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Ripples of connection (ROC): an occupation-based social emotional skills training for staff in informal educational settings serving neurodiverse youth

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RIPPLES OF CONNECTION (ROC):

AN OCCUPATION-BASED SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS TRAINING

FOR STAFF IN INFORMAL EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

SERVING NEURODIVERSE YOUTH

by

ILIA SRYGLEY

B.S., Texas Women's University, 2005
M.S.O.T., Texas Women's University, 2007

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Approved by

Academic Mentor _____

Nicole Villegas, OTD, MSOT, OTR/L
Teaching Professional of Occupational Therapy

Academic Advisor _____

Karen Jacobs, Ed.D., OT, OTR, CPE, FAOTA
Associate Dean for Digital Learning & Innovation
Clinical Professor of Occupational Therapy

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my two neurospicy children. Your courage, creativity, and authenticity inspire every part of this work. You are daily reminders of why inclusive and compassionate spaces matter. The joy you bring, along with the beautiful symphony of chaos that fills our home, remains one of my deepest sources of pride, gratitude, peace, and purpose.

There were countless moments when I had to choose school over being fully present with you, and each time, a small part of me ached. My hope is that the work created from those missed moments will become something that gives back to you, something that shows you that every hour spent apart was transformed into something meaningful, something that helps you and other children feel understood, included, and safe. This project is, in many ways, my love letter to the two of you and to the world I hope to help create for you.

And to my husband, whose foundational love and wonderfully ridiculous support carried me through every late night, every moment of doubt, and every erratic mood swing. This work reflects our shared belief in creating a mosaic of love and connection that deepens with each chapter of our life together.

Tyler, River, and Arden, I love you with my whole heart, my whole life, and beyond.

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ILIA SRYGLEY

Boston University, Sargent College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, 2026

Major Professor: Nicole Villegas, OTD, MSOT, OTR/L, Teaching Professional of Occupational Therapy

ABSTRACT

Youth across the United States are experiencing increasing emotional and mental health challenges that affect functioning, social connection, and participation within community settings. These challenges are particularly pronounced in informal educational settings (IES), such as afterschool programs and summer camps, where staff often receive limited training to support neurodivergent children, including those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), sensory processing differences, or emotional regulation challenges. Misinterpretation of neurodivergent responses may result in punitive or exclusionary practices, contributing to increased distress and reduced opportunities for social participation and engagement. Ripples of Connection (ROC) was developed to address this gap. ROC is a staff training program designed to enhance emotional intelligence, interoceptive awareness, mindfulness, and connection-based practices among IES staff. The program aims to increase staff confidence, promote co-regulation, and foster inclusive environments that support engagement, belonging, and emotional well-being for neurodiverse groups in IES.

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CHAPTER ONE – Introduction

Children across the United States are experiencing rising rates of mental health concerns, including anxiety, depression, sensory dysregulation, and emotional distress (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). These trends reflect what has been widely identified as a national youth mental health crisis (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024; Stephenson, 2021). These mental health challenges extend well beyond home and school settings and significantly shape children's experiences in informal educational settings (IES), such as afterschool programs and summer camps. More than 10 million children participate in IES annually, making these programs critical yet often overlooked environments for social, emotional, and relational development (Afterschool Alliance, 2023). Informal educational settings provide essential opportunities for belonging, exploration, autonomy, and peer connection, all of which are foundational for healthy development and long-term well-being (Vandell et al., 2020)

Despite their importance, many IES lack the educational, relational, and structural support necessary to meet the needs of today's youth, particularly neurodivergent children. Rates of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), emotional dysregulation, sensory processing differences, and trauma exposure continue to rise, and these difficulties often manifest in dynamic, group-based environments (Grossman & Avital, 2023; Lane & Reynolds, 2019). For many neurodivergent youth, particularly those with ADHD combined with sensory processing differences and emotional dysregulation, the demands of IES can interact with their needs in ways that transform

potentially enriching experiences into instances of misunderstanding, exclusion, or emotional strain (Grossman & Avital, 2023; Lane & Reynolds, 2019). Without evidence-informed strategies to support emotional safety and regulation, IES may inadvertently exacerbate the youth's feelings of overwhelm, misunderstanding, or exclusion.

The prevalence of ADHD continues to rise, with approximately 11 percent of U.S. children and adolescents carrying a diagnosis (Reuben & Elgaddal, 2024). ADHD is understood as a neurodevelopmental and neurocognitive condition that often persists into adulthood and is associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, substance use, and accidental injury (Franke et al., 2018; Kidwell, 2025; Sibley et al., 2021). Many youths with ADHD also experience emotional regulation challenges, lower emotional intelligence, heightened sensory reactivity, and difficulties forming or maintaining peer relationships (Champ et al., 2023; Grossman & Avital, 2023; Lane & Reynolds, 2019). These challenges often intensify in unstructured or semi-structured environments that require flexible social navigation, emotional awareness, and adaptive communication. When expectations are high for participation and self-management, but support is limited, neurodivergent youth are especially vulnerable to feeling misunderstood, stigmatized, or excluded.

Despite serving millions of children annually, IES staff across the United States often receive limited preparation for supporting neurodivergent youth. Literature suggests that conventional afterschool programs and summer camps rarely incorporate neurodiversity-specific social-emotional learning or regulation-focused training unless intentionally designed to do so. A thorough appraisal of current programs also shows

minimal evidence that IES programs offer such specialized preparation. Without foundational training in trauma-informed neurodiversity-affirming frameworks, behaviors rooted in sensory overload or emotional distress may be misinterpreted as intentional misbehavior (Grossman & Avital, 2023). These misinterpretations frequently lead to punitive or exclusionary responses that heighten distress, reinforce negative self-perceptions, diminish belonging, and increase longer-term mental health risks (French, 2019; Jung, 2023; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025). The absence of evidence-informed social-emotional support in IES represents a critical and under-addressed gap that contributes to the broader youth mental health crisis and impacts neurodivergent children.

Staff–youth interactions within IES have a profound influence on daily experiences and developmental outcomes, yet many staff enter these roles with limited preparation. High turnover, insufficient resources, and the emotional labor inherent in youth-serving positions further contribute to staff stress and burnout (Martin 2019; White et al., 2020). Burnout reduces empathy, diminishes relational capacity, and increases reactive or compliance-focused responses that do not support emotional regulation or belonging (Burić, 2025; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Martin et al., 2017; White et al., 2020). When staff are not emotionally regulated, their ability to provide warm, attuned interactions is compromised, and reliance on suppressive or reactive strategies increases (Burić, 2025; Martin et al., 2017). In this way, staff distress and youth distress can become mutually reinforced, creating cycles of dysregulation within settings designed to be safe and supportive.

While research underscores the value of emotional intelligence, interoception,

mindfulness-based approaches, sensory awareness, and relational attunement, these domains are largely studied in isolation. Staff training in IES that includes all of these competencies has yet to be identified. As a result, staff may not learn how to identify early physiological cues of emotional escalation, understand the neurobiological foundations of behavior, or employ relational strategies that foster co-regulation and psychological safety. Without these frameworks, behaviors rooted in sensory or emotional overload are likely to be interpreted as intentional misbehavior, leading to staff responses that unintentionally escalate rather than de-escalate distress (French, 2019; Grossman & Avital, 2023; Lane & Reynolds, 2019; Mahler et al., 2022; Porges, 2011).

Occupational therapy has a long-standing commitment to supporting participation, belonging, and emotional well-being, all of which align with the needs of IES environments. According to the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework (AOTA, 2020), emotional regulation, social participation, and supportive environments are essential components of meaningful engagement. From this perspective, behaviors that appear challenging are not understood as willful issues but as indicators that environmental and relational support are misaligned with the child's needs. IES settings have significant potential to foster inclusive and developmentally supportive environments because they are meant to support peer interaction, exploration, play, relational learning, and co-occupation.

The *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* program was developed to address these needs. *ROC* is a prevention-focused, community-centered initiative designed to equip IES staff with strategies rooted in emotional intelligence, interoception, mindfulness-based

regulation, and connection-based relational practices. Instead of emphasizing compliance or behavioral control, *ROC* reframes behavior as communication shaped by sensory experience, emotional need, and the innate desire for safety, autonomy, and belonging. *ROC* addresses a critical gap in professional development and seeks to strengthen staff capacity to serve as attuned, regulatory partners for the children they support.

Ripples of Connection positions IES staff as everyday agents of mental health promotion. The training curriculum incorporates experiential learning, reflective practice, real-world scenarios, and neuro-affirming communication strategies. Staff learn to recognize emotional and bodily cues in themselves and in youth, respond through co-regulation rather than control, apply mindful communication techniques, and adapt sensory and social environments to support regulation and participation (AOTA, 2020; Mahler et al., 2022; Porges, 2011). *ROC* aims to reduce exclusionary practices, strengthen staff confidence, enhance peer inclusion, and create emotionally safe environments that support regulation and participation. Expected outcomes are increased staff competence in social-emotional support, improved youth engagement, and greater use of relational, neuro-affirming practices within IES settings. By supporting both youth and the adults who serve them, *ROC* aligns with evidence demonstrating that emotionally regulated, well-supported staff foster environments characterized by warmth, structure, and engagement (Burić, 2025; Martin et al., 2017). Strengthening staff competence within IES has the potential to improve daily experiences for neurodivergent youth and to expand access to mental health–supportive practices in community environments where children spend substantial time.

Ultimately, the vision of *Ripples of Connection* reflects the belief that every child deserves to feel authentically heard, genuinely understood, affirmed in their dignity, and supported in ways that foster safety, connection, and growth. When staff are equipped with resources grounded in evidence-based knowledge, reflective awareness, and empathetic relational practices, they become catalysts for connection, resilience, and belonging for the youth they serve. Trained staff can transform everyday interactions into therapeutic opportunities that influence social confidence, meaningful participation, and emotional well-being. Through these ripples of connection, informal educational settings can be nurturing, inclusive spaces where neurodivergent youth are not only accommodated but supported to thrive.

CHAPTER TWO – Project Theoretical and Evidence Base

Across the United States, children are experiencing unprecedented emotional, behavioral, and developmental strain. Data from the past decade consistently show rising rates of anxiety, depression, sensory dysregulation, and other forms of emotional distress among school-aged youth (Hassani et al., 2024; Lane & Reynolds, 2019; Olczyk et al., 2024). National reports confirm this escalation, with recent analyses documenting that anxiety among children and adolescents increased from 7.1% in 2016 to 10.6% in 2022, while depression rose from 3.2% to 4.6% during the same period, reflecting a clear and sustained upward trend (Rohman, 2025). The U.S. Surgeon General has emphasized the impact of this crisis, noting significant increases in youth depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and identifying mental health as a pressing public health priority (Office of the Surgeon General, 2025). Broader epidemiological analyses suggest that mental illness has become a leading contributor to the health burden of adolescents and emerging adults, and that these increases represent true shifts in population well-being rather than improved detection alone (McGorry, et al., 2025). Among these conditions, ADHD remains one of the most common neurodevelopmental and neurocognitive diagnoses reported in childhood (Massoodi et al., 2024; Payen et al., 2022; Reuben & Elgaddal, 2024). These rising mental health and neurodevelopmental needs extend into afterschool programs, summer camps, and other informal education settings (IES) where children spend a considerable portion of their time. Staff working in these programs encounter increasing levels of emotional and behavioral complexity, yet are often unprepared to respond effectively (Afterschool Alliance, 2023; Burić, 2025)

Informal education settings provide opportunities for connection, exploration, and social development that complement but differ from the routines and expectations of formal schooling (Burić, 2025). Research demonstrates that high-quality IES participation supports social competence, academic resilience, and long-term well-being, particularly when environments are emotionally safe and relationally supportive (Afterschool Alliance, 2023; Burić, 2025; Clark et al., 2024; Grist et al., 2025; Ranieri, et al., 2024; Vandell et al., 2020). Despite this potential, IES often lack the structural preparation and training necessary to meet the needs of neurodivergent youth, especially those with ADHD, sensory differences, or emotional regulation challenges (Burić, 2025). The disparity between rising youth emotional needs and IES's limited capacity to respond effectively forms the central problem described in this chapter.

Visual Representation of the Problem

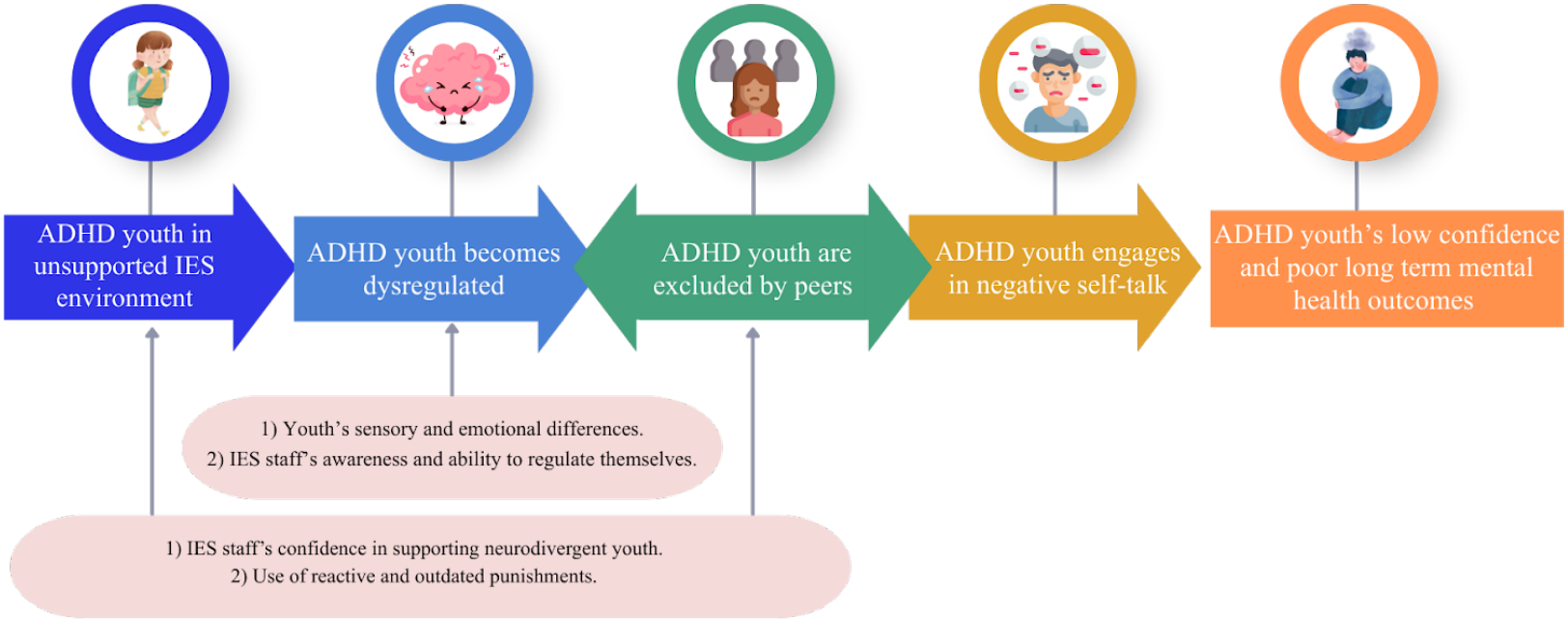
The model of the problem (Figure 2.1) begins with ADHD youth entering informal educational settings (IES) such as afterschool programs, recreation programs, and summer camps. These settings are considered unsupported when both staff and youth do not have the systemic structures and personal skills to navigate the dynamic physical and social environment. Unsupported IES are shaped by two key moderators: staff confidence in supporting neurodivergent youth and the continued use of outdated, punitive responses. These increase the likelihood that ADHD youth become dysregulated. ADHD youth dysregulation is increasingly more likely if they have sensory and emotional differences at baseline. Additionally, if staff are unaware and unable to regulate themselves when caring for ADHD youth, then they both may become

dysregulated and reactive.

Dysregulation in ADHD youth leads to difficulties in social interactions with peers. In these settings, dysregulated behaviors are often misinterpreted as intentional or oppositional, which leads to peer exclusion and fewer opportunities for positive social interaction. IES staff's confidence in addressing peer exclusion and their potential use of reactive and outdated punishments may increase the likelihood of further negative social interactions. This exclusion by peers can both increase youth's dysregulation and lead to negative self-talk. Over time, negative self-talk leads to a decline in self-confidence, making it increasingly difficult to initiate, sustain, or repair social connections. Ultimately, this pattern leads to long-term mental health risks, especially when staff are unsupported, unable to regulate themselves, and rely on reactive or outdated punishments rather than connection-based, relational strategies.

Figure 2.1

Explanatory Model



Youth with ADHD in Informal Educational Settings

Approximately 11% of U.S. youth are formally diagnosed with ADHD (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2024). Professionals across education, health care, and community programs frequently report higher rates of ADHD-like challenges in daily functioning than formal diagnostic statistics reflect (Franke et al., 2018). These observations suggest that many children remain undiagnosed or under-identified (Franke et al., 2018; Grossman & Avital, 2023; Lane & Reynolds, 2019; Reuben & Elgaddal, 2024). ADHD is increasingly understood as a complex neurodevelopmental and neurocognitive condition extending beyond inattention and hyperactivity to include emotional impulsivity, frustration intolerance, rejection sensitivity, low distress tolerance, and chronic difficulties with behavioral regulation (Champ et al., 2023; Graziano & Garcia, 2016; Grygiel et al., 2018; Massoodi et al., 2024; Maxwell et al., 2024; Na and Mikami, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2023). Findings from a recent comparative study show that adolescents with ADHD display heightened sensory reactivity across movement, auditory, touch, and visual domains, suggesting elevated vulnerability in dynamic, high-stimulus environments (Fabio et al., 2024)

Sensory processing differences frequently co-occur with ADHD, such as sensory over-responsivity, reduced ability to filter environmental stimuli, and difficulties maintaining physiological homeostasis in dynamic social settings (Fabio et al., 2024; Grossman & Avital, 2023; Lane & Reynolds, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2024). When sensory input like bright lights, unpredictable noise, crowded spaces, odors, temperature shifts, or rapid environmental pacing exceed a child's capacity to regulate, the nervous system can

move quickly into a state of overload or overstimulation (Lane & Reynolds, 2019; Maxwell et al., 2024). These episodes of sensory overstimulation often present as sudden shifts in behavior, ranging from heightened emotional reactivity to withdrawal or shutdown (Fabio et al., 2024; Grossman & Avital, 2023). Adults who are unaware of the physiological and sensory origins of these responses may misinterpret them as intentional misbehavior, defiance, or poor self-control rather than manifestations of neurobiological stress (Fabio et al., 2024). Youth with ADHD also experience elevated rates of peer rejection, conflictual interactions, and social misunderstandings compared to neurotypical peers, particularly within unstructured or fast-paced group environments (Cueli et al., 2020; D'Agati et al., 2019; Graziano & Garcia, 2016; Grossman & Avital, 2023; Grygiel et al., 2018; Massoodi et al., 2024; Maxwell et al., 2024; Na & Mikami, 2018; Nangle et al., 2010; Nguyen et al., 2023; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025). Over time, these social experiences interact with internalized negative self-talk, diminished self-efficacy, and stigmatized identity development, cumulatively shaping long-term participation and mental well-being.

Environmental and Relational Factors in Informal Educational Settings

Informal educational settings are emotionally and socially dynamic environments, with multiple transitions, group expectations, various and unpredictable sensory input, and intermittent adult supervision. (Afterschool Alliance, 2023; Burić, 2025). These features can be developmentally detrimental if staff cannot provide structure and co-regulation. These settings can be even more dysregulating when there is a lack of staff training in emotional support, neurodiversity, or trauma-informed practice. Many IES do

not include specialized professional development addressing emotional intelligence, interoception, trauma-informed care, or neurodiversity-affirming frameworks (Burić, 2025; Ranieri, et al., 2024; Steed & Roach, 2017). There is minimal representation of such training in peer-reviewed studies of afterschool programs or camps, indicating a substantial gap between existing emotional needs and available supports. This echoes national survey findings that nearly eight in ten youth-serving professionals report inadequate preparation to respond to behavioral and emotional challenges (Afterschool Alliance, 2023).

Within IES, environmental factors such as noise, large groups, unpredictable routines, and limited access to quiet or sensory-friendly spaces significantly increase sensory and emotional load, reducing children's capacity for meaningful engagement (Fabio et al., 2024). These conditions are especially challenging for neurodivergent youth, who may experience heightened vulnerability to sensory stimulation, overwhelm, withdrawal, and exclusion in environments lacking sensory reset areas or resources (Clément et al., 2022; Finnigan, 2024; Grossman and Avital, 2023; Noddings, 2017; Ranieri, et al., 2024). Without this preparation and training, staff may interpret behaviors rooted in sensory overload, anxiety, or distress as intentional misbehavior rather than as communication of unmet needs (Grossman & Avital, 2023; Hossain & Bain, 2025; Lane & Reynolds, 2019). Punitive or exclusionary responses, common in the absence of relational or regulation-focused alternatives, reinforce cycles of misunderstanding and escalate dysregulation (Cueli et al., 2020; D'Agati et al., 2019; French, 2019, Grossman & Avital, 2023; Mitchell & Greer, 2024).

Staff Competence, Systemic Barriers, and Burnout

IES staff often enter their roles with limited formal training in behavior support, emotional regulation, or neurodiversity, a challenge compounded by high turnover, minimal supervisory structures, and constrained resources (Collie & Perry, 2019, Hossain & Bain, 2025; Martin & Ochsner, 2016; Ranieri, et al., 2024). These workforce conditions contribute to elevated stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue. Burnout is associated with reduced empathy, decreased responsiveness, and increased reliance on reactive, compliance-focused strategies, particularly during moments of conflict or emotional escalation (Burić, 2025, Collie & Perry, 2019). When adults are unable to remain calm, supportive, and relationally available to youth, it can lead to interactions that inadvertently escalate rather than de-escalate youth dysregulation. These dynamics create reciprocal reinforcement events in which youth dysregulation fuels staff reactivity, and staff reactivity amplifies youth distress, resulting in patterns that mirror the pathway depicted in Figure 2.1.

Consequences for Youth's Participation, Identity, and Mental Health

Unsupported environments and reactive staff responses have documented impacts on social relationships, self-talk, participation, and long-term mental health. Neurodivergent youth are particularly susceptible to the cumulative effects of exclusion, peer misunderstanding, and perceived failure (Champ et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2024; Cueli et al., 2020; D'Agati et al., 2019; Grossman & Avital, 2023; Na & Mikami, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2023; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025; Ranieri, et al., 2024). Punitive responses are missed opportunities for co-regulation, and public correction contributes to negative

self-talk and internalized stigma. Over time, these experiences erode self-confidence and increase vulnerability to anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Cueli et al., 2020; D'Agati et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2024; Mitchell & Greer, 2024). When peer exclusion and adult misunderstanding co-occur, neurodivergent youth receive fewer opportunities to build peer relationships, cooperatively play, or have meaning experiences that cultivate belonging (Burić, 2025; Cueli et al., 2020; D'Agati et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2024; Ranieri, et al., 2024). These missed developmental experiences contribute to emotional overload, diminished resilience, and patterns of disengagement that extend beyond childhood. (Lowe et at., 2024; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025; Ranieri, et al., 2024)

Theoretical Foundations

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory explains behavior as the result of reciprocal interactions among cognitive processes, environmental conditions, and learned behaviors (Bandura, 1986). IES staff knowledge, skills, and perceived competence influence the strategies they use to support youth. Social cognitive theory research shows that self-efficacy develops when adults receive competent modeling, feedback, and environmental reinforcement, conditions that are seldom present in IES (Martin & Ochsner, 2016). Without this input, adults are less likely to maintain consistent, reflective behavior, especially during emotionally charged moments (Aldrup et al., 2023, Burić, 2025; Gitome et al., 2025). The result is reactive rather than responsive behavior from adults, reinforcing the series represented in Figure 2.1.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are essential for psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Neurodivergent youth, including those with ADHD, often encounter environments that undermine these needs, particularly when rigid behavioral expectations conflict with their regulatory capacities. Autonomy-supportive environments, by contrast, buffer stress, strengthen engagement, and promote resilience (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When staff understand how to scaffold skills and foster relational safety, youth internalize regulation strategies more effectively and experience greater belonging.

Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal Theory describes how physiological states influence communication, learning, and behavior (Porges, 2011). When environments or interactions cue danger, children shift into dysregulation and defensive states that impair social engagement (Porges, 2011). Attuned staff can help shift youth into regulated states through predictable routines, warm tone, and non-threatening relational presence (Mansoor, 2024). These physiological mechanisms support the use of intentional co-regulation in informal educational settings.

Interoception

Interoception is the perception and interpretation of internal bodily sensations. It provides the physiological and cognitive foundation for self-regulation, emotional awareness, and adaptive participation in daily contexts (Clark et al., 2022; Grist et al.,

2025; Price & Hooven, 2018; Tan et al., 2023). Youth with ADHD often show diminished interoceptive awareness, which impairs their ability to recognize early signs of stress or emotional escalation (Clark et al., 2024; Grist et al., 2025; Mahler et al., 2024). Studies show that improving interoceptive awareness enhances emotional regulation and daily participation (Clark et al., 2022; Mahler et al., 2024; Martin & Ochsner, 2016). When staff are unaware of interoceptive processes, they may misinterpret dysregulation as willful behavior rather than as a signal of internal distress. Children receive inconsistent responses that reinforce negative self-talk and exclusion (Champ et al., 2023; French, 2019; Grist et al., 2024; Grist et al., 2025). Building staff awareness of interoceptive processes is therefore integral to fostering co-regulation and emotional understanding within IES.

Collectively, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Polyvagal Theory, and interoception guide the understanding of the model of the problem (Figure 2.1) as well as the proposed solution. SCT explains why adult training and skill development are essential; SDT emphasizes motivational and relational conditions; Polyvagal Theory clarifies the physiological foundations of safety and connection; and interoception is a sense that supports emotional awareness. Each of these theories contributes to a holistic explanation of why unsupported environments can lead to dysregulation, exclusion, and diminished self-confidence for youth with ADHD.

Conclusion

The developmental, emotional, and relational experiences of youth with ADHD are profoundly shaped by the environments and adult responses they encounter in

informal educational settings. Evidence across psychology, education, and occupational therapy highlights how sensory demands, relational dynamics, and staff competency interact to either support or undermine regulation, belonging, and participation. When environments lack predictability, co-regulation, and neurodiversity-affirming practices, youth with ADHD face disproportionate risks for overwhelm, exclusion, and negative identity formation. Conversely, research across Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Polyvagal Theory, and interoception underscores that safe, attuned, and autonomy-supportive environments can interrupt cycles of dysregulation and foster resilience, confidence, and engagement. Despite the critical importance of these factors, research reveals a gap in evidence-informed staff training designed specifically for informal educational settings. This creates both an urgent need and a clear opportunity for occupational therapy to offer relational, sensory-responsive, and emotionally intelligent approaches that enhance the well-being of all youth. Collectively, these findings provide the conceptual foundation for *Ripples of Connection (ROC)*. Chapter 3 will build on this synthesis by examining existing training models in youth-serving settings and identifying the components necessary to design a comprehensive, social-emotional, evidence-based staff training intervention for IES.

CHAPTER THREE – Overview of Current Approaches and Methods

Informal educational settings (IES), such as after-school programs and summer camps serving children ages five through twelve, are increasingly recognized as essential environments for youth development (Afterschool Alliance, 2023). These settings offer opportunities for social learning, exploration, emotional growth, and relationship-building that extend beyond the school day. Yet, many children in these programs experience emotional, sensory, or behavioral challenges that require skilled, compassionate, and developmentally informed responses from staff.

To understand how well current training approaches prepare staff to meet these needs, this chapter examines social-emotional learning, inclusion, trauma-informed practice, connection-based methods, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and emerging interoception-informed frameworks. These components collectively represent the skills and knowledge staff require to support neurodivergent youth, particularly those with attentional, sensory, or emotional regulation differences. While many programs recognize the need for staff training, there is no accessible, standardized model that guides what staff should learn or how these competencies should be implemented. As a result, the content, depth, and frequency of training vary substantially across providers.

The purpose of this chapter is to evaluate the current state of staff training in informal educational settings, with specific attention to how existing practices support, or fail to support, neurodivergent youth. To contextualize these issues, the chapter describes practices and programs from the past five to ten years across youth development, after-school education, educational psychology, occupational therapy, and related disciplines.

This literature review identifies the training components most used in IES, the theoretical foundations underlying these practices, the outcomes associated with their use, and the limitations that restrict their effectiveness.

Current Trainings in Informal Educational Settings

Across the United States, most IES organizations draw from a patchwork of training sources that may include social-emotional learning curricula, trauma-informed care workshops, behavior management modules, or privately developed protocols. However, these offerings are typically delivered as stand-alone sessions rather than as part of a cohesive professional development system. Staff often receive limited or no training on neurodiversity, emotional regulation strategies, age-appropriate developmental expectations, or inclusive practices, and they typically lack ongoing support to apply these concepts in daily interactions.

State requirements further shape the training landscape. In Colorado, for example, licensed youth programs must complete at least three hours of annual training in social-emotional learning, yet no standardized curriculum is provided, and programs are responsible for selecting or creating their own materials (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, 2024; Colorado Shines, n.d.; Colorado Office of Early Childhood, n.d.). As a result, training and carryover quality varies substantially between organizations, and evidence-based approaches are not consistently adopted. The absence of a unified system leads to variability in how SEL concepts are taught, how staff interpret behavior, and how programs approach inclusion for children with disabilities or sensory and emotional differences.

Larger workforce initiatives aim to bring coherence to this variability. The American Institutes for Research (AIR) has developed national core competencies that outline the essential knowledge and skills for youth development professionals, and these frameworks increasingly guide state policies and training infrastructures. Yet even with these competencies, many after-school and camp programs lack the staffing capacity, coaching systems, or professional development funding needed to implement them fully. Research from the Journal of Youth Development emphasizes that the youth development field remains fragmented, with inconsistent pathways for training, limited alignment between school-day and after-school systems, and insufficient investment in staff support (Borden et al., 2020).

Jilink et al. (2025) synthesized ten systematic reviews and meta-analyses of after-school programs serving children ages four through twelve and found consistent small-to-moderate improvements in self-perception, prosocial behavior, identity development, and perseverance across both general and content-specific afterschool programs. Importantly, program quality, experiential learning design, relational climate, and implementation fidelity emerged as critical moderators of effectiveness, reinforcing long-standing findings that social-emotional gains are strongest when staff are trained, supported, and able to apply relational and regulation practices with consistency. Programs delivered inconsistently or by undertrained staff showed negligible or even null effects, while programs with strong adult-child relationships, intentional design structures, and ongoing staff support demonstrated significant social-emotional improvements (Jilink et al., 2025). The authors conclude that implementation fidelity is a valuable variable

distinguishing impactful programs from those that fail to meet developmental goals (Jilink et al., 2025).

Existing training options demonstrate a shared desire to improve youth outcomes but lack an integrated, evidence-based framework tailored to the needs of neurodivergent children in informal settings. This fragmented landscape highlights the importance of developing comprehensive, multidisciplinary staff training programs that align with national competency frameworks while addressing the unique sensory, emotional, and relational needs of youth with ADHD and related neurodevelopmental differences.

Table 3.1 summarizes the programs, training sources, and instructional approaches and key takeaways described throughout this chapter, highlighting the diversity of existing models. Taken together, these findings illustrate the breadth of existing training models and the degree of variation in their structure, depth, and evidence base.

Table 3.1

Programs and Training Approaches Identified within the Research

Program / Source	Type of Program or Training Focus	Training Components / Approaches Used	Key Takeaways
SEL Programs (Various) CASEL, nd; Lawson et al. (2019), Shi & Cheung (2024), Ha et al. (2025)	Social-emotional learning training for staff	Explicit skill instruction, emotion regulation strategies, active practice, modeling, supportive adult–child relationships, mindfulness integration	SEL is effective when training includes practice, modeling, and coaching; inconsistent in IES settings

Newman (2020)	Out-of-school-time staff SEL training	Coaching and reflective supervision	Improves staff confidence and implementation fidelity
Walker (2023)	Youth worker SEL skill development	SEL competency strengthening through reflective practice	Increased relational quality and readiness to integrate SEL into programming
Mindfulness and Compassion-Based SEL Programs (Min et al., 2024)	SEL curriculum emphasizing emotional awareness, kindness, resilience	Attention training, compassion practices, mindfulness-based regulation	Improves empathy, regulation, resilience; sustained benefits over time
Interoception Research / Foundations Mahler et al. (2024), Clark et al. (2022), Grist et al. (2024)	Not formal programs in IES, but emerging components	Body-signal awareness, sensory, interoceptive integration, self-regulation strategies	Promising but not yet included in staff training; enhances self-regulation and participation
Sensory-Informed Practice Literature Schmitt & Schoen (2022), Grist et al. (2025)	OT-informed, sensory processing frameworks	Interpreting sensory cues, environmental modification, modulation support	Crucial for neurodivergent youth; missing from most IES trainings
Trauma-Informed Approaches Ekstrom & Ekstrom (2024)	Behavior interpretation and trauma-sensitive response	ABC model, trigger identification, function-based interpretation, proactive support	Moves staff from reactive discipline toward structured, supportive responses
Whole-Brain Child Framework – Siegel & Bryson (2014)	Neuro-relational trauma-informed model	Connection-before-correction, emotional attunement, co-regulation	Supports trauma-sensitive practices in IES
Power of Camp Inclusion – Dolyka et al. (2024)	Disability-awareness and inclusion training for camp staff	Pedagogical workshops, structured support phases, peer-mediated inclusion activities	Improves peer engagement and social participation among autistic youth

Camps on TRACKS – Maich et al. (2015)	Peer-mediated inclusion training	Training neurotypical peers to include autistic campers	Improves social interaction; increases inclusion culture
CASEL & AIR Core Competencies	National SEL and youth-development frameworks	Competency alignment, staff SEL skills, coaching and continuous improvement	Guides state policy but inconsistently applied in IES
Partnership for Children and Youth (2017)	Continuous improvement approach across school-day and after-school	Alignment of SEL systems, coaching, data-driven cycles	Supports implementation fidelity
Garst et al. (2019)	Advanced youth development staff training	Multi-session, structured professional development; applied practice; reflection; feedback cycles	Increases leadership capacity and improves organizational practice over time
Kolb & Kolb Experiential Learning – Kolb & Kolb (2018)	Experiential learning theory for staff development	Active experimentation, reflection, scenario-based practice, problem solving	Foundation for experiential and continuous training models
Robideau & Santi (2020)	Coaching-integrated workshop model	Workshops + ongoing coaching	Improves competence and real-world strategy application
Shanahan & Sheehan (2020)	Cohort-based learning and communities of practice	Peer learning, group problem solving, reflective communities	Builds professional identity and enhances implementation fidelity
California SEL Workforce Strategy – Vance & Goldberg (2020)	Statewide training alignment initiative	Competency alignment, statewide frameworks, SEL skill development	Strengthens consistency across programs

Levine & Viano (2025)	OST systematic review	Structured PD pathways, reflective supervision, intentional design	High-quality, supported implementation improves youth outcomes
Ranieri et al. (2024)	Inclusion training in IES	Adaptations for autism and ADHD, individualized strategies	Targeted inclusion practices improve participation

Social-Emotional Learning and Related Approaches

Current staff training in informal educational settings frequently includes social-emotional learning (SEL), although the depth and quality of implementation differ significantly across programs. SEL training often seeks to increase staff understanding of social emotional development, conflict resolution, and positive youth development (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). Additional studies highlight that SEL is most effective when staff receive quality instruction, opportunities for practice, and ongoing coaching (Greenberg, 2023; Lawson et al., 2019; Newman, 2020). For example, Newman's (2020) mixed-methods study of out-of-school time staff demonstrated that coaching and reflective supervision significantly improved staff confidence and fidelity when implementing SEL curricula. In a separate qualitative study, Walker (2023) reported that youth workers who strengthened their own SEL skills were able to create more relational, supportive environments and were better prepared to integrate SEL principles into daily programming.

These staff-focused studies align with findings from large-scale research syntheses. In a meta-analysis of evidence-based SEL programs, Lawson et al. (2019)

identified four essential components of effective SEL interventions: explicit skill instruction, active practice, supportive relationships with adults, and emotionally competent role modeling. Similarly, Shi & Cheung's (2024) recent meta-analysis of 49 SEL interventions found that programs integrating emotion regulation strategies and mindfulness-based activities produced stronger effects on resilience, peer interactions, and emotional well-being than programs relying on didactic lessons alone. A systematic review examining SEL across Grades 1 through 12 further showed that SEL programs improve academic, behavioral, and emotional outcomes, but only when staff receive adequate training and ongoing support (CASEL, n.d.a.; CASEL, n.d.b.; Ha et al., 2025). Preschool research provides comparable findings. Ștefan et al. (2022) reported that classroom-wide SEL interventions improved prosocial behavior and reduced emotional difficulties, but these improvements depended on high-quality, sustained professional development for educators.

Despite a strong evidence base, SEL is often implemented inconsistently in informal educational settings. Many after-school and camp programs adopt SEL curricula or toolkits yet do not include the coaching, modeling, or reflective supervision that research identifies as essential for long-term effectiveness (Lawson et al., 2019; Newman, 2020; Shanahan & Sheehan, 2020). Large-scale syntheses emphasize that SEL programs only achieve meaningful impact when staff receive explicit instruction, guided practice, and ongoing implementation support (CASEL, n.d.; CASEL, 2020; Ha et al., 2025; Jilink et al., 2025). However, in practice, SEL is frequently reduced to one-time workshops, orientation-week activities, or prepackaged lesson menus that lack the depth needed for

real-time application of relational and regulatory strategies (Borden et al., 2020; NIOST, 2023; Robideau & Santi, 2020). Without continuous coaching and opportunities for active reflection, staff struggle to translate SEL principles into moment-to-moment interactions, particularly when supporting neurodivergent youth who benefit from consistent modeling, co-regulation, and emotionally competent environments (Ranieri et al., 2024; Walker, 2023). As a result, SEL in IES is widely valued but rarely implemented with the fidelity required to meet the sensory, emotional, and developmental needs of neurodiverse youth.

Although SEL remains the most common framework, contemporary research increasingly highlights the importance of mindfulness, emotional intelligence, connection-based approaches, and early interoception awareness for supporting children's regulation and participation, even though these components are rarely included in staff training (Mahler et al., 2024; Min et al., 2024; Tan et al., 2023). These shifts in research reflect a growing recognition that staff require competencies beyond behavioral management, particularly when working with youth who experience sensory or emotional differences. These approaches are grounded in established theoretical frameworks. Social cognitive theory highlights the influence of staff modeling on youth behavior, since children learn by observing emotionally regulated and empathic adults (Bandura, 2001). Self-determination theory further underscores that youth thrive when their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported, making relational and strengths-based approaches especially important (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

At the same time, researchers caution that informal educational settings are not

inherently inclusive simply because they are unstructured or enjoyable. Berman (2020) argues that without intentional training and attention to equity, informal learning environments may inadvertently reproduce social exclusion, particularly for neurodivergent youth or those with marginalized identities. This underscores the need for staff training that explicitly addresses trauma-sensitive practice, belonging, and connection as foundational elements of high-quality programming.

Together, current SEL and related training components in IES demonstrate both strengths and limitations. While evidence supports the effectiveness of SEL, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and relational approaches, these components are often taught in isolation, inconsistently supported, or lacking ongoing coaching. As a result, staff are not fully equipped to implement the comprehensive, sensory-informed, and emotionally attuned strategies required to support neurodivergent youth in busy, dynamic IES environments. Yet even with these expanded approaches, significant gaps remain in areas critical for supporting neurodivergent youth.

Emerging and Underdeveloped Components in Current Training Models

While SEL, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence training represent researched areas of practice, emerging components related to interoception, sensory processing, and occupational therapy frameworks remain underdeveloped within informal educational settings. Interoceptive awareness, internal sensory awareness of one's body signals, enables individuals to recognize physiological cues, (i.e. as a racing heart, shallow/rapid breathing, or a queasy stomach) as indicators of emotional states, thereby creating opportunities to self-regulate before emotions escalate (Craig, 2003; Füstös et al., 2012;

Mahler et al., 2024). Formal and direct staff training in interoception within IES is not found in the research. However, its principles align closely with mindfulness and emotion-regulation strategies. Evidence is steadily building that targeting interoception can improve emotional regulation and participation for children (Mahler et al., 2024). For example, Clark et al. (2022) found that higher interoceptive awareness in children was positively associated with greater participation in daily activities, highlighting its potential to enhance engagement and self-control across contexts. Similarly, Grist et al. (2024) demonstrated that sensory processing and interoceptive awareness are intertwined, suggesting that interventions that integrate these domains may support more adaptive emotional and behavioral responses.

Sensory-informed strategies are notably absent from most training models, despite extensive occupational therapy literature documenting the influence of sensory processing patterns on youth participation, emotional expression, and social interactions (Grist et al., 2024; Grist et al., 2025; Schmitt & Schoen, 2022). Staff in informal educational settings often encounter sensory-seeking behavior, sensory overload, or difficulty with modulation, yet program training rarely provides tools to interpret sensory cues or adapt activities and environments accordingly.

These gaps reflect broader workforce challenges. NIOST (2023) highlights that staff often feel underprepared to support youth with complex emotional or developmental needs and emphasizes the necessity of deeper training structures that go beyond surface-level SEL instruction (NIOST, 2023). Without explicit preparation in interoception, sensory processing, or regulation strategies, staff may misinterpret behaviors or miss

opportunities to support self-regulation. By training staff to understand and intentionally integrate interoceptive practices into IES routines, programs can strengthen staff social-emotional skills including self-awareness, self-management, and empathy, while simultaneously fostering youth emotional intelligence. Staff who are mindful, emotionally attuned, and knowledgeable about interoceptive processes are better prepared to create supportive learning environments that promote youths' social-emotional growth and participation in meaningful activities.

Trauma-Informed Practice and Behavior Interpretation

Trauma-informed frameworks remain inconsistently represented in IES training, despite their relevance for youth who experience chronic stress, sensory vulnerability, or emotional dysregulation. Ekstrom and Ekstrom (2024) demonstrated that teaching staff to use the ABC model (Antecedent, Behavior, Consequence) helped shift responses from reactive discipline toward more structured, proactive support by enabling staff to identify triggers, interpret behavior function, and adjust the environment accordingly. Although the ABC model is grounded in behavior analytic principles rather than trauma-informed care, its emphasis on understanding the context and purpose of behaviors can complement trauma-sensitive practices when paired with relational attunement and emotional support.

This aligns with principles described in the Whole-Brain Child framework, which emphasizes connection and emotional attunement as prerequisites for behavior change (Siegel & Bryson, 2014). Trauma-informed approaches also intersect with interoception; when staff notice physiological cues of dysregulation in themselves and in youth, they are

better prepared to provide timely co-regulation and help children return to their optimal state of regulation (Rollins, 2024). Despite their relevance, such frameworks are rarely included in IES training, contributing to missed opportunities for early intervention and relational support.

Recent evidence also highlights the value of integrating mindfulness and compassion-based practices into social-emotional learning, particularly for children experiencing chronic stress or trauma. Min et al. (2024) evaluated a six-week Social Emotional and Ethical Learning program with third and fourth grade students following the first COVID-19 outbreak. The curriculum emphasized attention training, kindness, emotional awareness, and compassion-based resilience strategies (Min et al., 2024). Students demonstrated significant improvements in emotional regulation, empathy, social skills, and multiple dimensions of resilience including self-efficacy, tolerance of negative affect, supportive peer relations, and perceived control (Min et al., 2024). While some gains naturally declined over time, follow-up scores across most domains remained higher than pre-test levels, suggesting sustained benefit (Min et al., 2024). These findings reinforce that brief, structured, and relational mindfulness-based SEL programs can meaningfully support children's regulation and resilience.

Training in Neurodiversity and Inclusion

Effective support for neurodivergent youth requires staff training in inclusive, individualized strategies. Ranieri et al. (2024) identify a growing body of work demonstrating the benefits of targeted inclusion practices in IES, particularly when staff are trained to adapt programming for youth with autism, ADHD, and other

developmental differences. Dolyka et al. (2024) evaluated the Power of Camp Inclusion program, which trained camp-staff companions through pedagogical disability-awareness workshops and in-camp support phases. In this 10-day camp context, staff received preparatory training and participated in structured phases of inclusive peer and staff-mediated activities (Dolyka et al., 2024). Results showed improved peer engagement and social participation among autistic children (Dolyka et al., 2024). Although the published report does not provide a detailed session-by-session curriculum for the staff training (e.g., coaching frequency, modeling cycles, fidelity checks), the findings highlight that staff preparation beyond short orientations can contribute to meaningful inclusion outcomes in informal settings.

Peer-mediated approaches also demonstrate promise. Maich et al. (2015) found that Camps on TRACKS, which trains neurotypical peers to include autistic campers, improved social interaction and fostered a culture of empathy and inclusion. These inclusion-focused practices align with resilience research, which suggests that positive peer experiences enhance coping and self-esteem for neurodivergent youth (Qi et al., 2024). Beyond inclusion-specific approaches, the broader training literature highlights the importance of experiential and ongoing learning processes for staff skill development.

Experiential and Continuous Training Methods

As training models within informal educational settings evolve, it is increasingly evident in the research that staff benefit most from approaches that allow them to actively practice, reflect on, and refine their skills over time. Experiential learning theory underpins many successful training approaches in these environments and emphasizes

learning through doing, reflection, and applied problem-solving (Kolb and Kolb, 2018). Effective staff development incorporates active learning structures such as role-playing, scenario practice, and guided reflection to support integration of new strategies into daily routines (Kolb and Kolb, 2018). Robideau and Santi (2020) found that workshops combined with ongoing coaching improved staff competence and increased use of newly learned skills during programming. Newman (2020) similarly highlighted that coaching fosters communities of support and shared problem-solving, both of which strengthen staff confidence and implementation fidelity.

Sustained professional learning is also essential for long-term change (CASEL, n.d.c) The Partnership for Children and Youth (2017) emphasized the importance of aligning school-day and after-school practices through continuous improvement rather than one-time trainings. Garst et al. (2019) further demonstrated that advanced youth development training, delivered through a structured and multi-session professional development model, significantly increased staff leadership capacity and improved organizational practice over time. Their findings showed that when staff participated in ongoing training cycles consisting of direct instruction, applied practice, feedback, and reflective discussion, they were more likely to translate new concepts into consistent, high-quality program delivery. These results underscore the role of continuous learning processes in supporting sustained practice change. Together, these experiential and continuous training approaches point to the need for wider organizational systems that reinforce learning through clear structures, coaching supports, and consistent implementation frameworks.

Systemic Supports for Staff Development

Building an effective workforce in informal educational settings requires more than individual training; it depends on coordinated, systemic support that enable staff to apply and sustain evidence-based practices (Levine & Viano, 2025). A recent systematic review of out-of-school time (OST) programs found that high-quality implementation is strongest when organizations establish consistent professional development structures, including clear program models, intentional staff training pathways, and regular opportunities for reflective supervision or coaching (Levine & Viano, 2025). These organizational features were consistently associated with improved youth outcomes, particularly for adolescents facing economic adversity. Similarly, Borden et al. (2020) emphasized that staff success relies on supportive organizational structures and national frameworks that prioritize competency alignment and program fidelity. Cohort-based learning models, online professional development, and communities of practice have expanded training access while strengthening peer learning and professional identity (Shanahan & Sheehan, 2020). Statewide initiatives such as California's SEL Workforce Strategy further illustrate the value of aligning staff competencies with research-informed practices to increase consistency across diverse settings (Vance & Goldberg, 2020). Retention-focused leadership and strong organizational culture also play critical roles by reducing turnover and supporting the continuity of staff practice (Wilkens, 2020). Together, these systemic efforts underscore the importance of integrated professional development systems that promote high-quality, sustainable training across informal educational environments.

Strengths and Limitations in Current IES Training

Across the literature, staff training in social-emotional learning, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, and early interoceptive awareness yields improvements in youth regulation, peer relationships and participation; with notable benefits for neurodivergent youth with emotional, sensory, or attention differences (Clark et al., 2022; Grist et al., 2023; Mahler et al., 2024; Ranieri et al., 2024). Relationship-centered, experiential, and ongoing approaches are particularly effective. Training that includes modeling, co-regulation, reflective practice, and emotionally supportive climates is associated with lasting outcomes such as improved emotional awareness and stronger feelings of belonging (Dolyka et al., 2024; Maich et al., 2015). Strengths of the research include diversity of methods, consistent positive outcomes, and some integration of trauma-informed and inclusion frameworks. Meta-analyses, quasi-experimental studies, qualitative research, and systematic reviews collectively demonstrate that SEL-based interventions improve mental wellness, emotional regulation, and social participation when implemented with fidelity and supported by coaching (Lawson et al., 2019; Newman, 2020; Walker, 2023).

Although some programs incorporate elements such as social-emotional learning, mindfulness, inclusive strategies, and trauma-informed care, these components are typically implemented in isolation rather than through a coordinated, evidence-based framework. Occupational therapy-informed models are largely absent from IES literature despite strong alignment between OT frameworks and youth sensory and emotional needs (Schmitt & Schoen, 2022). Additionally, few studies assess long-term outcomes,

fidelity is inconsistently measured, and outcome measures vary. Workforce and system-level barriers, including fragmentation, turnover, and inconsistent requirements further restrict implementation (NIOST, 2023). Critically, no existing program combines all proposed evidence-based components to address the problem, including SEL, mindfulness, emotional intelligence, trauma-informed practice, sensory and interoceptive awareness, and connection-based relational methods. This represents a significant gap given the complexities of supporting youth with ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

Conclusion

Informal educational settings have begun to incorporate several promising, research-supported training components, and these approaches can significantly improve youth participation, emotional well-being, and social connection when delivered effectively. Although, the implementation of these components is inconsistent, and rarely grounded in multidisciplinary or developmentally integrative frameworks. Current training efforts do not adequately prepare staff to meet the needs of neurodivergent children who often require coordinated support across sensory, emotional, and relational domains (Jilink et al., 2025). These findings echo the review by Jilink et al. (2025), which concluded that programs can meaningfully promote SEL only when staff are supported through intentional training, experiential learning structures, and clear relational frameworks. The field lacks a comprehensive training model to improve staff skills and confidence when working with ADHD youth. This absence represents a missed

opportunity, particularly as informal educational settings increasingly serve youth with diverse neurodevelopmental profiles in fast-paced, highly stimulating environments. *Ripples of Connection (ROC),* proposed in Chapter 4, directly responds to this need by offering an occupational therapy–led, integrated IES staff training designed to promote regulation, connection, and meaningful participation for all children, including those with ADHD and other neurodevelopmental differences.

CHAPTER FOUR – Description of the Proposed Program

Basis of the Proposed Program

Ripples of Connection (ROC) is an occupation-based social emotional skills training for staff in informal educational settings (IES), such as summer camps and afterschool programs, who serve neurodiverse youth. The program is delivered through interactive workshops facilitated by an occupational therapy practitioner (OTP) and equips staff with skills in emotional intelligence (EI), interoception, mindfulness, and connection-based strategies (Golding, 2014; Jung, 2023; Siegel & Bryson, 2014). Staff learn to recognize and interpret children's emotional and physiological cues (interoception), practice mindfulness and regulatory techniques, and apply empathy-driven communication methods. Staff will also learn to identify their own triggers and emotional regulation strategies. The goal is for the staff members to replace reactive and punitive responses to perceived challenging behaviors with compassionate, evidence-informed strategies that foster a supportive and inclusive environment for all children. Enhancing staff capacity to support neurodivergent youth is essential, as these children often face challenges in emotional regulation, social participation, and accessing meaningful activities (Taylor et al., 2021). Emotional regulation difficulties are correlated with reduced social competence, particularly in autism and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Zukerman et al., 2024). Additionally, resilience, particularly adaptive coping strategies, has been shown to improve emotional well-being and promote self-esteem in youth with sensory and neurodevelopmental challenges (Qi et al., 2024). Systematic and scoping review research indicates that intentional, informed strategies can

improve day-to-day success and long-term developmental outcomes for neurodivergent children (Bailey et al., 2019; Jellett et al., 2023). The overall aim is for staff to have the knowledge, confidence and practical skills to replace reactive, punitive responses to challenging behaviors with compassionate, evidence-informed approaches that foster a supportive and inclusive environment for all children, neurodivergent and neurotypical. Additionally, this training may function as a burnout prevention strategy by increasing staff confidence and competence, potentially reducing turnover (Herman et al., 2020).

Theoretical Frameworks Informing the Program

The Ripples of Connection program draws upon several interconnected theoretical frameworks that collectively support its design, delivery, and expected outcomes.

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes learning through observation, modeling, and reinforcement (Bandura, 2001). *ROC* uses experiential activities, role plays, and guided reflection to help staff practice self-regulation, empathy, and attuned interaction. Staff learn to model these regulatory and relational skills for youth, reinforcing positive behaviors through consistent and compassionate responses.

Self-Determination Theory highlights autonomy, competence, and relatedness as foundational psychological needs that enhance motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The training fosters these needs by equipping staff with effective tools, strengthening their sense of efficacy, and teaching strategies that cultivate autonomy and authentic connection for the youth they support.

Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) describes learning as a cyclical process

involving concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb & Kolb, 2018). *ROC* integrates ELT principles by combining real-world scenarios, hands-on practice, reflective journaling, and collaborative discussion. This approach helps staff internalize new skills and apply them effectively in dynamic youth settings.

Interoception research highlights the importance of internal body awareness for emotional regulation and meaningful participation (Craig, 2002; Clark et al., 2022; Grist et al., 2023; Mahler et al., 2024). These findings support *ROC's* emphasis on helping staff recognize early physiological cues in themselves and in youth, which can guide timely co-regulation and prevent escalation.

Evidence Base for Interoception and Emotional Intelligence Components

Recent findings demonstrate that interoceptive awareness is strongly linked to emotional regulation. For example, Mahler et al. (2024) reported that a seven-week intervention using *The Interoception Curriculum* led to significant improvements in regulation and interoceptive awareness among middle school students with diverse neurodevelopmental profiles. Notably, even without explicit emotional vocabulary instruction, participants improved their ability to manage emotions, suggesting that "focusing on noticing internal body signals may itself be a pathway to emotional control" (Mahler et al., 2024, p. 642).

Sensory integration also plays a key role. Grist et al. (2023) found that sensory modalities such as touch and vision were positively correlated with interoceptive skills like body listening and attention regulation. These findings reinforce the importance of

training staff to interpret behaviors not as defiance but as sensory-regulatory needs. Interoceptive awareness further supports participation in meaningful activities. Clark et al. (2022) reported that higher interoceptive skills were associated with greater engagement in social, recreational, and skill-based activities, with both parent and child perspectives aligning on these benefits.

Alignment With Policy and Practice Standards

The training aligns with the Colorado Office of Early Childhood's requirement for three hours of annual social-emotional training for childcare providers. Its design reflects trauma-informed, strengths-based, and developmentally appropriate practices endorsed in occupational therapy and educational psychology literature (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2020; Weissberg et al., 2015).

Key Stakeholders and Beneficiaries

Ripples of Connection (ROC) benefits a broad network of stakeholders across multiple ecological levels. By focusing on staff development within informal educational settings, the program creates positive ripple effects that extend to youth, families, organizations, and broader systems that shape policy and practice. Understanding these layers of impact clarifies both the program's relevance and its potential for sustainability and scale.

Micro Level Stakeholders

At the micro level, the primary beneficiaries are frontline IES staff and the children they serve. Staff members gain increased knowledge, confidence, and practical strategies for supporting youth regulation, social participation, and emotional well-being.

These enhanced competencies can lead to reduced stress, greater job satisfaction, and improved relationships with the youth in their care. Children, both neurodivergent and neurotypical, experience more consistent, compassionate, and developmentally attuned support. For youth with ADHD or sensory processing differences, this may reduce negative self-talk, disruptive behavioral cycles, and experiences of exclusion. Families also benefit at this level. When children encounter environments that nurture regulation and belonging, caregivers observe improvements across home, school, and community settings. Reduced behavioral escalations and increased self-confidence can strengthen family well-being and support meaningful participation in daily life.

Meso Level Stakeholders

At the meso level, summer camps afterschool programs, and community centers hosting *ROC* gain significant benefits. Improved staff competencies contribute to fewer behavioral incidents, more inclusive peer dynamics, stronger program climate, and greater family satisfaction. These outcomes may enhance program reputation, retention of staff and participants, and alignment with organizational missions centered on youth development. Professional networks, including coalitions of camp directors, afterschool administrators, and youth program leaders, also stand to benefit. As successful outcomes and best practices are shared across settings, *ROC* has the potential to influence a wider community of practice, promoting consistency and quality in how programs support neurodivergent youth.

Macro Level Stakeholders

At the macro level, the program has implications for policymakers, funding agencies, and the broader educational and health communities. By demonstrating meaningful improvements in staff practice, youth participation, and emotional regulation, *ROC* may inform statewide standards for youth program training. Foundations and public agencies that prioritize mental health promotion, inclusion, and equitable community programming may view *ROC* as a model worthy of investment and replication. Over time, professional fields such as occupational therapy, public health, and education may integrate insights from *ROC* into broader frameworks for workforce development and youth mental health support.

Case Study

Macy, a 10-year-old girl not formally diagnosed with ADHD however demonstrates many characteristics, per parent report, has been attending her local summer camp for two years. While she loves to participate in the activities, she often struggles with emotional regulation, self-esteem and maintaining friendships. This cycle leads to frequent conflicts with peers and misunderstandings with staff. Macy's parents have reported that her negative self-talk and feelings of exclusion have worsened after each week, leaving her feeling sad and repeated statements of, "no one likes me". Previous staff lacked training and understanding in neurodiverse behaviors, and they often responded to Macy's emotional outbursts with traditional disciplinary measures. These include: a sudden and/or inconsistent taking away of swim time, and free play which exacerbated her feelings of isolation and negative self-talk. This includes thoughts like,

"something is wrong with me" or "I'm just a bad kid" or "I can't change, I don't know how to be better"

Introducing ROC:

As part of meeting their required three hours of annual Social Emotional Learning (SEL) training, the camp implemented *Ripples of Connection (ROC).* The training focused on emotional intelligence, interoception, mindfulness, and regulation-based skills that support neurodivergent youth such as Macy. This training is also to help create confidence in staff as well as more inclusive and supportive environments. A central component of the program was connection-based methods and co-regulation to help staff understand and validate the child's internal experiences and find a connection before reacting to the youth's behavioral concerns.

ROC Implementation:

Staff learned to identify early signs of dysregulation in themselves and in the children they support. They also practiced interoception based strategies to help youth identify internal sensations such as increased heart rate or muscular tension that often precede emotional escalation. The program emphasized recognizing behavior as communication and using empathetic, supportive responses rather than reactive or punitive measures. Staff were instructed to verbally acknowledge the child's cues and feelings to promote emotional safety, trust, and co-regulation. The program also taught them to guide neurodivergent youth in identifying emotions and their triggers to then choose meaningful calming strategies before situations escalate.

Outcome for Macy:

At the beginning of the new camp season, Macy's counselor, Sarah, implemented the strategies from the I training. She became quicker at identifying Macy's early signs of distress during group activities. Rather than interpreting Macy's behavior as defiance, Sarah used connection-based techniques to empathize, validate, and support her. These interactions helped Macy feel safe, understood, and regulated. Through compassionate dialogue, Sarah discovered that Macy's heightened distress was rooted in fears of failure and discomfort with a peer who frequently cheered loudly. Sarah guided Macy through calming exercises and reassured her that she would help support positive peer exchanges. As a result, Macy re-engaged in activities with increased confidence and emotional security. Rather than disciplining Macy for what used to look like refusing to participate or "acting out", Sarah empathized and connected with Macy by following her training and using the verbal prompts. This helped Macy to feel supported and emotionally regulated. As the summer progressed, Sarah consistently applied interoception techniques, regulation and connection-based strategies, as well as mindfulness tools. Macy became more able to identify her early internal cues and use strategies to regulate her emotions. Her participation in group activities improved, and by the end of the season, she reported feeling proud of her ability to manage emotions and maintain friendships.

The site director also observed that staff who witnessed Sarah's approach became more confident in using the same techniques with other children, demonstrating natural diffusion of the program's practices across the staff team.

Impact of ROC:

Feedback from Sarah and other counselors indicated that the *ROC* training program was highly effective in providing meaningful tools to support youth. Through pre- and post- tests, surveys and reflection journals, staff reported increased confidence in regulating their own emotions which helped them tremendously in assisting the youth they serve. The camp observed a reduction in behavioral incidents and an increase in inclusive peer interactions. Staff described stronger rapport with youth and a greater sense of competence and connection in their roles.

Program Aims and Objectives

Ripples of Connection is designed to address the challenges identified in the explanatory model of the problem and to support staff in developing the emotional intelligence, neurodiversity awareness, and relational skills necessary to create inclusive and supportive environments for neurodivergent and neurotypical youth in informal educational settings. The program builds upon existing staff strengths while providing accessible, evidence-informed strategies that can be integrated into daily routines.

The overarching aim of *Ripples of Connection* is to transform informal educational environments into emotionally safe, relationally attuned spaces where neurodivergent and neurotypical youth can thrive. The program seeks to:

- Increase staff knowledge of emotional intelligence, interoception, and neurodiversity-informed practices.
- Strengthen staff skills in mindfulness, regulation coaching, and empathy-

driven communication.

- Reduce the use of outdated punitive reactions by equipping staff with connection-focused approaches.
- Promote environments where youth feel understood, supported, and empowered to engage in meaningful social and recreational activities.

To achieve these aims, the program includes the following specific objectives:

1. Enhance Staff Knowledge. Staff will develop a practical understanding of emotional intelligence, interoception, and the neurobiological foundations of behavior in youth.
2. Improve Staff Skills in Regulation and Support. Staff will learn to implement mindfulness strategies, guide youth through regulation routines, and use empathetic communication during moments of distress.
3. Shift Staff Responses from Punitive to Connection-Based. Staff will adopt strategies that prioritize relational connection, emotional validation, and co regulation rather than reactive or compliance-driven responses.
4. Promote Inclusion and Adaptive Engagement. Staff will apply sensory-aware and neuro-affirming strategies to ensure that all youth can participate meaningfully in group activities.

Expected Outcomes

By meeting these objectives, the program aims to produce:

- Short-term outcomes: increased staff confidence, foundational knowledge, and initial application of strategies

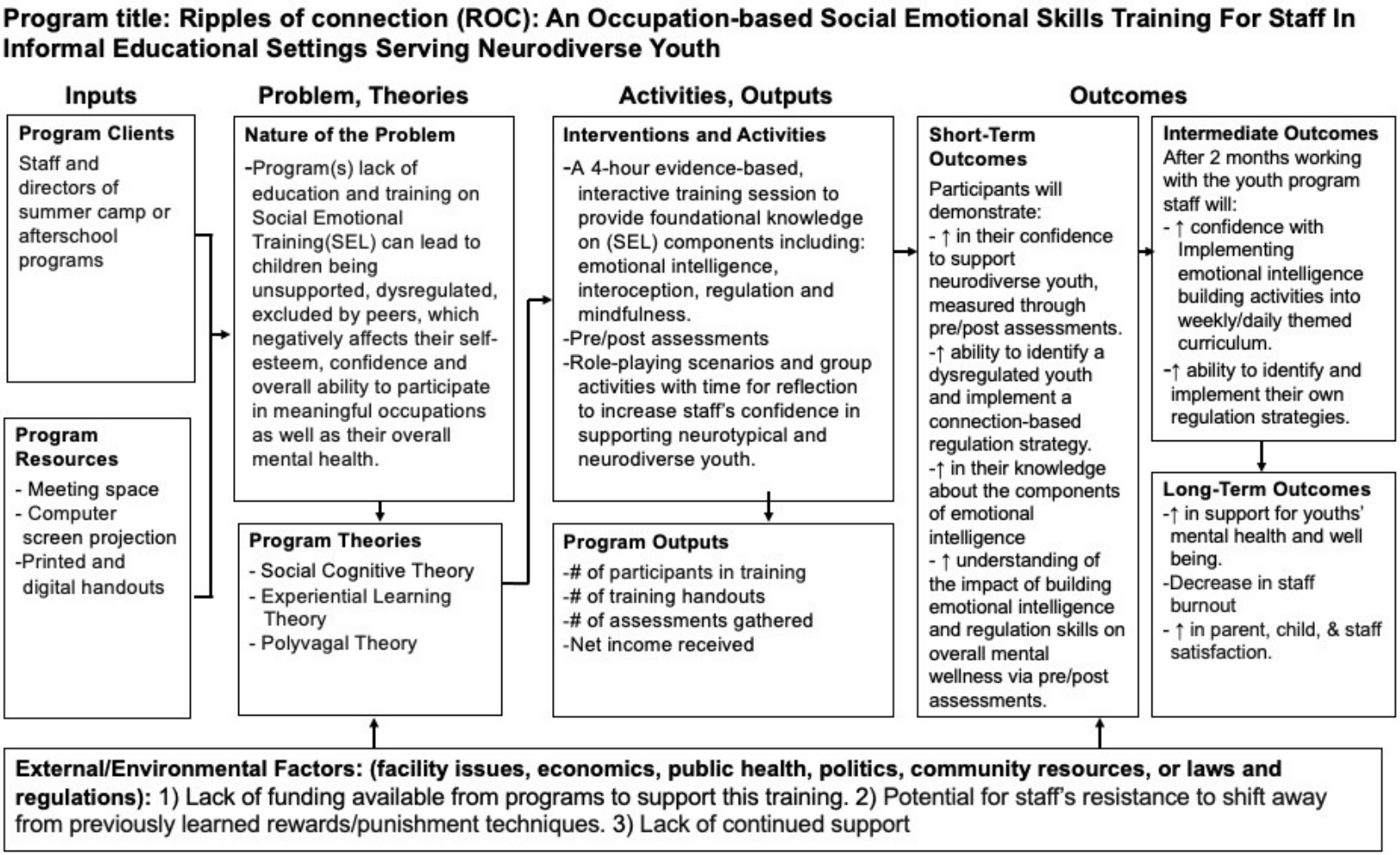
- Intermediate outcomes: consistent use of connection-focused practices, improved youth regulation, and more inclusive peer interactions
- Long-term outcomes: sustained shifts in program climate, reduced staff burnout, enhanced youth mental health, and wider adoption of inclusive SEL approaches across informal educational settings

Full Logic Model

A logic model (Figure 4.1) is a visual representation of the *ROC's* model of change. The inputs and resources such as the skilled OTP facilitator, training materials, and participating staff, feed into the training sessions and follow-up activities. These activities produce immediate outputs like trained staff members and materials distributed. The model then maps out the anticipated outcomes. This helps in curriculum development and outcome measurement. The logic model clarifies the underlying theory and logic of the program's functioning, and why the program is expected to lead to positive change (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2017).

Figure 4.1

Logic Model



Program Participants and Resources

Primary participants are frontline IES staff and leadership, including camp counselors, afterschool program leaders, and recreation staff. Recruitment occurs through partner organizations and aligns with Colorado's 3-hour annual SEL training requirement.

The program facilitator (occupational therapist) leads sessions, while co-facilitators (graduate students or assistants) manage activities and logistics. Site directors provide logistical support and endorsement to foster buy-in.

Sessions occur in natural IES venues such as camp halls or school classrooms, with space for small groups. Materials include manuals, sensory tools, slides, and digital resources. A hybrid option (synchronous online) is available if needed.

Initial outreach uses emails, brochures, social media, and conference presentations. Follow-up includes meetings to align content with site needs and highlight benefits (Gross & Rutland, 2017). Sustained engagement is supported through CEUs, certificates, alumni groups, and periodic resource sharing.

Interventions and Activities

Where typical emotional intelligence workshops emphasize self-reflection or communication scripts, the *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* approach redefines emotional intelligence as an occupation. Grounded in occupational therapy's holistic perspective, *ROC* integrates sensory processing, interoceptive awareness, and contextual adaptation to deepen understanding of how emotions are both felt and enacted. Staff learn that emotional experiences are not abstract concepts but sensory events in the body, shaped by

the surrounding environment. Within this framework, regulation becomes a dynamic occupation; one that can be intentionally practiced, graded, and supported through environmental design, relational attunement, and mindful participation. Through this lens, emotional intelligence evolves from a personal skill set into a shared process that strengthens connection, inclusion, and well-being across the entire community. These occupational therapy principles are operationalized through a structured, experiential training agenda that incorporates emotional awareness, interoception, regulation, and connection-based practices across a four-hour session. Table 4.1 outlines the *ROC* agenda, including session timing, activities, and areas of focus. Appendices B through D provide the agenda, facilitator guide and activity handouts.

Table 4.1

Ripples of Connection Training Agenda

Session	Time	Activity Overview	Focus
Welcome & Orientation	15 min	- Mindful arrival - ROC introduction - SEL–OT introduction	Neurodiversity EI
Emotional Intelligence (EI) Foundations	15 min	- Mini-lecture - Emotion mapping	EI Empathy Regulation Awareness
EI, Interoception, Mindfulness	45 min	- "What's on Your Plate" Activity - Body Scan & Sensation Awareness - "Name it to tame it" Group Reflection	Interoception Early stress signs
Break	15 min	Hydration, stretch, grounding	Self-regulation
Connection-Based Practices	30 min	- "Connection before correction" Lecture - Role-play - Reflection	Co-regulation Relationship skills

Scenario Application	30 min	- Macy's Case Study - Small-group problem-solving	EI in action: Inclusive practice
Break	10 min	Hydration, stretch, grounding	Self-regulation
ROC Activity: Emotional Awareness	30 min	- Individual "Plates" Activity - Discuss stressors/supports	EI Interoception Coping
Implementation Planning	30 min	- Toolkit - Journaling - "Ripple Action Plan"	Sustainability Inclusion
Closing & Next Steps	20 min	- Gratitude reflection - Sign-ups - Post-survey	Reflection Accountability

Anticipated Barriers and Challenges

The successful implementation of *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* requires attention to several predictable barriers and challenges commonly observed in informal educational settings (IES). These challenges may influence the fidelity of program delivery, the consistency of strategy adoption, and the sustainability of long-term outcomes. Anticipating these factors allows program planners to build proactive support that promote successful implementation across diverse sites.

Resistance to Change

Some staff and supervisors may be hesitant to adopt new approaches, particularly those that differ from traditional behavior management strategies. This resistance may stem from prior training, ingrained habits, or uncertainty about the effectiveness of connection-based practices.

Mitigation strategies:

- Conducting pre-training surveys to identify staff beliefs and concerns

- Establishing peer champions who model connection-based strategies
- Sharing clear evidence of program effectiveness and success stories

These approaches help normalize the shift toward relational, neuro-affirming methods

Time Constraints

IES programs often operate within tight schedules, limited planning periods, and high ratios of youth to staff. Staff may perceive the integration of new practices as time-consuming.

Mitigation strategies:

- Embedding training within mandated SEL training hours
- Highlighting time-saving benefits, such as fewer escalations and smoother transitions
- Encouraging micro-practices (e.g. brief regulation check-ins) that require minimal time yet yield substantial benefit

Staff Turnover

High turnover is common in youth-serving roles, which can disrupt continuity of training and impact long-term program adherence.

Mitigation strategies:

- Offering annual training cycles for new and returning staff
- Developing peer mentorship structures to support onboarding
- Providing digital refreshers and resource toolkits for asynchronous learning

These strategies promote consistency even when staffing patterns fluctuate.

Policy Misalignment

Some organizations may rely on policies or disciplinary frameworks that conflict with neuro-affirming or connection-based practices. Without leadership support, staff may feel unable to implement the strategies learned.

Mitigation strategies:

- Securing administrative buy-in prior to training
- Collaboratively reviewing site policies for alignment with *ROC* principles
- Offering structured guidance on adapting policies to support inclusion and emotional safety

Resource Limitations

Budget constraints, limited materials, or insufficient access to sensory tools may hinder full implementation of the training.

Mitigation strategies:

- Providing low-cost or no-cost materials, such as printable cue cards or digital resources
- Supporting organizations in pursuing mini-grants or community partnerships.
- Exploring a train-the-trainer model to enhance long-term sustainability
- Resistance to change: Mitigated by pre-training surveys, peer champions, and evidence-sharing
- Time constraints: Addressed by integrating training into mandated hours and highlighting time-saving benefits
- Staff turnover: Managed through annual repetition, peer mentors, and digital

refreshers

- Policy misalignment: Addressed by securing leadership buy-in and adjusting policies
- Resource limitations: Mitigated through low-cost materials, potential grants, and a train-the-trainer model

Conclusion

Ripples of Connection addresses a critical gap in IES staff preparation by equipping them with EI, interoceptive, and mindfulness-based strategies through an occupational therapy lens. Children in afterschool programs and summer camps, particularly those who are neurodivergent, frequently encounter emotional, sensory and relational challenges that are unintentionally amplified by environments that lack adequate training, structure, or neuro-affirming practices. *ROC* was designed to respond directly to evidence presented in earlier chapters, including research on emotional intelligence, interoception, mindfulness, and trauma-informed relational strategies. Guided by occupational therapy principles, and rooted in Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Determination Theory, Experiential Learning Theory and recent interoception research, the program's evidence-base ensures feasibility, relevance, and impact (Mahler et al., 2024; Grist et al., 2023; Clark et al., 2022). The program is explicitly aligned with state social-emotional learning requirements and reflects relevant policy and systems considerations, ensuring its feasibility and relevance for community-based youth programs. The logic model articulates the progression from inputs and activities to short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes, demonstrating a clear theory of change and

roadmap for implementation and evaluation. The long-term vision is the development of emotionally safe and supportive environments where neurodivergent and neurotypical youth experience improved participation, belonging, and mental well-being. The program also has the potential to reduce staff burnout by strengthening competence, reflective capacity, and relational attunement. With appropriate evaluation, the program may inform state-level training standards and contribute to systemic improvements in youth social emotional development and occupational therapy practice.

CHAPTER FIVE – Program Evaluation Research Plan

Background and Rationale

Ripples of Connection (ROC) is an evidence-based and occupation-based training for staff working in summer camps, afterschool programs, and other informal educational settings (IES). The aim is to equip staff with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to create inclusive, emotionally safe environments that support both neurodivergent and neurotypical youth. The program is delivered through a 4-hour in-person interactive training. The training utilizes experiential learning methods such as role-play, guided reflection, and mindfulness practices. Staff receive practical tools and resources such as emotion charts, mindful moment cards, and sensory strategy guides, and participate in evaluation follow-ups.

Intended Beneficiaries

- Primary beneficiaries: IES staff (camp counselors, afterschool leaders, site directors)
- Secondary beneficiaries: Youth participants ages 5–12; particularly those with ADHD and other neurodivergent profiles who will benefit from more inclusive, supportive, and emotionally intelligent staff practices
- Indirect beneficiaries: Families, program administrators, and communities who will see improved participation, social-emotional health, and program satisfaction.

Intended Users of Evaluation Findings

- Program administrators: to inform staffing, training, and program policy decisions

- Regional and site directors: to demonstrate compliance with Colorado's mandated SEL training requirements
- Staff participants: to enhance professional development and career growth
- Funding agencies and policymakers: to justify continued investment and potential statewide adoption
- Academic and occupational therapy communities: to contribute to the evidence base for OT-informed interventions in informal educational settings

Vision for the Program Evaluation Research

The program evaluation aims to determine whether staff training in emotional intelligence, interoception, mindfulness, and connection-based practices improves both staff competencies and youth outcomes in IES programs. The short-term vision for *Ripples of Connection* evaluation is to systematically document immediate increases in staff knowledge, self-efficacy, and practical skill application related to emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and connection-based strategies. This includes measuring changes in staff's ability to recognize and respond to youth emotional cues, integrate mindfulness and interoception practices into daily routines, and consistently apply connection-based techniques with confidence. In the weeks immediately following the training, the evaluation will also seek to identify early evidence of positive changes among youth participants, such as improved self-regulation, strengthened connections with peers and staff, and increased engagement in meaningful occupations within the informal educational setting. Capturing these early outcomes will provide valuable formative feedback, enabling program facilitators and administrators to refine training

content, adjust mentorship supports, and address barriers to implementation before transitioning to longer-term outcome measurement.

The long-term vision of the *Ripples of Connection* program evaluation is to generate a strong evidence base supporting the integration of occupational therapy informed social-emotional learning (SEL) training into informal educational settings across the state of Colorado. This vision encompasses addressing persistent gaps in neurodiversity-informed practices by equipping non-clinical providers with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to effectively support both neurodivergent and neurotypical youth in developing emotional intelligence, self-regulation, and positive social connections. By demonstrating that staff in these settings can successfully apply occupational therapy informed strategies, the evaluation aims to promote system-wide adoption of inclusive, relationship-centered approaches that enhance youth participation and well-being. Additionally, the program seeks to explore the potential for reducing staff burnout by fostering greater competence, emotional resilience, and satisfaction in their roles. The findings will contribute to the occupational therapy knowledge base by expanding the understanding of how targeted training for non-clinical providers can bridge service gaps, enhance program quality, and inform policy development for statewide implementation of inclusive SEL initiatives.

Engagement of Stakeholders

The success of *Ripples of Connection* will rely on the active involvement of multiple key stakeholders, each bringing a unique perspective and contribution to the evaluation process. The key intended users of the program evaluation findings are the

administrators of summer camp and afterschool programs. They will utilize the data collected to assess the impact of emotional intelligence (EI) and regulation skills training on staff performance and its subsequent effects on youth outcomes. The evaluation will provide essential insights to help administrators make evidence-based adjustments to the program's content and implementation, ensuring that it aligns with the evolving needs of both staff and the youth they serve. Additionally, the findings will allow administrators to demonstrate the program's effectiveness to external stakeholders, thereby strengthening the program's credibility and potentially securing ongoing funding and support. By showcasing the tangible benefits of the SEL training for neurodiverse youth groups in IES, administrators can also advocate for broader adoption of similar interventions in other Informal Educational Settings (Berman, 2020; Gross & Rutland, 2017; Ranieri et al., 2024).

Key stakeholders in this process include:

1. Site Director(s) (i.e., Summer Camp or Afterschool Program Director) The Site Director facilitates program implementation at the local level. They can also offer insights into the specific needs of the staff as well as the youth served. This will provide logistical support for the research process.
2. Regional Director (Overseeing Multiple Sites) The Regional Director offers a broader perspective on how the program can be adapted and implemented across multiple sites. Their role involves securing necessary approvals for the research, helping to standardize the program across locations and advocating for resources to ensure the program's success. They can also help identify

common challenges faced by different sites and collaborate on solutions.

3. Trained Staff (i.e., “Camp Counselors” or After-School Program Leaders) As the primary participants in the training program, the staff will provide critical feedback on the content and delivery of the training. They will also offer insights into how the training impacts their day-to-day interactions with the youth and highlight areas where additional support or training may be necessary. Their ongoing participation will be key to understanding the practical effectiveness of the program.
4. Families who share observations of changes in youth participation and well-being.
5. Policymakers and funders, who assess scalability, sustainability, and alignment with state social-emotional learning (SEL) requirements.

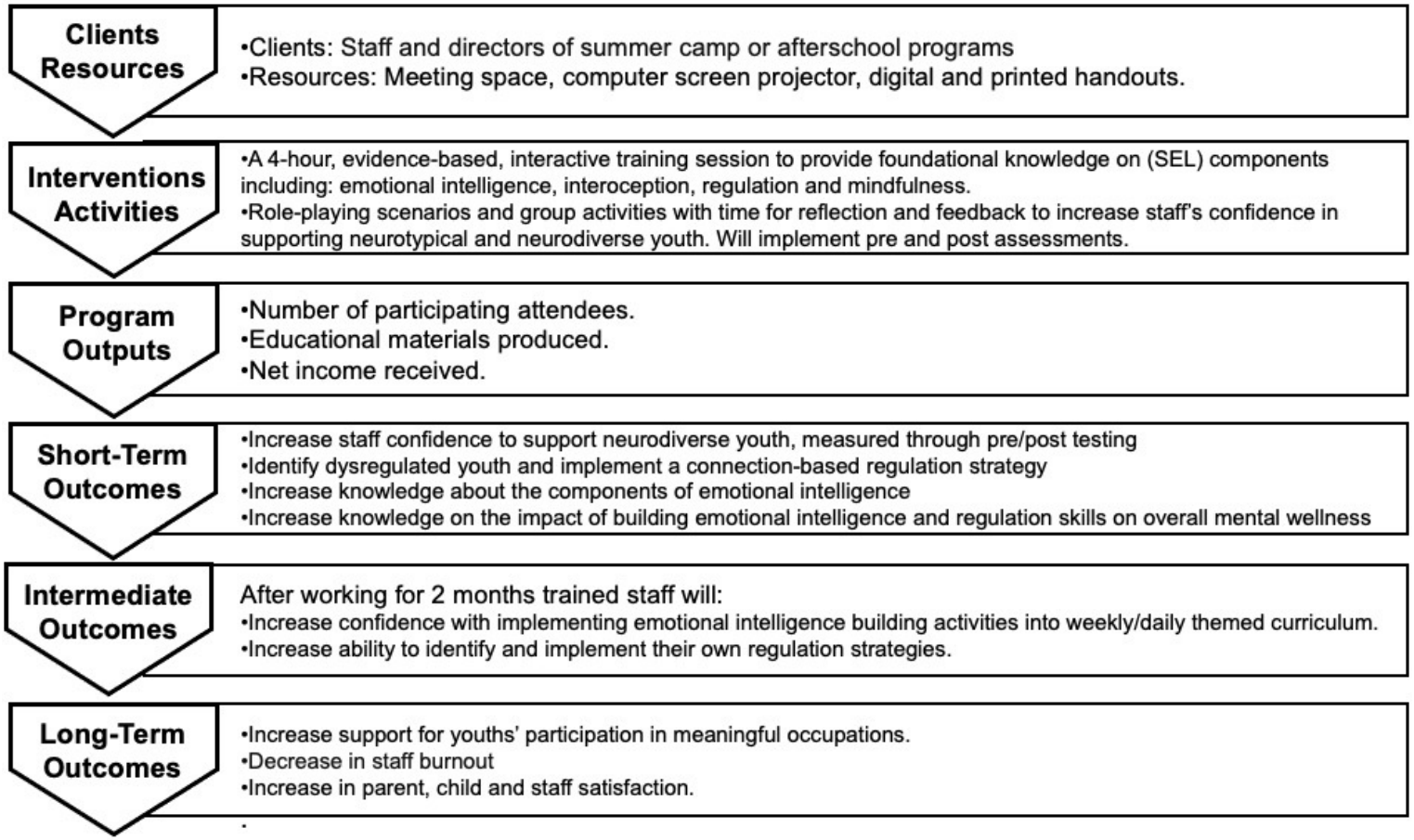
Collaborative meetings where stakeholders participate in initial planning meetings and needs assessments will foster a sense of ownership and ensure their voices are heard from the beginning. Engaging them early allows them to contribute their ideas and insights into shaping the research questions, program structure, and evaluation criteria. This strategy also ensures alignment between the program’s goals as well as the needs of the operational priorities of the stakeholders. Stakeholders will also be kept informed through updates, tailored communication, and progress reports. This could include email updates, check-ins, progress meetings, or individual briefings to show how their contributions are making a tangible difference. Acknowledging their input and demonstrating how it impacts the research will help sustain their buy-in and commitment.

A third way of engaging stakeholders may be to offer professional development and highlight how the training can be a valuable credential added onto their resumes. Framing the training as a chance to enhance their skill set and support their career growth will increase buy-in.

The simplified logic model (Figure 5.1) serves as a visual representation of the program's structure. This model summarizes key components, including the necessary resources, planned activities, measurable program outputs, and the desired short- and long-term outcomes. By outlining these elements in a concise format, the logic model helps communicate how each part of the program contributes to achieving its overall objectives, enabling stakeholders to better grasp the interconnectedness of efforts and results.

Figure 5.1

Simplified Logic Model of the Proposed Program and Evaluation



Evaluation considerations

When evaluating the *Ripples of Connection* training, it is especially important to consider the unique context of informal educational settings (IES) and the neurodiverse populations they serve. Unlike traditional classroom environments, IES programs often have varied staffing structures, fluctuating youth attendance, and less formalized behavioral support systems, which can influence both implementation fidelity and the interpretation of outcomes (Berman, 2020; Ranieri et al., 2024). Evaluation methods must account for these variables by using flexible, context-sensitive data collection strategies that capture changes in staff knowledge, confidence, and application of emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and connection-based practices. Additionally, because the program aims to benefit neurodivergent youth such as those with ADHD, it is critical to incorporate outcome measures that are sensitive to individual differences in emotional regulation, social participation, and engagement (Gross & Rutland, 2017). Gathering feedback from multiple stakeholders including staff, administrators, families, and youth will ensure that the evaluation reflects diverse perspectives and accurately captures both short and long-term program impact.

Preliminary Exploration and Confirmatory Process

The program evaluation will adopt a participatory approach to ensure stakeholder buy-in. Initial planning meetings with site and regional directors will confirm alignment of training content with program goals. Staff participants will be included in pilot surveys to refine training materials and evaluation tools. Confirmatory steps include distributing agendas, providing a logic model visual, and holding Q&A sessions before

training to clarify expectations.

Program Evaluation Research Questions by Stakeholder Group

1. Staff Participants
    - Will the training increase my confidence and knowledge in EI, mindfulness, and interoception?
    - How useful are the tools in my role?
2. Program Directors
    - Will this training reduce behavioral incidents and improve programming?
3. Families
    - Will my child feel more included, supported, and able to regulate emotions effectively?
4. Funders/Policymakers
    - Does the training fulfill SEL requirements and demonstrate measurable outcomes?
5. OT/Academic Community
    - Can this program strengthen the evidence base for OT in informal educational settings?

Research Design

This evaluation will use a mixed-methods, pre-post non-experimental design.

- Summative design (quantitative): Pre-, post-, and 2-month follow-up measurements using 10-point Visual Analog Scales (VAS) to track changes in staff knowledge, confidence, and application.

- Formative design (qualitative): Post-training open-ended surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups at follow-up to capture staff experiences, barriers, and recommendations.

IRB approval will be secured prior to data collection. Informed consent, confidentiality, and data security protocols will be strictly followed.

Methods

Setting and Participants

Training will take place in IES venues such as camp halls or school classrooms. 10–20 staff per session (aged 16+) will participate, including counselors and program leaders. This number range reflects the reality that the exact number of participants will depend on how many new or returning staff are hired or retrained during the onboarding process. The flexibility of this range ensures that the evaluation can be adjusted based on staffing levels. Staff must work directly with youth and meet basic English proficiency.

Training Intervention

A 4-hour training agenda (Table 4.1) will guide the session, covering:

1. Emotional Intelligence Foundations
2. Mindfulness and Interoception Practices
3. Connection-Based Approaches
4. Scenario Application and Planning
5. Closing Reflection and Mentorship Introduction

Quantitative Methods

- Independent Variable: The SEL training program

- Dependent Variables: Staff knowledge, confidence, awareness, implementation of connection-based practices, and satisfaction
- Measurement Tool: VAS administered pre-training, immediately post-training, and at 2-month follow-up
- Analysis: Paired t-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA to detect changes across time

Qualitative Methods

- Data Collection: Post-training surveys, semi-structured interviews, and 2-month follow-up focus groups.
- Analysis: Thematic analysis using NVivo, coding for recurring themes regarding staff experiences, barriers, and program impact.

Appendices E through H provide sample data collection surveys and forms.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data Management and Analysis

All quantitative data collected from Visual Analog Scales (VAS) at three time points (pre-training, immediately post-training, and two-month follow-up) will be entered into a secure, password-protected platform such as Qualtrics for collection and Microsoft Excel or SPSS for analysis. Data entry will be verified through double-checking to minimize errors. Each participant will be assigned a unique identification code to ensure confidentiality while enabling repeated measures tracking across time points. These descriptive statistics will provide an overview of central tendencies and variability in staff perceptions.

- Means, standard deviations, and ranges will be calculated for each dependent variable:
    1. Staff confidence in applying emotional regulation strategies
    2. Staff awareness and understanding of EI concepts
    3. Ability to implement connection-based methods
    4. Knowledge of interoception and mindfulness techniques
    5. Perceived effectiveness in supporting neurodiverse youth
    6. Overall satisfaction with the training program
- Paired t-tests will be conducted to compare pre-training scores with post-training and follow-up scores for each variable, identifying significant improvements or declines.
- A repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be employed to examine the overall trajectory of change across all three measurement points, capturing sustained versus short-term effects.
- Effect sizes (Cohen's d for paired comparisons and partial eta squared for ANOVA) will be reported to contextualize practical significance.

Handling Missing Data

Missing data will be addressed using pairwise deletion if missing at random (MAR). Sensitivity analyses will be conducted to ensure findings are not unduly affected by incomplete cases.

Visualization of Results

Line graphs and bar charts will be created to display mean VAS scores across

time points. These visualizations will highlight both group-level trends and individual progress when appropriate, offering stakeholders a clear, accessible view of outcomes.

Qualitative Data Management and Analysis

Qualitative data from open-ended surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups will be transcribed verbatim using a secure, HIPAA-compliant transcription service or automated software with manual verification. All transcripts will be uploaded into NVivo software for coding and analysis.

Thematic Analysis Procedure:

1. Familiarization: The principal investigator (PI) will thoroughly read transcripts multiple times to gain immersion.
2. Initial Coding: Open coding will be conducted in NVivo, tagging meaningful units of data relevant to staff experiences, barriers, and applications of the training.
3. Theme Development: Codes will be organized into broader categories reflecting recurring ideas, such as “confidence growth,” “barriers to application,” or “connection-based success stories.”
4. Reviewing Themes: Themes will be refined to ensure they accurately represent the data set and align with the research questions.
5. Defining and Naming Themes: Final themes will be clearly defined and supported with direct quotations from participants to preserve authenticity.
6. Triangulation: Data from surveys, interviews, and focus groups will be compared to confirm consistency and strengthen validity.

Ensuring Trustworthiness:

- Credibility: Member checking will be used, allowing participants to review and confirm summaries of their contributions.
- Dependability: A coding audit trail will be maintained to document decisions throughout analysis.
- Confirmability: Reflexive journaling will be conducted by the PI to identify and address potential researcher bias.
- Transferability: Thick description of the training context and participant experiences will allow readers to assess applicability to other IES environments.

Mixed-Methods Integration

To provide a comprehensive understanding of the program's impact, quantitative and qualitative findings will be integrated during the interpretation stage. For example, if VAS scores indicate a significant increase in staff confidence, qualitative data will be used to explain the specific training components that staff found most beneficial. Conversely, if quantitative improvements are modest, qualitative findings may highlight contextual barriers (e.g., time constraints or organizational policies) that hindered implementation. This convergence of data will ensure that outcomes are interpreted with both statistical rigor and contextual nuance.

Anticipated Outcomes of Analysis

The combined analysis is expected to demonstrate:

- Statistically significant increases in staff confidence, knowledge, and skill application immediately post-training and at follow-up.

- Thematic evidence of enhanced empathy, improved ability to recognize youth interoceptive cues, and greater use of connection-before-correction strategies.
- Identification of systemic or contextual barriers (e.g., staff turnover, time constraints) that may affect sustainability.

Together, these findings will provide actionable insights into program refinement and make a compelling case for broader adoption of the training model.

Anticipated Strengths and Limitations

Strengths:

- Mixed-methods design offers both depth (qualitative) and breadth (quantitative)
- Alignment with state SEL requirements enhances program relevance
- Use of experiential OT-informed methods increases practical applicability

Limitations:

- Small sample size may limit generalizability
- Reliance on self-reported measures may introduce bias
- Staff turnover could affect longitudinal follow-up

Communicating Evaluation Results

- Program Administrators: Executive summaries and actionable recommendations
- Staff Participants: Toolkits, reflection resources, and feedback reports
- Funders and Policymakers: Impact reports with infographics and ROI highlights
- Academic Community: Peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations
- Families: Accessible newsletters and social media highlights of program impact.

Conclusion

The *Ripples of Connection* program evaluation is designed to generate meaningful, actionable evidence about how occupational therapy–informed social-emotional learning can strengthen the quality of informal educational settings. By integrating quantitative and qualitative methods, engaging stakeholders at every level, and grounding the evaluation in both neurodiversity-affirming practices and experiential learning theory, this study will illuminate whether *ROC* effectively enhances staff competencies and improves youth participation, emotional well-being, and inclusion. The findings will guide program refinement, inform administrative and policy decisions, and contribute to the broader evidence base supporting OT-led SEL initiatives in community contexts. Ultimately, this chapter establishes a rigorous and feasible plan for examining how one targeted training can create ripples of connection that benefit staff, children, families, and the wider IES community.

CHAPTER SIX – Dissemination Plan

Program Overview

Ripples of Connection (ROC) is an evolving, occupation-based social-emotional learning (SEL) training program designed for staff in informal educational settings (IES) such as after-school programs and summer camps. These settings serve children ages 5 to 12 and provide structured, supervised opportunities for socialization, recreation, and learning beyond traditional school hours. They fill a vital community need by offering safe and enriching programs that support working families.

Staff in IES often come from non-medical backgrounds and may not have formal preparation to support neurodiverse children, particularly those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In the absence of such training, staff may use reactive or punitive approaches rather than strategies grounded in connection and co-regulation. *ROC* addresses this gap by equipping staff with occupational therapy–informed strategies that emphasize emotional intelligence, mindfulness, interoception, and participation. Designed to foster emotionally safe, inclusive environments, the program aims to enhance children's sense of belonging and participation, while simultaneously reducing staff burnout through reflection, self-regulation, and mindful practice.

Phased Dissemination Vision

The dissemination of *ROC* is structured in two phases. Phase One emphasizes local engagement and pilot recruitment. Phase Two focuses on broad dissemination of evaluation findings to professional, academic, and policy audiences. This phased

approach ensures that dissemination is grounded in community implementation and scales strategically to systems-level influence.

Phase One: Local Dissemination Goals for Implementation

Phase One dissemination aims to build awareness, establish partnerships, and secure organizational buy-in to support pilot implementation. Planned efforts will engage decision-makers and leaders in IES, cultivating enthusiasm, alignment with occupational therapy values, and operational support.

Short-term objectives:

1. Presenting *ROC's* conceptual framework and training design to key partners, including Mighty Camps and AlphaBEST Education, to recruit pilot sites and staff participants.
2. Sharing *ROC's* theoretical foundation, which is rooted in occupational therapy's emphasis on participation, regulation, and inclusion, with local and state stakeholders to build credibility and relevance.
3. Cultivating collaboration with Colorado State University's Department of Occupational Therapy to facilitate mentorship, graduate-student involvement, and evaluation planning.
4. Promoting awareness among youth-service providers and community organizations about the potential of occupational therapy-informed SEL training to enhance youth well-being, inclusive engagement, and staff resilience.

In the long term, *ROC* aspires to influence professional development frameworks in Colorado by being recognized as an evidence-based SEL training that satisfies the state's

required three-hour SEL component for informal education provider training.

Target Audiences

The primary audience during this phase includes Mighty Camps (Genesis Health Clubs) and AlphaBEST Education, each operating sizable after-school and summer programs in Northern Colorado. Their leadership, curriculum coordinators, and site directors are key decision-makers whose support is essential to pilot rollout. Secondary audiences involve Colorado State University's OT faculty and community partners such as CAYAC (Child, Adolescent, and Young Adult Connections). Collaboration with CSU enables rigorous evaluation design and academic support, while community organizations bolster cultural responsiveness and local reach.

Key Messages

Licensed childcare and youth program providers in Colorado must complete three clock hours of training each year in social-emotional development (Colorado Office of Early Childhood, n.d.). *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* offers a meaningful way to meet this requirement through an evidence-informed, occupation-based framework. Occupation-based means the program is grounded in occupational therapy theories and practices that view engagement in meaningful activities as essential to well-being. *ROC* incorporates purposeful daily activities, roles, and routines that provide youth with a sense of purpose and belonging. In this context, it emphasizes how participation in meaningful experiences such as play, learning, and social interaction supports children's emotional, social, and self-regulatory development. The program builds emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and inclusivity among staff while reinforcing the core values of

participation, regulation, and connection-based approaches. *ROC* translates these occupational therapy principles into actionable strategies that enhance staff confidence and child engagement across informal educational settings.

Mighty Camps (Genesis Health Clubs)

Mighty Camps' mission emphasizes developing confident, capable, and resilient youth through character-building opportunities. *ROC* aligns closely with this mission by expanding the camp's existing strengths in leadership and teamwork into the emotional and relational domains of development. Through *ROC's* experiential learning and training, staff learn how to integrate emotional regulation, interoception, and connection-centered communication into their daily routines and interactions. These skills enhance Mighty Camps' established culture of confidence, inclusion, and belonging while deepening the emotional safety of the camp environment. *ROC* also supports Mighty Camps' focus on mentorship and youth leadership by providing staff with reflective tools for mindful awareness and emotional balance. Participants learn to recognize signs of dysregulation, apply grounding strategies, and model calm, attuned communication during high-energy or challenging moments. In doing so, the program strengthens both the staff's sense of professional purpose and the campers' capacity for self-regulation. For Mighty Camps, *ROC* is not a new direction but rather an extension of what the organization already excels at, empowering youth and leaders alike through connection, growth, and confidence.

AlphaBEST Education

AlphaBEST Education's mission centers on extending learning beyond the classroom and fostering academic and social growth through after-school and summer programs. The organization provides creative and engaging activities and *ROC* will introduce training that integrates occupational therapy–based strategies with social-emotional learning, regulation and neurodiversity-affirming practices. Through participation in *ROC*, AlphaBEST staff will gain concrete tools for co-regulation, connection-based methods, mindful communication, and inclusive problem-solving. By implementing *ROC*, AlphaBEST Education can strengthen the connection between its mission; to expand every child's learning potential, and the day-to-day experiences of its staff and students. The program is designed to support all children, with a particular emphasis on neurodivergent youth who experience differences in attention, sensory processing, or emotional regulation, such as those with ADHD, to promote belonging, participation, and personal growth.

Shared Message for Both Programs

For both Mighty Camps and AlphaBEST Education, *ROC* offers far more than compliance-based training. It represents a sustainable culture shift toward connection, mindfulness, and inclusion. The four-hour, state-aligned SEL training fulfills Colorado's professional development requirements while transforming how staff understand, interpret, and respond to the emotional needs of children. The program fosters a climate of empathy, safety, and engagement where every child can thrive and every staff member feels valued, capable, and supported. By partnering with *ROC*, both organizations

demonstrate a shared commitment to advancing social-emotional learning, enhancing youth well-being, and cultivating emotionally intelligent, compassionate leaders. These partnerships represent a unified investment in the future; one that not only meets regulatory expectations but also builds communities grounded in connection, inclusion, and resilience.

For academic and community partners such as Colorado State University (CSU) and Child, Adolescent, and Young Adult Connections (CAYAC*), Ripples of Connection (ROC)* is a meaningful bridge between research and real-world application. These partnerships are essential in extending occupational therapy's reach beyond traditional clinical settings and into the community spaces where children, families, and providers interact daily.

1. For CSU, *ROC* aligns directly with the university's commitment to research excellence, experiential learning, and community partnership. The program offers opportunities for graduate students to engage in applied, occupation-based research and qualitative evaluation that contribute to scholarly inquiry while addressing real community needs. Faculty engagement supports mentorship, data analysis, and knowledge translation, strengthening CSU's mission to advance evidence-informed practice through interdisciplinary collaboration.
2. For CAYAC, *ROC* aligns with its mission to promote mental health access, early intervention, and family-centered care for youth. By introducing training grounded in emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and inclusive practices, *ROC* offers CAYAC a complementary framework to enhance staff understanding of

neurodiversity and strengthen support for children with ADHD and other developmental differences. The program provides a sustainable avenue for community education that extends CAYAC's reach beyond clinical services into everyday learning environments.

Through collaboration with CSU and CAYAC, *ROC* advances four shared priorities: applying occupational therapy principles to community systems, fostering experiential learning, generating research partnerships that drive innovation, and building sustainable community-based solutions that promote wellness and participation for all. These aligned partnerships form the foundation for credible and sustainable dissemination. By engaging respected academic and community collaborators, *ROC* gains both legitimacy and local relevance; two elements essential for long-term impact. With shared values in evidence-informed practice, mental health promotion, and inclusive community engagement, these partnerships also strengthen the network of advocates who can carry *ROC's* message forward.

Sources and Messengers

Dissemination will rely on credible and engaged stakeholders. As Project Director and doctoral candidate, Ilia Srygley, MS, OTR/L, will present *ROC's* theoretical underpinnings, implementation design, and training logistics to partner organizations and academic collaborators. Leaders from Mighty Camps and AlphaBEST Education will lend organizational insight, logistical perspective, and testimonials that support peer adoption. Faculty mentors from CSU's Department of Occupational Therapy will contribute research guidance and academic credibility. Community allies, such as

CAYAC and local youth organizations, will help promote *ROC* through trusted networks and local events.

Dissemination Activities

Phase One

In the initial three months, dissemination will focus on personalized outreach and relationship-building with key stakeholders. The author, hereafter referred to as the Project Director, will initiate contact with leadership teams at Mighty Camps and AlphaBEST Education through introductory emails, followed by scheduled phone calls, to formally present the *ROC* program, outline its purpose, and discuss its alignment with each organization's training priorities. These communications will be accompanied by a digital program overview and executive summary summarizing *ROC's* occupational therapy foundation, social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies, and pilot logistics. Following these introductions, virtual and in-person introductory stakeholder meetings will be offered to decision-makers and site directors to present the *ROC* framework, answer questions, and identify potential pilot locations. Simultaneously, the Project Director will collaborate with a volunteer graphic designer to launch a simple program webpage and short video explainer that highlight *ROC's* mission, visual identity, and benefits for IES staff and youth.

Between months four and six, dissemination efforts will shift toward strengthening professional collaboration and preparing for pilot implementation. A stakeholder roundtable, co-hosted with faculty from Colorado State University's Department of Occupational Therapy, will bring together representatives from

community organizations, potential funders, and pilot partners to refine the evaluation framework and finalize logistics for the training rollout. Ongoing communication through follow-up emails and check-in calls will ensure sustained engagement, transparency, and shared ownership of the program's goals.

Phase Two

Phase Two focuses on communicating *ROC's* pilot outcomes to professional, academic, and regulatory audiences. The aim is to position *ROC* as a validated, replicable model of OT-informed SEL training and to encourage systemic adoption and funding support. Dissemination during this phase will emphasize the translation of evidence into practice and the alignment of program outcomes with broader social-emotional and mental health initiatives.

The immediate focus of Phase Two is to disseminate pilot findings to professional and educational audiences, establishing *ROC's* credibility as a research-informed and community-responsive program. Specific short-term objectives include:

1. Preparing and submitting conference proposals to national and regional organizations such as the American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the SEL & Wellness Summit, and the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning (IFSEL) to present evaluation findings and practical implications.
2. Writing a manuscript that will be submitted for publication in a peer reviewed occupational therapy or education journal. The manuscript will document *ROC's* evidence base, methodology, and outcomes.

3. Creating a concise policy brief summarizing key findings and implications for informal education staff training standards, to be shared with the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and Colorado Shines.
4. Conducting dissemination meetings with local stakeholders, including participating pilot sites, community partners, and Colorado State University faculty, to share results and co-develop recommendations for program refinement and sustainability.

The long-term objectives extend beyond initial dissemination and aim to embed *ROC's* principles into broader systems of education and policy. These objectives include:

1. Achieving recognition of *ROC* as an approved or endorsed SEL training that fulfills the state's three-hour SEL requirement for childcare and informal education staff.
2. Establishing a sustainable partnership network among occupational therapy practitioners, universities, and community organizations to deliver *ROC* trainings statewide.
3. Securing ongoing funding through state or federal grants to expand the program's reach and support continuous evaluation.
4. Influencing policy and practice by contributing to state-level advisory discussions on SEL, mental health, and inclusive education initiatives, positioning occupational therapy as a key stakeholder in social-emotional workforce development.

5. Disseminating longitudinal findings demonstrating improved youth participation, staff self-efficacy, and organizational climate to support national replication and advocacy efforts.

Primary dissemination will target professional and SEL-centric organizations, including AOTA and CASEL. *ROC's* findings will also be presented at national and regional platforms such as the SEL & Wellness Summit and IFSEL's annual forums to engage educators, program directors, and policy influencers. Participation in these forums enables cross-disciplinary dialogue and reinforces *ROC's* alignment with broader SEL priorities (CalHOPE SEL, 2025; Institute for Social & Emotional Learning, n.d.; SEL & Wellness Summit, 2025).

Secondary audiences comprise the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and Colorado Shines, agencies that set training standards and quality frameworks for out-of-school care. Disseminating *ROC's* results and recommendations to these bodies may support *ROC's* recognition as an approved SEL training tool and encourage integration into state training pathways (Colorado Department of Early Childhood, n.d.; Colorado Shines, n.d.).

ROC demonstrates how occupational therapy contributes to SEL innovation through its emphasis on participation, context, and well-being. Pilot results will highlight improvements in staff regulation, confidence, inclusive engagement, and youth outcomes. By disseminating these results, ROC seeks to become a recognized model for incorporating OT-informed approaches into SEL training pathways and influencing training policy at the state level.

Anticipated Results of Dissemination Activities

As a result of the Phase Two dissemination activities, several meaningful outcomes are anticipated across individual, organizational, and systems levels. At the individual level, dissemination will strengthen awareness and competency among staff working in informal educational settings by deepening their understanding of occupational therapy–informed social and emotional learning (SEL) principles. These efforts will empower staff to better support neurodivergent youth, including those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), through connection-centered and regulation-based strategies that promote emotional safety and inclusion. Additionally, engaging in *ROC*-related dissemination events such as conference sessions or workshops will reinforce reflective practice and professional identity among occupational therapists, educators, and community practitioners, positioning occupational therapy as a leader in community-based mental health promotion. Participants who encounter *ROC's* framework may also adopt similar mindfulness and interoceptive awareness activities within their own programs, extending the program's impact beyond the immediate pilot context.

At the organizational and community level, dissemination is expected to catalyze adoption of *ROC*-informed approaches within partner programs such as Mighty Camps and AlphaBEST. These organizations may integrate *ROC* tools and language into onboarding, supervision, and daily practice, embedding the values of connection, regulation, and inclusion into their existing staff development culture. Collaborative dissemination through Colorado State University and other partners may also lead to the

development of shared evaluation metrics that assess staff confidence, youth participation, and inclusion across informal educational settings. As *ROC* gains visibility, additional community partners and youth-serving organizations may seek to participate or adapt the program, creating a regional network of aligned programs that support neurodiverse youth through occupational therapy–informed SEL training.

At the systems and policy level, the results of *ROC* dissemination may influence professional development frameworks across the State of Colorado by contributing to the recognition of occupational therapy–informed SEL training within the state's official training pathways. Presentations and publications through platforms such as the CASEL, IFSEL, and the SEL & Wellness Summit will position *ROC* within the broader national dialogue on SEL and mental health promotion. Through these efforts, occupational therapy perspectives on interoception, co-regulation, and participation may be integrated into SEL policies and funding priorities. Furthermore, successful dissemination could generate sustainable financial and institutional support from philanthropic foundations, state grants, and corporate partners, ensuring *ROC's* scalability and continued evolution.

Ultimately, these dissemination activities are expected to contribute to a broader cultural and professional shift. By strengthening the connection between occupational therapy and SEL, *ROC* will expand the field's evidence base in community-based intervention, interprofessional education, and prevention-oriented mental health approaches. In doing so, *ROC* not only advances academic and policy outcomes but also reinforces the profession's commitment to meaningful participation, inclusion, and well-being for all children, especially those who are neurodivergent or living with ADHD.

Table 6.1 contains the preliminary dissemination budget which summarizes the anticipated costs associated with executing the dissemination plan. These allocations reflect a fiscally responsible approach that prioritizes community engagement, professional visibility, and sustainable outreach efforts essential to the *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* program's implementation and long-term impact. In Year 2, dissemination and evaluation efforts will focus on sustaining and expanding the *ROC* program's impact rather than initial development. Costs are projected to remain relatively stable, with stakeholder engagement, conference participation, and evaluation tools to support broader outreach and continuous improvement. Printing and web-related expenses are expected to decrease slightly as foundational materials and digital platforms are already established. Overall, the Year 2 budget reflects a transition from program creation to sustainability.

Table 6.1

Preliminary Dissemination Budget

Category	**Description**	**Year 1 Estimated Cost**	**Year 2 Estimated Cost**
Printing & Design	Program briefs, infographics, and summary reports	$500	$400
Conference Registration & Travel	Participation in SEL & Wellness Summit, IFSEL, and AOTA/CASEL	$1,200	$1,200
Web Development & Hosting	ROC webpage hosting, video creation, maintenance	$500	$250
Stakeholder Events	Refreshments, room rental, materials for roundtables	$400	$400
Evaluation Tools	Survey platform license, analytics software	$400	$400
Total Estimated Budget		**$3,000**	**$2,650**

Evaluation of Dissemination Efforts

While the *ROC* program evaluation will focus on assessing the effectiveness of the training itself, this section describes how the success of dissemination efforts will be measured. Dissemination evaluation ensures that outreach strategies effectively engage key stakeholders, secure pilot partnerships, and build a foundation for the later dissemination of training outcomes to professional, academic, and policy audiences. Evaluating dissemination is essential for understanding how effectively *ROC* reaches its intended partners, promotes awareness, and generates sustainable interest and collaboration.

Evaluation of dissemination efforts will occur in two distinct yet complementary phases: the initial dissemination of the *ROC* framework to secure pilot partners and the subsequent dissemination of findings following pilot implementation. Both phases will employ a mixed-methods approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of dissemination effectiveness and program impact, combining quantitative measures of reach and engagement with qualitative insights into relevance, feasibility, and perceived value.

During the first phase, quantitative indicators will include the number of meetings conducted with informal educational settings such as Mighty Camps and AlphaBEST, the number of partner sites that formally commit to pilot participation, and attendance and completion rates among staff who attend the four-hour ROC training. Metrics such as the number of accepted conference abstracts (e.g., CASEL SEL Exchange, IFSEL, and the American Occupational Therapy Association Annual Conference) and the reach of digital dissemination materials, including website engagement analytics and distribution of program briefs, will also serve as indicators of dissemination success.

Qualitative evaluation will deepen understanding of *ROC's* impact by capturing the experiences and perceptions of those involved in both dissemination and pilot implementation. Data sources will include participant feedback obtained through open-ended survey questions, reflective journals, and focus group discussions conducted after training sessions. These narratives will be analyzed thematically to identify emerging patterns related to participants' sense of competence, connection, and inclusivity in their professional roles. Stakeholder interviews will provide contextual insights into the

program's feasibility and alignment with organizational goals, while advisory feedback from Colorado State University (CSU) faculty and graduate students will help refine program content and evaluation methods to ensure continued adherence to occupational therapy principles. Success will be indicated by the formal commitment of at least two informal educational organizations to participate in the *ROC* pilot, statistically significant improvements in pre- to post-training self-efficacy measures, and strong qualitative feedback reflecting perceived relevance, applicability, and emotional resonance of the training. Additionally, interest or collaboration from state-level entities such as the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and Colorado Shines will serve as evidence of *ROC's* growing credibility and policy relevance.

Conclusion

The *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* dissemination plan establishes a clear and actionable pathway for implementing an inclusive, occupation-based program that bridges occupational therapy principles with the realities of informal educational settings. *ROC* aims to empower staff in after-school programs and summer camps to create emotionally attuned, neurodiversity-affirming environments in which all youth can thrive through meaningful participation, authentic connection, and improved self-regulation. Through intentional dissemination efforts, *ROC* seeks to build collaborative partnerships that prioritize inclusion, elevate neurodiverse perspectives, and integrate evidence-based approaches into everyday programming.

The *ROC* initiative envisions a sustained impact across multiple levels. It aims to empower staff in informal educational settings to view behavior through a connection-

centered lens, support organizations in embedding inclusive practices within their culture, and inform state-level policy to ensure equitable access to quality social and emotional learning opportunities for all youth. Ultimately, *ROC* represents a model of how occupational therapy can extend its reach beyond traditional clinical contexts to foster communities that celebrate neurodiversity, nurture belonging, and cultivate the confidence and emotional intelligence of every child.

CHAPTER SEVEN – Funding Plan

Ripples of Connection (ROC) is a staff training program for informal educational settings (IES), such as after-school programs and summer camps, which serve children ages 5–12. *ROC* prepares staff with research-informed approaches to support neurodiverse youth and foster inclusive group participation. The training program will be initially launched in Northern Colorado. For the purposes of this funding plan, "local" refers to Northern Colorado, including Fort Collins, Windsor, and surrounding communities where informal educational settings (IES) such as after-school programs and summer camps are actively serving children and families. *ROC* will be developed, piloted, and evaluated within this regional context, making local resources essential to its success.

During the design and facilitation phase, local occupational therapists and graduate students will provide volunteer hours as advisors and facilitators. Their involvement will ensure that the program reflects best practices in occupational therapy, social-emotional learning, and neurodiversity-affirming approaches. Colorado State University (CSU) is located in the region and represents a particularly valuable resource. CSU graduate students may contribute through practicum or volunteer experiences, while faculty may provide consultation to strengthen program design and evaluation (Colorado State University, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

For program implementation, in-kind support from local merchants and community partners can offset costs by providing donated or discounted supplies such as printing, art materials, and snacks for training sessions. Colleagues and students with

skills in graphic design, marketing, and web development can assist in professionalizing ROC materials to enhance credibility and accessibility. Community organizations including CAYAC, Mighty Camps (Genesis Health Clubs), and Alphabest Before and Afterschool Care programs may serve as host sites for training sessions, provide staff participants, and support recruitment and outreach (Genesis Health Clubs, n.d.; AlphaBEST Education, n.d.).

During the dissemination and outcomes measurement phase, families of neurodivergent youth, advisory volunteers, and CSU graduate students will support evaluation by providing feedback through surveys, focus groups, and data collection. Their involvement will ensure that ROC outcomes remain responsive to the community's needs while also building sustainable partnerships for future expansion. These Northern Colorado resources, which include professional, academic, business, and community support, create a strong foundation of in-kind contributions. Their involvement increases feasibility, reduces costs, and reinforces *ROC's* community-centered roots.

Budget

The *ROC* budget (Table 7.1) is streamlined to ensure sustainability and realistic planning. Year One reflects program development and pilot testing, while Year Two scales training delivery and evaluation. Personnel costs for *ROC* are designed to be lean yet sustainable. The Project Director will deliver the four-hour SEL training required by the State of Colorado, along with program preparation, participant follow-up, and evaluation check-ins. Compensation is benchmarked against national standards to ensure accuracy and reasonableness. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023),

training and development specialists earn an average of $38.65 per hour. External trainers and nonprofit professional development consultants typically command higher rates, ranging from $75 to $150 per hour (Association for Talent Development [ATD], n.d.; Nonprofit Quarterly, 2019). In addition, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) highlights the importance of high-quality, research-based professional development in Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and offers self-directed courses that reinforce market expectations for trainer expertise (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.c.). Based on these benchmarks, *ROC's* projected stipend of $7,500–$12,000 across the first two years reflects partial compensation for Project Director responsibilities, with additional effort provided in-kind to demonstrate sustainability.

Table 7.1

Projected Year One and Year Two ROC Budget

Category	Item Description	Year One (Pilot)	Year Two	Justification
Personnel (Project Director)	Doctoral-level occupational therapist with 18 years of experience in pediatric practice, leadership, and SEL training. Responsible for curriculum development, delivery of 3-hour training, participant follow-up, and coordination.	7,500	12,000	Ensures high-quality, evidence-based program implementation; stipend reflects partial compensation with additional effort provided in-kind.
Consultants (evaluation, guest input)	External experts for program evaluation, content refinement, or guest speakers to enhance training quality.	2,000	3,000	Provides specialized expertise in assessment, outcome measurement, and SEL best practices.
Instruction materials	Participant workbooks, reflection journals, training slides, online database of resources and certificates.	1,000	1,500	Supports staff engagement and knowledge retention with professional-quality resources.
Equipment (projector)	Portable projector and accessories for on-site training.	500	-	One-time purchase to ensure flexible, mobile delivery in varied IES settings.
Supplies	Demonstration kits (sensory tools, mindfulness props, regulation aids).	750	1,000	Allows participants to practice strategies and enhances experiential learning.
Communi-cation	Website hosting, flyers, and digital outreach.	500	750	Promotes program awareness, recruitment, and professional branding.
Materials preparation	Graphic design, editing, and printing services.	500	750	Ensures polished, accessible training materials for diverse audiences.
Travel	Local mileage reimbursement for Project Director to training sites.	250	500	Enables delivery across multiple IES partners in Northern Colorado.
Facility rental	Training space for workshops when community	500	750	Covers rental needs while maximizing in-

	partners cannot provide in-kind.			kind space partnerships (e.g., CSU, camps, afterschool programs).
Evaluation	Data collection tools, survey platform licenses, and reporting support.	1,000	1,500	Tracks participant outcomes, staff confidence, and program impact for sustainability and replication.
Contingency	Reserved for unforeseen costs	250	500	Flexibility for unforeseen expenses.
Dissemi-nation plan	Printing and design of briefs, infographics, and reports; web hosting and video maintenance; participation in conferences; stakeholder roundtables.	3,000	2,650	Supports strategic dissemination through professional presentations, accessible materials, and stakeholder engagement.
Total		$17,750	$24,650	

Note. Budget projections are approximate and subject to adjustment based on community contributions and grant alignment.

The *ROC* pilot is designed as a lean, sustainable program supported by community partnerships and in-kind contributions. With a projected cost of $14,250, the pilot emphasizes essential personnel, participant materials, and evaluation while leveraging donated space, graduate student support, and volunteer expertise to minimize expenses. In Year Two, the budget grows modestly to $22,250 to support scaled delivery, expanded evaluation, and additional training sites. This phased approach demonstrates fiscal responsibility and scalability, ensuring that *ROC* can be realistically sustained through a combination of federal grants, foundation support, and local community partnerships. By keeping personnel costs modest and prioritizing program impact, the *ROC* budget reflects a strong commitment to both efficiency and long-term viability.

Potential Funding Sources

To ensure sustainability, *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* will require diversified funding sources that combine federal opportunities, foundation support, corporate partnerships, and community-based philanthropy. Table 7.2 outlines potential sources, what they offer, who is eligible, funding timelines, and why each is a viable fit for *ROC.*

Table 7.2

Potential Funding Sources and Descriptions

Source	What is Offers	Who's Eligible	Why it Fits ROC
Federal Grants **EIR Program**	Awards up to $3 million for SEL initiatives that demonstrate innovation and measurable outcomes (CASEL & Committee for Children, n.d.). Typically, 3–5 years, with annual reporting requirements.	Nonprofit organizations, schools, and community programs with evidence-based SEL alignment.	ROC's evidence-based SEL framework and focus on youth mental health directly align with EIR priorities, offering scalability potential.
Federal Grants SAMHSA	Competitive grants supporting youth resilience, prevention, and community mental health initiatives. Multi-year (2–5)	Community based organizations, nonprofits, universities, and health agencies.	ROC supports resilience, emotional regulation, and inclusion, making it a strong candidate under SAMHSA's youth-focused priorities.
CASEL-Aligned Funding	Funding streams aligned with CASEL's SEL framework, used by states and districts for evidence-based training (CASEL, 2020, 2021). Annual to multi-year.	Programs demonstrating SEL fidelity, school/district partnerships, or community-based SEL initiatives.	ROC mirrors CASEL's five core competencies and can demonstrate fidelity, making it eligible for SEL-focused funding.
Corporate Partners	Charitable giving program with grants up to $5,000 for youth education,	Local nonprofits, schools, and	ROC promotes youth wellness and inclusion, aligning with Costco's

Source	What is Offers	Who's Eligible	Why it Fits ROC
Costco Wholesale	wellness, and community initiatives (Costco Wholesale, n.d.). Typically, one year; renewable upon review	community programs.	charitable priorities while leveraging local community impact.
Local Corporate & In-Kind Support	Donations of supplies, printing, snacks, or discounted services from local businesses. Typically, one-time or renewable annually.	Local merchants, service providers, and corporate community engagement programs.	In-kind support reduces costs for training sessions and builds community buy-in for ROC's sustainability.
Academic and Community Partners	Volunteer hours from graduate students, faculty consultation, training sites, and co-hosted programming Multi-year (2–5 years)	Academic programs and community youth organizations	Partnerships provide mutual benefit by enriching student experiences, supporting community youth, and expanding ROC's reach.
Foundations and Local Philanthropy **Denver Foundation** **Boettcher Foundation**	Grant funding for initiatives promoting youth wellness, inclusion, education, and mental health Varies: often 1–3 years with renewal opportunities.	Nonprofits and community-based initiatives.	ROC aligns with local foundations' missions to enhance youth wellness and inclusion across Colorado communities.
Crowd-sourcing **DonorsChoose or GoFundMe**	Publicly raised funds directed to specific program needs such as equipment, sensory tools, or scholarships for staff training One-time or ongoing, depending on campaign success.	Educators, nonprofits, or program developers.	Crowdsourcing provides flexible, community-driven funding that can cover smaller expenses and build public awareness of ROC.

Conclusion

Ripples of Connection (ROC) has the potential to transform informal educational settings into inclusive, emotionally intelligent communities that foster growth and well-being among neurodivergent and neurotypical youth, as well as the staff who serve them. With realistic budgeting, strong academic and community partnerships, and diverse funding streams, *ROC* is positioned for sustainable implementation. The total projected expenses include approximately $17,750 for pilot implementation and $24,650 for scaled delivery and dissemination, reflecting a fiscally responsible and scalable design. Federal grants, CASEL-aligned support, corporate giving, and community partnerships, including CSU's occupational therapy program and local organizations such as CAYAC and Mighty Camps, will help ensure both feasibility and long-term impact. Through this integrated funding and dissemination plan, *ROC* can extend its ripple effect across Colorado's youth-serving communities, promoting connection, confidence, and inclusion for all.

CHAPTER EIGHT – Conclusion

Ripples of Connection (ROC) was developed to address a clear and urgent problem: informal educational settings (IES) play a significant role in children's daily lives, yet staff frequently lack preparation to support the relational needs of neurodivergent youth, particularly those with ADHD. Connection, emotional intelligence, and neurodiversity-affirming practices are essential to youth well-being. These components are foundational to healthy development. The evidence demonstrates that the environment and staff's responses to youth's experiences profoundly influence youth participation, confidence, sense of identity, and emotional regulation. When staff in IES are equipped with relational, sensory-responsive, and regulation-supportive strategies, they become powerful protective factors who promote belonging, resilience, and well-being.

Research across neuroscience, psychology, education, and occupational therapy demonstrates the potential of emotionally attuned, autonomy-supportive, and relationally grounded environments for youth. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this project, including Social Cognitive Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and Polyvagal Theory, offer strong explanations for the multidimensional nature of behavior and emotional regulation. These frameworks inform the experiential, reflective, and occupation-based strategies embedded within *ROC*.

The process of building *Ripples of Connection* highlighted limitations in the current literature. Most studies do not measure long-term outcomes for staff or youth, making it difficult to determine the durability of training effects. Fidelity is inconsistently

assessed, which limits understanding of which intervention components are most impactful. Within informal educational settings, there is minimal consensus on how to effectively measure emotional intelligence, staff confidence, and youth participation. Notably, despite a thorough search, comprehensive, occupational therapy-led social-emotional program designed specifically for IES staff was not found. This represents a significant gap in the field and underscores the urgency and originality of *Ripples of Connection* as a model that bridges this divide.

Professional Growth and Contribution to the Field of Occupational Therapy

Ripples of Connection was designed to provide non-medical IES staff with occupational therapy–informed strategies supported by resources that align easily with themed modules and curricula. Through its focus on empowerment, reflective practice, and practical application, the program offers tools that staff can use immediately in fast-paced IES environments. The development of *Ripples of Connection* affirms the essential yet underutilized role of occupational therapy in guiding staff training across community-based educational settings. By integrating OT perspective in emotional intelligence, interoception, mindfulness, and relationship-based regulation, *Ripples of Connection* offers an innovative framework that equips staff with practical and empowering tools.

This work also highlights informal educational settings as a meaningful and emerging practice domain for occupational therapy. Youth programs such as summer camps and afterschool settings are deeply influential environments that support play, social participation, emotional development, and identity formation. Yet these spaces rarely benefit from the expertise of occupational therapists, whose training in

neurosensory processing, co-regulation, environmental adaptation, and strengths-based, participation-focused intervention is highly relevant to the challenges these programs face. Ripples of Connection demonstrates how OT practitioners can serve as consultants, educators, and capacity builders who strengthen staff competence, reduce reliance on punitive disciplinary practices, and promote youth inclusion and well-being.

Positioning occupational therapy within these settings expands the profession's reach beyond traditional medical, clinical and school-based models and reinforces its role in mental health promotion and prevention at a systems level. By offering a replicable, consultation-driven training model, Ripples of Connection shows how occupational therapy can meaningfully elevate program quality, strengthen staff confidence, and help create environments where every child feels emotionally safe, understood, and included. In doing so, the project responds to a real and pressing need in informal educational settings and also moves the profession forward. It demonstrates how OT consultation and coaching can bring evidence-based clarity and practical support to youth programs, while advancing the vision of occupational therapy as a partner in community mental wellness, belonging, and participation.

Implications for IES Staff Development and Systems Change

Findings from this project highlight critical implications for the design and implementation of future IES training initiatives. First, staff training must prioritize neurodiversity-affirming, emotionally intelligent, and connection-centered approaches, especially for youth with ADHD who experience heightened vulnerability to overwhelm, exclusion, and misinterpretation of behavior. Punitive responses, which remain common

in many community settings, often escalate dysregulation rather than resolve it. Second, occupational therapy is uniquely positioned to lead SEL training in IES due to its expertise in sensory processing, interoception, environmental modification, and meaningful participation. Third, sustainable and systemic change requires collaboration across universities, community organizations, and state-level agencies. *Ripples of Connection* offers a replicable and scalable model that can meaningfully contribute to statewide SEL training requirements and quality frameworks for staff working in youth-serving programs.

Future Directions for Program Development

ROC will require pilot implementation using fidelity tracking, mixed-methods evaluation, and long-term monitoring of staff and youth outcomes. Future research should explore how staff training in OT based components, including emotional intelligence, interoception and co-regulation, influence both staff practice and neurodivergent youth participation over time. At the systems level, intentional dissemination, policy alignment, and advocacy are essential for integrating *ROC* within statewide professional development systems and securing sustainable funding pathways.

Call to Action

Youth deserve emotionally safe and inclusive environments where their differences are respected, and their needs are understood. Staff deserve training that empowers them, supports their well-being, and strengthens their capacity to build meaningful relationships with youth. Informal educational settings will be strengthened with training models that are evidence-based, sustainable, and grounded in compassion

and inclusivity. *ROC* represents one meaningful pathway toward these goals. It is an occupational therapy-informed, connection-centered, and regulation-supportive program intentionally created to change how staff understand and respond to the social and emotional development of the youth they serve.

This doctoral project demonstrates that meaningful improvements in youth mental health outcomes in informal educational settings can be achieved when staff training is guided by an occupational therapy lens that centers inclusivity, empathy, evidence, and regulation-supportive practices. *Ripples of Connection's* development, evaluation plan, dissemination strategy, and funding considerations provide a clear roadmap for continued growth and long-term sustainability. As the program matures, essential next steps include rigorous evaluation, continuous refinement, and advocacy for integration within statewide professional development systems. The broader implication is profound. When staff are supported and empowered, youth thrive. When connection and emotional intelligence guide practice, environments become inclusive. When occupational therapy extends its reach into community-based learning environments, the profession contributes to building a culture of belonging and emotional wellness for all children. With continued research, deeper collaboration, and a sustained commitment to community partnership, *Ripples of Connection* will continue to expand its ripple of connected and nurturing environments where neurotypical and neurodivergent children thrive, professionals feel empowered, and meaningful participation becomes possible for all.

APPENDIX A – Key Terms

Neurodivergent youth - Children and adolescents whose brain-based developmental, cognitive, sensory, or emotional profiles differ from what is considered statistically typical. Neurodivergence may be innate, as seen in autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, or other neurodevelopmental variations, and it may also be acquired through factors such as traumatic brain injury or neurological illness. Within the neurodiversity paradigm, these differences are understood as natural forms of human variation rather than deficits, while still acknowledging that environmental barriers can contribute to participation challenges and disability (Fotheringham et al., 2023; Goldberg, 2023; McLennan et al., 2025; Pavlopoulou et al., 2025). For the purposes of this project, the focus is on innate neurodivergence, particularly ADHD and sensory-emotional regulation differences that commonly affect children in informal educational settings.

Neurodiversity - A framework that recognizes neurological differences, including variations in attention, thought patterns, perception, emotional regulation, sensory, and social-emotional skills. These are valuable forms of diversity rather than disorders. Rooted in disability-rights advocacy, the neurodiversity paradigm emphasizes acceptance, accommodations, and supportive environments that reduce disabling barriers and promote full participation for neurominority groups (Dwyer, 2022; McLennan, 2025; McLennan et al., 2025; Goldberg, 2023).

Informal Educational Settings (IES) - Learning environments that exist outside the structure of formal K–12 classrooms, such as after-school programs, summer camps, museums, community centers, zoos, and other enrichment spaces. In this doctoral paper, IES specifically refers to after-school programs and summer camps serving children ages 5–12. Learning in IES occurs through play, exploration, social interaction, and self-directed engagement rather than a structured curriculum.

Self-regulation - Self-regulation refers to an individual's learned ability to monitor and manage internal states, including thoughts, emotions, physiological responses, and behaviors, in order to meet environmental demands and achieve personal goals (Akeren et al., 2025; Robinson et al., 2023). In other words, it is the capacity to consciously direct one's internal experience and outward actions, rather than reacting reflexively (Robinson et al., 2023). Key components of self-regulation include recognizing internal signals of stress or escalation, selecting appropriate coping strategies, and adjusting responses in real time to navigate challenges effectively (Mahler, 2023). Children are not born with mature self-regulation; rather, these skills develop gradually through repeated, supportive interactions and guided practice (Bennie, 2024; Mahler, 2023).

Co-regulation - Co-regulation can be defined in various ways across disciplines, but it is most commonly understood as a dynamic, supportive process in which an attuned adult or peer provides external emotional and physiological support to help another individual modulate their arousal and emotional state (Mahler, 2023; Paley & Hajal, 2022). From

birth, individuals require the presence of caregivers to assist the developing nervous system in interpreting and responding to the world. Through consistent co-regulation practice, caregivers, peers and adults can offer the balance of sensory, emotional, and relational input needed for regulation, laying the foundation for the development of self-regulatory capacities over time.

APPENDIX B – Ripples of Connection Agenda

Time	Session	Activity Overview	Focus
0–15 min	**Welcome & Orientation**	- Mindful arrival - ROC introduction - SEL–OT introduction	Neurodiversity EI
15–30 min	**Emotional Intelligence (EI) Foundations**	- Mini-lecture - Emotion mapping	EI Empathy Regulation Awareness
30–75 min	**EI, Interoception, Mindfulness**	- "What's on Your Plate" Activity - Body Scan & Sensation Awareness - "Name it to tame it" Group Reflection	Interoception Early stress signs
75–90 min	**Break**	Hydration, stretch, grounding	Self-regulation
90–120 min	**Connection-Based Practices**	- "Connection before correction" Lecture - Role-play - Reflection	Co-regulation Relationship skills
120–150 min	**Scenario Application**	- Macy's Case Study - Small-group problem-solving	EI in action: Inclusive practice
150–160 min	**Break**	Hydration, stretch, grounding	Self-regulation
160–190 min	**ROC Activity: Emotional Awareness**	- Individual "Plates" Activity - Discuss stressors/supports	EI Interoception Coping
190–220 min	**Implementation Planning**	- Toolkit - Journaling - "Ripple Action Plan"	Sustainability Inclusion
220–240 min	**Closing & Next Steps**	- Gratitude reflection - Sign-ups - Post-survey	Reflection Accountability

APPENDIX C – Emotional Intelligence Module Facilitator Guide

Duration: 60 minutes
Sessions: Emotional Intelligence Foundations & EI, Interoception, Mindfulness

Purpose

To develop staff's emotional intelligence (EI) competencies through experiential learning that integrates mindfulness, interoception, and co-regulation, demonstrating how occupational therapy (OT) frames EI as a dynamic interaction among person, environment, and occupation.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this session, participants will be able to:

1. Identify personal emotional states, personal triggers, and internal cues that influence interactions with youth and peers.
2. Describe how self-awareness and regulation shape the emotional climate of the environment.
3. Apply at least one OT-informed strategy to manage internal states and model emotional regulation.
4. Reflect on how emotionally intelligent responses create positive ripples across relationships and environments.

Materials

- "What's on Your Plate" worksheet (one per participant)
- Markers or colored pencils
- Reflection prompts handout
- Optional: calming background music or chime
- Flip chart or whiteboard for group themes and reflection

Facilitator Tips

- Model vulnerability by sharing your own "plate" example.
- Emphasize awareness over perfection; emotional regulation is a skill that grows with practice.
- Connect each reflection back to youth outcomes, such as understanding that a regulated staff creates safer environments that foster participation and belonging.
- Define and utilize consistent OT language throughout (i.e. self-regulation, participation, co-regulation, sensory, therapeutic use of self).

Schedule

Time	Segment	Focus / Purpose
0–5 min	**Emotional Intelligence Through an OT Lens**	Introduce importance and differences of awareness, regulation, and connection in staff and Neurodivergent youth.
5–10 min	**Emotion Mapping- Group Discussion**	Normalize emotions and shifts, strengthen empathy and identify baseline awareness
10–45 min	**Activity – "What's on Your Plate"** **Body Scan and Sensation Awareness**	Develop interoceptive awareness and identify personal stressors.
45–55 min	**Group Reflection "Name it to Tame it"**	Integrate skills and connect emotion to neuroscience.
55–60 min	**Closing & Journaling**	Reflection on awareness and shifts in Sensory systems. Plan for daily integration.

0–5 min: Introduction: Emotional Intelligence Through an OT Lens

OT Framework	Person–Environment–Occupation Model; Therapeutic Use of Self
Concept	Emotions influence participation; regulation supports occupational performance
Goal	Introduce emotional intelligence and build shared understanding of how it supports regulation and participation in IES.

Materials:

- Flip chart or whiteboard for emotion words
- Reflection Prompt Handout

Discussion Prompts

- As we get started, call out a word that describes how you're arriving today.
- One word is perfect. No explanations needed.
- There's no right or wrong word here.
- You can share something positive, neutral, or challenging.

Script:

"Welcome to the heart of today's work: emotional intelligence (EI). In ROC, we view EI not as a fixed trait or natural ability, but as a learned skillset grounded in awareness, empathy, and regulation. It's not just about naming emotions, but about tuning into our own signals and being present for others. It is about learning how awareness of our inner state shapes how we connect with youth and each other. You don't have to be calm to connect; you must be aware. Awareness allows us to pause and choose our response rather than react. In occupational therapy, we understand emotions as participation. How we feel, sense, and respond shapes engagement; ours and the children's."

5–10 min: Emotion Mapping Group Discussion

OT Framework	Interoception and mindfulness
Concept	Reflection-in-Action; Emotional Attunement
Goal	Establish shared emotional vocabulary; normalize self-awareness

Materials:

- Flip Chart: Page titled "Emotional Awareness – Before"

Discussion prompts:
Write answers on the Flip Chart (e.g. reactive, stressed, tense, calm.)

- What words describe your emotional state right now?
- What word fits your energy or nervous system today?

- You can name more than one if that feels true.
- If you notice a shift already, feel free to add another word.
- When was the last time your own emotions influenced how you interacted with a child? How did you feel?

Script:

"We're going to pause and settle into our bodies and sensations. This check-in helps bridge awareness between what's going on inside and how we show up and respond to others. Regulation doesn't mean perfect, calm, or ignoring emotions. It means noticing and adjusting to what the environment calls for."

15–45 min: "What's on Your Plate" Activity, Body Scan, Sensation Awareness

OT Framework	Interoceptive awareness, Mindfulness as occupation, Co-regulation; Social Emotional Learning, Experiential Learning
Concept	Emotional Intelligence, Empathy, Regulation, Awareness, Interoception, Mindfulness
Goal	Building awareness of internal states to enhance regulation and to increase awareness of triggers and dysregulation.

Materials:

- "What's on Your Plate" white paper plate (one per participant)
- Reflection Prompt Handout

Discussion prompts:

- What did you notice about what takes up space on your plate?
- What surprised you about your internal signals as you filled it?
- What did you notice in your body during the activity?
- How similar or different are the coping strategies on the back from what you offer to children?

Script:

"We are going to pause and notice what is on our plates in this season of life. Please sit comfortably, feet on the floor, and gently close your eyes or soften your gaze. Take a slow breath in, and a long breath out. Notice any sensations in your body, any emotions, any thoughts that are here with you. There is nothing to fix, only to notice.
When you are ready, open your eyes and look at the blank plate in front of you. On the front of the plate, write or draw everything that is 'on your plate' right now: responsibilities, bills, work schedules, caregiving roles, daily routines, and even the small things that take up mental space.

As you fill your plate, I will cue you to pause every so often to notice what shifts you might be feeling/thinking. What happens in your body, your thoughts, your emotions as the plate fills up? Jot a few of those internal signals on the extra worksheet provided. Now flip the plate over. On the back, list or draw the things that help you cope, balance or feel more like yourself. This might be movement, quiet time, music, humor, sensory input, time in nature, or connection with people or pets. There is no right or wrong answer.
It can be helpful to see that everyone carries a lot on their plate, and coping is highly individualized. What helps one person feel calm may overwhelm another. Recognizing our own internal signals and needs is the first step to recognizing them in children, and to choosing the kind of ripple we want to create in our programs."

45–55 min: Group Reflection "Name it to tame it"

OT Framework	Regulation
Concept	Interpersonal Neurobiology; Labeling emotion as regulation
Goal	Regulation through awareness strengthens co-regulation and inclusion

Materials:

- Flip Chart–Title of new page: "Emotional Awareness – After"

Discussion Prompts:

- How does naming emotions change the way we interpret behavior?
- What words come to mind when you think about a regulated adult?
- What happens when we skip over awareness, regulation and connection and instead move straight to correction?
- How does emotional awareness change how you interpret behavior?
- How does your regulation support children's regulation?
- Regulated and Aware vs Perfection mentality shift.

Script:

"Dr. Dan Siegel calls this 'Name it to Tame it.' When we label what we feel, we activate the part of our brain that helps us calm and connect. When we notice that we're frustrated or having a bad day but have to keep it together, it's important to acknowledge that that's real. Regulation doesn't mean pretending or being perfect, it means noticing and adjusting." "Now that you've filled your plate, let's talk about naming emotions and why it matters. Neuroscience shows that simply naming what we feel activates the thinking brain and reduces emotional overwhelm.

55–60 min: Closing & Reflection

OT Framework	Reflection and Growth mindset
Concept	Reflection consolidates learning, supports self-efficacy and confidence and promotes intentional regulation.
Goal	With increased confidence, staff will demonstrate shifts in knowledge and confidence for the application of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and regulation strategies during daily interactions with children and colleagues in informal educational settings.

Materials:

- Reflection Prompt Handout

Reflection Prompts:

- What surprised you about what's on your plate?
- How do your coping strategies help regulate your nervous system?

Script:

"On your Reflection handout, write about one stressor and one regulation tool you identified today. How might this insight shift your approach to a child's behavior? The emotions and energy we carry ripple out. When we are aware of our own state, we can better co-create safety and connection for those we serve."

APPENDIX D – Reflection Prompt Handout

This reflection is for your awareness only. There are no right or wrong responses. Simply notice and write down.

Emotions *What feelings do you notice right now?*

Thoughts *What thoughts or mental patterns are present?*

Sensations *What do you notice in your body? Consider breath, tension, energy, comfort, or discomfort.*

Optional Reflection *Did you notice any shifts as you paused or as the activity progressed?*

APPENDIX E – Staff Check-in Form

(Post-Training Follow-Up)

Name (optional): **Date:**
Site/Group:

1. Emotional Awareness Scan
Right now, I feel…

- ☐ Calm
- ☐ Neutral
- ☐ Overwhelmed
- ☐ Tired
- ☐ Activated
- ☐ Other:

Body cues I notice:

2. "One Drop" Success Moment
Describe one moment this week when you used ROC skills.

What ripple did it create?

3. Stuck Point or Challenge
Describe a moment that felt difficult:
What made it challenging? (Check all that apply):

- ☐ My own stress
- ☐ Fast-paced environment
- ☐ Child overwhelmed
- ☐ Time pressure
- ☐ Noise/chaos
- ☐ Unclear expectations

What support might help next time?

4. Tools I Used This Week

- ☐ Emotion labeling
- ☐ Breathing / grounding
- ☐ Body scan
- ☐ Adjusting the environment
- ☐ Connection before correction
- ☐ Co-regulation
- ☐ Self-regulation break
- ☐ Sensory strategy
- ☐ Other:

5. My Ripple Commitment for Next Week
One small action I will try that can make a positive ripple:
6. Optional Reflection
How did this week feel different from weeks before the ROC training?

APPENDIX F – Pre/Post Knowledge, Confidence & Skillset Survey

Rate each item using the visual analog scale below.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all / Very low									Extremely / Very high

SECTION A: Emotional Intelligence Skills

1. Identifying emotions in myself
   How confident am I in noticing and naming my own emotions during the day?
2. Identifying emotions in children
   How confident am I in recognizing the emotions behind a child's behavior?
3. Understanding how emotions influence behavior
   How confident am I in understanding how emotions shape my interactions with youth?
4. Responding with empathy
   How confident am I in responding to children with empathy, even during challenging moments?

SECTION B: Interoception & Mindfulness

5. Noticing early signs of my own stress
   How aware am I of my body's early cues of stress, frustration, or overload?
6. Noticing early signs of stress in children
   How skilled am I at spotting early indicators that a child is becoming overwhelmed?
7. Using mindfulness strategies myself
   How confident am I in using breathing, grounding, or mindfulness strategies to regulate my own nervous system?
8. Teaching mindfulness strategies to children
   How confident am I in guiding children through simple mindfulness or calming strategies?

SECTION C: Connection-Based Practices

9. Using connection before correction
   How confident am I in connecting with a child before giving correction or redirection?

10. Co-regulation skills
    How confident am I in supporting a child by staying regulated myself and modeling calm?
11. Reading sensory or environmental triggers
    How confident am I in recognizing when the environment is overwhelming or contributing to dysregulation?
12. Adapting the environment to support success
    How confident am I in making quick environmental adjustments (noise, pacing, spacing) to support kids?

SECTION D: Staff Knowledge & Confidence

13. Knowledge of emotional intelligence concepts
    How knowledgeable do I feel about emotional intelligence skills?
14. Knowledge of interoception & sensory processing
    How knowledgeable do I feel about interoception and sensory-aware practices?
15. Knowledge of connection-based strategies
    How knowledgeable do I feel about connection-based behavior support?
16. Overall confidence supporting neurodiverse youth
    How confident am I in supporting children with ADHD-like regulation needs, sensory differences, or emotional sensitivity?

SECTION E: Professional Well-Being

17. Confidence in staying regulated under stress
    How confident am I in keeping myself regulated (maintaining my composure) during fast-paced or challenging situations?
18. Emotional bandwidth at work
    How able do I feel to show up emotionally present for the children I support?
19. Ability to pause before reacting
    How confident am I in pausing before reacting to escalations or challenging behaviors?
20. Sense of connection with the children I serve
    How connected do I feel to the children in my group or program?

SECTION F: Program Satisfaction

(These are only included on the post-training survey)
21. The ROC training improved my ability to support children
22. I feel more confident after this training than before
23. The strategies were practical and relevant to my setting
24. I intend to use these strategies regularly

Optional open-ended questions
25. What is one thing you want to feel more confident about when supporting youth?
26. What is one ROC strategy you plan to use immediately?
27. Any additional comments?

APPENDIX G – Satisfaction Rating

Rate your experience using the scale below.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not at all / Very low									Extremely / Very high

1. The training content was relevant and useful for my role.
2. The trainer's explanations and examples were clear and easy to understand.
3. The experiential activities (e.g., What's on Your Plate, scenario practice) supported my learning.
4. I feel more prepared to support youth with emotional, sensory, or regulation needs.
5. I would recommend this training to other staff in my program.
6. Overall, how satisfied are you with the ROC training experience?

Optional Short-Answer Items:

7. What was the most meaningful part of today's training for you?
8. What is one strategy you plan to use this week?
9. What else would you like additional support or training on?

APPENDIX H – Site Director Observation Form

Staff Implementation Check-In

Director Name: **Date of Observation:**
Program / Site: **Staff Member(s) Observed:**

1. How does the staff member speak, respond, and connect with youth?
Tone with youth (1 = harsh/rigid, 10 = warm/attuned):
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 ☐
Comments (e.g., calm voice, frustration cues, patience level, repair attempts):

2. How regulated and emotionally available did the staff appear during interactions?
Staff regulation (1 = stressed/overwhelmed, 10 = grounded/present):
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 ☐
Examples observed (e.g., breathing, body posture, re-centering strategies):

3. How effectively did the staff handle dysregulation, conflict, or emotional needs?
Co-regulation skills (1 = reactive/punitive, 10 = supportive/connection-based):
1 ☐ 2 ☐ 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐ 7 ☐ 8 ☐ 9 ☐ 10 ☐
Notes (e.g., validation, sensory supports, connection-before-correction):

4. Which ROC strategies did you notice the staff member using? Check all that apply.

☐ Naming emotions / emotional vocabulary
☐ Pausing before responding
☐ Mindful breathing or grounding
☐ Sensory-aware adjustments (e.g., noise, space, pacing)
☐ Offering choices / shared control
☐ Connection-based phrasing
☐ Co-regulation strategies
☐ Repair attempts after conflict

5. How did the child or group respond to the staff's approach?

☐ Calmed / settled
☐ Stayed engaged
☐ Increased participation
☐ Increased trust/closeness
☐ Continued distress
☐ Avoidance / withdrawal

6. Strengths Observed: What is the staff member doing well?

7. Growth Opportunities: What skills, supports, or strategies would help the staff member continue growing?

8. Additional Notes or Context

APPENDIX I – Executive Summary

Background and Need

Informal educational settings (IES), including after-school programs and summer camps serving elementary-aged children, play a vital role in child development beyond the traditional classroom. These programs provide structured, supervised environments where children build relationships, develop social and emotional skills, and engage in meaningful learning experiences (Afterschool Alliance, 2023). Despite this importance, a significant gap persists in staff preparation to effectively support children with neurodevelopmental differences such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and a wide range of emotional or behavioral needs.

Many IES providers come from non-medical and non-clinical backgrounds. They may have limited training in inclusive practices, emotional regulation, and neurodiversity-affirming strategies. Without access to targeted professional development, staff often rely on reactive or punitive behavior management methods such as exclusion, time-outs, or rigid disciplinary practices. These responses can unintentionally escalate conflict, undermine trust, and compromise emotional safety for both children and staff. As a result, programs experience greater behavioral disruptions, lower engagement, and diminished capacity to meet social-emotional learning goals.

This lack of training also affects program quality and workforce stability. Research shows that burnout among youth-serving professionals is widespread and often

stems from emotional fatigue, inconsistent behavioral strategies, and the absence of reflective or supportive supervision structures (Booren, 2025). High staff turnover interrupts consistency increases supervision demands and weakens overall program climate. Directors and administrators across the state report ongoing challenges in recruiting and retaining staff who feel confident managing complex emotional and behavioral situations in healthy, compassionate ways. As a result, directors and administrators face ongoing challenges maintaining program stability, quality, and workforce morale.

Simultaneously, IES, also referred to as out-of-school time programs, have been recognized as underutilized resources in addressing the youth mental health crisis (Afterschool Alliance, 2023). Recent national data reveal that children and adolescents are experiencing unprecedented levels of stress, behavioral health challenges, and neurodevelopmental conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Both the United Health Foundation (n.d.) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023) report increasing rates of youth mental health challenges in recent years. The Surgeon General identified this trend as a national youth mental health crisis, calling for stronger prevention and community-based supports. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021) Concurrently, data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that nearly one in five children ages 3–17 has a diagnosed mental, emotional, or behavioral condition (CDC, 2025). In Colorado, local data illustrate the urgency of this issue: between 2017 and 2021, the proportion of adolescents reporting poor mental health more than doubled; from 8.8% to 18.5% (Colorado Health Institute,

2023). Collectively, these findings underscore the critical need for accessible, community-based interventions that equip providers in youth programs with tools to promote emotional well-being, resilience, and safety. This need is particularly highlighted for neurodivergent children whose differences are often misunderstood or unsupported in group settings.

Staff in after-school and camp programs are distinctly positioned to make a positive difference. They often serve as trusted mentors who foster confidence, belonging, and resilience in children. However, they require practical, evidence-based tools to help them promote emotional safety, prevent escalation, and navigate behavioral challenges with empathy and consistency.

Ripples of Connection (ROC) directly addresses these needs by providing a structured, inclusive framework for training staff in emotional intelligence, mindfulness, interoception, and connection-based practices. *ROC* offers an evidence-informed approach to behavioral management that strengthens program safety, enhances youth outcomes, and improves staff well-being and retention all while equipping staff to better support neurodivergent children through a trauma-informed, sensory-responsive, and neuro-affirming lens.

Program Overview: Ripples of Connection (ROC)

Ripples of Connection is an occupation-centered social-emotional learning (SEL) training program designed specifically for staff in informal educational settings.

Grounded in occupational therapy (OT) theory and aligned with established SEL frameworks, *ROC* translates therapeutic concepts into accessible, practical tools that non-clinical providers can easily apply in daily interactions.

The mission of *ROC* is to help staff create emotionally safe, inclusive, and connection-focused environments where every child, neurotypical or neurodivergent, can thrive through meaningful participation. The program utilizes the Person–Environment–Occupation (PEO) model of occupational therapy, which emphasizes how sensory, environmental, and relational factors shape participation and behavior (American Occupational Therapy Association [AOTA], 2020). Staff learn to use mindful communication, sensory-responsive strategies, and environmental adaptations that enhance emotional regulation, inclusion, and overall safety. As a result, programs benefit from more consistent behavioral expectations, calmer environments, and stronger staff–child relationships.

The *ROC* framework helps staff identify and respond to diverse sensory and regulation needs, adapt environments to support attention and engagement, and interpret behavior through a neuro-affirming perspective. As a result, programs benefit from meaningful group dynamics, stronger relationships, and more equitable participation across neurotypes.

A distinguishing feature of *ROC* is its integration of a digital resource library full of tools that extend learning beyond the in-person workshop. Participants receive a digital toolkit containing printable interoception activities, video links to mindfulness activities,

scripts with reflective prompts, as well as emotional-intelligence exercises. These materials allow staff to embed *ROC* principles into their weekly routines, ensuring that the values of connection, reflection, and regulation continue to influence daily practice long after the training concludes.

What Staff Will Learn: Core Training Components

ROC curriculum is organized around four core training components. Each provides concrete, applicable strategies to strengthen behavioral management, conflict resolution, and inclusion while supporting personal well-being and professional growth.

1. Emotional Intelligence and Reflective Practice

Emotional intelligence forms the foundation of *ROC*. Participants explore how self-awareness, empathy, and relationship management influence youth outcomes and the overall climate of their programs (Goleman, 2020). Through guided reflection and experiential activities, staff examine how their own emotions influence behavioral responses and learn to model calm, empathic regulation. All valuable skills that can be particularly critical when supporting children with ADHD or emotional and sensory sensitivities.

Research demonstrates that educators with higher emotional intelligence experience reduced stress, improved relationships, and enhanced program effectiveness (Brackett et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2017). *ROC* applies this evidence through an occupational therapy lens, framing emotional regulation as a practical skill that can be

strengthened through awareness, practice, and environmental adaptation. This approach empowers staff to manage behavioral challenges with confidence and compassion, fostering safer and more inclusive environments.

2. Mindfulness and Interoceptive Awareness

Participants learn to recognize internal cues such as changes in breathing, heart rate, or muscle tension as early indicators of stress or emotional escalation. Interoception, or the awareness of internal sensations, is presented as a core component of emotional regulation and proactive behavioral management (Mahler et al., 2024).

Guided mindfulness activities such as body scans, breathing exercises, and grounding techniques help staff increase self-awareness and develop calm, centered responses during challenging interactions. Research shows that interoceptive awareness supports regulation, reduces reactivity, and enhances overall well-being (Füstös et al., 2013; Tan et al., 2023). By improving awareness and regulation, staff can model emotional balance and create a climate where neurodiverse youth can thrive.

3. Co-Regulation and Connection-Based Methods

ROC supports a shift from reactive discipline to connection-based behavioral management. Staff learn to interpret challenging behaviors as forms of communication that reflect unmet needs rather than opposition (Mahler et al., 2024; Khalsa & Lapidus, 2016). Training includes co-regulation techniques such as maintaining a calm voice,

using grounded posture, and demonstrating relational presence to help children regain emotional balance.

These practices align with Polyvagal Theory, which explains how feelings of safety and connection activate the body's social engagement system (Porges, 2017). From an occupational therapy perspective, co-regulation is understood as a collaborative process in which both adult and child contribute to achieving regulation. This concept is especially relevant for youth with ADHD or sensory processing challenges, who benefit from external regulation and predictability. Staff learn that connection must precede correction and that emotional safety is the foundation for sustainable behavioral change.

4. Inclusive Communication and Empathic Problem-Solving

The final component focuses on communication strategies that promote inclusion, empathy, and collaboration. Participants practice reflective listening, validation, and problem-solving to uncover the sensory or emotional needs underlying behavior. These strategies improve conflict resolution, enhance safety, and strengthen relationships among staff and youth. These skills are essential for fostering inclusion and reducing stigma for neurodivergent youth who may communicate distress through behavior (shutting down and/or acting out) rather than words.

ROC integrates occupational therapy principles such as environmental modification, activity adaptation, and relational support into experiential learning activities. Through scenario practice and role-play, staff gain confidence applying these

skills in real-life situations. The result is a cohesive approach to behavioral management that honors neurodiversity while emphasizing connection, consistency, and respect.

Training Format and Application

ROC is delivered as a four-hour, in-person experiential workshop designed for groups of approximately ten to twenty participants. The format includes interactive instruction, reflective discussion, and scenario-based practice that allow staff to immediately apply new skills. This structure meets Colorado's requirement for at least three hours of annual SEL training for licensed childcare and youth program providers (Colorado Office of Early Childhood, n.d.).

Each participating site receives a *ROC* digital toolkit that includes interoception exercises, mindfulness prompts, and emotional check-in templates for weekly integration. These materials transform the training from a single workshop into an ongoing culture of reflection, regulation, and emotional intelligence.

Beyond improving behavioral management and youth outcomes, *ROC* enhances staff well-being and retention. By offering strategies to reduce stress and strengthen professional confidence, the program helps prevent burnout and turnover. When staff feel capable and supported, they are more likely to remain committed to their roles, creating stability and continuity within programs, especially in environments serving youth with diverse behavioral and sensory needs.

Phased Implementation and Dissemination

Phase One: Local Pilot Implementation

The pilot phase of *Ripples of Connection (ROC)* will launch in Northern Colorado in collaboration with Mighty Camps (Genesis Health Clubs) and AlphaBEST Education. Stakeholder meetings will introduce directors and site leaders to the program's evidence-based framework, occupational therapy foundation, and SEL alignment. Evaluation will include both quantitative and qualitative measures such as pre- and post-training confidence surveys, reflection journals, and focus-group feedback. Success will be defined by improved staff self-efficacy, positive participant experiences, and sustained partnership commitments.

Phase Two: Broader Dissemination and Policy Integration

Following the pilot, *ROC* will expand through professional, academic, and policy dissemination. Findings will be presented at national conferences including the AOTA, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), and the Institute for Social and Emotional Learning (IFSEL). Abstracts and manuscripts will be prepared for submission to conferences and peer-reviewed journals to disseminate program outcomes and expand the evidence base connecting occupational therapy, neurodiversity inclusion, and community-based SEL.

Policy briefs will be submitted to the Colorado Department of Early Childhood (CDEC) and Colorado Shines to advocate for ROC's recognition as an approved SEL

training option. A train-the-trainer model will ensure scalability while maintaining fidelity. Through this work, *ROC* seeks to embed occupational therapy and neurodiversity-informed principles into statewide professional development systems and demonstrate the power of OT-informed approaches to mental health promotion.

Funding and Sustainability

The estimated budget for the ROC pilot and initial dissemination is approximately $3,000, covering materials, evaluation tools, and outreach activities. In-kind contributions from Colorado State University and community partners will help offset costs. Long-term sustainability will depend on diversified funding streams including grants from SAMHSA, Education Innovation and Research (EIR), and Title IV of the Every Student Succeeds Act. *ROC* will operate under a social enterprise model to promote both accessibility and financial stability. A sliding-scale fee structure will ensure equitable access for programs of varying size and budget. Because *ROC* directly addresses staff retention, burnout prevention, and program safety, it represents a high-value investment for directors seeking to improve both workforce sustainability and the quality of youth experiences.

Conclusion and Vision

Ripples of Connection (ROC) bridges occupational therapy, social-emotional learning, and inclusive practice to address the behavioral and emotional challenges faced within informal educational settings. Investing in staff training is like dropping a pebble

into calm water; the initial impact may seem small, but the ripples extend far beyond the point of contact.

When staff are empowered with emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and connection-based skills, their influence reaches every child and every relationship. Each mindful pause and compassionate response creates ripples of positive change that enhance behavioral management, build safer environments, and promote a sense of belonging.

ROC challenges reactive and punitive methods by reframing behavior as communication that reflects underlying needs. By integrating emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and co-regulation practices, staff learn to foster emotional safety, improve meaningful relationships, and sustain program consistency. This transformation strengthens staff morale, inclusive practices, reduces burnout, and increases retention, ensuring that connection always comes before correction.

The overarching vision of *ROC* is that every child, including those who are neurodivergent or living with ADHD, experiences belonging, safety, and meaningful participation in their community programs. By equipping staff with the skills and confidence to create emotionally safe, inclusive environments, *ROC* promotes both immediate impact and long-term systems change. Ultimately, one well-designed investment in staff development can create enduring ripples of connection, resilience, and well-being that strengthen programs, empower staff, and uplift entire communities.

APPENDIX J – Fact Sheet

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Ripples of Connection (ROC):

An Occupation-based Social Emotional Skills Training for Staff in Informal Educational Settings Serving Neurodiverse Youth

Ilia Srygley, MS, OTR/L, OTD Candidate

The Problem: *The Ripple Effect of Misunderstanding Neurodiversity*: Exclusion and Dysregulation Diminish Youth Confidence & Well-Being

Unsupported Environment & Untrained Staff → Reactive & Outdated Punitive Measures → Youth's Escalation & Dysregulation → Peer Exclusion & Negative Self-Talk → Poor Mental Health Outcomes

Informal educational settings (IES) are after school programs and summer camps that serve ages 5-12.

Up to 80% of IES programs report challenges (Afterschool Alliance, 2023).

Only 30% of IES staff feel prepared (EdWeek, 2022).

IES participant groups are often **neurodiverse**. Programs include neurodivergent and neurotypical youth attempting to learn, play and growing together.

ADHD affects over 1 in 10 U.S. children. It is one of the most prevalent neurodevelopmental conditions (CDC, 2024; NCHS, 2024).

1 in 5 youth experience mental health challenges (CDC, 2023).

IES staff may lack training to specifically serve youth with ADHD or emotional dysregulation.

Punitive discipline fuels stigma and weakens both teacher and student well-being (Mitchell & Greer, 2024).

Burnout and lack of training affect over half of IES, threatening program quality and child well-being (UNI ScholarWorks, 2022; Afterschool Alliance, 2022).

Proposed Solution

The Ripple Effect of Connection and Understanding: Fostering Regulation, Inclusion, and Confidence in Neurodivergent Youth

Evidence-based Staff Training (ROC) → Supportive Environment → Co-Regulation & Inclusion in Meaningful Tasks → Resilience & Positive Self-talk → Increase in Well-Being & Mental Wellness

Ripples of Connection (ROC)

Program Design

- 4-hour in person experiential workshop for 10–20 IES staff participants
- Fulfills Colorado's SEL training requirement for youth-program providers. (Colorado Office of Early Childhood, n.d.)
- Digital Resource library for activities to implement into themed daily or weekly curriculum

Curriculum Content

- Integrates evidence based occupational therapy (OT) and social emotional learning (SEL) research.
- Training through an OT lens:
  - Mindfulness
  - Interoception
  - Emotional intelligence (EI)
  - Connection-based practices

Social emotional skills address the importance of staff awareness to recognize and respond to the emotional and environmental factors shaping each child's participation and well-being (AOTA, 2020; Goleman, 1995).

Guiding Theories

- Social Cognitive Theory
- Self Determination Theory
- Polyvagal Theory
- Interoception

Evaluation Plan

- Pre/post staff questionnaires, open-ended surveys, and reflections measuring EI knowledge, awareness, and confidence.
- Mixed-methods analysis using descriptive statistics and qualitative themes to summarize outcomes

Outcomes

Increased staff awareness, knowledge, confidence & empathy

Improved youth and staff regulation as well as peer connection

Reduced Staff burnout & use of outdated disciplinary reactions

Strengthen inclusion & participation for neurodiverse youth groups

Advancement of Occupational Therapy

- Furthers AOTA's Vision 2025 & 2030 to advance mental well-being, inclusion, and meaningful participation for all (AOTA, 2017; 2025).
- Positions OTs as leaders in training, collaboration, and environmental modification to support inclusive participation in community and informal educational settings (Recigno, 2024; Ryan et al., 2024)

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Empowered staff and youth leaders create *Ripples of Connection* by nurturing inclusive, emotionally safe environments where all youth can thrive socially and emotionally through meaningful participation!

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