The Role of Leadership in Social-Emotional Learning Implementation: Principal and Counselor Practices to Support Social-Emotional Learning

Author: Donna M. McGarrigle

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:107977

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2018

Copyright is held by the author. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0).
THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IMPLEMENETATION: PRINCIPAL AND COUNSELOR PRACTICES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Dissertation in Practice by

Donna M. McGarrigle

with Michael A. Caira, Jr., Sarah J. Hardy, and Deborah Langlois

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

May 2018
The Role of Leadership in Social-Emotional Learning Implementation: Principal and Counselor Practices to Support Social-Emotional Learning

by

Donna M. McGarrigle

Dr. Vincent Cho, Chair, Dr. Elida Laski, Reader

Dr. Ingrid Allardi, Reader

Abstract

This case study of a public school district in the Northeast United States explores the leadership practices of elementary and middle school counseling staff and principals in supporting SEL, using a distributed leadership framework (Spillane, 2006). Data sources included 24 interviews with administrators, guidance counselors and social workers and document review. Findings indicate counseling staff support students and staff in a variety of ways through both formal and informal leadership practices. Principals support SEL by establishing SEL programs or strategies to match the needs of their student population. Two different models were found for how guidance counselor and social worker responsibilities are structured. The most common model, in six of the nine schools, is a tiered model where guidance counselors work with the majority of students on academic support/monitoring and delivering SEL lessons. Social workers focus on smaller numbers of students with more intensive needs. The second but less common model, in three of the nine schools, does not differentiate the roles of social workers and guidance counselors and instead assigns responsibilities by grade level. Concerns with this second model were raised by some administrators and several counselors. The quality of peer and administrator relationships was reported to be supportive and collaborative in the schools with differentiated roles. In the non-differentiated schools, it varied, and was related to shifting staff, a misunderstanding of the role differences, and challenges in developing collaborative relationships. Recommendations include assessing support structures to ensure the model adequately supports the SEL needs of the school.
So many people helped me on this difficult but challenging journey. First, I would like to thank my dissertation team- Michael Caira, Sarah Hardy, and Deborah Langlois. You are amazing. Although I will not miss the marathon writing days, I will miss each of you greatly. You enriched my thinking and made much of the hard work joyous. Thanks also to Dr. Vincent Cho, my dissertation chair, who supported me throughout this oftentimes arduous process. His feedback and clear thinking were invaluable. Thanks also to my two readers, Dr. Ingrid Allardi and Dr. Elida Laski for your support and insight during the dissertation process.

Thank you to all my professors who have pushed and challenged me these last three years. Thank you to PSAP Cohort IV. This journey and my life have been enriched by getting to learn among such dynamic, passionate, intelligent leaders.

Many thanks to Superintendent Erin Obey and the Pembroke School Committee for their ongoing support.

Finally, thank you to my family. My husband who has picked up so many pieces to allow me the time to finish this work and who never doubted, as challenging as this was, that I was well able for it. Thanks to my posse of cheerleaders- my two children, Rory and Maura, my mom, my sisters Cathy, Mary, and Julie, my brothers Joe and Robert, and all my incredible nieces and nephews. Your support and love matters more than you know.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents

Copyright Page.................................................................................................................... ii
Abstract Page .................................................................................................................. iii
Acknowledgement Page..................................................................................................... iv
Table of Contents ............................................................................................................... v
LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................... viii
CHAPTER ONE ................................................................................................................. 1
  DISSERTATION DESCRIPTION & LITERATURE REVIEW ....................................... 1
  Individual Studies and Conceptual Lens............................................................................. 2
  Literature Review................................................................................................................ 3
  Definition of Social-Emotional Learning ......................................................................... 4
    The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning for Students........................................... 6
      Academic achievement ............................................................................................... 6
      School behavior .......................................................................................................... 7
      Life-long success ........................................................................................................ 8
    Teacher’s Role in SEL ................................................................................................... 9
      Teacher-student relationships ..................................................................................... 9
    Importance of a positive classroom environment ..................................................... 10
    Implementation of SEL practices and programs ....................................................... 10
  The Importance of Educational Leadership .................................................................. 11
    Setting direction ........................................................................................................ 12
    Developing people .................................................................................................... 12
    Redesigning the organization....................................................................................... 13
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 14
CHAPTER TWO .............................................................................................................. 16
  METHODOLOGY ........................................................................................................... 16
    Site Selection ................................................................................................................ 16
    Data Collection ............................................................................................................. 17
      Individual and focus group interviews ...................................................................... 17
        Individual and focus group interview instruments................................................ 18
        Individual and focus group interview participants............................................... 18
        Individual and focus group interview process ..................................................... 19
      Document review .................................................................................................... 21
    Data Analysis ................................................................................................................ 21
CHAPTER THREE .......................................................................................................... 24
  PRINCIPAL AND COUNSELOR PRACTICES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
  LEARNING ...................................................................................................................... 24
  Literature Review........................................................................................................... 25
    Distributed Leadership................................................................................................. 25
    Counselors and Distributed Leadership....................................................................... 27
      Counselor skills and knowledge .............................................................................. 27
      Leadership potential of counselors ....................................................................... 28
      Factors related to counselor leadership practices................................................... 28
The Role of the Principal ................................................................. 29
Professional Relationships ............................................................. 29
Methods .......................................................................................... 30
Setting ............................................................................................... 30
Data Collection .................................................................................. 31
Participant data ............................................................................... 31
Interviews ........................................................................................ 32
Documents ....................................................................................... 34
Data Analysis ................................................................................... 34
Interviews ........................................................................................ 35
Documents ....................................................................................... 36
Research journal .............................................................................. 36
Findings ............................................................................................. 36
Formal and Informal Leadership Practices of Counselors ................. 37
Formal leadership practices ............................................................. 37
Informal leadership practices .......................................................... 39
SEL supports .................................................................................. 39
Crisis response ............................................................................... 40
Student advocacy ............................................................................ 41
Supporting SEL: Principals and Counselors ..................................... 42
Principals and counselors: Differences in supporting SEL ............... 43
Organizational structure of counselor roles ..................................... 43
Patterns in schools with non-differentiated counselor roles ............... 44
Staff concerns with non-differentiated support model .................... 46
The Impact of Relationships ............................................................ 47
Discussion ....................................................................................... 48
Leadership Activities ...................................................................... 49
Organizational Models for Counseling Staff .................................... 50
Principal and Counselor Relationships ............................................ 52
Conclusion ....................................................................................... 53
Limitations ....................................................................................... 54
CHAPTER 4 .................................................................................... 56
DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS ...................................... 56
District Strengths ............................................................................. 56
Social-Emotional Learning is Bigger Than You Think ....................... 57
Social-Emotional Learning is for Everyone ....................................... 58
Social-Emotional Learning Includes Creating Safe, Caring Learning Environments .................................................. 59
Recommendations to Expand Understanding of Social-Emotional Learning .............................................................. 60
Setting Direction ............................................................................. 62
School Autonomy ............................................................................. 63
Developing Group Goals .................................................................. 64
Recommendations for Setting Direction .......................................... 64
Developing People ........................................................................... 65
The Role of Professional Development in Change .............................. 66
Instructional Methods of Effective Professional Development .......... 67
Recommendations for Future Practice in Developing People .......... 68
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A leadership driven needs assessment</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation of a professional development plan</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Redesigning the Organization</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective Structures to Support Social-Emotional Learning</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Processes</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation for Organizational Structures</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Administrators</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured Interview Protocol: Counselors</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group Interview Protocol</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding Manual</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchical Table with Code Categories</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1 *Four Studies of the Role of Leadership in Social-Emotional Learning Implementation* .................................................................3

Table 1.2 CASEL’s *Core SEL Competencies* ..............................................................5

Table 2.1 *Participants* ..................................................................................................20

Table 3.1 *Interview Participants by Role and School Level* .....................................31

Table 3.2 *Recruitment Response of Counselors* .........................................................32

Table 3.3 *Administrator Semi-Structured Interview Questions Connected to each Research Questions* ..........................................................33
CHAPTER ONE

DISSERTATION DESCRIPTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

For the last 20 years, educational reforms have focused on implementing learning standards and increasing accountability (Cohen, Fuhrman, & Mosher, 2007; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). While these reforms led to gains in student achievement (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003), the definitions of student readiness and success are expanding. Educators, legislators, and researchers have recognized the importance of non-cognitive skills for school success and longer term functioning (Zins & Elias, 2007). These constellations of ‘soft’ skills are commonly referred to as social-emotional competencies (Elias, 2013). In school, students develop these competencies through social-emotional learning (SEL) (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). SEL is the process through which people gain and apply skills that allow them to understand and regulate their own emotions, to apply empathy in interactions with others, and to successfully negotiate social problem solving (Zins & Elias, 2007). As such, SEL is increasingly considered essential to every child’s education (Slade & Griffith, 2013).

While the concept of SEL is not a new one (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004), in recent years federal legislation, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) brought SEL instruction to the forefront for educators and administrators. This national policy codified the requirement for educators to provide students with a well-

---

1 This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Michael A. Caira, Jr., Sarah J. Hardy, Deborah Langlois, and Donna M. McGarrigle.
rounded education and a school environment that enhances learning by attending to social-emotional as well as the academic needs of children. In an ongoing effort to address this reform movement, schools employ a variety of programs aimed at addressing discrete social-emotional issues such as substance abuse, conflict resolution, attendance, and character building (Greenberg et al., 2003). However, such stand-alone efforts often fail because they lack connection to a wider vision for SEL.

It is the responsibility of leaders to set direction in their districts, ensure staff development supports that direction, and create organizational structures that yield the desired results (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Therefore, leaders direct SEL implementation by establishing policies, setting vision, and creating strategic goals, all of which unite the many elements that comprise successful SEL programming (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Additionally, leaders can ensure the appropriate allocation of resources for staff development and for necessary organizational structures.

Although much research exists regarding the impact of leaders on teaching and learning (e.g., Blase & Blase, 2000; Marks & Printy, 2003), there is a dearth of research addressing how school and district leaders can best support implementation of SEL policy and initiatives. Educational leaders play an important role in providing the support and guidance needed to implement effective SEL programming (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Therefore, the broader aim of this project was to explore the role of school and district leaders in supporting implementation of SEL in public education.

**Individual Studies and Conceptual Lens**
This project examined specific aspects of SEL implementation and educational leadership through four individual studies (Table 1.1). Each study established specific research questions and explored the implementation of SEL opportunities through a different conceptual lens. Table 1.1 lists each individual study and its corresponding conceptual framework. Collectively, the four views provided an understanding of the work done by school personnel to implement SEL in one district.

Table 1.1

Four Studies of the Role of Leadership in Social-Emotional Learning Implementation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Study Title</th>
<th>Conceptual Lens</th>
<th>Investigator</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One District’s Approach to Professional Development</td>
<td>Self-efficacy and Professional</td>
<td>Caira, Jr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making Sense of Social-Emotional Learning Initiatives</td>
<td>Sensemaking</td>
<td>Hardy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership and Classroom Learning Environment</td>
<td>Leadership Practices</td>
<td>Langlois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal and Counselor Practices to Support Social-Emotional Learning</td>
<td>Distributed Leadership</td>
<td>McGarrigle</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Literature Review

The following review will familiarize the reader with the research literature used to inform our project. First, we define SEL, for the purpose of our project. Second, we present background information and research showing the importance of SEL on various student outcomes. Third, we examine the role of teachers in SEL implementation.
Fourth, we review the literature regarding the role of leaders in developing and supporting SEL initiatives and improvements in schools.

**Definition of Social-Emotional Learning**

Elias (2006) calls SEL “the ‘missing piece’ in education, because it ...links academic knowledge with a specific set of skills important to success in schools, families, communities, workplaces and life in general” (p. 6). Throughout the research literature, the term SEL has various definitions and overlaps with a multitude of terms used in education, such as: character education, emotional literacy, whole child education, grit, and resilience (Elias, 2013). However, the commonality among terms is a focus on the development of essential social-emotional skills and the impact of these skills on student functioning and learning (Murray, Hurley, & Ahmed, 2015).

The inclusion of the word “learning” in the term “social-emotional learning” is intentional because it indicates social-emotional skills can be acquired (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016). The term SEL recognizes the complex process involved in the attainment of social-emotional skills. As described by Elias and Moceri (2012), “[SEL] implies a pedagogy for building those skills and an intervention structure to support the internalization and generalization of the skills over time and across contexts” (p. 424). The importance of this skill development “over time and across contexts” highlights schools as a critical setting to foster social-emotional skills. In addition, these researchers recognized the importance of a range of people (e.g., teachers, parents, and peers) being involved in skill instruction, practice, and generalization of social-emotional competencies.
The definition for SEL from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was the most appropriate one for our project due to its framework for organizing social, emotional, and academic learning. According to CASEL (2015), SEL is the process of teaching, practicing, and reinforcing five social-emotional competencies. Formally, this definition states that SEL is:

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2015, p. 5).

Per CASEL’s (2015) definition, the five identified competencies related to social-emotional health include: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. See Table 1.2 for the definition of each of these competencies.

Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social-emotional competencies</th>
<th>Competency Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness</td>
<td>Recognizing one’s emotions and identifying and cultivating one’s strengths and positive qualities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social awareness</td>
<td>Understanding the thoughts and feelings of others and appreciating the value of human differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-management</td>
<td>Monitoring and regulating one’s emotions and establishing and working toward achieving positive goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship skills</td>
<td>Establishing and maintaining healthy, rewarding relationships based on cooperation, effective communication, conflict resolution, and an ability to resist inappropriate social pressure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsible decision making</td>
<td>Assessing situational influences and generating, implementing, and evaluating ethical solutions to problems that promote one’s own and others’ well-being</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning for Students

The impact of SEL on students is substantial. SEL influences academic achievement, school behavior, and life-long success (Zins & Elias, 2007). We discuss the impact of SEL on these areas of student functioning in turn.

Academic achievement. There is a growing body of research that points to the link between academic achievement and students’ social-emotional development (Elias, 2009). A meta-analysis of 213 studies looked at the effectiveness of universal SEL programs and found SEL programming positively impacted a broad range of skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). An analysis of one subset of these studies revealed an 11-percentile point gain in the academic achievement of students taking part in SEL programming. Similarly, Payton et al. (2008) found up to a 17-percentile point increase in academic test scores for students involved in SEL programming. Another study examined reading and math standardized assessment scores and found a link between reading and math achievement and social-emotional competencies (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Hertzman, & Zumbo, 2014). The same pattern of results is evident for subgroups of students. For example, when only students from economically disadvantaged families are included, regular participation in universal SEL services is also linked to better development of social-emotional and academic skills (Zhai, Raver, & Jones, 2015). Thus, time spent on SEL, even when taken away from the core curriculum, is time well spent.
There is a growing body of research that points to the link between academic achievement and students’ social-emotional development (Elias, 2009). A meta-analysis of 213 studies looked at the effectiveness of universal SEL programs and found SEL programming positively impacted a broad range of skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). An analysis of one subset of these studies revealed an 11-percentile point gain in the academic achievement of students taking part in SEL programming. Similarly, Payton et al. (2008) found up to a 17-percentile point increase in academic test scores for students involved in SEL programming. Another study examined reading and math standardized assessment scores and found a link between reading and math achievement and social-emotional competencies (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Hertzman, & Zumbo, 2014). Even for students from economically disadvantaged families, regular participation in universal SEL services was linked to better development of social-emotional and academic skills (Zhai, Raver, & Jones, 2015). Thus, time spent on SEL, even when taken away from the core curriculum, is time well spent.

School behavior. The importance of SEL for students goes beyond the impact on academic achievement and includes improved behavior (Durlak et al., 2011). Shechtman and Yaman (2012) examined the effect of integrating SEL in literature instruction on student behavior. Along with increased content mastery, students had commensurate improvements in their classroom behavior and motivation (Shechtman & Yaman, 2012). So too, implementation of SEL programming was found to reduce student antisocial behaviors (Frey, Nolen, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2005) and improve school conduct (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2011).
SEL can impact student behavior outside of the classroom as well. Even in less structured school settings, social-emotional skills play a key role. The use of explicit instruction in behavioral expectations coupled with positive adult reinforcement may lead to a reduction in undesired recess behavior (Lewis, Colvin, & Sugai, 2000) and improved hallway conduct (Oswald, Safran & Johanson, 2005). Thus, SEL is important to student success in a range of school settings.

While the presence of SEL programming can positively influence student behaviors (Brackett et al., 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; Lewis et al., 2000; Frey et al., 2005; Oswald et al., 2005; Shechtman & Yaman, 2012), the absence of thoughtful SEL implementation comes at a cost. According to Blum, Libbey, Bishop, and Bishop (2004), without the development of social-emotional competencies, students lose interest in school over time. In addition, without sufficient social-emotional skills, students struggle to form functional relationships. Furthermore, as students’ connections to school erode, so too does student academic achievement. Consequently, a failure to establish effective relationships may lead to school failure (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007).

**Life-long success.** In addition to the shorter term academic and behavioral benefits, skills gained through SEL are linked to better long-term outcomes for students. Elias (2009) explained, “[SEL] is about teaching all children to have the patience, interest, and skills to think about the complex issues all citizens face and to have the knowledge, inclination, and skills needed for civic participation” (p. 840). The skills and dispositions necessary to participate in a democracy also lead to well-being and happiness (Cohen, 2006). Therefore, providing systematic and explicit instruction in
SEL supports students in developing skills that are essential for long-term success in life (Zins & Elias, 2007).

Dodge et al. (2015) conducted a longitudinal study to determine the impact of an intervention program on kindergarten students with high ratings of aggressive or disruptive behavior. Half of the students, approximately 445 children, were provided instruction in social-cognitive skills and peer relationships. Eighteen years later, researchers examined the arrest rates, drug and alcohol use, and psychiatric symptoms of all participants. They found lower rates of externalizing and internalizing behaviors with individuals who participated in the intervention. Thus, investing in students’ social-emotional development through SEL programming and initiatives can have both short term impacts (e.g. increased achievement and prosocial skills), as well as long term ones (e.g. reductions in negative adult outcomes).

**Teacher’s Role in SEL**

Teachers play an important role in the successful implementation of SEL for students. Our review of literature revealed teachers promote SEL for students in three broad ways. First, we discuss teacher-student relationships. Second, we examine the importance of a positive classroom environment. Third, we present research findings regarding the effective implementation of SEL practices and programs.

**Teacher-student relationships.** Relationships play an important role in the cognitive and social development of students (Davis, 2003). Therefore, relationship development is instrumental in the implementation of SEL. According to Pianta (1997), positive adult relationships are important resources for student learning and development. In fact, students who learn from caring and responsive teachers were found to have a
stronger work ethic and report a greater enjoyment of learning (Rimm-Kaufman, Baroody, Larsen, Curby, & Abry, 2015). Additionally, positive teacher-student relationships can lead to a decrease of externalized and internalized negative behaviors in children (Merritt, Wanless, Rimm-Kaufman, Cameron, & Peugh, 2012; O’Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011) and higher levels of prosocial functioning (Brock & Curby, 2014; Merritt et al., 2012). Warm and communicative relationships may also increase a student’s social-emotional well-being (O’Connor et al., 2011). Positive relationships were found to be especially important for students with behavioral difficulties (Brock & Curby, 2014) and for those with a lower sense of self-efficacy (Martin & Rimm-Kaufman, 2015). So, although students enter school with a range of competencies, how teachers nurture these relationships has important implications.

**Importance of a positive classroom environment.** The relationships teachers establish with students are foundational in creating a positive learning environment. According to Elias (2006), "effective, lasting academic learning and SEL are built on caring relationships and warm but challenging classroom and school environments" (p. 7). Students learning in positive classroom environments were more secure, attended to their academics at higher rates, and communicated more positively with peers (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). Additionally, classrooms characterized by a positive climate moderated the risk of early school failure (Hamre & Pianta, 2005).

**Implementation of SEL practices and programs.** While teacher-student relationships and classroom environments influence SEL, teachers also support SEL development through pedagogy and the explicit teaching of social-emotional skills through structured programs. The implementation of these programs has implications for
their effectiveness. Researchers found teacher training in SEL programming led to increased program dosage and fidelity, which in turn, positively impacted students’ emotional problem solving and emotional literacy (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012). Similarly, fidelity with and consistent implementation of an SEL program matters. As an example, Ottmar, Rimm-Kaufman, Berry, and Larsen (2013) examined the impact of the consistent use of Responsive Classroom, an educational approach focused on building a relationship between academics and SEL. They found this approach positively impacted the effectiveness of mathematics instruction, through student development of class rules, student choice in work, and regular modeling of classroom routines and expectations.

When weighing how best to develop SEL, it is critical to note that quick-fix, short-term, or isolated approaches are inadequate (Zins, Elias, & Greenberg, 2007). Thus, conveying the importance of SEL to staff prior to implementing new SEL initiatives is imperative in order to attain staff buy-in. Therefore, the role of leaders in SEL implementation becomes essential.

**The Importance of Educational Leadership**

As is true with all school reform, educational leadership plays an important role in the development and implementation of SEL (Kendziora & Osher, 2016). Although research gaps exist regarding the impact of leadership in the effective implementation of SEL, leaders can move organizations forward by “influenc[ing] a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2016, p. 16). Setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization are three sets of practices through which leaders can facilitate change (Leithwood et al., 2004).
**Setting direction.** Creating a vision and articulating a plan to realize that vision are common practices among effective educational leaders (Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). Leaders help to establish a sense of purpose and meaning by placing organizational goals into a broader context for the staff (Honig, 2016). How leaders frame a policy highlights certain aspects of the reform. Leaders can best garner support for reform by helping staff understand how the change connects to current practice, why the reform is necessary, and why the particular reform was selected. A leader’s ability to articulate a compelling vision for the organization can energize and motivate staff to engage in the organizational reform (Minckler, 2014). Several researchers found vision setting to be a collaborative process in schools that affects positive change (Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2013; Dinham, 2005; Silins, Mulford, & Zarins, 2002). Irrespective of how a vision is determined, it is ultimately a leader’s responsibility to set the organizational vision and determine the organizational direction (Leithwood et al., 2004), whether as an individual process or a more collaborative one.

**Developing people.** Motivating and energizing staff is often insufficient on its own to sustain growth, as even motivated staff may not have the requisite skills to make progress with new organizational initiatives (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). However, participation in professional development can increase skills and efficacy of staff (McKeown, Abrams, Slattum, & Kirk, 2016). When leaders provide teachers with targeted professional development, teachers are more likely to attempt new techniques and implement changes to their daily practices (Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002). Educational leaders can support staff development by providing appropriate external professional development or by facilitating access to internal
resources or expertise (Minckler, 2014). In the development of staff SEL, effective professional development and supportive coaching can increase the quality and quantity of lessons implemented with a new SEL curriculum (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009).

**Redesigning the organization.**

Effective leaders establish the conditions that support staff towards meeting organizational goals (Dinham, 2005; Higgins, Ishimaru, Holcombe, & Fowler, 2012). Leaders can improve outcomes by creating the time and space for staff to work together and by establishing expectations for the work (Minckler, 2014). Leaders can also foster teacher collaboration as a norm of educator practice (Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, & Beatty, 2010). Creating the appropriate structures and norms is particularly important for sustaining SEL initiatives due to the important role contextual conditions play in SEL (Ringeisen, Henderson, & Hoagwood, 2003).

Leaders can increase organizational capacity through the creation of innovative learning environments that support risk-taking and the development of new skills (Higgins et al., 2012). In a study of Australian secondary schools, teachers who took a lead role in increasing organizational capacity were recognized and reinforced by school leaders (Silins et al., 2002). Similarly, Dinham (2005) found high performing schools had school leaders who placed value on actively growing through innovation. These leadership behaviors modeled for the staff the importance of growth and risk-taking in building organizational capacity.

A calm, well-structured environment is another organizational condition found to support reform initiatives (Leithwood, Steinbach, & Jantzi, 2002; Zins et al., 2007). A
meta-analysis examining the impact of leadership found the creation of smooth, orderly school climates allowed increased learning for teachers and students, and thus contributed to greater organizational growth (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Leaders need to establish an educational climate of respect, care, and support to foster greater organizational growth (Minckler, 2014; Silins et al., 2002). Higher levels of administrative support were positively related to teacher efficacy and a greater breadth of teacher strategies (Bellibas & Lui, 2017). Creating appropriate organizational supports led to more effective implementation of SEL initiatives (Ransford et al., 2009).

Educational leaders have an important role to play in building their schools through improving an “organization’s innovative capacity, teachers’ working conditions, and smooth internal organizational functioning” (Witziers, Bosker, & Krüger, 2003, p. 416).

Conclusion

This literature review defines SEL as:

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (CASEL, 2015, p. 5)

SEL is dependent upon core social-emotional competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Students’ academic achievement, behavior, and future success are impacted by SEL. Teachers are essential in creating positive relationships and building the environment where SEL can succeed. School and district leaders might play a pivotal role by
supporting the work of teachers through vision setting, staff development, and the promotion of positive organizational conditions for the implementation of SEL.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this project was to explore the role of school and district leaders in supporting implementation of SEL in public education. This project utilized a qualitative case study methodology (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative data provides a rich description of “phenomena as they are situated and embedded in local contexts” (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, p. 20). Our research focused on one public school district. As a bounded system (Merriam, 2009), this district provided a useful context for examining the work of district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and counselors as they worked to support the social-emotional development of students.

This project was conducted by four researchers investigating different aspects of the implementation of SEL (see Table 1.1). While our four individual studies shed light on specific approaches to the implementation of SEL, our collective work provided us insight into how a district can support such reform. We worked as a team in many aspects of the process including site selection, data collection, and analysis. In the following section, we identify the process used to determine the appropriate district for our project, define our common data collection process, and provide an overview of the data analysis used by the entire team. Data collection and analysis unique to the individual studies are reported in those respective chapters.

Site Selection

We conducted our research in a public school district located in the Northeast United States. For purposes of anonymity, we refer to the school district as Jamesberg.

---

2 This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Michael A. Caira, Jr., Sarah J. Hardy, Deborah Langlois, and Donna M. McGarrigle.
Two distinct criterion drove our site selection process. First, we identified a school district focused on developing and improving SEL programs and practices. During our initial site selection process, we discovered two documents that provided evidence of the Jamesberg School District’s focus on SEL implementation: a health and wellness newsletter from June of 2016 and the superintendent’s entry plan. Together, these documents indicated to us that Jamesberg was a district seeking to expand its SEL capacity.

Second, we wanted to conduct our research in a medium- to large-sized public school district. Presumably, a public school district of 5,000-10,000 enrolled students allowed for access to multiple schools of different grade levels and the potential to interview a large percentage of school leaders. We gathered information regarding student enrollment and school distribution from the state’s education department website (School and District Profiles, n.d). According to the district and school profile, Jamesberg had a population of approximately 8,500 students and 14 schools (one preschool; nine elementary schools; three middle schools; and one high school).

**Data Collection**

This collaborative project utilized three sources for data collection: semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, as well as documents. We discuss these sources in turn.

**Individual and focus group interviews.** We conducted semi-structured, in-person individual and focus group interviews from October to December of 2017. Conducting interviews allowed us to gather information through a focused conversation (Merriam, 2009). The semi-structured format provided a framework based on our
research questions while allowing for flexibility in the exact wording of questions and question order. Below, we describe the development of interview protocols, the selection and recruitment of participants, and the interview process.

**Individual and focus group interview instruments.** Semi-structured interview protocols for administrators (see Appendix A), counselors (see Appendix B), and teachers (see Appendix C) were developed to explore SEL implementation. The protocols for administrators and teachers were created collaboratively by including specific questions to address individual studies as well as the broader purpose of the overall project. We field tested the protocols by interviewing school leaders, teachers, and counselors not connected to our research district. Based on the field tests, we adjusted the protocols for clarity and to ensure the interviews stayed within a 45 minute to one-hour time frame.

The final interview protocols contained questions about practices used by district and school leaders for SEL implementation. Additionally, we included questions about participation in and perceptions of SEL implementation activities. We also created questions to elicit information regarding how leaders set direction, developed people, and redesigned organizational conditions during the implementation of SEL.

**Individual and focus group interview participants.** We selected our participants from four categories: district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and counselors. Using the district website, we collected the names and contact information of all district administrators, principals, and assistant principals. Based on the listed job descriptions, we targeted district leaders whom we presumed would be knowledgeable about SEL. We contacted seven district leaders and 21 school leaders through email and invited them to
participate in an interview. Of these recruitment contacts, four district leaders and 13 school leaders agreed to participate.

We conducted focus group interviews with teachers. To do this, we gained permission from the principals of three elementary schools, three middle schools, and the high school to inform teachers about the focus group interviews and to share our contact information. Teachers were contacted by a member of our team with details regarding location and time of the focus group interviews. We held four focus group interviews with a total of fourteen teachers. Focus group interviews were held at two elementary schools (with two teachers and five teachers), one middle school (with two teachers), and one high school (with five teachers). Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 counselors from the elementary and middle school levels: five guidance counselors and five social workers (see Table 2.1). All interviews were recorded and then transcribed by a professional transcription service. Subsequently, transcripts were read in their entirety to check for accuracy.

We selected our participants from four categories: district leaders, school leaders, teachers, and counselors. Using the district website, we collected the names and contact information of all district administrators, principals, and assistant principals. Based on the listed job descriptions, we targeted district leaders whom we presumed would be knowledgeable about SEL. We contacted seven district leaders and 21 school leaders through email and invited them to participate in an interview. Of these recruitment contacts, four district leaders and 13 school leaders agreed to participate.

**Individual and focus group interview process.** In order to ensure a calibrated interview process, the first five interviews were conducted in pairs. Afterward, we
reflected on our use of questioning and prompting in eliciting interview data. Together, we reviewed the transcripts of the first several interviews to ensure questioning and prompting for all questions matched the needs of the individual team members. Our calibration provided us with confidence to move forward with interviews that were conducted by individual group members. In total, nine interviews with district and school leaders were conducted by paired researchers and eight interviews were conducted individually. Three of the four teacher focus group interviews were conducted in pairs. All 10 counselor interviews were completed by an individual researcher.

Table 2.1

Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant by Role</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Interview Type</th>
<th>Studies Using Data Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Leaders</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Semi-Structured</td>
<td>Caira, Hardy, and McGarrigle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leaders</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Semi-Structured</td>
<td>Caira, Hardy, Langlois, and McGarrigle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>McGarrigle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Semi-Structured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Caira, Hardy, and Langlois</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We conducted focus group interviews with teachers. To do this, we gained permission from the principals of three elementary schools, three middle schools, and the high school to inform teachers about the focus group interviews and to share our contact information. Teachers were contacted by a member of our team with details regarding
location and time of the focus group interviews. We held four focus group interviews with a total of fourteen teachers. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 10 counselors from the elementary and middle school levels: five guidance counselors and five social workers (see Table 2.1).

**Document review.** We gathered a range of documents from the Jamesberg Public Schools related to SEL implementation. The majority of the documents were available on the district website. In addition, the superintendent presented us with documents that were still in the working stage, most notably the strategic plan. See Appendix D for a full list of documents and how they were supplied to us. Our review of documents provided auxiliary information of the district’s past and future plans for SEL. All of the documents reviewed met one or more of the following criteria:

- Addressed some aspect of the social-emotional development of staff or students
- Addressed district or school policy or practices related to social-emotional health
- Articulated procedures for managing social-emotional health, either internally or in conjunction with external agencies
- Addressed communication on social-emotional health to families or the larger community
- Addressed some aspect of staff development related to SEL.

**Data Analysis**

As with data collection, the research team worked closely together in the analysis phase of the project. Specific questions in the common interview protocols were included to inform individual studies. Each team member read the entire transcript of district and school leader interviews, allowing us to gain a broader understanding of how the district was supporting SEL implementation. In addition, each group member conducted an initial review of the documents to ensure the relevance of the information
and data provided (Bowen, 2009). During our initial document review, we identified quotes or sections related to the research questions and conceptual lens of each study. Additionally, information gleaned from this first review was used in the implementation of the semi-structured interviews by contributing to our knowledge base about SEL initiatives in the district.

To ensure continual communication and build a common understanding, we entered the qualitative data into a shared Dedoose account (www.dedoose.com), a data management tool for organization, categorization, and coding of data. Dedoose, as well as the use of a common analytical journal allowed us to refine, reanalyze, and document our findings (Yin, 1981). For the journal, we utilized a common document to record and share our thoughts, hunches, and wonderings as they came to mind throughout the data analysis process (Saldaña, 2009). Team members read and commented on the entries made by others. These two systems allowed the group members to track and share commonalities and disparities revealed in our individual analysis, which then informed our collective understanding.

Each researcher used two cycles of coding based on the research questions and conceptual lens of his or her study (see Chapter 3). The analysis for the central exploration of the role of district and school leaders in supporting implementation of SEL in public education was completed collaboratively. We began with compiling the findings from our individual studies. This allowed us to see the district implementation efforts from multiple perspectives and supported the analysis procedure. We then used our individual data to determine which (if any) findings were universal or particular to that study. This process allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the data and
allowed team members to review each other’s coding cycles, increasing the reliability of our collaborative conclusions and impressions.
CHAPTER THREE

PRINCIPAL AND COUNSELOR PRACTICES TO SUPPORT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Social-emotional competencies have become a seminal focus in school reform (Greenberg et al., 2003). As such, an important challenge districts face is how best to support a comprehensive approach to SEL programming given public school systems’ limited resources. Although principals are ultimately responsible for implementing new initiatives and growing their organizations (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), they may have skill gaps in how best to support SEL (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015). The majority of principals come from a teaching background (School Administrators: An Occupational Overview, Fact Sheet 2016) and teacher preparation programs often provide minimal training in supporting SEL (Armstrong, Price, & Crowley, 2015; Social and Emotional Learning in Teacher Education, 2013). However, most school systems have a counseling staff trained in understanding and developing SEL practices. Encouraging counselors to take a leadership role may be one potential solution to expanding SEL capacity. The focus of this study was on examining how counselor leadership practices impacted the implementation of social emotional learning programs in one district.

Although numerous conceptual papers have theorized on the potential of counseling staff to take on leadership roles to increase SEL, there are gaps in the research

---

3 This chapter individually written by Donna M. McGarrigle.
literature in demonstrating what those leadership practices may be (e.g. Bemak, 2000; McMahon, Mason, & Paisley, 2009; Walker, 2006). Accordingly, fewer empirical studies have examined specific practices employed by counselors to promote and sustain SEL efforts (e.g. Berzin, O’Brien, & Tohn, 2012; Colbert, Pérusse, Bouknight, & Ballard, 2006; Tubin, & Pinyan-Weiss, 2015); thus, the purpose of this research study is to explore the informal leadership practices of counselors in supporting SEL. The research was guided by the following research questions:

- **RQ1** What are the leadership practices of the counseling staff?
- **RQ2** How are the leadership practices distributed among administrators and the counseling staff?
- **RQ3** How do the working relationships impact these leadership practices?

**Literature Review**

The concept of distributed leadership guided this study. First, I describe distributed leadership’s focus on the day-to-day practices of organizational members rather than focusing only on the practices of formal leaders. Second, I review the research related to this model. Third, I review the importance of principals even within a distributed leadership lens. Fourth, the final section reviews the impact of professional relationships in supporting SEL.

**Distributed Leadership**

How principals and counseling staff support SEL will be explored through a distributed leadership lens. Unlike more traditional leadership frameworks, distributed leadership focuses on the *practices* of leading. These leadership practices are “tied to the core work of the organization…[that are designed] to influence the motivation, knowledge, affect, and practices of other organizational members” (Spillane, 2006, p.
In this leadership perspective, attention is paid to the micro-tasks, the day to day work, in order to better understand the practices that contribute toward broader organizational goals or processes (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). Leadership is about influence and not formal authority (Gronn, 2002). Accordingly, leadership practices can emerge from formal leadership roles, like a principal, or from roles not historically seen as leadership roles, in the case of this study, counselors. Harris (2011) comments, leadership practices “can involve both formal and informal leaders, it is not an either/or” (p. 11). Distributed leadership is a way of sharing responsibility for leading change across an organization that acknowledges the informal leadership that already exists. Spillane notes that distributed leadership is often a “description of how leadership already is” (Spillane, 2006, p. 10) in a complex organizational system like a school. The context of these practices are important to consider - the timing and location, the interactions that occurred, and the tools, systems, and routines used (Spillane, 2005). The organizational structure of roles and responsibilities are also part of the contextual factors that may shape leadership practices (Spillane et al., 2001). All of these components are inseparable from, and provide meaning to, these practices.

To demonstrate how leadership practices may be viewed in this framework, imagine a district purchased a new math curriculum and teachers were expected to incorporate a math workshop into their regular lessons. A veteran teacher might volunteer to model the planning and delivery of a math workshop model to a first year teacher. She might then meet with the new teacher weekly to co-plan for upcoming workshop lessons. The modeling and coaching provided by the senior teacher are examples of leadership practices, or microtasks, that could help support the effective
integration of this new teaching model into the curriculum. The timing of the curriculum adoption, the experience level of each teacher, the organizational expectation to learn a new instructional model, the time to model the lesson and subsequently co-plan, are all contextual variables that provide meaning to the leadership practices.

Counselors and Distributed Leadership

A distributed leadership lens looks at leadership practices from both formal and informal leadership roles (Leithwood et al., 2007). In order to examine the leadership practices of counselors, first I review how the educational background of a counselor supports taking leadership roles in supporting SEL. Second, I review studies that discuss the leadership potential of counselors. Third, I examine variables found to support and hinder counselors from engaging in leadership practices.

Counselor skills and knowledge. School counselor training has been seen as a natural fit for the leadership needed in schools to better support SEL initiatives (Walker, 2006). The use of internal expertise is one of the hallmarks of distributed leadership, as it is “simply more efficient to ask non-administrators to engage in leadership activities if they have the necessary expertise” (Mayrowetz, 2008, p. 429). Researchers have identified the skills, training, and knowledge of counselors as important resources in supporting SEL. Van Velsor (2009) sees the potential of counselors to be school-based leaders through a role as SEL consultants. Walker (2006) argues that the consultation, facilitation and communication skills of counselors can be effective tools to support school principals in leading these school improvements. Additionally, a counselor’s more in-depth child development training (Atkins, Hoagwood, Kutash, & Seidman, 2010)
and facility with data (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009) allows for a more nuanced understanding of the challenges that may be impeding student progress.

**Leadership potential of counselors.** Other research has looked at how counselors and administrators have framed the leadership potential of counselors. One study found several principals wanted their counselors to be ‘innovative school leaders’ and take an active leadership role to improve the functioning of the staff and the school (Amatea & Clark, 2005). Likewise, in another study, principals described the ideal counselor role as one of ‘shared leadership’ that is based on ongoing collaboration, trust and communication (Janson, Militello, & Kosine, 2008). Similar to the sentiments raised by principals, when counselors were asked to describe their perspective on their professional leadership behaviors, one of the viewpoints, ‘engaging systems change agent,’ was consistent with a distributed leadership framework (Janson, 2009). This view valued leadership behaviors that would affect the larger systems and described these leadership behaviors in a more politically assertive and less relational frame.

**Factors related to counselor leadership practices.** How counselor leadership is practiced within complex organizations such as public schools is highly contextual (Hulpia, Devos, & Van Keer, 2011). There are conditions that can either support or inhibit these leadership practices. Individual factors, such as a lack of counseling experience and youth, may impact counselor leadership practices. These variables have been found to be barriers to engaging in leadership activities. Counselors with more professional experience or who were older were more comfortable taking on leadership roles (Mason & McMahon, 2009). Irrespective of age or experience, counselors who avoided the risk of taking on new tasks (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Saginak, 2008) or
struggled with managing conflict (Bemak & Chung, 2008) were less likely to take on leadership activities. Other variables were found to have a positive impact on promoting counselor leadership. These included setting clear, attainable goals, problem solving and seeking out the support of administrators (Dollarhide et al., 2008).

**The Role of the Principal**

Principals have an important role to play in fostering distributed leadership practices (Leithwood et al., 2007). Through their formal roles, principals have the authority to establish the organizational conditions that can facilitate or hinder distributed leadership (Harris, 2011). Researchers have posited that “Leaders in formal positions of authority retain responsibility for building a shared vision for their organizations” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 5). This vision setting provides direction for the practices of both formal and informal leaders in the goals of the school or district.

**Professional Relationships**

A counselor’s relationship with principals and colleagues can be an important precursor to distributed leadership practices, as engaging in informal leadership practices “will only be possible within a climate of trust and mutual support which becomes an integral part of the internal organizational social and cultural context” (Woods, Bennett, Harvey, & Wise, 2004, p. 447). Moreover, an existing positive working relationship can be strengthened by a counselor’s foray into leadership practices (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007).

The importance of mutual trust is foundational in the development of a strong working relationship between counselors and principals (Ponec & Brock, 2000). Trust has been found to be one of the critical organizational components in a case study
examining the distributed leadership process with teachers (Angelle, 2010). A
counselor’s ability to develop trust among colleagues and administrators is an important
condition as “any collective action in schools will be affected by the level of trust among
its members” (Louis, Mayrowetz, Smiley, & Murphy, 2009, p. 160). The presence of
trust creates a climate where distributed leadership practices can flourish; thus, trust acts

**Methods**

The leadership practices of counselors and principals in supporting SEL were
examined as a part of a larger study that examined leadership activities relating to SEL.
These leadership practices were studied through a qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) of a
single public school district in the Northeast United States. To document how this
research study was conducted, I begin by describing the school district that served as a
setting for this study. Next, I discuss the data tools and collection process, and finally
shift into how the data was analyzed in order to answer to my research questions.

**Setting**

The site for this research study was a public school district in the Northeast
United States, the Jamesberg⁴ Public Schools. Details on site selection can be found in
Chapter 2. This project, a subcomponent of a larger study, focused on elementary and
middle schools only.

⁴ The name of the district is a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.
Data Collection

I used semi-structured interviews and a review of district and school documents as the primary data sources to explore the research questions. Procedurally, data were gathered from August to December 2017.

Participant data. In total, there were 24 participants interviewed for this study: 14 administrators, five guidance counselors and five social workers (see Table 3.1). For the purposes of this study, ‘administrator’ included building-based administrators (i.e., principals, assistant principals) and district administrators (e.g., superintendent, assistant superintendent). 'Counselors' or 'counseling staff' included both guidance counselors and social workers. These two counseling roles were chosen as they serve as the two primary student support roles in the Jamesberg district.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Participants by Role and School Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This sample represented faculty from seven of nine elementary schools, two of three middle schools and the district offices. Eight of those buildings had between two to five interview participants, including four administrators from the district office. Two schools had one interview participant.
The recruitment process for administrators has been reviewed in Chapter 2. In recruiting counselors for this study, every social worker and guidance counselor at the middle school and elementary school level received 1-2 recruitment emails (see Table 3.2) within a one-month window beginning in September 2017. Out of the recruitment emails sent to thirty-four potential counselor participants, three emails were automatically returned with messages stating that the staff person was on leave and sharing contact information with the long-term substitute. Long-term substitutes were not contacted for potential study participation, with the assumption that their knowledge of SEL development in the district would be minimal. Three staff indicated a willingness to participate but in the back and forth scheduling process, they discontinued contact. Sixteen of the mental health staff did not respond to recruitment contacts.

Table 3.2

Recruitment Response of Counselors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Elementary</th>
<th>Middle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Declined participation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of Office Assistant: on leave</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response to email</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial interest but communication faded</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participated</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>22</strong></td>
<td><strong>12</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Interviews.** A semi-structured interview protocol was used to direct the focus of the conversation. A semi-structured interview allows the flexibility to gather information in an inductive, exploratory manner but also provides structure and parameters (Merriam, 2009) to direct the focus of the conversation.
Administrator interviews were conducted as a data-gathering tool for the larger
group dissertation project, and therefore, the administrator interview protocol was
developed to gather information for all four studies. Table 3.3 indicates the administrator
questions that supplied data for this study, organized by research question. The
administrator interview questions that were used asked about the leadership practices,
social emotional organizational goals, and administrator/counselor relationships.

Table 3.3

*Administrator Semi-Structured Interview Questions Connected to each Research Question*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Administrator Interview Questions</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What SEL initiatives has your school implemented in the past two years?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Talk about how the initiative(s) was implemented?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What professional development has occurred regarding SEL?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Can you talk to me about the ways you support staff or students socially-emotionally?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Talk to me about your work with your counselors.</td>
<td>RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. What impact does trust have on how you work with your counselors?</td>
<td>RQ1, RQ2, RQ3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* RQ1: What are the leadership practices of the counseling staff?  
RQ2: How are the leadership practices distributed among administrators and the counseling staff?  
RQ3: How do the working relationships impact these leadership practices?

The counselor interview protocol was developed for this study and, thus, all the
questions were designed to gather information related to the research questions (see
Appendix B). The interview protocol gathered data on the leadership activities
counselors have participated in to support SEL initiatives, the relationships between
counselors and administrators, their experience in managing conflict, their advocacy work and the systems and tools they used in this work.

**Documents.** A variety of documents related to district or school SEL were gathered. Documents that were publicly available were collected from the district and school websites. Other documents were requested and shared by district personnel. Examples of documents used included PBIS information on school and district websites, SEL Readiness and Engagement Assessment (CASEL report), and a Health & Wellness Newsletter (see Appendix D). Documents were reviewed to evaluate and verify themes that emerged from the interview data. There were three criteria used in the selection process:

- *Addresses some aspect of the social-emotional development of staff or students that the counselor is involved in supporting.*
- *Addresses district or school policy or practices related to social-emotional health that is the responsibility of the counselors.*
- *Articulates procedures for managing social-emotional health, either internally or in conjunction with external agencies that are managed by the counselors.*

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of assigning meaning, through codes, themes or some other categorization process, to the data in order to answer the research questions (Saldaña, 2009). Thus, data must “be organized around specific propositions, questions, or activities, with flexibility provided for modifying these topics as analysis progresses” (Yin, 1981, p. 60). Data analysis began as the data was gathered and coding continued to be refined and analyzed throughout the fall of 2017. Interviews supplied the majority of data in understanding the SEL leadership practices in this school district. Document
review data served to support some of the findings related to SEL initiative work and role structure.

Below, I review the process for analyzing interview data, followed by the data analysis process for the documents. I end this section by describing the research journal kept to document this research process.

**Interviews.** The procedure for administrator interviews was reviewed in Chapter Two. Counselor interviews were between 45 to 60 minutes in length. At the start of each interview, informed consent was obtained by verbally reviewing and sharing a copy of the consent form. Interviews were audiotaped for 23 of the 24 participants and transcribed using an online transcription service (Rev.com). One interviewee did not consent to being audiotaped, so hand-written notes were taken during the interview and typed up later. Transcripts were uploaded to Dedoose (www.dedoose.com), a web-based data management tool, where the interview data was coded. The content of the interviews, as well as the research questions, drove the topics that emerged in this analysis. Coding was an iterative, multi-step process (Saldaña, 2009). After I listened to the audiotapes and read the interviewee transcripts of the first several interviews, I developed some preliminary codes based on my initial impressions of the data. This initial open, exploratory process, known as First Cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009), was used to begin to categorize and organize the data. The First Cycle codes included the categories of trust, collaboration, communication systems, relationships, tasks, SEL initiatives and barriers/challenges. Some of these topics were directly explored through the interview questions (e.g. trust, SEL initiatives, tasks), whereas other codes (i.e., barriers/challenges and leadership opportunities) were based on themes raised by...
interviewees. Second Cycle coding was used to reorganize and reanalyze First Cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). Role delineation was added as a sub code to ‘tasks’ and then I hand-coded the transcripts for each research question (i.e., RQ1, RQ2, RQ3). I created a coding manual to define codes and give example of the codes (see Appendix E). This table supported my reliability in coding consistently. A hierarchical table (see Appendix F) indicates which codes were used in answering the three research questions.

**Documents.** Documents were analyzed for their relevance to the research questions. Document analysis is “the process of evaluating documents in such a way that empirical knowledge is produced and understanding is developed” (Bowen, 2009, p. 34). Documents related to the organizational structure of the support staff (RQ1, RQ2), the formal leadership roles (RQ1), the district SEL initiatives that involved the support staff (RQ1, RQ2) were gathered to determine if they were consistent with the interview data. Document data played only a minor role in the findings and were used to corroborate or enrich the data gathered from the interviews.

**Research journal.** In addition to the group journal reviewed in Chapter 2, I maintained an individual research journal throughout the project. The research journal documented my process of developing the interview protocols, recruiting participants, and gathering and analyzing the data, thus allowing for the study’s replication and increasing the transparency of my study’s methodology and procedures (Yin, 2009). The journal helped document my thoughts and questions throughout the data collection and analysis process and I used it as a reference tool throughout this project.

**Findings**
In accordance with my research questions, the first section below describes the leadership practices of counselors in supporting SEL. The second section examines the roles administrators and counselors have taken in supporting SEL. The final section reviews the impact of relationships on supporting social-emotional health.

**Formal and Informal Leadership Practices of Counselors**

The first research question examined the leadership practices of elementary and middle school counseling staff. Leadership practices were found through both formal and informal leadership roles. Accordingly, the first section describes the formal leadership practices reported by counselors, followed by the second section that describes the informal leadership practices of the counselors.

**Formal leadership practices.** Formal leadership practices were activities conducted within district-sanctioned roles in addition to the standard job responsibilities. Each of the roles had a stipend allocation and addressed an identified district need of sustaining a program initiative or developing staff.

The first formal leadership role, undertaken by several counselors, was supporting the district-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) initiative. The PBIS initiative, which began eight or nine years ago, was in different stages of implementation across the nine elementary and three middle schools. To expand and sustain this initiative, the district hired district-level PBIS chairs and building-based coaches. As one PBIS leader recalled, we “underwent two year-long PDs with the May Institute to create lesson plans, core values, incentive programs.” This PBIS leadership team met monthly. They oversaw the implementation and data-monitoring components
of the PBIS initiative. In addition, they were responsible for ongoing training of staff at the building level and at times, the district level.

A second formal leadership role was being a facilitator. Facilitators were hired for each mental health discipline to support monthly department meetings. There was a K-8 guidance counselor facilitator and a K-8 social worker facilitator. The health and wellness department had 95 members and included nurses, guidance counselors, social workers and school psychologists. Due to the size of this department, this leadership structure was created to support the professional growth of members. Facilitators received training and led the monthly meetings for their department. Facilitators created a monthly agenda based on initial discussions with the health and wellness director. The agenda was then shared among all the department members for feedback and additional agenda items. As one counselor explained, “They'll send out the agenda before the monthly meeting and say, you know, this is what we're thinking of but, absolutely, they welcome input and feedback throughout the month.”

A third formal leadership role was supporting new counseling staff. Several of the more experienced counselors served as mentors to newer staff. In order to establish consistency in expectations, mentors had to complete a mentoring course prior to being assigned a mentee because, as one experienced mentor reported, “It got very loose, and then it got very tightened up. You have to have 60 hours by January. So you go through the schedule and you're like, I could meet with you two to three hours a week.” The district assigned mentors and mentees based on roles, so new social workers were assigned a social worker mentor, new guidance counselors were assigned a guidance counselor mentor.
In the course of these three formal roles, counseling staff engaged in leadership practices to support the PBIS initiative and the ongoing professional development of their mental health colleagues. By creating and funding these leadership roles, the district created formal structures in which counselors and social workers could take formal leadership roles to help address these organizational needs.

**Informal leadership practices.** Informal leadership practices were those times when staff took action to address what they saw as a system need. These practices occurred within the confines of their counseling roles. Some of these practices addressed gaps in SEL programming or structures, while others were in response to crises or entailed advocating for at-risk students.

**SEL supports.** Several counselors proactively introduced SEL supports. One counselor piloted GoZen, an online program to reduce student anxiety the year before last. She planned to continue with the program this past year. When the health and wellness department would not pay for the cost of an expanded license, the counselor said “I'll find a way around this. I'm really good at this, finding a way around things.” She worked with her colleagues to familiarize them with the program and suggested they divide the cost amongst the nine of them, thus allowing each to afford a piece of the program within their $200 annual budget. As a result, all elementary school counselors had access to this program and several reported implementing it this year.

A different counselor talked about delivering a personal safety curriculum in her elementary school, along with her two counselor colleagues. When they first began implementing this curriculum, it was to only a few grade levels but now the team has since delivered the program to every grade level as they recognized the need. They visit
each classroom in the school to deliver a 45-minute lesson and then pull small groups of students to check-in on their personal sense of safety. These small group follow-ups were framed as an integral part of the curriculum, in spite of the increased time demands. As one counselor commented:

It really is nice to have that extra opportunity to either know that kids are feeling safe and to hear about all the wonderful grown-ups that they have. Or to find out some things and, you know, and, in a couple of situations, the parents didn't have any idea and ... we're just so grateful to the program.

Another counselor worked collaboratively with the counseling staff in another building to create a screening tool that would monitor student functioning. The screener used a color-coded system to sort students by need level (e.g., “Is this a kid who functions well independently?... needs occasional check-ins?...needs frequent re-direction?”). This in-house screener aligned with the PBIS tiered model of support and allowed for targeted interventions and monitoring within the current system. Based on the data from the screener, whole or small group interventions were planned.

**Crisis response.** Several counselors were proactive when their school communities experienced tragedies, and they chose to provide support during these challenging times. One student had a terminal illness. Several counselors met with the counseling staff of the child’s home school to plan for ways to support the students and faculty for this looming loss. One counselor reported, “There were three of us that went over, and the four of us were kind of talking about what it would look like.” With news of the child’s passing, these counselors traveled to the home school and “ran circles, and processed with some of the classrooms.” On the day of the child’s funeral, several staff went to the home school to allow that faculty to attend the funeral. In a similar vein, one of the counselors reported coming to work early after the recent shootings in Las Vegas.
She recognized this incident would be upsetting to students and that staff would be fielding their questions and concerns. She said, “I knew that we needed to have some type of talking points and ideas for teachers to be prepared” and it was important that document be ready as teachers began their day.

**Student advocacy.** Two counselors relayed stories of advocating for at-risk students. One talked about a student in her school who had extremely low academic skills. Her mother was in an abusive relationship, and, as a result, “she doesn't have the capacity to really worry about what reading level her child is at.” The counselor pushed for over a year to get the school supports she believed the child needed. At the start of the second year, when she was told once again, "Oh, we'll just wait," she responded:

> No, we will not just wait. I'm tired of being told that I need to wait to get something for this child. It's really hard just because ... and I really believe this, I think it's borderline institutional racism. I think that if this were a white parent knocking down our door, we would be doing so many more things.

However, she reported getting students what they needed was not easy, as “these systems aren't made for these types of people to get what they need. Injustice is what holds them back, and I see it, and to point it out to colleagues is really uncomfortable sometimes.”

Another counselor shared working with a mother that wanted to home school her child with autism, as the mother said, “I don't think school is for him” since he had so many behavioral problems in his previous school. After her son was enrolled, the counselor created a detailed behavior plan and began weekly counseling. To keep the mother abreast of her son’s progress, the counselor and mother talked weekly. At the end of the year, the family had to move. The mother called and said, "I want to thank you because I didn't think that he could go to school and you showed me that he could." The clinician, clearly moved when recalling this vignette, ended by reflecting, “That's why I
do it. That's why I do it. School is an amazing [opportunity] ... as many challenges as there are, and there are many, it is an unbelievable opportunity for people.”

In sum, when examining the leadership behaviors of counselors, several counselors were involved with both formal and informal leadership practices. Formal roles were created by the district to support the implementation of SEL initiatives or to support the broader development of the counseling staff. The staff involved in these additional leadership practices were primarily those with more professional experience and longevity, with a minimum of seven years working in the district. Informal practices were also found. These practices were self-identified opportunities to respond to district needs. Similar to those counselors involved in formal leadership roles, these informal leadership practices were reported by the more seasoned members. All these practices served to address the social emotional needs of the students or staff.

**Supporting SEL: Principals and Counselors**

The second research question explored any differences in how principals and counselors supported SEL. The first section examines the role administrators took in supporting SEL and how those practices differed from that of counselors. The next section delves into the organizational structure of counselor roles. Consistent with a distributed leadership lens, how roles are structured can inform how these roles support the social emotional needs of students (Spillane et al., 2001). For guidance counselors and social workers, two organizational models were reported. Thus, the second section reviews the most common support model, where guidance counselors and social workers had different roles, based on level of student need. The third section reviews the second organizational model, where the job responsibilities were divided by grade level and
there was little differentiation between the two roles. The section ends with staff concerns with the recent shift in the support model.

**Principals and counselors: Differences in supporting SEL.** There were clear distinctions in how principals and counselors addressed SEL needs. A counselor’s primary responsibility was monitoring and supporting students, through working directly with students or via their work with teachers; whereas, principals were more often setting the programmatic vision.

Most administrators were proactive in incorporating programs or strategies into their schools that supported SEL. In over half of the schools with administrator interviews (5:8), principals had piloted or were piloting a range of social-emotional curriculums or support programs. One principal worked with her staff to incorporate restorative practices into regular classroom practice to increase student skills for “repairing relationships when harm is done” rather than just learning to follow the behavioral expectations of the PBIS model. Another principal created a mentoring program in response to unexpectedly losing her behaviorist (“we've got all these kids and families that he had relationships with, they're all gonna fall apart”), so she quickly created a program to support these vulnerable students. A third principal supported her counselor to pilot a program and the counselor remarked, “I feel like she trusts all staff to take risks.”

**Organizational structure of counselor roles.** There were two different models that existed for the roles of guidance counselor and social worker. In six out of the nine schools, the roles were structured based on the training of the different disciplines. Guidance counselors managed the pre-referral process and monitoring/supporting
students’ academic functioning and, oftentimes, delivered SEL lessons. As one guidance counselor framed it, the important parts of her work were “to go and talk about socio-emotional curriculum, and things we're doing for targeted academic intervention, how are we tracking it and how are we recording the data.” Guidance counselors managed larger student caseloads, typically 80 percent of the overall student body, and worked closely with teachers to monitor student functioning. Social workers had a smaller number of students on their caseloads. Typically, they worked with students who required more intensive counseling and surround care needs. These students are categorized as being on a Tier 3 or Tier 2 intervention level when framed using a PBIS framework common in this district. One counselor referred to this as the ‘Jamesberg Model’, where the guidance counselor “handles all of it, the Tier 2...all of the academic, all of the regular ed[sic] stuff, all those meetings where you're talking about academics, all new student stuff, attendance, everything's that's school related” and the social worker “is family and community related.”

Three schools structured the roles of the guidance counselor and social worker by grade levels. These schools had support delivery models with little to no distinction between the two roles. Counselors were assigned to specific grade levels and were wholly responsible for all the needs of those students, irrespective of the level of need. As an administrator from one of these non-differentiated schools remarked, “Social worker and counselor seem to be doing the same stuff. I still don't know the difference. I don't care, so long as we're helping the kids.”

Patterns in schools with non-differentiated counselor roles. Similarities were found among the three buildings that structured counselor roles by grade levels. All three
of these elementary schools were ‘turnaround’ schools and were voluntarily working with the state education department to increase student achievement. The stress level in those buildings was reported to be excessively high by several interviewees, due to increased administrative monitoring around planning and teaching. One district administrator summed it up this way, “So the crisis is in the turnaround schools right now.” However, because of that crisis, determining how best to structure social-emotional supports was an additional challenge facing these already overly stressed schools. When asked about why there was a shift in the support model, one administrator stated, “It's hard to unpack what's going on and put something, a process in place, so we're trying to figure that out right now.” Another administrator described the organizational structure of the support staff this way, “We’re trying to break down those silos, put in work-flows.” So the data suggest these three buildings were in transitional phases with increased expectations and monitoring of staff that had resulted in a stressed faculty. Determining how best to structure social-emotional supports appeared to be part of the challenge of how best to meet rising student needs.

There were differences among these three schools, as well. One of the schools with the grade level division had been structured that way for years. The other two schools shifted to a new model in the fall. One district administrator claimed the shift was made due to a high level of student crisis in these buildings (e.g., “nobody was really getting to the kids, they were just constantly in crisis.”). Shifting the support model was seen as a solution to manage these student crises. In addition to restructuring the support model, a social worker was added to these two buildings to further address the concerns with rising student need. However, in spite of the hope that a shift in the support model
and an increase in support staff would be the solution, concerns remained because, as one administrator lamented, “Well, they're still in crisis.” Further, this administrator stated ambivalence with the shift in the support model by remarking, “I'm not real comfortable with the idea of making the assumption that social workers and counselors can do the same things.” Several counselors shared these sentiments. How they voiced their concern is below.

**Staff concerns with non-differentiated support model.** Several counselors voiced similar concerns with this shift to a non-differentiated support model. One framed the concern this way, “Well, it's very confusing for us...the predominant question right now, when we meet as an elementary grade level, is what is going on in these different buildings that's not differentiating between guidance counselor and social worker? They're two different degrees. They're two different licenses.” Additionally, several counselors worried that the systemic Tier 1 and Tier 2 layers for monitoring all students would erode under this new model, “In high needs schools...you have to have that kind of a global picture of what's going on, otherwise you just end up running around putting out individual fires.” Skills sets between guidance counselors and social workers were not seen as interchangeable, “Could I call PES [emergency services] and get the referral to go to get a kid hospitalized and get police delivered here? I can do that, but she's much more well trained, she understands the steps.” Another counselor thought this organizational shifting was related to a lack of administrator understanding about the differences among the two disciplines, “The people who are the supervisors, over time, I can't put it all on them, but [they] haven't had enough information to know how to push the conversation...But I don't think higher up is understanding the nuances.” One district
administrator had similar thinking. She also believed that leadership changes had contributed to misunderstanding the tiered organizational structure of the counseling staff in Jamesberg and the differences between the roles of guidance counselors and social workers (“all of the changes over time in leadership, that information gets lost really quickly. Real quickly.”).

The Impact of Relationships

The final research question sought to understand how relationships among counselors and between principals and counselors impacted staff in supporting SEL. Relationships between administrators with their counseling staff and relationships within the counseling staff both emerged as important. The quality of these professional relationships varied. Findings appeared to be influenced by the structure of the support delivery model. The counselors from the six school-based teams with the differentiated model all reported strong interpersonal and supportive relationships among teammates. One interviewee summed it up this way, “So, to be able to have that support, and pick up the phone, and feel like you've got at least a handful of people you can call... is really huge.” Several interviewees reported a supportive environment in which teammates pitched in with crossover tasks as needed to support students and each other, “I feel we work well together, and when somebody is like, look there's really too much here, [they say] like what can I do for you?”

The interviewees that reported collaborative peer relationships stated equally positive relationships with their principals, “No, it's very good. I feel like I can approach both administrators, and I feel like it's a two-way street. They approach me as well. It's really good.” In fact, they often named their teammates and administrators as the people
they would go to for advice or when seeking emotional support. “We have a really good way of just being brutally honest with each other and it works.” This level of support within the district and within their schools was meaningful for several staff members as indicated by the following example: “I think that is probably the most important day-to-day sort of a thing to do, to just feel you're supported by the people around you, the people above you and people alongside you.”

The quality of the relationship was meaningful in how several people viewed their role and appeared to be connected to the organizational support model. In the buildings with differentiated roles, all interviewees reported well-developed and supportive relationships with their peers and administration. However, in the buildings with non-differentiated roles, determining the quality of these relationships was more challenging. Anecdotally, when talking about the model shift in the other buildings, several counselors reported there have been historic challenges with staff retention and team dynamics in some of those buildings. They questioned if administrators had the level of information needed to understand the differences between the roles or provide effective supervision. They also identified a constant shift in leadership as one of the reasons that may have contributed to the decision to shift to a grade level support model.

**Discussion**

The importance of SEL is a seminal focus in understanding how best to support students. Distributed leadership “can be a way to acknowledge and perhaps even celebrate the many kinds of unglamorous and unheroic leadership that often go unnoticed in schools” (Spillane, 2006, p. 10). Accordingly, understanding the leadership practices of counselors and principals in supporting SEL was the focus of this research study.
Three research questions were used to understand the practices of counselors and principals in supporting SEL and the impact of relationships on these practices.

**Leadership Activities**

Taking a distributed leadership perspective helps explain how some of the leadership work gets accomplished in schools (Gronn, 2002; Hallinger & Heck, 2010; Harris, 2008; Leithwood et al., 2007). When examining how counselor practices supported SEL, some of these practices occurred within formal roles. These formal roles addressed the district needs of developing staff and implementing district initiatives. Penuel, Frank, and Krause (2010) found implementation efforts improved when districts created effective support structures and increased staffing to address those efforts.

Through these roles, the district effectively utilized the SEL expertise of their counselors, a common hallmark of distributed leadership (Atkins et al., 2010; Penuel et al., 2010; Wright, 2008) to build organizational capacity.

As the district continues to explore how best to support SEL, creating formal structures will be one way to continue to use the expertise and commitment of counselor leaders. Like in the thoughtful development of the PBIS structures, this could be an effective strategy to support bigger SEL initiatives spread across buildings.

In contrast to the formalized leadership roles, informal leadership practices were those in which the counseling staff, in the course of their day-to-day practice, proactively responded to what they saw as emerging and unfilled needs. As has been found in previous research, these were practices driven by the passion and beliefs of the counselors (Leithwood et al., 2007). In fact, in contrast to the formal roles the district created, this type of spontaneous leadership “cannot be prescribed in advance but
emerges within the organisation [sic] in order to solve problems or to take action” (Harris, 2008, p. 175).

The counselors who engaged in either formal or informal practices, demonstrated a professional commitment and a personal sense of responsibility and agency in having the skills and passion to address the SEL needs of the school system (Clemens, Milsom, & Cashwell, 2009). Consistent with previous research (Mason & McMahon, 2009), it was the more seasoned staff that were comfortable taking the initiative to engage in these leadership practices.

**Organizational Models for Counseling Staff**

The second research question looked at the differences in how the roles of social workers and guidance counselors were structured. How positions are structured is one of the contextual variables that can shape leadership practices in a distributed leadership lens (Leithwood et al., 2007). Creating the right structures to match the SEL needs can lead to more effective outcomes (Ransford et al., 2009). Hence, when considering the leadership practices of counselors in supporting SEL, the positional parameters and the job expectations/responsibilities can be variables that may hinder or facilitate certain practices.

Two models were found. The most common model had specialized roles for each. This model was consistent with the specific training of these two disciplines (Flaherty, et al., 1998; Humes & Hohenshil, 1987). Consistent with a view of utilizing organizational expertise, this differentiated model required ongoing communication and collaboration between guidance counselors and social workers; each clinician may be working with the same group of teachers and invariably, some students will shift from
lower tiers of support (tier 1 or 2) to higher tiers (tier 2 or 3) or vice versa. Thus, this model results in a reciprocal interdependence between roles where they must “rely on the strengths of their peers,” however, through collaborating “they enhance their lesser skills” (Gronn, 2002, p. 433). For counseling staff, interdisciplinary collaboration can be a strength to the development of a comprehensive school health program (Flaherty et al., 1998). Peer collaboration can also contribute to increased job satisfaction (Altshuler & Webb, 2009).

The second, less common, and more recently emerging model, divided student caseloads by grade levels for guidance counselors and social workers. This model required less collaboration between counselors, since they supported discrete groups of students. Although there was less demand for a collaborative relationship among counselors, this model required an increase in the tools and knowledge of each in order to effectively meet the broader demands of this dual role. Both guidance counselors and social workers must expand their areas of expertise; both roles must understand the protocols, routines and procedures of supporting students with a range of support needs. Further, a concern raised with this model was that it could be reactive and that counseling staff could spend significant time managing student crises and the time to systemically monitor student functioning and address student skills in a proactive manner would be lost.

How roles are structured can have implications for how organizational goals can be met (Leithwood et al., 2007). The purpose of "comprehensive school services are to...improve the quality of life for all students (Flaherty et al., 1998, p.423), so determining an effective support model will have implications for supporting SEL. It is
important to put "the right people in the right roles and relationships...[so] these formal arrangements can accommodate both collective goals and individual differences” (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 47). The district will need to determine if a consistent organizational support model across schools will be important for effective and consistent SEL delivery, instead of allowing building principals the autonomy to switch to a different support model. Based on the different training and expertise of guidance counselors and social workers and the tiered PBIS structures currently in place across all elementary and middle school, the more established differentiated support model would appear to be the most effective structure for Jamesberg. However, the absence of clear job descriptions and organizational flow charts to better define these support roles should be addressed so that all staff have clear understanding of the how these roles will function in Jamesberg. Certainly, increasing administrator understanding on the differences and similarities across these two disciplines would better support building and district leaders in developing this organizational structure to support SEL needs (Ponec & Brock, 2000).

**Principal and Counselor Relationships**

A supportive relationship between a counselor/social worker and his/her principal is meaningful in that it is related to more effective SEL programming (Tubin & Pinyan-Weiss, 2015; Dollarhide et al., 2007; Ponec & Brock, 2000). There are other benefits as well. The presence of a supportive principal/counselor relationship is related to increased counselor retention and job satisfaction (Clemens et al., 2009). Findings from this study are consistent with those research findings. Most counselors reported trusting, supportive relationships with their building principals and these counselors had longer work histories in Jamesberg. In addition, the counselors that reported more supportive relationships
with their building principals were also more likely to have reported leadership practices through both formal and informal roles, and thus were more active and demonstrated a greater sense of agency in their work.

As important as the principal and counselor relationships were, most counselors also spoke to the importance of being on a collaborative support team where support was given and received, as has been found by other researchers (Flaherty et al., 1998). Similarly, most counselors reported a team mindset, where everyone pitched in to help when needed and decisions were made in the best interests of the child.

The presence of supportive lateral and hierarchical relationships was more consistently reported in schools with the differentiated support roles. In contrast, counselors reported that some buildings had a less successful history of developing collaborative support teams due to ongoing shifts in support staff and leadership and a lack of familiarity with the difference in the training and expertise of each role. Similar to other research, leadership or counselor turnover is a barrier to establishing effective SEL programming (Clemens et al., 2009; Durlak, 2016). Fostering positive collaborative relationships is critical because “efforts that principals make (or fail to make) to cultivate trust” can impact the development of distributed leadership practices (Smylie, Mayrowetz, Murphy, & Louis, 2008, p. 500.).

**Conclusion**

This study explored the leadership practices of counselors and administrators in supporting SEL. Principals were instrumental in setting the direction of SEL efforts by identifying SEL programming or strategies. The counseling staff supported SEL through their work with students and staff. Counselor leadership practices in supporting SEL
were found through formally structured roles in supporting SEL initiatives or providing professional development to their counseling peers. Additionally, many counselors reported leadership practices through informal leadership roles. These practices entailed implementing SEL supports they believed were missing in their buildings, helping staff and students navigate crises, or advocating for students whom they believed needed a champion. Two organizational models were found in how the work of social workers and guidance counselors were structured. The more common model was a tiered model, where guidance counselors provided lower tiers of support to the majority of students and social workers provided more intensive counseling supports to a smaller number of students. The second support model did not differentiate responsibilities between guidance counselors and social workers and instead assigned solely by grade levels, thus guidance counselors and social workers had the same job responsibilities. Most teams reported strong, supportive professional relationships. Supportive, collaborative relationships with administrators and peers were related to increased reports of counselor leadership practices. These supportive relationships were found more consistently in schools with differentiated roles for the counseling staff. There was less counselor and administrator turnover in the schools where counselors reported supportive relationships.

**Limitations**

This study explored how counselors and principals supported SEL in the fall of one school year at the middle and elementary school levels. The window for collecting data was fairly short, so only a narrow picture could be obtained from that window of time. Follow up interviews may have added additional depth to understanding counselor and principal leadership practices. Additionally, adding in observational data may have
been another way to add additional depth to understanding principal and counselor leadership practices. For example, observing the PBIS chairs supporting the PBIS initiative at faculty or committee meetings may have shown differences or similarities in how the initiative is being supported in these formal roles. Similarly, observations could have added additional information to understanding how the different support models were progressing and if, in fact, a non-differentiated model resulted in significant crisis management. Observations could also have identified additional leadership practices not reported in interviews.

Another variable that should be weighed in interpreting this study's findings is a potential self-selection bias of the counseling staff that participated. More experienced staff volunteered and reported being involved in both formal and informal leadership practices. Although attempts to recruit all active guidance counselors and social workers were made, who chose to participate and, thus the findings from this study, may be more representative of more experienced counselors.
CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of school and district leaders in supporting implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) in public education. To do so, we examined the role of district leaders in establishing SEL initiatives (Hardy, 2018), the district’s approach to SEL-related professional development (Caira, 2018), the practices of principals and counselors (McGarrigle, 2018), and the practices of school leaders in supporting teachers to build a positive learning environment (Langlois, 2018).

We begin the following chapter with an observation of the district's strengths as related to SEL. Next, we discuss how the narrow view of SEL articulated by school and district leaders could hinder forward progress in this initiative. Finally, we explore the status of SEL implementation in Jamesberg through the lens of the three leadership practices outlined by Leithwood et al. (2004): setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization.

District Strengths

From the beginning of our exploration of the Jamesberg district, the importance placed by district and school leaders, as well as teachers and counselors, on the academic and social-emotional well-being of their students was clear. Renewed commitment to SEL programming was fueled, in part, by the entry of a new superintendent in April 2017. In multiple individual and focus group interviews, educators in Jamesberg expressed faith that under his leadership the district would not only improve but thrive.

---

5 This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Michael A. Caira, Jr., Sarah J. Hardy, Deborah Langlois, and Donna M. McGarrigle.
While all parties acknowledged there was much work to be done, specifically in the area of SEL, there was a feeling of optimism for what lay ahead.

Even before the start of the new superintendent’s tenure, the district was interested in providing social-emotional support to its students. This was evidenced by the use of two outside resources to garner information about the district’s SEL practices. In 2016, the district hired the Collaborative for Academic and Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL) to generate a report assessing the district’s SEL readiness and engagement. In addition, in the spring of 2017, employees, students, and families participated in a survey assessing perception of school climate and safety, student engagement, and student-teacher relationships. Finally, the new superintendent brought in a consultant who specialized in SEL methodology to work with him and his leadership team during his initial district takeover. District and school leaders used the data gathered from these reports as a resource when drafting a district strategic plan that prominently featured SEL. The details of this process are just one of many examples demonstrating the strong investment educators in Jamesberg had in the success of their students.

**Social-Emotional Learning is Bigger Than You Think**

SEL has garnered increased attention in the field of education in recent years (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Slade & Griffith, 2013; Zins & Elias, 2007). As a result, public schools have implemented a variety of SEL programming. The strongest SEL reforms include a comprehensive, multifaceted approach (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003). However, Jamesberg’s approaches to SEL implementation were based on a narrowly scoped definition of SEL, which resulted in a fragmented program (Hardy, 2018). We noted gaps in two specific areas. First, although research indicates that SEL
should be part of programming designed for all students (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias, 2009; Payton et al., 2008), we did not find this to be the case in Jamesberg. Second, a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to SEL includes the creation of safe, caring learning environments (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias, 2006). Yet, in Jamesberg, creating positive learning environments was not viewed as part of SEL implementation (Langlois, 2018). We discuss the significance of these two areas of concern in turn. Furthermore, we make research-based recommendations for the district regarding potential next steps in both areas.

Social-Emotional Learning is for Everyone

Multiple studies exist supporting the importance of instructing all students in social-emotional competencies for academic and life-long success (Durlak et al., 2011; Elias, 2009; Payton et al., 2008). Whereas, in Jamesberg, we found staff were primarily focused on the aspects of SEL that supported students with deficits in social-emotional or behavioral skills (Hardy, 2018). Missing from SEL programming in Jamesberg was an understanding of the social-emotional competencies all students should be acquiring. Evidence-based SEL curriculum is one way all students can be exposed to SEL content (Low, Cook, Smolkowski, & Buntain-Ricklefs, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). Jamesberg had some explicit social-emotional skill instruction in place (McGarrigle, 2018). However, research indicates SEL practices should also be embedded in academic instruction to capitalize on the connection between emotions and learning (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004). Beyond the training provided to a few teachers regarding the incorporation of Responsive Classroom (Caira, 2018), Jamesberg staff rarely referred to embedded SEL instructional practices. Embedding SEL practices into
academic instruction ensures all students acquire and practice these skills in their daily contexts (Elias, 2006). Later, in the recommendation section, we make suggestions for how leaders in Jamesberg could approach this work.

Another way schools ensure SEL instruction reaches all students is by using counseling staff (i.e. guidance counselors and social workers) in a systematic way to teach, model, and practice social-emotional competencies for all students (Flaherty et al., 1998). However, our findings indicated some counseling staff in Jamesberg spent a large amount of time responding to students in crisis (McGarrigle, 2018). As a result, some counselors were less involved in proactively supporting SEL for all students. Because of this, only some students in Jamesberg benefited from the support this specialized staff can provide. We make recommendations regarding the utilization of counseling staff at the end of the section.

**Social-Emotional Learning Includes Creating Safe, Caring Learning Environments**

In addition to understanding that SEL instruction is for everyone, a comprehensive definition of SEL recognizes the role of safe, caring learning environments in the development of social-emotional competencies (Durlak et al., 2011). Healthy teacher-student relationships allow students to learn about and practice social-emotional competencies and also increase student engagement and motivation to learn (Anderman, Andrzewjewky, & Allen, 2011; Elias & Moceri, 2012). At least two schools in the district were implementing a Responsive Classroom approach (Caira, 2018), which develops students’ social-emotional competencies through the establishment of a positive classroom and school environment (Abry, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, & Brewer, 2013). However, the only systematic, district-wide programming in place to address learning
environments was Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Hardy, 2018; McGarrigle, 2018). PBIS has been shown to increase school attendance (Freeman et al., 2015) and student compliance with behavioral expectations (Lewis, Colvin, & Sugai, 2000). Yet, PBIS is only one component that contributes to creating a positive and safe learning environment (Cohen, 2006; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2010).

In addition to establishing behavioral expectations, another aspect of creating safe, caring learning environments is the establishment of positive teacher-student relationships (Skiba, Ormiston, Martinez, & Cummings, 2016). As such, an understanding of the comprehensive meaning of SEL includes the role teacher-student interactions play in SEL development (Klem & Connell, 2004). Although research indicates students are most able to learn when they feel safe, competent, and autonomous (Brooks, 1999), this concept was not included in most leaders' or teachers' definition of SEL (Langlois, 2018). Instead, establishing positive classroom environments was more often brought up in relation to problematic student behavior. This reactive way of approaching positive environments highlighted how many leaders thought of SEL as implementing a prescribed program or curriculum, instead of a set of skills to be embedded into teacher-student interactions and academic content (Langlois, 2018). The section to follow contains recommendations for next steps.

**Recommendations to Expand Understanding of Social-Emotional Learning**

Broadening the definition of SEL in Jamesberg is an essential next step for leaders. Below, we outline recommendations in two areas: expanding the focus of SEL instruction to *all* students and including the establishment of safe, caring learning environments as part of SEL programming.
First, through policy and practice, leaders should seek to establish SEL as a component of instruction essential for all students in the district (Zins & Elias, 2007). One way to approach this task would be to outline a developmentally appropriate scope and sequence for social-emotional competencies (Elias & Moceri, 2012). Including a list of expected SEL instructional practices would help staff understand how SEL should be embedded into their daily instruction with all students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Training curriculum leaders regarding how social-emotional competencies are embedded in instructional practice is another possible avenue. As academic curriculum is implemented, curriculum leaders could facilitate embedding SEL practices into unit design. The key task for leaders in Jamesberg will be to shift the thinking of principals and teachers to see SEL as a core component of programming for all students.

In addition, we recommend that leaders in Jamesberg examine the roles of counseling staff within their schools. Articulating a clear definition for their roles would be a first step. As part of that work, leaders might consider how counseling staff could be used to provide explicit instruction to students in a proactive manner instead of a reactive one (Zins & Elias, 2007). For example, leaders could facilitate the creation of a schedule for counseling staff to provide direct instruction in social skills to students. These supports would allow the district to best utilize counseling staff.

Our second recommendation regards building safe, caring learning environments as part of the district’s approach to SEL programming. We suggest the leaders of Jamesberg expand the understanding of SEL to include the ways adults interact with students and the relationships they form. While school leaders support teachers in building these relationships, they do so in reaction to problems, versus as proactive
professional development (Langlois, 2018). A critical step in this process is through the identification of the school environment as a part of SEL implementation (Elias, 2009). PBIS has taken root in the district. Thus, if leaders continue to support the systems and practices provided through PBIS, schools will benefit. However, district leaders should help school leaders and staff expand their understanding of the elements of a safe, caring school environment, including how the school environment can be used to provide coordinated supports for students (Slade & Griffith, 2013). One way to accomplish this is to include a specific action item in the strategic plan addressing the creation of a common definition and understanding of a positive school environment. Furthermore, leaders can provide professional development opportunities for teachers that are directly related to building positive classroom environments (Caira, 2018). Ultimately, if school leaders and teachers hold a more comprehensive and proactive approach to SEL programming they will be able to support the success of all students.

**Setting Direction**

As seen in this project, staff in Jamesberg were invested in the social-emotional needs of their students, but had a narrow definition of SEL. In addition to having a comprehensive understanding of SEL, effective educational leaders utilize a set of leadership skills aimed at setting direction in their schools and districts (Leithwood et al., 2004). These skills enable leaders to direct efforts through the establishment of a clear, shared vision and the development of group goals that define high expectations (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2014). However, outside of the PBIS initiative, Jamesberg lacked district-wide priorities or actions steps for change related to SEL implementation. Without consistent priorities and goals, there was limited cohesion
in SEL instruction. Instead, most SEL initiatives were fueled by individual principals (Hardy, 2018; McGarrigle, 2018).

The creation of a unified district vision is particularly important for successful SEL implementation, because it brings cohesion to the variety of programs, practices, and interventions required for a comprehensive approach (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). The lack of a unifying vision in Jamesberg led to an uneven application of SEL programs and practices across the district (Hardy, 2018), as well as the trainings that were offered to teachers regarding SEL practices (Caira, 2018). Next, we will discuss implications in two areas: the impact of school autonomy and the need for aligned goal setting. Finally, we will follow with recommendations for the district in the area of direction setting.

**School Autonomy**

Without a clear, shared vision, the adoption of SEL programs in Jamesberg was primarily initiated by school principals (Hardy, 2018; McGarrigle, 2018). School leaders established a range of SEL curricula and practices based on the needs of their individual buildings and their particular interests and beliefs. According to Honig (2016), context is important to consider when implementing a new initiative, but in Jamesberg, the district context was not considered. Instead, principals worked autonomously from the building-centric contexts of their individual schools when framing SEL initiatives. While this autonomy provided building leaders the freedom to address the SEL needs in their school, it also resulted in inconsistencies among schools, particularly in the area of training (Caira, 2018) and support of teachers in building positive learning environments (Langlois, 2018). Many of the school leaders interviewed expressed concern over the lack of funds and opportunities for new teachers to be trained in SEL programs. While
school leaders strove to provide effective in-house professional development, keeping new staff trained on previously introduced SEL programs was problematic. New teachers did not always have access to the same level of training as teachers who had been in district when that program was first introduced and there was not a system to address this gap. This inconsistency of training led to inconsistency of implementation. For some schools, it also meant no SEL programming beyond PBIS. In the recommendation section, to follow we make suggestions for establishing a clear, shared vision.

**Developing Group Goals**

Establishing a clear, shared vision is only one part of setting direction. Leaders must also use that vision to fashion group goals with high expectations for staff (Leithwood et al., 2014). This is often accomplished through the use of strategic planning. A strategic plan assists in setting the direction of a district; it provides shared goals as well as a roadmap for meeting those goals (Seashore Louis et al., 2014). Jamesberg had a team of district and school leaders charged with developing a district strategic plan. Directed by the superintendent, the plan included a goal to integrate SEL into instructional practices (Hardy, 2018). The committee was charged with creating the necessary action steps to realize this goal.

**Recommendations for Setting Direction**

Given the importance setting direction plays in the success of reform, we have three recommendations for next steps. First, we recommend the goals and action steps outlined in the strategic plan address a comprehensive meaning of SEL. As detailed
previously, this would include a focus on SEL instruction for all students and the inclusion of safe, caring learning environments (Elias et al., 2003).

As indicated by Elias et al. (2015), vision setting allows leaders to take a variety of SEL programs and practices and help staff understand how they relate to each other. Therefore, our second recommendation is that district leaders take a detailed inventory of SEL programs currently in place. This inventory will enable district leaders to decide if specific programs should be brought to scale across the district (Elias et al., 2003). Furthermore, leaders in Jamesberg can use the information to determine which programs to support with trainings for new teachers.

A collaborative process for vision setting yields an effective planning process (Devos et al., 2013; Silins et al., 2002). Therefore, our third recommendation is for leaders to ensure the vision set for SEL is truly a shared one. The superintendent brings a passion for SEL instruction to the district. Yet, before he arrived, principals and staff were invested and working hard to address the SEL needs of their students. Many school leaders had established SEL programming in their individual schools (Hardy, 2018). As a vision for SEL is established in the district, it should include the input of all educators in Jamesberg. It will be important to ensure staff understand the visioning process and are given a way to actively participate in the creation of action steps. Shifting from complete principal autonomy to a district-led vision will present challenges. Consistent and transparent communication around vision setting will be an important tool in bringing all stakeholders into this work and ensuring the vision is truly shared among all of them.

Developing People
Setting direction enables a school district to set a vision for reform and outline goals and action steps related to that vision. In conjunction with setting direction, developing people propels reform efforts because it allows leaders to build the capacity of staff to carry out the reform (Leithwood et al., 2004). Seashore Louis et al. (2014) found targeted staff development builds knowledge and skills and positively influences the attitudes of staff members in carrying out organizational goals. As such, a focus on developing people will be essential for leaders in Jamesberg as they work to improve SEL in the district. Below we offer perspectives on the role of professional development in change and the instructional methods that lead to effective professional development. Further, we put forth recommendations for next steps in the area of developing people.

The Role of Professional Development in Change

According to Ransford et al. (2009), effective professional development can have a direct impact on the quality and quantity of lessons implemented when introducing specific SEL curricula. As such, targeted professional development can lead teachers to attempt new practices and implement changes to their everyday teaching (Desimone et al., 2002). Teachers in Jamesberg reported a general dissatisfaction with the district professional development around SEL (Caira, 2018). For instance, the introduction of SEL programs in Jamesberg was not often paired with sufficient training. In some cases, school leader support for teachers in building positive relationships was not seen as professional development so no programing existed to support the work. School leaders instead responded individually to teachers struggling in this area (Langlois, 2018). Research shows insufficient training may lead to deficits in program fidelity and
negatively influence students’ emotional problem solving and emotional literacy skills (Reyes et al., 2012).

**Instructional Methods of Effective Professional Development**

The instructional methods used to implement professional development affect the outcomes. Effective professional development includes the active participation of those involved, and it requires access to relevant tools and content applicable to teachers’ practices (Bruce et al., 2010; Desimone et al., 2002; Ingvarson, Meiers, & Beavis, 2005). Therefore, professional development where teachers are not simply listening, but performing tasks related to learning, increases the impact of the learning on teacher performance (Desimone et al., 2002; Ingvarson, et al., 2005). However, relevant SEL-related professional development that included active participation was rarely reported in Jamesberg (Caira, 2018). While the district partnered with outside organizations and hired expert lecturers, teachers did not have access to instructional coaches regarding SEL practices and methodologies. Supports such as coaches have been found to improve teacher confidence during SEL implementation (Ransford et al., 2009). Ultimately, when provided with targeted professional development, teachers are more likely to attempt new practices and implement changes to their everyday teaching (Desimone et al., 2002). Consistent with Bruce et al. (2010), we found that without involvement in direct experiences, embedded into everyday teaching, teachers reported feeling disconnected from many professional development offerings. As such, we make recommendations for future practice related to developing people.
Recommendations for Future Practice in Developing People

When defining the vision and goals for SEL, the district will inevitably identify areas requiring professional development. As informed by our collaborative findings and the research literature, we have two recommendations for leaders as they consider the work of developing people. First, we recommend district leaders perform an assessment to examine professional development needs (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Second, we recommend district leaders establish a professional development plan that coincides with a cogent strategic plan and accounts for information gathered through the needs assessment. We will discuss these two recommendations in turn.

A leadership driven needs assessment. The results of our collaborative findings provided evidence that the Jamesberg administration and teaching staff are committed to the academic and social-emotional needs of their students (Caira, 2018; Hardy, 2018, Langlois, 2018; McGarrigle, 2018). In order to capitalize on the staff’s commitment, we recommend district leaders perform a review of professional learning needs (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). The purpose of the assessment would be three-fold. First, district and school leaders should carefully review and consolidate the information contained in the CASEL report and the survey from spring 2017 assessing perception of school climate and safety, student engagement, and student-teacher relationships. These data sources provide valuable information from teachers and counselors regarding specific areas related to SEL in which they would like support. Second, the assessment could identify staff knowledge and skills related to SEL goals articulated in the district strategic plan (Seashore Louis et al., 2014). Third, district and school leaders could evaluate current professional development as it pertains to the action steps in the new strategic plan and
consider ways to incorporate active participation and relevant content in future SEL-related professional development opportunities (Desimone, et al., 2002; Ingvarson, et al., 2005).

**Creation of a professional development plan.**

Using the information from the assessment, we recommend district and school leaders collectively create a professional development plan. The collaborative plan would ensure the information derived from the assessment is used in clear and actionable ways to develop staff in the area of SEL instruction. We recommend two areas for leaders to consider as they develop the professional development plan.

First, in order to ensure the success of the professional development plan, it should be paired with a strong vision for SEL implementation and designed to build the knowledge, skills, and disposition of staff required for the successful execution of SEL practices (Seashore Louis et al., 2014). Specifically, the content outlined in the professional development plan should be relevant to the context of teachers (Datnow, 2000). This can be accomplished by addressing areas identified in the assessment and by linking the content of professional development to staffs’ prior knowledge and building-based goals (Desimone et al., 2002). Relevance can also be created by ensuring the content of professional development includes how to apply the essential elements of the concept, and how to address any problems that arise (Durlak, 2016).

Second, in considering the instructional practices outlined in the professional development plan, leaders should seek ways to promote active participation (Desimone et al., 2002; Ingvarson et al., 2005) and allow time for staff to reflect and absorb the material (Kendziora & Osher, 2016). According to Bruce et al. (2010), active
participation includes providing and receiving feedback. One way this could be accomplished is by providing additional opportunities for teachers to participate in peer observations. School leaders should ensure peer observations are paired with time for discussion and reflection (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016).

Furthermore, active participation relies upon engagement with specific instructional strategies and allows teachers time to reflect and connect their learning to their practice (Bruce et al., 2010, Desimone et al., 2002). One mechanism for reflection and making connections is through the supervision and evaluation process. This process allows leaders to provide specific and meaningful feedback to teachers. However, our collaborative findings did not show evidence of the supervision and evaluation process as a source of professional development for SEL (Caira, 2018, Langlois, 2018). Therefore, we recommend training and encouraging administrators to provide targeted feedback related to SEL along with time for collaborative reflection.

**Redesigning the Organization**

In addition to setting direction and developing people, an important aspect of effective educational leadership is the ability to build organizational structures that support learning (Leithwood et al., 2004; Witziers et al., 2003). This requires the creation of structures that support and encourage the growth of staff members to integrate new learning into their current practice (Elias, 2006). Jamesberg had successfully created structures to support SEL growth through its PBIS initiative. To build on this preliminary work, we have identified two focus areas for leaders: effective support structures and ongoing collaboration (Leithwood et al., 2003). At the end of the section, we present recommendations for school and district leaders.
Effective Structures to Support Social-Emotional Learning

Creating the right structures to sustain SEL initiatives is a challenge for school systems (Elias et al., 2015). To determine the right structures to support SEL efforts, districts should consider the contextual variables and internal expertise (Elias et al., 2003; Minckler, 2014). Jamesberg was successful in integrating PBIS in all the elementary and middle schools through the use of a district-wide tiered support structure (Hardy, 2018; McGarrigle, 2018). This structure supplied an implementation framework that was flexible enough to allow schools to individualize the program based on their schools’ needs. Although PBIS was an incomplete response to a more comprehensive SEL system, this program was successfully embedded in these schools through the multi-pronged structures created to implement and sustain it.

In contrast to the support structure of the PBIS initiative, the support structures of guidance counselors and social workers were not consistent across buildings (McGarrigle, 2018). Most schools had a support model that aligned with the training and expertise of each discipline (Flaherty et al., 1998). A few schools recently shifted to a model where the roles and responsibilities of guidance counselors and social workers were interchangeable. Instead of differentiating the roles based on level of student need, the roles were assigned by grade level. Both models have their benefits and drawbacks, dependent upon school and district context (Datnow, Park, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Robinson et al., 2008). However, in Jamesberg the support model that differentiated roles based on the training and expertise of counselors had been well-established and aligned well with the PBIS tiers of support. There was concern among several counselors
and administrators that the shift to a grade level model would not effectively support all students.

**Collaborative Processes**

Another organizational mechanism to support SEL implementation is to create structure in the school schedule that allows for and even encourages collaboration (Minckler, 2014). Research has shown that providing staff members with the opportunity to collaborate is a powerful way to develop staff (Bruce et al., 2010; Desimone et al., 2002) and meet organizational goals (Leithwood et al., 2014). The district recognized and responded to this need for the counseling staff by building a collaborative structure for sharing expertise and effective practices (McGarrigle, 2018).

As found throughout this project, teachers, too, yearned for additional opportunities to collaborate in order to increase their skill set and receive emotional support from peers (Caira, 2018). Most teachers identified seeking out support for SEL challenges through impromptu conversations with counselors, peers, or principals (Caira, 2018, Hardy, 2018; Langlois, 2018). Specifically, teachers discussed positive interactions with support staff as a means to growing one’s efficacy. When teachers felt supported by their colleagues, they felt more confident in their own abilities (Caira, 2018).

Although these conversations were helpful, teachers reported wanting a more formal structure for collaboration (Caira, 2018). This is consistent with research that shows the integration of SEL practices into a teacher’s skillset increases when collaboration is a standard practice (Berzin, O'Brien, & Tohn, 2012; Guo, Justice, Sawyer, & Tompkins, 2011).
Recommendation for Organizational Structures

As informed by our collaborative findings and the research literature, we have two recommendations for leaders as they consider the work of redesigning organizational structures. First, we recommend leaders review the roles and responsibilities of guidance counselors and social workers to ensure that structures support the SEL needs of schools and the district. Clear, consistent structures and operating procedures (Leithwood et al, 2007) help organizations run more efficiently and allow all organizational members to understand how to best access supports. As part of the review process, we recommend establishing clear job descriptions and role expectations in order to clarify and strengthen the existing student support systems. Additionally, this clarity could lead to collaborative relationships among these professionals in order to create a responsive support structure that serves all students (Flaherty et al., 1998). Leaders could utilize the already established guidance meetings as a time to gather and analyze a list of duties, tasks, and responsibilities for each role.

Second, we recommend leaders establish a schedule that allows for collaboration between teachers regarding SEL. In addition, providing teachers with a protocol for collaborating about SEL will keep discussions focused and productive. Creating a formalized structure to allow development of collaborative, collective teams in schools can convey a sense of organizational stability and clarity of purpose. For staff, this can lead to higher levels of connectedness, collegiality, trust, and mutual respect (Bellibas & Liu, 2017). Student outcomes in schools that build in collaborative structures for staff include higher achievement (Dinham, 2005), engagement, and participation (Silins et al., 2002).
Conclusion

The awareness of social-emotional learning (SEL) as an essential aspect of education is growing. District and school leaders are increasingly aware of the need to provide programming and support for teachers in order to meet the needs of students. Therefore, the broader aim of this project was to explore the role of school and district leaders in supporting implementation of SEL in public education. Our research project focused on one district from four different perspectives: the role of district leaders in establishing SEL initiatives, the district’s approach to SEL-related professional development, the practices of principals and counselors, and the practices of school leaders in supporting teachers to build a positive learning environment.

In Jamesberg, we found a district with a strong investment in the academic and social-emotional well-being of their students. Overall, the district's approach to SEL implementation was narrowly defined. While many programs and initiatives existed, there lacked a unifying district-wide vision for SEL programming. Professional development for SEL was evident but did not adequately meet the needs of the district. Finally, we found evidence of some organizational structures to support SEL.

The three leadership practices outlined by Leithwood et al. (2004) (setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization) established a framework for future recommendations.

The commitment of the new superintendent and the on-going strategic planning reflected the district’s commitment to incorporating SEL into the practices of all staff. Staff investment in the academic and social-emotional well-being of students, along with
a leadership team focused on making district-wide improvements, provided a sense of hopeful optimism for Jamesberg and the future implementation of SEL.
References


Elias, M. J. (2013). The character of schools, the character of individuals, and the character of society: Creating educational policy to reflect this inextricable interconnection. *KEDI Journal of Educational Policy, SPEC. ISSU*, 141–149.


Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol: Administrators

1. What SEL initiatives has your school (or the district - for district leaders) implemented in the past two years? a. **Probe** (for District Leaders): What levels/schools implemented the initiative(s)?
2. Talk about how the initiative(s) was implemented?
   a. **Probe**: What strategies were used during implementation to help building-based staff understand the purpose or goal of the initiative?
   b. **Probe**: What strategies were used during implementation to help building-based staff develop their knowledge base about the initiative?
   c. **Probe** (for District Leaders): How was the plan for implementation communicated to school-based staff?
   d. **Probe** for (District Leaders): What structures were used or created to improve communication between district leaders and school-based staff and/or among school-based staff?
   e. **Probe**: What support systems (if any) were put in place to help building-based staff during adoption of the SEL initiative?
3. What professional development has occurred regarding SEL?
4. Have teachers been afforded the opportunity to collaborate with peers regarding SEL?
5. Has confidence improved due to participation in SEL related PD?
6. How do you define a positive classroom learning environment?
   Potential categories of answers include:
   1. Clear signs of rituals and routines/organization
   2. Instructional strategies for engagement
   3. Social emotional (teacher/student interactions, teacher sensitivity, regard for adolescent perspective)

**Interviewer**: I’d like for us to focus on the social-emotional aspects of the classroom environment for the next three questions.
7. What skills do teachers need in order to build positive relationships with students? **Probe**: Can you give me an example?
8. What skills do teachers need in order to build positive relationships between students? **Probe**: Can you give me an example?
9. In what ways have you successfully supported a teacher struggling to build a positive relationship with and between students? In what ways have you not been successful? Look for professional development, coaching feedback (specifics) and evaluation.
10. What are the biggest challenges you’ve faced as you support teachers in this area?
11. Can you talk to me about the ways you support staff or students social-emotionally?
12. Talk to me about your work with your counselors.
   a. **Probe**: Do you meet regularly? How often?
   b. **Probe**: How does the communication work between you and the counselors?
13. What impact does trust have on how you work with your counselors? Teachers?
   a. **Probe**: Talk to me about the ways you built trust as an administrator
   b. **Probe**: What have been barriers, if any, you have experienced in building trust?
Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview Protocol: Counselors

Background Data

I/we’d like to start by learning a little more about you.

1. What is your role in this school?
2. How long have you been in this role?
3. Have you worked in other school systems?

SEL Initiatives

1. Can you tell me about the ways you support SEL in your role?
2. Have there been any initiatives in this school/district to develop SEL? Can you talk to me about them? What was your involvement?
3. Talk to me about your work with students? What does that look like? What goes well? What makes that work challenging?
4. Tell me about a time you worked with a student that had a big impact on your personally or professionally?
5. Talk to me about your work with teachers. What goes well? What makes that work challenging?
6. Talk to me about your interactions with administration? How do the communication channels work?
7. Who do you go to for advice/support?
8. What impact does trust have on your work with students? Teachers? Administrators?
   **Probe:** Talk to me about how you go about building trust?
9. What's missing in this building/district? What would make this a better place for staff and students?
10. Have you been involved in providing any professional development for teachers?
11. Have you attended any professional development recently?
12. What motivates you in this work?
13. Where do you see yourself professionally in the future?
Appendix C

Focus Group Interview Protocol

1. Has this school (or district) provided any professional development on social-emotional learning? If so, what was (or is) your involvement?

2. Talk about why your school and district implemented __________ (fill in with specific SEL initiative)?
   
   **Probe:** What were the hopes for the initiative?

3. Have you been afforded the opportunity to collaborate with peers regarding SEL?

4. How confident are you regarding SEL centered practices?
   
   a. **Probe:** Has your participation in SEL centered PD changed your practice in any way?
   
   b. **Probe:** Has your confidence improved due to your participation in SEL related PD?

   c. **Probe:** How has your understanding of SEL changed or developed?

5. Do you actively research SEL or attempt to incorporate SEL activities/strategies into your everyday practices?

6. Tell me about a meaningful experience you had that has impacted the way you incorporate SEL practices.

7. How do you define a positive learning environment?

8. What skills do you, as a teacher, need in order to successfully build a positive learning environment in your classroom?

9. What supports has your principal offered to you to support your growth in building a positive learning environment in your classroom? (Possibilities might include: feedback, peer-to-peer observations, professional development)

   **Probe:** Did you find any of the supports helpful or effective? If so, please explain how. If not, please explain why not.
Appendix D

Documents

Agenda from Administrative Leadership Retreat on 8/24 and 8/25

Attendance Initiative Overview

Collective Turnaround Plan for three elementary schools

Content from Health and Wellness Website

District Strategic Plan dated March 2014

District Panorama Key Insight Report – spring 2017

Draft of District Strategic Plan dated January 2018

Educational Visioning Community Forum Events flyer

Final FY18 Budget Book

Health and Wellness Newsletter – June 2016

Metro West Health Survey

Multi-year strategic planning working documents for 4 standards

PBIS Information from Elementary School Website

PBIS Information from Middle School Website

PowerPoint from 2016 PBIS training by the May Institute

Professional Development Day Plan for March 1, 2016

Redacted teacher evaluations

School Improvement Template and Guidance Document

SEL rating for GLIMS

SEL Readiness and Engagement Analysis – by CASEL Nov. 2016
## Appendix E

### Coding Manual

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Example codes from transcripts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>trust</td>
<td>Stating the impact or process of trust in the work setting</td>
<td>I know if I ask for help, they'll be there for me.</td>
<td>&quot;You have to present it in a nice, respectful, articulate way that will help create the buy-in, create the understanding and the trust.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collaboration</td>
<td>Working with peers (teachers, counselors, admin) to solve problems</td>
<td>I worked with the principal on setting up the RTI team.</td>
<td>&quot;So, we'll present a student and everybody will kind of hear what's going on. It's a critical friends group trying to provide support, trying to decide if the support we have in place is appropriate support.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role delineation</td>
<td>Difference btw what interviewee does in relation to other faculty</td>
<td>As the social worker, I connect families to town housing resources.</td>
<td>&quot;So I think there are definitely lines that separate them. The guidance staff work with the grade level...&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication</td>
<td>How sharing information works btw staff (regular meetings, on the fly, email)</td>
<td>We meet with the counselors 1x/month on Fridays</td>
<td>&quot;We understand it's not just for doing it with students, it's also for having these circles with the staff and giving them a forum to talk to us through the circle.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>relationships</td>
<td>The connection btw staff that facilitate or hinder the work</td>
<td>I know the SWs in other bldings, so can easily reach out and ask ?s</td>
<td>&quot;I think the social worker, in particular, is amazing with parents...Staff go to her, I go to her, everyone goes to her.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tasks</td>
<td>Different tasks that are performed by the interviewee</td>
<td>Training staff on behavioral interventions is s/t I do in this role.</td>
<td>&quot;Our guidance staff run countless groups.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiatives</td>
<td>District or bldg-level implementation of SEL supports</td>
<td>The district has a PBIS initiative across schools. We are in the Tier 1 phase.</td>
<td>&quot;We were trained by Suffolk for restorative practices and circles. We are starting that this year.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>barriers/challenges</td>
<td>Systemic pieces that inhibit effective practices</td>
<td>They make us jump through these hoops, so you have to know how to do work-arounds.</td>
<td>&quot;It would be nice to have a sense of belonging. A sense of 'it doesn't matter where you go, here's the expectation.' So as a district we haven't pulled that together.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership pipeline/opportunities</td>
<td>Examples of leadership opportunities (e.g., stipends, promotions)</td>
<td>I am the PBIS coach for the district. It's a stipend position.</td>
<td>&quot;I'm the PBIS coach here.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix F

Hierarchical Table with Code Categories