

Implementing Second Step® with Fidelity: Insights from Rural Special Educators

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Although coaching is a promising intervention for promoting implementation of evidence-based practices with fidelity, less is known about applications in rural locales, which have unique strengths and challenges, including access, personnel, and geographic limitations. Additionally, little is currently known about how to best support special education teachers in rural settings to effectively implement SEL curricula in general, and specifically Second Step®. We used a multi-phase, mixed methods design within a descriptive multiple-case study framework to examine how individual educators experienced targeted instructional coaching for the implementation of Second Step. This study is part of a larger, five-year project focused on developing and testing an explicit coaching model to support rural teachers' social emotional learning curriculum implementation. Findings indicate teachers increased fidelity of Second Step® implementation which led to improvements in inclusive practices, pedagogical skills, and educator confidence as well as increased student academic performance and social competencies. Implications for rural practice and future research directions are shared.

Keywords: Rural special education, social emotional learning, inclusive practices, rural mental health

Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become an essential part of educational programs, with research indicating its potential to enhance students' academic success, behavior, and long-term life outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2023). Since 2011, 12 meta-analyses have been conducted to examine the effectiveness of SEL interventions in multiple countries and contexts, all of which noted some positive effects on the development of social and emotional competencies, as well as learning engagement and academic performance. However, a lack of consensus remains on the moderators that impact outcomes, including the characteristics of locales, teachers implementing SEL curricula, and the students receiving SEL instruction (Durlak et al., 2011; Greenberg, 2023). Additionally, there are comparatively few studies that focus on implementing SEL interventions in rural schools or districts. For example, in their meta-analysis of 213 studies conducted from 1955 to 2007, Durlak and colleagues (2011) reported that only 15% of the SEL studies included rural schools. More recently, in the largest analysis of SEL intervention studies

to date, Cipriano and colleagues (2023) noted a mere 4.5% of the 424 studies reviewed were completed solely in rural locales. This is problematic, as nearly 20% of all students in the United States (US) attend rural schools (Showalter et al., 2023). Even fewer studies have evaluated SEL interventions for students with disabilities who benefit from specialized social, emotional, and behavioral instruction. A recent systematic review was completed to examine the effect of SEL interventions on the social-emotional competencies of students with disabilities, as well as the conditions most important to consider (Hassani & Schwab, 2021). Of the eleven studies that met the inclusion criteria, the impact on student social and emotional outcomes was varied. Both emotional and social/behavioral outcomes ranged from small to large effects, which were hypothesized to be a result of implementation fidelity.

Regardless of the setting and student sample, implementation fidelity is consistently discussed in the SEL literature as a variable that warrants further investigation to enhance outcomes. Program completion, adherence, and the quality of lesson delivery were examined. Teachers reported modifying the associated visuals or the format of activities, or adding components, to keep students engaged with the program. Teachers also reported that time constraints factored into their decision-making about how to present the program to their students. Additionally, the more administrators provided time-saving support (e.g., offering flexible schedules, helping to create materials, providing coaching), the more likely teachers were to adhere to the prescribed implementation strategy (Hunter et al., 2022). Identifying the key variables that impact teacher implementation of evidence-based SEL curriculum with fidelity, the degree to which a program is implemented as designed, will ultimately improve student outcomes (C Cipriano et al., 2023).

The challenge of implementing SEL curricula with fidelity is particularly critical in rural schools serving students with disabilities, where teachers often face unique constraints, including limited resources, professional isolation, and students with diverse and complex needs (Berry et al., 2011; Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Rude & Miller, 2018; Showalter et al., 2023). Despite these challenges, students with disabilities may be among those who benefit most from high-quality SEL instruction, as research suggests the program is particularly effective for students with pre-existing behavioral concerns (Low et al., 2015; 2019; Merrin & Low, 2023). Yet, the literature offers limited guidance on how to support teachers in achieving the implementation fidelity necessary for positive outcomes.

This study addresses a critical gap by examining a targeted coaching intervention designed to help rural special education teachers implement the Second Step® curriculum with fidelity. Considering the documented importance of implementation quality and the specific challenges rural special educators face, this study explored whether brief, non-evaluative coaching could enhance implementation fidelity while fitting within the time and resource constraints of rural settings.

Second Step® Curriculum

Second Step® is one of the most widely used SEL programs in American Schools, reaching over 26 million children in 45,000 schools across 50 states from preschool through middle school (Committee for Children, 2024a; Merrin & Low, 2023). Based on social learning theory, the program offers 20- to 45-

minute lessons, using evidence-based teaching methods such as modeling, guided practice, and scaffolded skill development (Frey et al., 2000). The program aims to equip students with “human skills they need to navigate their lives successfully” (Committee for Children, 2024b, para. 1). Despite its popularity and a strong theoretical foundation with positive student outcomes (Committee for Children, 2024a, 2024b), emerging research presents a complex picture of the effectiveness of Second Step®, showing both significant improvements in specific areas and essential limitations that warrant attention. Outcomes are heavily influenced by the quality of implementation (Gage, 2025; Gage et al., 2025). As a result, researchers have shifted focus towards the factors that affect successful program delivery, particularly the importance of teacher support and ongoing professional development in achieving positive student outcomes.

Coaching

Coaching is a professional learning activity that occurs consistently within the classroom context and is used to implement and extend the professional development and training that teachers receive (Cusmano & Preston, 2018). Several recent studies have been published that examine the effect of coaching on teacher implementation of specific SEL curricula. For example, the MyTeachingPartner coaching model was effective in improving the fidelity of teaching implementation for the 4Rs (i.e., Reading, Writing, Respect, & Resolution) intervention, thereby enhancing both social-emotional and academic student outcomes (Doyle, 2023). In a systematic review of 19 studies, Ulla and Poom-Valickis (2023) found that coaching was a significant contextual variable when considering the implementation quality of an SEL intervention. They noted strong empirical support for coaching to improve intervention implementation fidelity, but that generally comes with high cost and potentially short-term benefits related to the relational and temporal nature of coaching.

With respect to classroom management and climate, coaching incorporating a variety of feedback modalities (e.g., written, video, in-ear, emailed) has been successfully used to increase the implementation of evidence-based practices among special education teachers. These practices include behavior-specific praise (Ennis et al., 2020), opportunities to respond (Johnson et al., 2024), and teaching employment skills (Horn et al., 2020). Kretlow and Bartholomew’s (2010) review of coaching studies noted that teachers experienced the most success in coaching scenarios where they were provided with individual follow-up, support, and coaching after an initial professional development training. Quality coaching, regardless of the model, involves the use of well-trained coaches, emphasizes strategies to enhance student engagement, provides structured feedback, and is non-evaluative in nature (Thompson et al., 2012; Walters, 2014).

Although coaching is a promising practice for promoting implementation of evidence-based practices with fidelity, less is known about applications in rural locales, which have unique strengths and challenges, including access, personnel, and geographic limitations. Randolph and colleagues present three models that have been effective to support rural educators, eCoaching (immediate feedback to educator; Horn & Rock, 2022), iCoaching (relies on bug in ear technology to track the teacher and provide immediate feedback, Randolph & Duffy, 2019), and teacher dyad coaching (weekly team meetings with a

coach, Holbrook, 2017). These models have been tested in rural locales and show promise; however, replication and scaling are necessary to establish effective practice. Additionally, little is currently known about how to best support special education teachers in rural settings to effectively implement SEL curricula in general, and specifically Second Step®.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

This study is part of a larger, five-year project focused on developing and testing an explicit coaching model to support rural teachers' social emotional learning curriculum implementation. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of a brief coaching model on teacher implementation of Second Step® and pedagogical fidelity in a rural public school setting with special education teachers. The following questions guided this study:

1. How does targeted instructional coaching improve the fidelity of Second Step® curriculum implementation among rural elementary special education teachers?
2. How do rural elementary special education teachers describe their experiences with coaching as it relates to their Second Step® curriculum implementation?
3. What specific components of the Second Step® curriculum present the greatest challenges for implementation among rural elementary special education teachers?
4. What relationship exists between implementation fidelity scores and teacher perceptions of effectiveness?

Method

This study employed a multi-phase, mixed methods design within a descriptive multiple-case study framework to examine how individual educators experienced targeted instructional coaching for the implementation of Second Step® (Yin, 2018). The design for the intervention consisted of collecting pre-interview qualitative data, followed by quantitative fidelity data collection and analysis, and then in-depth qualitative interviews that explored participants' experiences (Creswell, 2017). The rationale for the approach was twofold: quantitative fidelity scores provided objective measures of implementation changes, while qualitative interviews explained these changes through the voices of participants, revealing the mechanisms behind the numbers (Dewhirst et al., 2025; Mertens, 2023).

The case study methodology was particularly suitable for investigating this complex phenomenon within its natural setting, namely, a rural public day school implementing an evidence-based SEL curriculum with coaching support (Yin, 2018). While bounded by a single institutional setting, the study encompassed multiple individual cases, with each educator's coaching experience representing a distinct unit of analysis within the larger case (Creswell, 2017). This design allowed for both within-case and cross-case analysis, revealing patterns while preserving individual experiences.

Setting and Participants

This study represents the Development phase of a five-year research project that will create and test a coaching model to support the implementation of Second Step® Elementary® in high need rural districts. The project comprises three phases: Development (Years 1-2), Implementation (Years 3-4), and Sustainability (Year 5). The Development phase, which includes the current study, explores adoption barriers, identifies necessary implementation supports, and pilots these supports to help teachers deliver the curriculum with fidelity.

The study took place at Deep Pines School (pseudonym to maintain confidentiality), a public day school serving students with disabilities from preschool through grade 12 in a rural district in the southern United States. Deep Pines expressed interest in participating in the project and received a monetary incentive for research participation. Teachers received classroom supplies, dedicated iPads, and hot spots to participate in coaching. Deep Pines School serves five rural districts that operate under a shared services agreement when districts determine that the least restrictive environment for students with Individualized Education Program plans is a specialized school. This setting exemplified the challenges facing rural special education: 55% of the teachers worked under emergency, alternative, or non-traditional certifications, and over 85% of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch programs. District superintendents identified interconnected challenges, including student behavioral issues, family substance abuse, and significant academic gaps. In addition to Deep Pines School, the special education corporative provided a continuum of special education and related services across the five participating districts. All five districts reported struggles with consistently implementing social, emotional, and behavioral support due to staff shortages, high turnover, and limited professional development opportunities. These factors significantly impeded SEL initiatives and were suggested as a reason why students were provided services at Deep Pines School rather than their zone schools.

Eight educators responsible for elementary SEL curriculum implementation (Kindergarten to Grade 5) agreed to participate in this study: four special education teachers and four administrators (including a special education director, principal, and two school psychologists serving five districts). Teachers were purposively selected (Punch, 2005) to represent varying experience levels (from first-year to 12-year veterans), certification status (certified and non-certified), and student populations (autism, behavioral needs, and multi-grade), allowing examination of how coaching supported different professional development needs while addressing similar implementation challenges. All participants were White, with administrators holding advanced degrees (Ph.D., Ed.D., Ed.S., or M.Ed.) and having 16 to 40 years of experience in special education. Teachers had more varied backgrounds, including degrees in psychology, education, business, and entrepreneurship, with experience ranging from 1 to 12 years in special education. Seven out of eight participants had previous SEL experience.

The coach for this study had over 30 years of experience teaching elementary grades and, most recently, served as a principal of an elementary school before retiring. They were familiar with the Second

Step® program, having implemented it in their classroom as a teacher and provided instructional support as a building administrator.

Procedures

Prior to the intervention, the research team conducted individual introductory meetings with all four participating teachers. These initial sessions served dual purposes: establishing rapport and trust, which are essential for effective coaching relationships, and configuring the technological infrastructure necessary for remote coaching delivery. Given the distance between the district and the nearest collaborating research university and the desire to avoid undue influence on instruction by adding another team member to the classroom, iPad-based video conferencing technology was used for both classroom observations and coaching conferences (Zoom®). The technology setup process ensured all teachers were comfortable with the equipment and procedures before formal observations began, minimizing potential disruptions to instruction and maximizing focus on implementation quality during the intervention period.

Coaching Intervention

Participants were asked by their principal to independently review the Second Step® training video and begin implementing lessons. Coaching began approximately 3 weeks after initial implementation to allow teachers to become familiar with the program on their own. The coaching intervention followed a structured four-phase cycle repeated over six or seven weekly observations. After verifying that teachers had reviewed the online training, the coach reviewed the teachers' implementation and had them submit their Second Step® implementation schedules at the start of the study. All observations were scheduled for Mondays to capture the first lesson of the week, in accordance with their building schedule.

Phase 1: Pre-Observation Preparation

Prior to each observation, the team made contact using a standardized pre-conference email template. This message, sent several days before the scheduled observation, served multiple purposes: confirming the observation date and time, requesting the specific lesson number the teacher planned to deliver, and scheduling the post-observation coaching session. The coach also shared the observation protocol with teachers, explaining the focus areas that would guide observations. After receiving the teacher's lesson details, the coach reviewed the related Second Step® lesson plan to prepare for a well-informed observation.

Phase 2: Classroom Observation

During the approximately 20-minute Second Step® lessons, the coach used the structured observation protocol to score implementation across three domains: (a) implementation fidelity, (b) teaching and engagement, and (c) climate and management. Additionally, the coach used a rubric to note specific examples of effective practices and areas that needed improvement, thereby creating a basis for the next

coaching conversation. This observation method focused on collecting descriptive data about implementation practices, classroom management, and classroom climate, allowing the coach to provide support to teachers through feedback rather than judgment on their performance.

Phase 3: Post-Observation Conference

Coaching sessions started with the coach expressing appreciation for teachers' efforts. Using the Teacher Observation Debrief Script (created to coordinate with the fidelity protocol), coaches systematically reviewed each focus area, offering both positive feedback and constructive suggestions based on specific observed examples. The conferences emphasized teacher strengths and a goal for growth. This structured yet flexible approach ensured thorough coverage while providing individualized support tailored to each teacher's needs. Post-conferences were brief, lasting approximately 10 minutes following each observation, and did not require extensive preparation on the part of the coach.

Phase 4: Follow-Up and Continuous Support

After each conference, the coach sent a follow-up email, summarizing the discussed strengths, growth areas, and agreed-upon next steps. This written record reinforced verbal feedback and provided teachers with a reference for applying the suggested strategies. Each observation was built on earlier coaching conversations, allowing coaches to offer more targeted support as teachers refined their practices. The coaching intervention relied on criterion-based rather than time-based completion, with coaches providing weekly support until teachers achieved predetermined fidelity benchmarks (90% or greater across each of the three domains). This resulted in differentiated intervention lengths: six weeks (T2, T4) and seven weeks (T1, T3), allowing for responsive, individualized professional development.

Data Sources and Instruments

Classroom-level data from the Second Step® data Dashboard, observation protocols, and semi-structured interviews were used as data sources, enhancing methodological rigor through triangulation (Yin, 2004).

Observation Protocol

The research team developed a comprehensive observation protocol to systematically evaluate the implementation of Second Step® across two key dimensions: program-specific fidelity and essential classroom supports. This dual focus reflects the reality that student outcomes depend on what is taught (curriculum content) and how it is taught (instructional strategies). The first section of the protocol assessed fidelity to core Second Step® components using a two-point scale (Observed, Not Observed, Not Applicable). This included preparation (with materials ready), sequential completion of lesson parts (Brain Builder, Getting Started, Practice, Check, and Performance Task, when applicable), and adherence to the script. This section yielded a maximum fidelity score of seven points if all the components were applicable.

If components were not applicable, the percentage was calculated based on the total number of applicable components (e.g., five/six applicable components = 83%). The second section, using the same scale, evaluated classroom supports through four categories derived from Second Step® resources (Committee for Children, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d): Teaching Practices (modeling, nonjudgmental responses, think time, plus at least two other evidence based strategies, that is, physical movement, turn and talk, whole class discussion, role playing, and other), Student Engagement (tailoring examples, checking comprehension, capturing attention, noticing engagement), Positive Classroom Climate (building relationships, creating safety, developing norms, responding to behaviors), and Classroom Management Strategies (uses an attention signal, breaks down directions for optional learning, provides opportunities to respond, partners students quickly and effectively, provides prompting and reminders, and provides behavior specific praise). This section contained a maximum score of 18 points, recording data to emphasize that effective SEL implementation requires both curriculum fidelity and supportive instructional conditions.

Implementation Fidelity Triage Framework

To systematically guide teachers toward 90% implementation fidelity, the research team developed a triage framework that prioritized coaching focus areas based on weighted importance and classroom needs. The framework divided implementation into three sections, each with a different weight: Lesson Implementation (40%), Teaching Practices & Engagement (30%), and Classroom Climate & Management (30%). The triage process followed a hierarchical decision tree. First, coaches assessed whether teachers achieved 90% fidelity in Lesson Implementation, which is the core Second Step® components, including *Brain Builder*, *Getting Started*, *Practice Activities*, *Final Check*, and *Performance Tasks* (if available). If this threshold was not met, coaching focused solely on these key elements, as they formed the essential foundation for program effectiveness.

For implementation fidelity, meeting 75% of milestones was considered basic implementation, 85% of milestones was considered proficient implementation, 90% of milestones was considered target implementation achievement, and 95% of milestones was considered distinguished achievement. Once teachers demonstrated 85% fidelity in *lesson implementation*, the coach identified a secondary focus. For classrooms facing engagement challenges, coaches prioritized *Teaching Practices & Engagement*, focusing on pedagogical practices such as modeling techniques, *Turn and Talk* activities, and comprehension checks. For teachers working to enhance classroom management, the coach emphasized pedagogical strategies, including setting clear expectations, using attention signals, and fostering positive relationships.

This structured approach enabled teachers to focus on one area for improvement while ensuring that resources were used efficiently. The review of the observation protocol helped track progress and guided subsequent coaching efforts until teachers reached the 90% fidelity target. Although 90% fidelity was the target, 95% fidelity was noted as Distinguished Implementation. The coach maintained detailed observation logs for all teachers, which included the observation and debriefing dates and times, the unit

and lesson numbers, lesson and support implementation scores, implementation milestones, and coaching priorities.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four teachers and four administrators. Each participant was interviewed twice (except for two administrators, who were interviewed once each): once before the coaching intervention began and again after it was completed. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant permission, followed standardized procedures to ensure consistency, and included assurances of confidentiality. Administrator interviews followed a parallel structure to capture systems-level perspectives on the coaching intervention. The pre-coaching teacher protocol consisted of 17 questions across five domains, and the administrator protocol consisted of 15 questions across the same five domains. See Supplementary Material for interview protocols.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Analysis

The lesson number, date, and time spent on each lesson were retrieved and recorded for each classroom using the Second Step® data dashboard, and weekly coaching protocol scores were calculated. Quantitative analyses included descriptive statistics and percent change in criterion from lesson to lesson until mastery in each of the three domains was achieved. Results were graphed and reviewed weekly.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This study employed systematic inductive thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023; Saldaña, 2021) to analyze pre- and post-intervention interviews conducted with four special education teachers and four administrators. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows researchers to identify "abstract and subtle expressions/patterns/processes that explain a phenomenon" (Mishra & Dey, 2022, p. 187), making it especially suitable for understanding complex implementation dynamics across multiple participant perspectives in case study research.

The analysis proceeded iteratively through four stages: initial coding, category development, theme building, and integrating findings across participant groups. First, line-by-line coding produced 168 codes from eight teacher interviews and 305 codes from six administrator interviews (Administrators three and four only completed pre-intervention interviews). These codes ranged from descriptive (e.g., "Teaching Experience - 12 years") to interpretive (e.g., "Confidence Growth through Validation"), each accompanied by supporting quotes and transcript references to ensure clear audit trails.

In the second phase, codes were organized into categories through an iterative sorting process. The teacher codes generated 15 categories that captured implementation approaches, student engagement, coaching experiences, and professional development. The administrator codes generated 24 categories that reflected system-level perspectives, including rural challenges, resource allocation, and

stakeholder coordination. The higher number of administrator categories reflected their focus on multiple stakeholder groups and system-wide considerations. Theme construction involved interpretive analysis guided by the question, "What story does this tell about the implementation experience?" Teacher categories were grouped into five themes, while administrator analysis produced eight themes. Post-intervention themes relied mainly on data from the two administrators who completed both interviews.

The final phase combined teacher and administrator themes to form five comprehensive themes that reflected both converging and diverging viewpoints: Adaptive Implementation as Professional Expertise, Transformation Through Non-Evaluative Coaching, Student-Centered Indicators of Success, Rural Context as Both Barrier and Advantage, and Sustainable Systems Through Professional Identity. See Supplementary Material for additional information on the data analysis process.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

The analysis used Lincoln and Guba's (1994) four criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was established through the triangulation of administrator observations and teacher self-reports, with structured team discussions serving to challenge interpretations (Carter et al., 2014). Weekly team meetings examined various explanations for emerging patterns. Dependability was ensured through a thorough audit trail that documented the analytical process, which began with 473 codes and ultimately resulted in 39 categories, ultimately leading to five integrated themes. Dated analytical memos recorded decisional turning points, such as the realization that "rural constraints" paradoxically created certain implementation benefits. The team maintained detailed records of code definitions, category adjustments, and theme development, enabling external review of the analytical process (De Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018).

Transferability was improved through detailed descriptions of the rural special education setting, including specific information about geographic isolation, resource shortages, and student demographics. These descriptions help readers evaluate the applicability of the findings to their own situations, while also understanding the unique combination of rurality and special education needs that influenced implementation. Confirmability was achieved through systematic researcher reflexivity. The research team included members with different levels of connection to the study context. The lead researcher, a special education professor and parent of a child with disabilities (though not a student in the study district), brought both professional expertise and personal investment in effective special education practices. This dual perspective encouraged regular self-reflection on assumptions about the distinction between "evidence-based practices" and "typical practice." The second researcher, an early childhood education professor without direct special education experience, provided critical distance and challenged assumptions about disabilities and teacher practice.

To manage these positionalities, the team implemented several safeguards. First, the coach who delivered the intervention was excluded from conducting post-intervention interviews and data analysis, preventing the conflation of implementation hopes with participant experiences. Second, the team used structured coding procedures to reveal and examine interpretive differences. Third, the team openly

acknowledged limitations, including missing post-intervention interview data from two administrators. Instead of overextending, themes reliant on post-intervention data were clearly identified as representing partial administrator perspectives. This transparency, paired with systematic reflexivity practices, enhanced confidence in the validity of the themes.

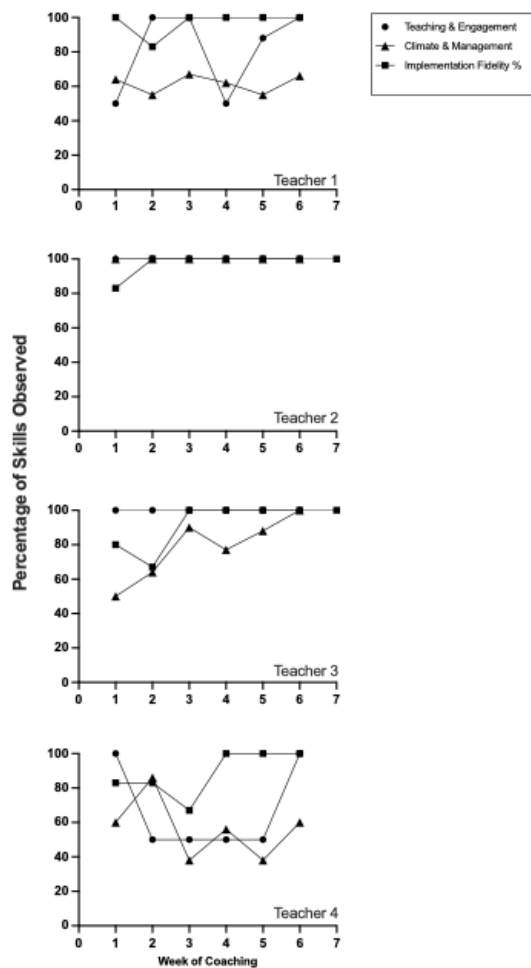
Results

Quantitative Findings

At the onset of the study, T4 had not begun Second Step® implementation, and T2 was completing four to five lessons each week (approximately one lesson per day). T1 and T3 were implementing each lesson in the entirety without adaptation. Teachers 1, 3, and 4 watched or rewatched the Second Step® introductory video and coaching began with teachers shortly after program implementation. See Figure 1 for Teacher Second Step® Observation Protocol Scores.

Figure 1

Teacher Second Step® Observation Protocol Scores



Teachers who began at a lower percentage of implementation fidelity made larger gains, and those that began at a higher percentage made gains and reached 100% fidelity faster. As shown in Table 1, T1 was observed to demonstrate implementation fidelity (100% accuracy) for all portions of the Second Step® program for every observation except one (observation week two, 83%). T2 began with 83% implementation fidelity at week one, but by week two was implementing all steps at 100% accuracy and continued with the same level of accuracy through week six. T3 was implementing 80% of steps in week one, decreased to 67% in week two, then increased to 100% in weeks three to six. T4 began at 83% in week one and week two, dropped to 67% in week three, and increased to 100% in weeks four to six. All teachers met the distinguished criteria for implementation fidelity at one point during the six observations and all teachers met 100% of criteria by the sixth observation.

Table 1*Coaching Results for Focus Area of Lesson Implementation*

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teacher 1	100	83	100	100	100	100	No data
Teacher 2	83	100*	100	100	80	100	100
Teacher 3	80	67	100	100	100	100	100
Teacher 4	83	83	67	100*	100	100	No data

As shown in Table 2, T1 was observed to meet the teaching and engagement standards at 50% in week one, increased to 100% in weeks two-three, 50% in week four, 88% in week five, and 100% in week six. T2 began at 100% and maintained this level through week six. T3 began with 100% accuracy for this area and kept that standard through week six. T4 was observed to meet the teaching and engagement standards at 100% in week one, but dropped to 50% for weeks two to five, then increased back to 100% in week six.

Table 2*Coaching Results for Focus Area of Teaching & Engagement*

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teacher 1	50	100	100	50	88	100	No data
Teacher 2	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Teacher 3	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Teacher 4	100	50	50	50	50	100	No data

As shown in Table 3, T1 was observed to meet the climate and management standards at 64% in week one, 55% in week two, 67% in week three, 62% in week four, 55% in week five, and 66% in week six. T2 began at 100% and maintained this level through week six. T3 began at 50% in week one, increased to 64% in week two, reached 90% in week three, decreased to 77% in week four, then increased to 88% in week five, and finally reached 100% in week six. T4 was observed to meet climate and management

standards with 60% accuracy in week one, 86% accuracy in week two, 38% accuracy in week three, 56% accuracy in week four, 38% accuracy in week five, and 60% accuracy in week six.

Table 3

Coaching Results for Focus Area of Climate & Management

Week	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Teacher 1	64	55	67	62	55	66	No data
Teacher 2	86	91	89	100	75	100	100
Teacher 3	50	64	90	77	88	100	100
Teacher 4	60	86	38	56	38	60	No data

Coaching sessions and feedback were brief, lasting nine to 15 minutes per session for a total of 75 to 90 minutes across the six or seven sessions. Coaching sections focused on teaching practices and classroom climate fidelity (12.5-16 minutes) were slightly longer than those focused on curriculum fidelity (nine-13 minutes).

Qualitative Findings

Analysis of pre- and post-intervention interviews with participants identified five main themes. These themes provide interconnected insights into the study's research questions. Themes One (Adaptive Implementation as Professional Expertise) and Two (Transformation Through Non-Evaluative Coaching) primarily explain how coaching improved fidelity (Research Question 1) by framing it as thoughtful adaptation rather than strict compliance for special education classrooms. Theme Two, along with Theme Five (Building Sustainable Systems Through Professional Identity), demonstrates how teachers experienced coaching (Research Question 2) as transformative, supportive, and non-evaluative, which built confidence and encouraged professional growth. Theme One thoroughly discusses specific implementation challenges and successes (Research Question 3), while Themes One, Three (Student-Centered Indicators of Success), and Five highlight the complex connection between fidelity and effectiveness (Research Question 4), showing that adaptive implementation guided by coaching resulted in better student outcomes than strict adherence to the curriculum.

Theme 1: Adaptive Implementation as Professional Expertise

The Necessity of Adaptation. Both teachers and administrators recognized that successfully implementing Second Step® required the thoughtful development of exemplars and scenarios, rather than strict adherence to the options available through the Second Step® program. A2 acknowledged the developmental mismatch: "I don't think it's at the level necessarily for the majority of our kids," yet supported differentiated implementation: "We're gonna meet them where they are, and then try to help them grow. And that's gonna look different for every kid." A1 praised creative adaptations she heard like implementing lessons during PE as "a brilliant idea," while A4's perspective as a school psychologist who travels across

five districts added another dimension to the adaptation necessity: "Since I go to all five districts, everything is done different." This inconsistency across the co-op created additional adaptation challenges, leading to A4's vision: "It would be awesome to have it across the co-op to have consistency to be able to work with our kids. The same things are being done here. And if we travel to the next location, it's very consistent and we can use the same type of words and program."

Core Adaptation Strategies. Teachers developed three main adaptation strategies (language modifications, timing adjustments, and activity restructuring). Every teacher adjusted language complexity. T1 explained: "I follow the script, but a lot of times I have to break the script down a little bit to explain some of the words or give an example because a lot of times my babies don't understand the exact wording." Teachers restructured pacing for attention spans. T1 implemented weekly repetition: "We take one lesson. And we do that one lesson every day for the week. So, they get the repetitiveness of it." T3 similarly broke lessons across days due to limited attention spans. Partner activities required a complete reimagining. T3 explained: "We don't do the turn and share with a partner because I don't have enough students that use spoken language at the level they would need to be," implementing whole-class discussions instead.

Specific Implementation Challenges. Beyond these core adaptations, two systemic challenges emerged across all classrooms: scenario relevance and engagement. Urban-centric scenarios consistently failed to connect. T3 had to "skip, like two or three slides before I could find a scenario that they could relate to," particularly struggling with substitute teacher scenarios in a setting where "our subs are people they know." A1 identified this as fundamental: "Second Step® was not validated on rural schools." In terms of engagement and attention, A2 observed: "It's not animated enough. It doesn't hold their attention." Teachers addressed this through visual supports, with T3 creating "actual human faces of all the different emotions" using photographs rather than cartoons because "the cartoons they kind of go off on cause cartoon to them is play."

Successful Components and Creative Solutions. Despite challenges, certain components proved universally effective. Mind Yeti emerged as the most successful element, with T3 reporting: "They love our Mind Yeti session every morning," contrasting this structured approach with previous ad-hoc attempts. Breathing techniques provided concrete tools, with T1 noting: "I have three kiddos that grip onto blowing in the bowl of soup when they get upset." Brain Builder activities also consistently engaged students across classrooms, becoming daily warm-ups that "got them engaged as a group together."

Theme 2: Transformation Through Non-Evaluative Coaching

The coaching model catalyzed professional transformation across experience levels, with both teachers and administrators emphasizing its non-evaluative, supportive nature as key to success. This theme reveals how coaching redefined professional development in rural special education settings.

From Resistance to Enthusiasm. The change in teacher attitudes was remarkable. A1 described the progression: "[The teachers] didn't really want to do the program, but they have seen the benefits... And

they enjoy it." Personal experiences showcased this shift. T1 went from "It makes me a nervous wreck" to "It was a positive experience, and it kept me motivated to keep going," specifically crediting this to knowing she "was doing it right." The non-evaluative stance proved essential. A1 stated: "[The teachers] thought it was, like, oh, they're coming to observe me and tell me I'm doing this wrong. And when they realize that's not what it was, then they were able to actually utilize the service."

Differentiated Professional Support. The coaching model addressed the individual needs of teachers. For T1, a 12-year veteran, coaching offered validation: "[The coach] would find things that... I do on a regular, everyday basis. And she would point out... that is so amazing that you do." This external validation was very meaningful in isolated settings where, as A2 noted, "It's good for them to hear it from someone else, because the superintendents don't come tell them that." For T2, a first-year teacher, coaching boosted confidence without overwhelming her. She appreciated coaches "not making me feel overwhelmed with it" and realized that adaptation was acceptable. T4's experience represented the most dramatic transformation. As non-certified staff with an AA in a different field, he was "thrown into" teaching mid-year when "we can't hire another teacher after the teacher left because he had some issues." He candidly admitted, "I had no clue what the heck I was doing. It helped me learn how to actually do teaching on stuff." The coaching provided T4 with fundamental pedagogical skills. He learned classroom management strategies that revolutionized his practice: "Like how different ways to say things to kids instead of just always saying the negative, say the positive." He gave specific examples: "Instead of saying stop doing this, say, 'Thank you, Johnny, for paying attention.'" This shift was revelatory: "I didn't even realize I was doing that until after I was told."

The Power of Immediate, Specific Feedback. Both groups emphasized the coaching model's immediate feedback structure as transformative. The weekly debriefs created iterative improvement cycles. T4 explained their value: "The debrief helped a whole lot... let me know, okay, you did this this week and then this the other week and then this is how you can improve this and how you can improve that." He actively used this feedback: "I write things down on what I can improve on and what needs to be fixed, maybe some suggestions here and there." T2 also found the immediate feedback particularly helpful: "Just the meeting afterwards was very helpful, and then I could know directly what I did that day, or even a small thing that I said that I might have not thought was very significant that actually was very helpful." This granular attention to detail helped teachers recognize their unconscious effective practices.

A2 identified the coaching model's uniqueness: "Typically, you don't get that with any other, we haven't with any other training." The administrator praised specific coaching elements: "For you guys to actually meet with the teachers and to do in the ear, do the tablet, and be able to start that coaching process... it shows that you're invested in trying to help them." The coaches' understanding of classroom complexity enhanced their credibility. A2 further noted that the coach understood "the big picture of the classroom and the responsibilities" while providing encouragement. This holistic understanding allowed coaches to provide relevant, actionable feedback rather than idealistic suggestions.

The findings suggest that teachers need direct support to use the full range of options for presenting scenarios and exemplars. T1 in pre-intervention interview said, "The program is pretty straightforward. You're given what to say. As long as you have common sense, you can follow the directions." However, she noted in her post interview that she may have needed more assistance than she had thought; she stated she worked with the coach on "adap[ting] it for my kiddos, so, um... a lot of the, like, turn and talk type things, we have to do as a class. like, I'll break down... some of the things that the script says to where it's more of what they can understand."

Theme 3: Student-Centered Indicators of Success

Both teachers and administrators measured the effectiveness of implementation through observable changes in student behavior rather than relying solely on curriculum completion metrics. Individual success stories served as powerful validation for the entire implementation effort, with both groups sharing remarkably specific examples of transformation.

Functional Improvements as Success Metrics. Teachers measured success by observing specific behavioral changes that enhanced students' daily functioning. T1's observation of vocabulary development was particularly striking: "My student flat out said, 'They're not sharing. It made me mad.' A month ago, it would have just been a big, huge meltdown. I think it's extremely important for my littles to learn the social emotional part." This verbal expression of emotion, rather than behavioral escalation, represented significant progress for students with autism in her class who struggled with communicating their feelings. T2 stated, "I find them conversing about it more on their own. I'll hear my kids say, oh, that's not a kind thing to do. Let's solve that problem together. It's really clicking with them." T4 documented comprehensive skill development in his students: "Most of them have adapted and used what we've learned, you know, especially the calming down, they'll go to like a certain corner or they'll start deep breathing or counting, and what can I get else, Mr. T4?" He observed metacognitive growth as students became aware of their emotional states: "They've kind of got in tune with their emotions and how to calm themselves down and you know what emotions you want and then noticing other people so that they can either stay away or help them if they need help." A1 observed skill generalization: "I've actually seen the kids utilize the skills that they have when they transition over to a different campus [student zone school]."

Engagement as Evidence. Student engagement shifts were significant. T3 reported: "We have a lot more back-and-forth conversation with the kids and can get through the entire teaching part in one session, whereas when I started it, we were only getting, like, 5-10 minutes." T2's students demonstrated advanced engagement by anticipating scripted questions before she asked. The transition from resistance to routine signified a major change, with T3 noting: "They don't put up a fight to come to the teaching session for Second Step® as much. It's become part of their routine."

Theme 4: Rural Context as Both Barrier and Unexpected Advantage

The rural special education setting created unique implementation dynamics that profoundly shaped the coaching and curriculum adaptation process. Both teachers and administrators identified remarkably similar challenges while discovering surprising benefits unique to their context.

Systemic Rural Barriers. Geographic isolation caused cascading effects. A1 quantified: "We are more than 60 miles from there [service centers]. We don't have the staff to cover the classes." Financial constraints forced difficult choices, with A2 explaining: "If you look at how many staff members we need to be able to keep our kids safe, loved, and understood. That's the largest part of our budget. And again, that takes away from curriculum." Technology infrastructure posed daily challenges. T4 reported: "We don't always have the best internet... There are days we had internet down." The multi-district collaboration added complexity, with students from "five different campuses" and "different admin coming in wanting different things."

Infrastructure Vacuum as Opportunity. Paradoxically, the lack of SEL programming created new opportunities. A1 described the baseline: "My teachers don't get anything... they've gone years and years and years without even a curriculum." This meant Second Step® did not compete with existing programs. Previous efforts were described as "lacking" with "no worthwhile outcomes," just "putting out the biggest fire." This gap allowed for a paradigm shift. A3 stressed that SEL skills "need to be explicitly taught and practiced," indicating an evolution in rural special education approaches.

Small Environment Benefits. Despite challenges, rural settings offered unexpected benefits. T2 found it easy to implement Second Step: "I couldn't imagine the chaos of a large school." Teachers praised exceptional administrative support. This support included daily check-ins and philosophical alignment. A2's main focus was ensuring students were "safe, loved, and we try to understand them. That's all that matters each day."

Theme 5: Building Sustainable Systems Through Professional Identity

The coaching process sparked lasting change that went beyond the intervention period through two linked mechanisms: the development of systematic institutional supports and the growth of teachers' professional identities. This dual transformation (structural and personal) created conditions for ongoing implementation despite the challenges inherent in rural special education settings.

At the administrative level, leaders developed concrete strategies to incorporate SEL into the fabric of their schools. A1 suggested using peer expertise through mentor teachers (i.e., ongoing coaches) who could share "the same tips that they got" with new staff, addressing the ongoing challenge of rural teacher turnover. A2 took a further step, advocating for both scheduling and policy integration. She emphasized that Second Step® would become non-negotiable: "That's gonna be part of your schedule," placing it alongside mandated services like PE and art. Most importantly, she advocated for embedding SEL into legal frameworks: "There has to be some SEL in every kid's BIP [Behavior Intervention Plan]. Every kid's

IEP." This policy incorporation would ensure continuity, regardless of staff changes, transforming SEL from an optional program into a vital component of special education services.

At the same time, teachers experienced deep identity shifts that made sustainability personally meaningful. T1's post-intervention advice to colleagues summed up this change: "Do it. Even if you don't think your kids will get it, some of them will." This acceptance of partial success as valuable marked a major shift from all-or-nothing thinking about curriculum implementation. Teachers began to view SEL not as an additional program, but as an essential part of their practice. T2 described this philosophical change: "We are nothing without our social-emotional skills. We can do math and reading all day, but if we're not getting along or solving problems with our peers, we're not really getting anywhere." This identity shift showed in teachers' enthusiasm to become mentors themselves. T1 offered to "give them pointers on how I adapted it for my kiddos... invite them to watch," while T3 planned to share her modifications "so that way they didn't have to go rewrite the script again." This willingness to share both successes and failures reflected newfound professional confidence and a commitment to collective improvement.

The evidence indicated that sustainability arises from the connection between external structures and internal motivation. T4, despite encountering significant implementation issues such as technology failures and insufficient training, showed genuine enthusiasm: "I actually enjoyed the whole process. I like doing Second Step." A1 noted steady but consistent improvement: "We just see an increase in their fidelity with implementing the program," indicating internalized commitment rather than simple compliance. T2's reflection captured the dual focus that made sustainability likely: "It just kind of helped show me how important it really is, and how much it's really changed the kids' mindsets, not only about learning, but about each other." This recognition of both student impact and professional growth suggested that SEL instruction had become a key part of teachers' professional identity, ensuring persistence beyond external support.

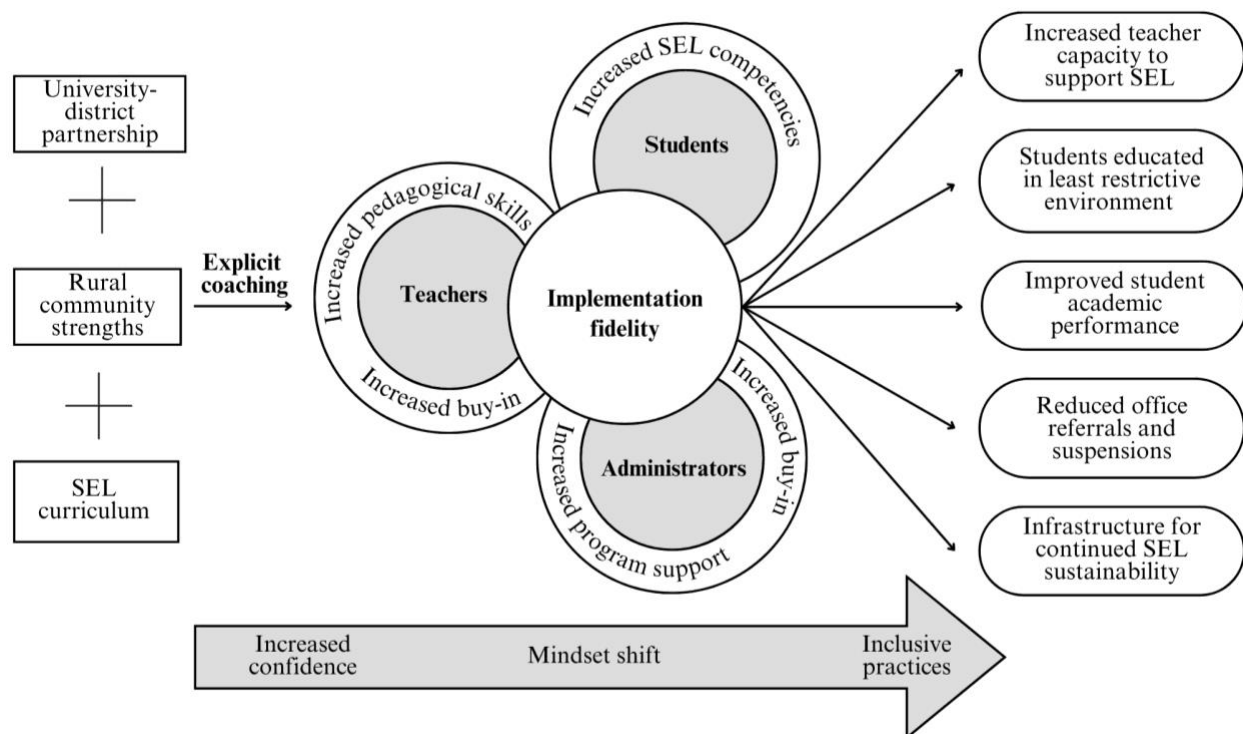
Discussion

A rich body of literature notes the positive impacts of SEL, including improved peer relationships, school functioning, and academic achievement (Cipriano et al., 2023). However, these gains have not been universally observed. Students receiving special education and related services have been understudied, particularly those from rural areas, where unique opportunities and challenges are prevalent (Berry & Gravelle, 2013; Rude & Miller, 2018). These contextual factors may play a role in overall program acceptance as well as implementation fidelity, a critical component of SEL effectiveness (Gage, 2025; Gage et al., 2025). The purpose of this study was to explore teacher coaching and the impact on implementation fidelity of Second Step® in a rural public school with special education teachers. The lessons learned from Deep Pines School provide insight into the needs of rural teachers implementing SEL curricula. Findings suggest that a brief, explicit coaching model was effective not only in increasing fidelity of implementation but also in improving classroom management and climate, ultimately leading to sustainable implementation.

To understand how the coaching intervention achieved these outcomes, a theory of change was developed to illustrate the mechanisms through which brief, targeted coaching can create lasting impact in rural special education settings (see Figure 2). This theory is derived from the mixed-methods findings and helps clarify the interconnected pathways from initial inputs to long-term outcomes. The theory identifies three essential inputs: (1) university/district partnership, which proved crucial for system-level support; (2) access to an evidence-based SEL curriculum (Second Step); and (3) rural community strengths (strong relationships among educators, nimble administration able to make programmatic changes, educators with deep ties to students and the community). These inputs catalyzed multiple simultaneous processes. At the administrative level, superintendents and building administrators developed a new perspective for viewing SEL as essential rather than optional. At the teacher level, increased buy-in emerged alongside improved pedagogical skills, leading to greater confidence and ultimately more inclusive practices. Students began to demonstrate improved SEL competencies, which reinforced teacher commitment. Critically, these changes prompted concrete planning for sustainability. The ultimate outcomes extend beyond immediate implementation success. As students transition to their zone schools, they are expected to show stronger SEL skills, improved academic results, and fewer disciplinary actions.

The shifts in mindset among teachers and administrators, from viewing SEL as inappropriate for students with disabilities to recognizing it as essential, create conditions for sustained implementation beyond the coaching period. The theory of change illuminates how the coaching intervention addressed multiple barriers simultaneously, as evidenced by the specific transformations observed at Deep Pines School. Prior to coaching, three of the teachers had watched the training video, while one teacher had neither watched the video nor begun implementation, despite being directed to do so by the administration. None of the teachers were aware that the program allowed for adaptations in scenarios to meet student needs. During pre-interviews, all the teachers expressed concern (prior to participating in coaching) that Second Step® is unlikely to be appropriate for their students. During post interviews, teachers shared that the program scenarios could be easily adapted and that students were able to actively participate in lessons with accommodations, including visual supports and activity modifications. One teacher shared that the reinforcement from coaching clarified that the practices she implemented were both evidence-based and effective.

Figure 2
Theory of Change



Perhaps most importantly, the coaching intervention fundamentally changed teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities. Before coaching, all teachers doubted that Second Step® was suitable for their students with disabilities. This deficit-focused perspective underwent significant shifts throughout the coaching process. Post-intervention interviews showed that teachers no longer just believed their students could benefit from the curriculum, but also actively supported its continuation. As T1 told colleagues: "Do it. Even if you don't think your kids will get it, some of them will." This shift from skepticism to advocacy marks a profound mindset change: teachers have moved from seeing their students through a lens of limitation to one of possibility. Such a change in beliefs is crucial, as teacher expectations greatly impact student outcomes.

Like many rural schools, Deep Pines faces significant resource shortages and limited time for professional development. The effectiveness of this coaching model has important implications for resource-limited rural schools. With only 75 to 90 minutes per teacher beyond regular instruction (including email communication, technology setup, and six to seven brief post-conferences), the intervention achieved impressive results. This small time investment led to: (1) all teachers exceeding 85% implementation fidelity, with most reaching 100%, (2) quick improvements in classroom management and climate for three out of four teachers; and (3) significant shifts in teacher beliefs about student potential. The maintained high level of treatment fidelity is a critical component that could explain differences in SEL treatment outcomes (Gage, 2025; Gage et al., 2025). The return on investment is especially notable since these 90 minutes of coaching triggered lasting changes in both teaching techniques and professional identity. For rural schools

with limited professional development time and resources, this model demonstrates that meaningful change can be achieved without requiring large time commitments. Instead, focused, non-evaluative coaching can produce substantial benefits when aligned with teachers' immediate needs and seamlessly integrated into their natural teaching environment.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, student-level academic data were not collected. Academic progress was reported by teachers and administrators. Students worked on individualized goals with individualized progress monitoring. Second, observations were not double-coded to support reliability. Third, teachers served students with a variety of support needs, which required different amounts of time and reinforcement to ensure student mastery of key concepts. This additional time for program implementation may not have been consistent across classrooms.

Future Directions

Future work should scale the coaching model and collect student-level data on academic and behavioral outcomes. This is particularly important for rural schools and for students with disabilities, who are among the most likely to benefit from SEL instruction but are also among the least likely to be included in research endeavors (Hassani & Schwab, 2021). Without further evaluating the use of interventions in rural communities, even those supported by research, such as SEL interventions, it is impossible to identify factors that may impact their effectiveness and acceptability in rural communities.

Conclusion

This case study illustrates the outcomes of a brief, explicit coaching intervention that led to fidelity in the implementation of the Second Step® SEL curriculum. Both teachers and administrators reported enhanced confidence and mindset shifts that ultimately lead to more inclusive practices. The authors wish to thank the teachers and administrators who opened their doors to their classrooms and generously shared their feedback to support the development of a brief coaching intervention to support SEL program implementation.

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