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Challenges with Social Emotional Learning at a Rural School District

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Abstract

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a systemic approach that includes key competencies that can support school personnel to advance educational equity by focusing on all stakeholders within a system. The link between educator and student SEL has grown, as educators practice, model, and support the development of SEL in students. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore six mental health personnel's experiences of implementing SEL at one rural school district in a southwestern state. Analysis identified four roadblocks to SEL implementation: a lack of foundational knowledge of SEL, lack of structural supports, learned helplessness, and inadequate ongoing professional development. This study calls upon one rural school district's need to support mental health team needs, including autonomy and agency to make SEL a priority.

Keywords

Social Emotional Learning, rural, school district, counseling, mental health, professional development, SEL implementation

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Challenges with Social Emotional Learning at a Rural School District

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Abstract

This article reports on the findings of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of school counselors and school-based mental health professionals in a rural school district following a social emotional learning professional development. Four themes were found: lack of foundational knowledge, lack of structural support, learned helplessness, and inadequate ongoing professional development. The authors discuss the implications of these findings for better application of social emotional learning related professional development, especially in relation to rural school districts.

Keywords: Social emotional learning, school counseling, professional development, rural

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is a set of competencies that support the learning needs of students. Although SEL is evidence-based (Durlak et al., 2015), there are factors that can make the implementation of SEL a challenge in some school systems. Research has suggested increased difficulties in small and rural districts (Rogers, 2019), as well as other school systems that do not have the funding or infrastructure to support SEL implementation broadly. For example, the case of Martinez and Yazzie vs. Martinez (State of New Mexico) found that the state violated the state constitution which provides the right to sufficient and equitable education for all students, especially those that identified as Hispanic, Native American/Indigenous, English Language learners, as well as students with disabilities (NM Center on Law and Poverty, 2020). The court ordered the state to provide educational programs and services to might better prepare students for college and career readiness. In particular, the lawsuit made note of need for better attention to social and emotional learning (SEL) for students.

The roots of SEL in educational discourse can be traced back more than two decades. In *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning*, Elias et al. (1997) introduced educational leaders to the key concepts that we now know as SEL. This seminal text promoted skill development for the purpose to enhance students' social and emotional competencies. Over the past 25 years, the literature related to SEL has expanded exponentially; there are hundreds of books that speak to Social Emotional Learning or support social and emotional competencies. A recent search of Google Scholar found over four million results on Social Emotional Learning in journals and publications. Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established in 1997 and has become prominent in the dissemination of SEL-related resources to inform individual educators and school districts in their implementation (i.e., Anchorage School District, Chicago Public Schools, Oakland Unified School District).

CASEL (2021) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the

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knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. Accordingly, SEL involves direct teaching of five competencies: self awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2021). Self-awareness is defined as understanding one's emotions, personal identity, goals, and values. This competency includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations, having positive mindsets, possessing a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy, and optimism. High levels of self-awareness require the ability to understand the links between one's personal and sociocultural identities and to recognize how thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected (Jagers et al., 2018). Self-management is defined as skills and attitudes that facilitate the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors (CASEL, 2021). This competency includes the ability to delay gratification, manage stress, control impulses, and persevere through personal and group-level challenges to achieve personal and educational goals (Jagers et al., 2018). Social awareness involves the ability to take the perspective of those with the same and diverse backgrounds and cultures and to empathize and feel compassion (CASEL, 2021). This competency also involves understanding social norms for behavior in diverse settings and recognizing family, school, and community resources and supports (Jagers et al., 2018). Relationship skills include the tools needed to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships, and to effectively navigate settings with differing social norms and demands. (CASEL, 2021) This competency involves communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when it is needed (Jagers et al., 2018). Finally, responsible decision-making is defined as the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to make caring, constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse settings (CASEL, 2021). This competency requires the ability to critically examine ethical standards, safety concerns, and behavioral norms for risky behavior; to make realistic evaluations of consequences of various interpersonal and institutional actions; and to take the health and well-being of self and others into consideration (Jagers et al., 2018). Each of the five competencies are distinct, but interrelated and the importance of systemic implementation of SEL is becoming a growing emphasis for educational stakeholders (Mahoney et. al., 2020; Meyers et. al; 2019; Oberle et.al., 2016; Weissberg, 2019).

Although grounded in the field of education, there is a great deal of overlap between concepts discussed in SEL, as well as those discussed in the field of professional counseling. The greatest connection between the two is perhaps the concept of wellness, as discussed by Myers and Sweeney (2005). There are five second order factors in the Wheel of Wellness, much like SEL as described by CASEL. Although there is not a one-to-one overlap between the two, there are obvious parallels between the Social Self (Wheel of Wellness) and Social Awareness (SEL), as well as the Coping Self (Wheel of Wellness) and Self-Awareness (SEL). Further, aspects found in SEL (i.e., self-management, relationship skills, responsible decision-making) can be gleaned from reviews of the other categories of self in the Wheel of Wellness, demonstrating how SEL may related more directly to the field of professional counseling. Further review of the Chi Sigma Iota Counselor Wellness Competencies (Gibson et al., 2021) further help to highlight the relationship to many of the elements of SEL to the expected work of a counselor.

A meta-analysis of 213 school based universal SEL programs examined the practice of sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) SEL interventions (Durlak et al., 2011). The researchers found that programs following all four recommended SAFE training procedures produced significant effects for all six outcomes [i.e., (a) social and emotional skills, (b) attitudes toward self and others, (c) positive social behaviors, (d) conduct

problems, (e) emotional distress, and (f) academic performance], whereas programs not following SAFE achieved significant effects in only three areas (i.e., attitudes, conduct problems, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). This study demonstrated the significant positive effects of universal, school-based, social-emotional development programs on students, evidenced by increased prosocial behaviors and a reduction in both problematic behavior and internalizing mental health symptoms. The study also supported the importance of well-designed and implemented SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011).

Researchers, school administrators, teachers, counselors, community leaders, and child advocates are all a part of moving the practices of social and emotional learning forward (Albright et al., 2019; Bridgeland et al., 2013; Collie et al., 2012; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Durlak et al., 2015; Elias, 209; Immordino et al., 209; Jagers et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018; Mafouz et al., 2019). There is wide support that SEL programs that focus on student behavior benefit students and teachers, while supporting classroom learning (Greenberg et al., 2016; Collie et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichel et al., 2017). As SEL research has evolved from a focus on programming for students exclusively to a more holistic approach, educational stakeholders have been struggling with how to prepare adults to be able to teach and model the social and emotional competencies with the young people they serve (Elias, 2019). Relatedly, Durlak (2016) identified twenty factors that can affect SEL program implementation which include but are not limited to organizational capacity, openness to change, frequent and open communication among school stakeholders, and champions who can maintain support and problem solve difficulties that arise. As we begin to get a more nuanced understanding of the needs from the systemic to the individual level to implement SEL in our schools, we are better able to determine the gaps. This is why the exploration into the needs of rural schools is necessary. As Elias (2019) noted, “a higher level of SEL competence will be needed to grapple with increasing complexities of civic life and citizenship and our own personal identification and sense of positive purpose” (p, 242). Unfortunately, the literature has suggested that educators are unprepared to teach SEL skills and competencies.

Building the Case for Adult SEL

To date, the SEL literature has been mostly focused on students’ needs; however, there is growing recognition that SEL program success is predicated on adult SEL. In order for school personnel to teach, model and support student SEL, they also need to possess the SEL competencies (Yoder, 2014). Researchers have found three factors undergirding the necessity of school personnel SEL as part of successful SEL programmatic implementation (Collie et al., 2012; Greenberg et al., 2016; Lane et al., 2015; Rudasill et al., 2010). First, school personnel SEL competency enables students to see, experience, and enact SEL in relationship. When school personnel consistently utilize tools to target specific social behaviors throughout their work with students, the students are more likely to use those skills in other environments (Lane et al., 2015). Second, school personnel SEL competencies are associated with increased school connectedness and more positive stakeholder relationships through greater engagement with students and other adults. Rudasill and colleagues (2010) noted that when teachers are in tune with the needs of students, it builds a classroom climate that “may buffer children from lower academic achievement associated with poor attention, and children’s temperamental attention and classroom emotional support work together to predict academic achievement” (p 113). In turn, when school personnel are more engaged and have built relationships with students and stakeholders, students and stakeholders are more likely to participate in the educational environment. Finally, Collie and colleagues (2012) noted “in the short-term, learning new skills for SEL appears to be stressful; however, in the long term- once teachers’

confidence for implementing SEL increases- they are likely to experience less stress, greater teaching efficacy, and greater job satisfaction" (p. 1198). IThe lower stress and increased higher job satisfaction may protect against professional burnout and the associated job transition since SEL in the classroom predicts greater teacher commitment (Collie et al., 2012).

There is increased recognition of the import of enhancing the SEL competence of adults who are teaching SEL (Jones et al., 2018). Niemi and Weissberg (2017) suggested "if teachers are not aware of their own social and emotional development and are not taught effective instructional practices for SEL, they are less likely to educate students who thrive in school, careers, and life" (Schonert-Reichel et al., 2017, p. 3). Despite this, a national study examining the degree to which SEL was incorporated into state-level teacher preparation programs found that very few states required pre-service teachers to learn self-awareness and self-management (Schonert-Reichel et al., 2017). Taken collectively, this research highlights that there is little to no direct instruction for emerging educational professionals to practice self-awareness skills like identifying their emotions and triggers, integrating their personal and social identities, and linking feelings, values, and thoughts (Schonert-Reichel et al., 2017). With no training in self management, educators lack learning opportunities to identify and use stress management strategies, set personal and collective goals, and demonstrate personal and collective agency.

It has been found that hiring, organizing, and training school personnel was one of the key practices to advance SEL (Allbright et al., 2019; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Such SEL opportunities included professional development for not only teachers, but also for leadership teams, mental and emotional health professionals, and non-instructional staff (Allbright et al., 2019). Scholars have indicated that SEL professional development should be driven by local problems and reflect local contexts, relate to participants' current job responsibilities, and collaboratively use modeling, support, feedback, and reflective practices (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Teachers and other educational stakeholders who demonstrate strong SEL competencies create classrooms that are well managed and focused on the relationship. As a result, the students learn more deeply and are more invested in the learning community (Schonert-Richel et al., 2017). This can be a particular challenge for rural schools. As noted by Lavalley, "rural students and the schools they attend receive little attention in either policy or academia" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 3). While the importance of advancing social and emotional learning for educators might be seen as important, rural schools do not often have the resources or personnel to provide such trainings. As such, lack of training is a salient issue for rural communities.

Some of the most common challenges in SEL implementation include a lack of common agreement or understanding of the definition of SEL and the lack of consistency in SEL practices and implementation approaches (Albright et al., 2019), as well as difficulty in meaningful SEL implementation (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). For example, survey research identified that while 55% of teachers received some form of SEL training, only 23% of this was from in-service trainings (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Further, results indicated that those most likely to be receiving training were in preschool or elementary school environments, whereas high school teachers are the least likely to receive training on SEL (Bridgeland et al., 2013). These results contradict best practice recommendations that include contextual and whole school programming across school systems (Bridgeland et al., 2013); however, there is limited research that investigates such best practice recommendations. Furthermore, although prior SEL studies included varied school personnel in the samples, no research could be identified to date that exclusively sampled mental health professionals to gain their unique professional perspective.

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of SEL at one rural school district in a southwestern state. Members of the district's mental health team (e.g., school counselors, social workers, and school psychologist) were interviewed about their experiences of district wide SEL implementation in the schools in which they worked. The goal for the study was to better understand the challenges and opportunities in district wide SEL training that was designed to encourage and support school mental health professionals' implementation of SEL.

Participants

Six women volunteered to participate in the study. Four participants identified as Hispanic and two as Caucasian/white. All worked in a single rural school district in a southwestern state. Participants averaged at least 9 years of experience in their current school district and a minimum of 14 years in the counseling field. Ages for participants ranged from the 30s to the 60s. Participants varied in their grade level of experience, with one participant working in high school, one in elementary school, two in middle schools, one school social worker, a school psychologist who served across the district.

Instrumentation

Personal Reflection and Assessment-SEL Competencies for School Administrators, Students and Staff

The Personal Reflection and Assessment measure, obtained from the CASEL website (CASEL, 2020) was used as a pre-training measure to allow the school mental health team to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses prior to training. This instrument was not created for research purposes, but as a self-reflection tool (CASEL, 2021). The tool consists of five scales, each reflecting the five dimensions of SEL as described by CASEL (self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, self-management, and responsible decision making), and had a total of 45 items.

Semi-structured Interview Guide

The researchers jointly constructed a semi-structured interview guide, based on extant SEL literature. The questionnaire consisted of items related to the school based mental health professional's prior training and experience with SEL, their impressions of their strengths and challenges based on their personal assessment, their experience within the SEL training program, the relationship between their SEL and their work within the school/district, and their continue needs in relation to SEL. Additional items explored the difference in SEL work from when they worked in person in schools, versus the work they conducted virtually while in the COVID-19 pandemic.

SEL Professional Development Training

In May of 2020, the mental health professionals and district administrators across the district were given training. The goal was for school leaders and change agents to learn about how Social Emotional Learning involves schoolwide systems change. The professional development was designed to help the educators develop strategies to use in their own schools and districts when implementing SEL. The learning outcomes were to discover the meaning of SEL as systems change; examine the frameworks and infrastructures that support their SEL implementation; learn about the results of the self assessment that they took to inform their needs; to develop strategies to invest stakeholders in the change process; reflect on current procedures and processes and discover new ways to implement SEL; and to develop their roles as mental health professionals in a tiered system of support. The second day was a deep dive into developing their tiered model for social emotional learning. In October 2020, there was a focus on the self-assessment with strategies geared to support their self-awareness and responsible decision-making competencies.

Researcher Positionality

At the start of the study, the research team discussed their positionality and biases, including how these might impact the data collection and analysis process. The first and third authors identify as a heterosexual, white females both of whom have worked in K-12 through higher education for over 20 years. Their work included being a teacher, school counselor, researcher, district administrator, and consultant. They both held strong beliefs in the positive effect of school counselors to the overall school community and the role of SEL ompetencies to produce productive and regulated citizens. The first author recognized the importance of working with rural educators particularly in the southwest as she has experience working with these populations whereas the third author's professional work was predominately in urban and suburban school districts in the northeast. The third author indicated a possibility that these differences across her professional experiences and that of the participants and other researchers could contribute to a lack of familiarity with and understanding of some of the participants' contextualized and regionalized experiences; however, she also expected that the differences could simultaneously permit an outsider perspective that facilitated triangulation and increased trustworthiness.

The second author identifies as a gay, white male who has worked as a counselor educator for over a decade at two different universities. He noted his beliefs that the rural school district might lack resources to support staff and students, based on the poverty in the state and the state's record in education. He also recognized that as part of the landmark Yazzie-Martinez lawsuit, the court's findings were that social emotional needs of youth were not adequately addressed in the state's schools, and therefore it was likely that topic would come up with participants. He also acknowledged his belief that participants may struggle with online working conditions due to the poor broadband access in the state, pockets of poverty in the community the school served, as well as the rural nature of the district. The researchers journaled about their biases and beliefs during the study, as well as during the data collection and analysis process. They attempted to bracket their personal beliefs in analyzing data and met often to discuss what they were finding and how their personal beliefs may have influenced their process.

Procedures

Following a connection between the district and the university during the College of Education's education summit in Spring 2019, the researchers contacted the school district to engage in professional development and research around SEL. Both parties met to discuss the opportunity for professional development training and research and agreed to common terms that included the scope and format of SEL training, resource needs, as well as time for school mental health staff to be available. After this, the researchers applied for and received institutional review board approval at their university. Next, researchers worked with district administrators responsible for the school district's mental health team to plan and prepare for the SEL professional development training.

Prior to the SEL training, the researchers sent the Personal Reflection and Assessment SEL Competencies for School Administrators, Students and Staff tool via Qualtrics to members of the district's mental health team inquiring about their strengths and challenges with SEL in their own work. The survey included an opportunity for participants to suggest additional topics and issues of concern to be included in the professional development training provided by researchers, including current needs while working in the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers conducted multiple SEL trainings, with the first consisting of two successive 6-hour days of professional development via ZOOM. Six months later, the researchers conducted a third 6-hour booster. After the completed 18 hours of professional development trainings, participants were invited to voluntarily participate in follow up research related to their

experiences of the training and their associated work with SEL. All persons were informed that decisions about participation would confidential and would not impact their access to future trainings. Interested volunteers were told to email the researchers and once participants completed an informed consent, they were evenly divided between the two authors for interviews via ZOOM. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the interviewer, with researcher notes incorporated. Interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour.

Data Analysis

This interpretative phenomenological study explored the experiences of six school mental health professionals at a rural district to better understand their experiences engaging with and SEL professional development training as part of implementing a SEL program in their school/district. The idiographic philosophical influence requires researchers to complete a detailed, thorough, and systematic individual case analysis for each of the participants. We completed this through an analysis of both participants interviews, responses to the CASEL SEL self-assessment, as well as permission from participants to observe them and record their thoughts in the group setting (Smith et al., 2009). This study implemented IPA's inductive and integrative strategies (Smith et al., 2009)—once analysis of interview was completed, participants had their data individually analyzed across the case, so that bracketing between participants could occur as part of the analysis process, so that time was provided between each of the participants to ensure the idiographic approach and limit analysis for the individual participants phenomenon.

After all participant data was analyzed, an idiographic table was developed. This table included a detailed account of the analyzer's interpretation and 1) experiential and micro-themes (originally identified as superordinate and subthemes), 2) definition of themes, and 3) participant extracts. Researcher notes and memos from initial coding helped to develop superordinate themes (Smith et al., 2009). The three researchers met and discussed coding and thematic development to consensus. A final member check (Thomas, 2017) and opportunity to offer any feedback or clarification on the entirety of how their experience was interpreted was provided to each participant; a way to ensure the description and interpretation by the analyst were as accurate as possible. The aim of this final data point was to offer participants time to review the whole of the parts within the hermeneutic circle, including all parts of the participant's case (Smith et al., 2009).

Trustworthiness and Credibility

The first method of trustworthiness came at the start of the project where each researcher journaled and shared with each other their research positionality, and any biases or preconceived notions that could impact the data collection or analysis processes. Throughout the project the researchers returned to their positionality statements and journals to reflect and re-reflect on this and the data to ensure participant voice came forward from the study and to minimize the influence of researcher bias. Other trustworthiness checks came from collecting multiple forms of data, including the CASEL survey, researcher reflection notes during the trainings and during coding, as well as the interviews. The allowed researchers to follow up on previous data collected in the interview to explore this from participants' own perspectives, and the researchers worked to triangulate the data to ensure there was consistency in at least two forms of data before it became a theme. Further, each researcher audited the others' data after initial codes and reflections were written, so that researchers more removed from an interview were able to see and react to each the participants' experience, as well as the initial analysis from their colleagues, to ensure the analysis was closer to participant voice and not overly influenced by researchers' preconceived notions or biases. Last, an auditor was used after initial code and theme development to check for

accuracy and consistency, to further support the trustworthiness and credibility of the research.

Findings

Lack of Foundational Knowledge Regarding SEL

The first theme that we recognized was the lack of foundational knowledge of the field of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) research. When discussing SEL, participants struggled to identify specific SEL in answering questions about which and how they integrate SEL into their practice; however, once SEL was described by researchers, all participants noted in their own personal ways that they are “doing that" in their respective roles in schools. This deep divide was evidenced in the interviews with all six of the participants. For example, one participant, Luz, noted that there was not a need to know the specific nomenclature and history of SEL as they essentially were what she has been doing for the past few decades. Adriana stated, “...I’ve been a counselor, this is my 24th year and all the different I've taught of all these aspects in different ways over all the years and you learn there's always a program that is fun or different things come up but really the core is just teaching just those basic values of you know how to be able to be around other people in a positive way right now.” In exploring SEL more deeply with participants, the interviewers discovered that the counselors in this group were not aware of the foundational studies or what Adriana said, “... I ask the facts of SEL I guess this is part of everything that I do hey then you know I didn't call it SEL but it's just part of what I do is my job with the kids with the little ones.” Another participant, Carmen, described it this way, Actually, being labeled SEL was when I started in district. I’ve always done it. You have to address the social emotional aspect of a child for them to be able to learn. Dealing with things that are going on with their life. This has been part of my practice all along. It was labeled with a name when I came to the district.

Without the foundational knowledge, understanding of the core components, and using research based SAFE procedures, the practice of SEL as we have always done it amounts to inconsistent application and planning for what works based on 30 years of past research on the topic. Stephanie noted that some of these gaps may have to do with inconsistent training that the mental health team had while working in the district. She noted that in her previous experience in a larger district, there was ongoing training in current topics in school counseling, and constant focus on the mental health needs of students. When coming to her current district, however, she noted that it “was like going back to the 1950’s.” She went on to say that the training provided by interviewers “was the first mental health specific training” she or her colleagues had ever had while working in in the district in their roles as school counselors.

Lack of Structural Supports

In discussing the training with the interviewers, each of the participants noted the lack of structural supports that they had available to engage in their work, as well as communication issues that appeared to pervade the system. In their own ways, each of the participants noted the lack of communication across the mental health team, and the ability to collaborate to complete their work. For example, Sarita stated,

> In trainings, when we go into groups, we got to socialize. I don’t really know other counselors. It was nice in the breakout groups to get to know each other and talk to each other on a different level grade level wise. We would answer the question we were supposed to answer but hearing and making personal contact was the best ever.

The lack of communication appeared to be based around the types of trainings that the mental health team was used to receiving, which was either typically paired with teaching staff, or focused on faculty issues even when meeting in the mental

health team. Participants' reports of previous trainings also appeared to be very lecture based, with little opportunity to discuss with others. This behavior appeared to be mimicked in the school settings, as a majority of the participants also noted the lack of communication across school counselors and school social workers, thereby limiting access to information and support when collaboration across student issues. Luciana noted that "this training was the first professional development that was just the counselors…we always attend trainings that are for educators and have nothing to do with our jobs…This training is the first time in my time with the district that we were able to come together as a mental health team and actually talk with one another!"

Another structural issue appeared to be participants' perceptions of the lack of administrative support for them to complete their job, expressed by Luciana "The challenge I have at my school currently is the principal is not a very social emotional person….It's hard for me because…he doesn't seem to like the idea of treating kids that way…he's a real disciplinarian as far as (saying) let's just suspend them and get it over with." Most participants noted that administrators responsible for the mental health team were not mental health professionals, and the gap in knowledge appeared to stymie the participant's professional growth. Some participants noted that the gaps in mental health specific training might be related to their administrator's background and lack of expertise in mental health specific issues. Others wondered if they were adequately represented at the district level, allowing them to receive the focus and resources they believed that they needed. One participant, Sarita, discussed her frustration over the district's use of a suicide prevention program, which a number of counselors were sent to be trained. Although this was the identified program for use in the district, Sarita noted that it was never discussed beyond the trainings, the work appeared to her to be inconsistently applied, and did not receive appropriate focus in regular mental health team meetings. When she raised her concern with the district leadership, she noted that she felt reprimanded that she should be leading the initiative since she was trained, and often asked to speak on behalf of the mental health team about this training because others appeared "unwilling" or "incapable" about learning about a program that was so important to the district.

These lack of structural supports and communication issues did appear to come to a head for most participants who noted that "we all do different things" and "are not on the same page" in relation to their work in the district. Stefanie noted that everyone in the school "from the custodians to the teachers" to administrators and other staff were there to support students, but each did their work differently and didn't have the time to consult with one another to get on the same page, which led to inconsistent advice, teaching and mentorship across the system. She noted that they deserve to "have 30 minutes" with each of the different professionals in her specific school to get on the same page so that they wouldn't be working at "cross hairs" with her other staff members. Other participants, such as Sarita, noted this is also true with work surrounding child abuse report, social emotional learning, and addressing COVID-related remote work. She went on to note: "If everyone is on the same page and uses the same language and has the same background and how this may benefit students, we could come more together as a team." She further explained that "the school, as a whole, could come as a cohort together to lead it." She later noted that this is "hard now due to pandemic and their own struggles, hard" but would be worthwhile to address issues and work together in a more coherent way.

Learned Helplessness

Across each of the participants, interviewers noted different ways that participants expressed learned helplessness in their daily work. Although noted differently across participants, each appeared to ask permission or approval from their administration to complete their jobs, or blamed administration or

others for their inability to engage in their school communities in the ways that they wished they could. Examples of this included from Beth,

> Right now, you know it's just not possible to go into classes and do things. We have actually never don't that at the middle school (implementing school wide SEL). We are too busy doing non-counseling things that have been a part of us…..We don't do that, we don't have time but our teachers also they have so much to do too. And they don't want to give up an hour of their time and so doing it schoolwide, it's you know, it's just difficult.

This appeared to contribute to a lack of a systematic approach to their work, which each noted they desired. This was perhaps spoken most clearly by Sarita who indicated "We find the barriers and stop us from doing anything." She reflected on why she hadn't engaged in work in her school that she knew she enjoyed after it was introduced in the training (i.e., specific form of group counseling for minors above the age of consent for counseling in the state). She noted,

> I find joy in doing that work, but I'm scared because I know how hard it is to get parental consent, especially working in a small district where everyone knows each other. At times, I think it is too hard, or wonder why I'd try because of how difficult it has been in the past.

She then reflected with the interviewer about her experience in the training when the trainers confronted her on this and offered a new way to understand her work. Sarita thanked the interviewer for that experience because she "hadn't thought about it [her work] in that way" and saw new opportunities for her future work.

Another example of a similar insight was offered by Stefanie, who expressed frustration in not being able to communicate with other counselors in the school that she serves because she is part time across multiple schools, and that every time she "attempted to communicate with them via phone or email, they never responded." She identified that the section of the training focused on self-empowerment made her re-think her part in the lack of communication, and how she could do a better job of asserting herself and her needs in her school environments. She explained that "this was different from before," as she "hadn't noticed how disempowered I felt in regard to communicating with my peers, compared to others in my life, including previous co-workers" and likely this supported this circular relationship in her current work environment where her needs were not met.

Sarita also offered how her emotions have gotten her overwhelmed, both prior to and after the pandemic began. In relation to her stopping herself from engaging in work to present to her staff in school surrounding mental health topics, she noted,

> Oh my gosh-there is so much info out there! For the presentation for our staff, I did a lot of footwork for that. Researching things. What are we going to present? The research is overwhelming. I don't know how and feel like I can't with lack of support. I want to do something, and there this internal process-you should be doing something, as well.

She often let the internal process stop her from moving forward, both disempowering her from moving towards engaging in her work the way she wanted to, as well as serving to continue the lack of access other school staff had in relation to mental health materials.

Another participant, Luz, directly identified her helplessness in her work with students due to the administration she works with have been focused on discipline. She noted that they "are not a very social emotional person" and that "it's hard for me because I...don't know...they don't seem to like the idea of treating kids" in ways that support their learning when they make mistakes. She went on to explain that because they "are a real disciplinary" and operate with a "let's just suspend them and get over it" attitude that "it's been difficult" because

she didn't know how to communicate with them given the differences in philosophy or theory of change. She suggested that the administrators' style trickled down to other teachers who also engaged with students in the same, very disciplinary focused way.

Inadequate Ongoing Professional Development

The SEL professional development training included research behind SEL, relationship between mental health and SEL, SEL in a multi-layered system of support, and the role of counselors with SEL. Participants indicated that they had not received any professional development training on mental health within their school district employment. As Beth stated,

> This has actually been for the first time in my 14 years we have had training for mental health. Every year there is professional development for teachers, and we are forced to go and sit there and learn teacher stuff and thirteen years of suffering through. This was great to be focused on mental health. I am engaged and interested in it, I am not sitting there like Oh, when is this going to be over. It was nice to talk to other counselors and be trained by other counselors and just the focus of being mental health was just awesome.

Again, this is where the lack of understanding the foundational concepts of SEL came up for Adriana, "I've learned more about the actual social emotional learning and the actual components of it and the different aspects of it even though I've taught it for forever and it was interesting to just see it more formal." She assessed this by saying that "A lot of good, you know, you learn a lot of good resources and different ways to teach things."

Another participant, Sarita, felt that they needed an even more basic training than the one that was provided. She had noted that the training was like "drinking out of a firehose." She later went on to state that it may have been "too advanced and too early," as she and many of her colleagues have never had professional development specific to school counseling in this district. In reflecting on their own experiences, the researchers felt that the mental health team needed more training, and this feeling was shared by participants in their interviews. Another participant, Stefanie, specifically noted that she would "likely wait until more training before moving on actionable steps." She later went on to state that she "just need to be given a step-by-step toolkit to be able to do SEL." Participants like Stefanie felt that without the tools and the curriculum, they "can't implement anything." This was explicitly and implicitly stated by participants, who noted that they struggled with knowing what to do next without training and development. As Luz stated, "...like you said-assessment and data. I would love to learn more how to perfect that or put into daily practice more. Learning different ways to do that effectively." Without proper and strategic learning strategies for how to implement SEL that is relevant to the mental health team, they noted that they wouldn't be prepared to teach or support the kind of daily social and emotional competencies that are necessary for schoolwide implementation.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of SEL at one local, rural school district in the southwest. Members of the district's mental health team (e.g., school counselors, social workers and school psychologist) were interviewed to better understand their experiences of SEL professional development training and the SEL implementation in the schools and at the district where they worked. The goal for the study was to determine the barriers consistent with the challenges in one rural school district. Four findings became evident through the analysis process: the mental health team lacked consistent and meaningful training, which resulted in them not feeling prepared to meet the needs of their students and

implement SEL systemically; this lack of training lead to a lack foundational knowledge about SEL, which resulted in inconsistent application in school. Further, there were a lack of structural supports that they had available to engage in their work, as well as communication issues that appeared to pervade the system, this resulting in some learned helplessness from the staff and their need for permission or approval from administration. We will explore each of these findings more fully and set them in the context of the current research into SEL practices in schools.

Lack of Foundational Knowledge

The importance of foundational knowledge cannot be understated, especially in the current climate around SEL. SEL is a focus on concrete, specific, observable, and teachable skills (Jones, et al., 2017). As noted, before, this consists of specific skills such as managing one's emotions, experiencing self-efficacy, demonstrating empathy and compassion, resolving conflicts constructively, and identifying solutions for personal and social problems. The mental health professionals in this study had a difficult time delineating between the social and emotional competencies and the work that they do in other domains of their profession. For example, one participant described the curriculum of "signs of suicide" as SEL. Another participant, Beth, went on to describe SEL as "social emotional learning with students means being strict, accountable, listening and honesty." These are general characteristics or qualities but not targeted to skill development that aligns with student needs. Knowing that the focus of SEL is prevention and early intervention and mental health has a much bigger and deeper meaning, educators who are unprepared to support SEL can lead to huge deficiencies in K-12 schools and a failure to support students, and school communities, in the ways they might most need service (Jennings & Frank, 2017).

Lack of Structural Supports

Participants in this study failed to identify structural supports to aid them in their work or spoke clearly about the need for additional structural supports to be built into the school system to ensure that adequate resources are available to support this work. Prior SEL literature identified structural supports include the people (who have the training and skills to move implementation forward), resources (budget for time and money), structure (organized and planned communication structures to make meaningful decisions), systems (including all educational stakeholders in a universally understood framework), and culture (environment that promotes vision of SEL for all; Olsen, 2021). There was a gap in systems (universally understood framework) identified by the researchers during the interview process. When asked what their current needs were to develop a mental health support continuum, many of the participants did not have an understanding for the need of prevention and intervention as a continuum of care. Adrianna said, "Our mental health team puts together a resource list every year that I refer with and it's all the different counseling agencies that are local….I guess we just do what we can and we refer out as we can and as we need to but there is a lot of wonderful resources out there…" Luciana's response to that question was, "For the kids, I'm doing SEL and I guess that is what I am focusing on right now because I don't know how I would be supported doing anything else in the school right now. So I don't know the answer to that." These statements point to a lack of understanding for a continuum of care which includes prevention. Instead, they do not know or think of the high need students and how referring out is the method of support. Previous research has dictated that most teachers believe the social and emotional skills are teachable (95%), but they also believe that to effectively implement SEL in their schools they need the support of district and school leaders (Bridgeland et al., 2013). This requires a clear and consistent message of support backed by resources of time, training, budget, and a collective vision for SEL that all stakeholders can take a part in. The researchers identified a gap in the resources. Many of the participants noted the differences from school to school and that they are "not on the same page." This can be a major problem because of the perception of what others are doing or not doing can

affect implementation. The researchers identified a gap in culture, as previously described to be an "environment that promotes vision of SEL for all" (Olsen, 2021), Principals' own social and emotional competence and knowledge can lead to inequity in resources across schools, where some administrators are adopting the practices and others are opting out (Mafouz et al., 2019). Our participants' experiences suggested that this can be confusing and frustrating for the school personnel who are trying to implement the work for everyone.

Learned Helplessness

The researchers noted in their researcher memos that there was a feeling of learned helplessness amongst the participants. Learned helplessness can emerge when an individual or group of individuals feel powerless to make any real change which can lead to passivity, decreased interest, and burnout (Greer & Wethered, 1984). The participants expressed various versions of low expectation of success in efforts, allowing roadblocks to stop progress toward stated goals, and describing success to factors beyond their control. Due to structural constraints, this was one of the first times participants had been in the same place and communicated with one another as the mental health team.

Individuals working as school-based mental health personnel can be placed in roles that are inappropriate to their skills and education, but the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model (ASCA, 2012) calls for school counselors to take a leadership role in prevention programming and consultation (Velsor, 2009). Specifically, this means for school counselors and other members of the student support staff to be a major part of the SEL implementation process in their local schools and districts. The importance of using school counselors' expertise during SEL implementation cannot be understated. The ASCA position on the school counselor and social-emotional development states, "School counselors use appropriate appraisal methods to promote a school environment designed to propel students toward positive mindsets and behaviors supporting social/emotional development through direct (e.g., classroom curriculum, group counseling and individual counseling) and indirect (e.g., collaborating or consulting with staff, families or communities) services" (American School Counselor Association, 2017, p.1). This learned helplessness may have occurred due to the lack of using their professional expertise in their current roles. The participants alluded to the misuse of their expertise and trainings in this school system. As such, these skills for participants in this study may have atrophied due to lack of use. The participants used words during their interviews that demonstrated elements of burnout: overwhelmed, frustrated, inability to communicate, disempowered and helplessness. When these ways of being occur over a prolonged amount of time, it would be natural for these mental health practitioners to feel burned out and begin to feel that their efforts are not being received.

Lack of Ongoing Professional Training

All participants noted that there was a lack of ongoing professional training, especially trained directly related to their roles on the mental health team. In the May 2020 self-assessment, the mental health team was asked, "What are your current professional development needs?" One participant wrote,

> I think our entire staff could benefit from professional development in the area of Social Emotional Learning. Our students' social emotional needs are overlooked and they are a huge factor in school performance. School Counselors know we could provide great support in this area, but we are given many other duties that prevent us from focusing on SEL and also struggle to gain access to students in order to address SEL needs in a preventative manner such as presenting Counseling Core Curriculum in the classroom setting. Maybe if

more staff were aware of this important need counselors could be better utilized in this area.

Ongoing professional development is a necessity for all educators to support them through things such as manuals, lesson plans, annual trainings, and communication pathways (Elbertson et al., 2010). Only as we learn more from research and program implementation can we improve and augment our current practices to better meet the needs of our students. Without this, like our participants, educators will become stagnated in antiquated practices. The research on how to improve the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of students has grown (Allbright et al., 2019; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012) and includes support for SEL professional development as a means to improve not only the way that educators work with students, but also how they manage their own social and emotional competencies (Collie et al., 2012). In the National Scan of Teacher Preparation and Social Emotional Learning (2017), one of the recommendations for next steps was to examine how promoting educators SEL in in-service education leads to improvements in teacher well-being and their own social and emotional competence. This is a challenge for schools across the nation, but particularly for schools with limited resources.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the current study. For instance, the participants of this study came from a single school district in a rural location of one southwestern state. Although general qualitative research permits a deep and robust account of participants' observations, perspectives and experiences, the professional context of participants in this study may not translate to all school-based mental health personnel across the country or all rural communities. Similarly, the research method does not provide the ability to distinguish what aspects of the findings result from or apply to rural schools, in the southwest. As much of the extant SEL research has focused on large, urban or suburban school districts and utilizes conceptual and quantitative methodologies, the study does begin to address these gaps.

Implications

There are two primary implications for findings in this study, namely related to a) the need to adapt to the specific challenges and strengths of rural schools in the United States as it relates to SEL training and b) future research related to school-based mental health personnel's SEL work.

Rural schools contend with many of America's greatest issues but without the resources to mediate those issues. For example, poverty (including generational poverty), inequalities that disproportionately affect minority children, lower literacy, limited access to advanced coursework, and lower college attendance (Lavalley, 2018). The level of isolation can create a barrier to resources like training and highly qualified educational staff. These barriers can impact the use of evidence-based practices to teach social and emotional competencies. As Lavalley (2018) discussed "School leaders in rural areas also struggle with poor access to high-quality professional development" (p. 20). If rural educators do not receive timely and effective training, they may become less effective over time.

Another implication to this research is to determine who is responsible for providing training and support to other educators for Social Emotional Learning. In many schools, the responsibility for implementation of SEL is placed in the hands of the school-based mental health personnel (Allbright et al., 2019). In many ways, this makes sense; however, many schools and districts are not prepared to support the school-based mental health personnel in the responsibility of systemic SEL program implementation. Participants in this study, all working within a small, rural district, struggled with a range of internal and systemic obstacles that interfered with their SEL work. Findings suggested

a need for additional resources to increase foundational knowledge, structural support, autonomy, agency to make decisions, and access to ongoing professional development. Future research should extend related investigations of SEL program implementation by school-based mental health personnel.

Conclusion

Educators are often left unprepared to teach social and emotional skills in the current educational climate. The landmark Yazzie-Martinez lawsuit in the State of New Mexico has highlighted this as one of the central findings of the case; New Mexico educators are not addressing its students' social emotional needs. Social Learning Theory helps us understand the necessity of adults to be trained and educated about their own social and emotional competencies and how to teach others to become more socially and emotionally competent (Redding & Walberg, 2015). Social interactions require role modeling, verbal instruction, and supervised feedback from individuals who can demonstrate these skills on a regular basis. School administrators, teachers and support staff are not only responsible for implementing social emotional learning programs but must be able to model positive relationships, emotional skills, and social behaviors (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003).

This study addressed the importance of social emotional learning and the difficulties that rural schools face during implementation. It forwards the case that adult social and emotional competencies are key to advancing practices for students and systems. The purpose of this phenomenology study was to explore some of the challenges of implementation at one rural school district. There were four findings based in the experiences of the mental health support staff embedded in the schools. The challenges are that there was a lack of foundational knowledge regarding social emotional learning, a lack of structural supports to help with implementation, noted learned helplessness from the participants, and inadequate ongoing professional development for the staff. These challenges create additional barriers for implementation by this rural school district.

This study highlights the importance of developing systems to train and prepare adults to implement practices to support student's social and emotional competencies. It is crucial to have a better understanding of the unique characteristics, challenges, and strengths of rural districts to meet their needs. The results of this study help to give other practitioners some insight into the way to serve rural schools more effectively.

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