been elaborated (e.g., Provincial System Support Program & Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2017) and other research on SEL programming had been conducted

b. Desire to update the content: some of the content (e.g., activities, resources) could be more developmentally appropriate for Grade 10 students and ensure it represented the latest thinking on mental health promotion

c. Appeal for peer-review: teachers needed to thoroughly review resource content to make it 'classroom-ready'

d. Requirement to align the resource to curriculum: the Ontario Ministry of Education had recently begun to integrate SEL into the high school curriculum, meaning it was necessary to make even greater and more explicit alignment with the Civics and Careers curriculum.

Accordingly, SRDC updated the literature review and environmental scan in the summer of 2018, roughly a year after the pilot report was released. One of the main findings was that while CASEL's was still the dominant SEL framework, more recent thinking considered developmental needs more explicitly, such as how adolescents can develop a sense of identity, community, and purpose. The importance of context and equity considerations also figured more prominently in more recent work and learning standards had been developed for each of the main competency areas (CASEL, 2017). However, there had not been much advancement in empirical research, particularly in understanding the *mechanisms* by which SEL affects outcomes for this age group.

> **Key Point**: Keep up with the latest findings and best practices in the field as some areas, like SEL, evolve rapidly.

Identifying Gaps

In the fall of 2018, SMH-ON worked with SRDC to update the theoretical framework for the resources to better consider adolescents' developmental needs. This work was also informed by the literature review conducted by CAMH on common elements found in SEL programs for elementary school-aged children.

SRDC undertook a gap analysis to identify if these new SEL elements were covered in the HTFHS resources. The SRDC team also mapped the extent to which key concepts in the modules were already covered in other parts of the Ontario high school curriculum. The result of this gap analysis showed that the current version of the resource required additional components to reflect some developmental tasks and needs of adolescents such as developing grit, finding a sense of purpose, committing to help-giving, and making connections to the community. The Leadership Team reworked the HTFHS modules to bridge the identified gaps.

Revising the HTFHS Resource

In late 2018, SMH-ON collaborated with the Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation (OSSTF) to engage a team to update and revise the HTFHS resource. The team included Career Studies teachers and regulated school mental health professionals. Once the revisions were completed, the two federations representing high school teachers in Ontario reviewed the HTFHS resource and determined its pertinence for their members. Both organizations lent their support to the resource.

Further, SMH-ON gathered feedback about the students' handouts from SMH-ONs youth advisory members (THRIVE SMH). Youth reviewed the proposed tools and provided their insights and suggestions related to the clarity and relevance of concepts, the age-appropriateness of the vocabulary, and the extent to which they found the handouts engaging.

> **Key Point**: Engage teachers who have deep knowledge of the delivery context, and provide content with clear links curriculum, to ensure the resource is truly implementation sensitive.

Newly Updated Resource

Following extensive revisions, the resource's name was updated to **Skills for Life (S4L)** in English and **Habiletés de vie (H2V)** in French.

First, these revisions aimed to help teachers integrate the resource into regular teaching of Career Studies classes to facilitate resource uptake and implementation. The SEL domains were those identified in the CAMH framework (most skill domains also align with the CASEL framework).

Second, based on teacher feedback, the content was reduced from nine "modules" to eight "lessons". In their feedback, teachers had indicated that nine modules were too much to embed within their teaching schedule. Also in the review process, teachers designed each section in lesson plans and used terminology familiar to them. These changes were designed to resonate with a teacher audience.

The newly designed S4L lessons aim to improve student outcomes in the following areas:

▶ Enhanced student knowledge about mental health and mental illness
▶ Increased student sensitivity, understanding and support for those struggling with mental health problems
▶ Enhanced student knowledge about strategies to improve mental health and wellbeing
▶ Greater student willingness to adopt practices that support their mental health

The eight lessons, which are detailed in Figure 2, build on each other to create an *S4L Toolkit,* which is a personal roadmap to resilience that each student develops throughout the course.

Figure 2. Skills for Life eight lessons overview

Each lesson has the following structure:
- Title
- Brief description of the lesson
- Big idea (to reinforce what is being taught)
- Curriculum expectations
- Learning goals & success criteria
- Teacher notes, including:
    - Elements that teachers may want to pay attention to before delivering the lesson.
    - Direct instructions/scripts to prepare the students to apply the practice.
    - Specific activities for students to put their learning into practice.
    - Consolidation
        - Linking back to the "Big Idea" and asking students to complete their Roadmap to Resilience.
- Bonus content if time permits
- Additional references and resources

The resource also provides additional appendices, which offer the following:
- Tips to create a mentally healthy classroom
- Tips for effective SEL instruction
- Tips for talking about mental health with students

With these enhancements, the Leadership Team expects that *S4L* will increase teachers' confidence in providing instruction in SEL and mental health.

Phase 3b: Evaluation

Revisiting the evaluation plan

While content revisions were underway in the Winter-Spring 2019, SRDC team members were busy refining the tools for measuring SEL skills, including new constructs such as identity, mattering, and optimism. The survey they developed strikes a good balance between conceptual precision and enhanced comprehensibility, and is both brief and safe for students to answer (e.g., questions were reviewed to minimize the chance of triggering an emotional response). The student survey was piloted with youth and final revisions were made based on their feedback.

The SRDC team also focused on finalizing the plan for the *S4L* outcome evaluation, which was anticipated to occur in Fall 2019. These activities included obtaining overall approval from a community-based Research Ethics Board, followed by ethics approval from each identified district school board (n=10). The initial plan was to evaluate the S4L resource using a random assignment design – the 'gold standard' for outcome evaluation - involving 32 schools and close to 5,000 students. However, labour unrest in the province at that time again forced a delay; the plan was revised to start in February 2020, then put on hold because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since early 2020, all school-based research activities in the targeted school boards have been suspended, and schools were fully closed from March to September 2020.

Since then, the Leadership Team has been exploring options for how to proceed and the SRDC team sought approval from school board Research Ethics Boards for a modified study design. Given the variety of teaching formats (in-person vs virtual), course schedules (semester, quadmester, octomester), and the general uncertainty looming amongst teachers, students, and parents, the Leadership Team decided - together with the funders of the project - to postpone the outcome evaluation for the time being.

Rather, the new plan is to conduct a limited release of S4L in Spring 2021 to the Mental Health Leads of boards who meet readiness criteria (yet to be determined). This limited release would involve teachers from a handful of schools who are willing to try the resource in its new format and provide feedback about how they use it (in-person or virtually) and how they feel it could be improved. The Leadership Team also hopes to learn about the appropriateness of S4L for students, and its delivery feasibility, in a pandemic context.

Teachers who agree to deliver the lessons will take part in a one-time 1.5 hour webinar offered by SMH-ON and followed by a 30 minute Q & A session related to S4L. This training format will also be evaluated to determine its usefulness. Each participating school board will have their board's MHL introduce themselves and help answer questions regarding implementation during the webinar.

Finally, the new design proposes to host a community of practice (CoP) for MHLs participating in the modified project. This CoP will support learning across the province

about implementation enablers and barriers that are being encountered in the delivery of S4L.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned About Supports

After learning in the pilot that Civics and Careers teachers may lack confidence teaching SEL skills – since it is not typically a focus in that course – the Leadership Team revised the S4L resource to include a series of helpful tips.

The Leadership Team also learned that teachers need information about the resource in a variety of formats to accommodate different learning styles and to provide opportunities to interact with the resource.

In addition, if release time is needed, this time must be budgeted and planned for proactively.

Lessons Learned About Implementation

Successful implementation of school-based interventions requires knowledge of the education system and related initiatives, understanding of the school environment, and successful engagement of stakeholders, including credible and influential champions. In this project, the partnership with OSSTF and SMH-ON allowed SRDC to understand and plan for a wide range of contexts and delivery constraints.

Evaluation planning continuously evolved to incorporate new learnings such as learning about implications of the semester school system and the timing of teacher assignments. The goal is to provide enough flexibility for delivery in different schools while ensuring consistency of core program components. In other words, operational details are critical for school boards and teachers to buy-in to a plan, but researchers must balance flexibility with preserving research rigour.

Lessons Learned About Partnerships

Another key lesson was to recognize the value of collaboration with informed and committed partners, even though it can be time-consuming to coordinate activities among busy professionals. Furthermore, a level of humility is required when considering partners' positions and priorities.

Successful engagement of stakeholders – especially funders – is also sometimes a matter of timing (and patience!). In the first part of this design phase, the SRDC team struggled with a dilemma: they wanted to engage potential funders and a youth panel early so they could help shape the development of the program materials, yet also wanted to wait until they could offer stakeholders clearer ideas and more concrete plans. Furthermore, due to the unpredictability through 2020, both partners and funders required patience so that the SRDC team could plan and provide options that would accommodate everybody's needs.

Next Steps

During the academic year 2020/2021, the following activities are planned:

- *Refining the S4L lessons.*
  SMH-ON aims to:
    - engage with Indigenous colleagues to integrate an Indigenous lens to the resource
    - incorporate a culturally-responsive preamble and edits throughout the eight lessons
    - add content to the preamble about the notion of "sense of purpose"
    - include THRIVE SMH youth suggestions

- *Developing a new evaluation plan in uncertain times.*
  SRDC will work on:
    - alternative research questions
    - a reduced data collection process
    - a quality improvement lens rather than a formal implementation evaluation (i.e., obtain feedback on S4L lessons content, delivery—in-person or online—and supports)

- *Keeping school boards and schools engaged.*
  Moving forward with the (limited) release of S4L and some evaluation activities, both SMH-ON and SRDC will communicate sporadically with school boards to discuss the new study design and confirm their interest in participating.

- *Planning an effectiveness study.*
  Despite the challenges faced to date, the Leadership Team hopes to conduct an outcome evaluation in the subsequent academic year, but they remain flexible in their plans.

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