The Role of Leadership in Social-emotional Learning Implementation: Leadership and Classroom Environment

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BOSTON COLLEGE

Lynch School of Education

Department of Educational Administration and Higher Education Professional School Administrators Program

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION: LEADERSHIP AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Dissertation in Practice by

Deborah Langlois

with Michael A. Caira, Jr., Sarah J. Hardy, and Donna M. McGarrigle

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Education

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Abstract

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION: LEADERSHIP AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Deborah Langlois

Dissertation Committee: Dr. Vincent Cho (Chair), Dr. Ingrid Allardi (Reader), Dr. Elida Laski (Reader)

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of school leaders in supporting teachers as they build relationships with and between students in the classroom. These two important aspects of creating a positive classroom learning environment are necessary for Social Emotional Learning to be successful. This qualitative case study drew upon data from interviews with school leaders, teacher focus group interviews, and redacted teacher evaluations in one school district in Massachusetts. While the role of school leaders in the academic success of students has been explored in the literature, there is less research on the specific actions school leaders take to support teachers struggling with classroom environment issues. This study will explore the actions of school leaders through the lens of three leadership practices: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The findings highlighted the difference in school leaders’ perception of the capacity of adults versus students to learn relationship building skills. In some cases school leaders were not confident that building these skills was possible and consequently they struggled to provide clear and specific strategies to teachers. The findings also reflect the reactive versus proactive nature of the support teachers received for building relationships with and between students. Recommendations include re-organizing resources to allow for more teacher collaboration, targeted professional development in relationship building and exploration regarding the difference in how student peer relationships were viewed compared to teacher student relationships.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the teachers and professors of Boston College for providing a challenging yet supportive environment for this process. I am a better scholar, practitioner, and person thanks to your efforts. I would also like to acknowledge the efforts of the dissertation committee Dr. Vincent Cho, Dr. Ingrid Allardi, and Dr. Elida Laski. Your suggestions and feedback pushed me to work harder, and it is deeply appreciated. I do not have enough words to describe the depth of gratitude and appreciation I feel for my teammates on this project: Donna McGarrigle, Sarah Hardy, and Michael Caira. Your patience, wisdom, humor, and constant supply of junk food ensured that our work together was successful and fun. Finally, I wish to thank my friends and family for their support and willingness to provide last minute feedback and proofreading.
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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-

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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

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<th>Investigator</th>
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**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

CASEL’s Core SEL Competencies

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<th>Social-emotional competencies</th>
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<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>
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*Note. Adapted from "Effective social and emotional learning programs," by CASEL (2015).*

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,
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.

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
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 prerequisite 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

STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Study Design

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.

Methodology

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

2This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Michael A. Caira, Jr., Sarah Jean Hardy, Deborah Langlois, and Donna M. McGarrigle
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. 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.

**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. (see Table 2.1).

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>• Principals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Assistant Principals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselors</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Semi-Structured</td>
<td>McGarrigle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Guidance Counselors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Social Workers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>Caira, Hardy, and Langlois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Classroom Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Special Education Teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**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

LEADERSHIP AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Supporting the social emotional learning (SEL) of students has been identified as a priority in many districts because of its impact on academic achievement and the healthy development of children (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). SEL is the process through which one acquires and effectively applies 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, n.d.).

Successful implementation of SEL begins with the creation of positive learning environments in the classroom (Elias, 2006). Two components of a positive learning environment are warm and caring teacher-student relationships (O’Connor, Dearing, & Collins, 2011) and positive peer relationships (Rimm-Kaufman, Baroody, Larsen, Curby, & Abry, 2015), both of which are connected to student academic achievement. Research suggests a positive correlation between a teacher’s success in building a positive classroom environment and a student’s academic achievement (Allen, Gregory, Mikami, Lun, Hamre, & Pianta, 2013; Back, Polk, Elizabeth, Keys, Christopher, & McMahon, 2016).

While teachers are at the forefront of creating a positive classroom environment, they do not do it alone. The success of classroom teachers is dependent on the culture

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3 This chapter was written individually by Deborah Langlois.
and climate of the school community in which they teach, and with the school leadership, in particular, being an important component of culture building in schools (Ingersoll, 2001; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Much research has described the role of school leaders in supporting instruction, including SEL, through specific leadership practices (Blasé & Blasé, 2000; Dinham, 2005; Sebastian & Allensworth, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2004). Leithwood et al., organized these practices into three key areas: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization. In general, these leadership practices focus on how school leaders create a whole school environment appropriate for learning. What is less often explored, however, is how school leaders support teachers in creating a positive classroom environment, specifically in terms of building relationships with and between students.

The purpose of this research study is to explore how school leaders support teachers in creating a positive classroom learning environment through the lens of the three key leadership practices mentioned above and set forth by Leithwood et al., (2004): setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization. Specifically, this study explores the ways that school leaders work with those teachers who struggle to build and maintain positive relationships with students and/or those teachers who struggle with supporting students in building positive peer relationships. The following research questions guide this study:

**RQ 1:** How do school leaders define a positive classroom learning environment?

**RQ 2:** What do school leaders see as the skills teachers need to successfully build positive relationships with and between students?
RQ 3: How have school leaders supported teachers in building positive relationships with and between students?

**Literature Review and Conceptual Framework**

This literature review begins with an exploration of the existing research regarding three key practices of school leaders in promoting academic achievement. Subsequently, I will review the literature regarding two aspects of positive learning environments: teacher-student relationships and student-peer relationships. After providing an overview of each aspect and its connection to academic achievement, I will review the literature regarding the role of the teacher in building and supporting these two types of relationships.

**Practices of School Leaders**

The research is organized using three key leadership practices: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Setting direction.** Setting direction can be interpreted as clearly articulating the vision of the organization as a way to create common goals (Leithwood et al., 2004). This does not mean the school leader creates the vision in isolation. Rather, this leadership practice emphasizes the importance of the principal working with staff to ensure that the school’s vision and chosen goals are commonly shared with the community of teachers (Weathers, 2011). Effective leaders will ensure the goals are meaningful, achievable, and based on a long-term agenda, rather than serving as a quick fix (Dinham, 2005). Once the vision is set and the goals determined, it is the role of the school leader to effectively communicate those goals and ensure appropriate
accountability (Leithwood et al., 2004). The ability to hold each member of the community accountable to those goals depends on the level of trust between the school leader and staff members, as well as staff perception that the school leader is socially engaged with them and with the school (Price, 2015). A school leader who emphasizes the importance of a positive learning environment will articulate and support a school-wide goal in this area.

**Developing people.** Actions that support developing people include “offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support and providing appropriate models of best practice and beliefs considered fundamental to the organization” (Leithwood et al., 2004, p. 7). One way to support teacher growth is to encourage reflective dialogue through modeling or after a classroom observation. Through this individualized approach, a school leader can have a strong impact on improving instruction (Kythreotis, Pashiardis, & Kyriakides, 2010). A second way to develop staff is through professional development. Providing opportunities for collaboration, such as teachers working together as peers or in mentoring relationships, is especially powerful (Blase & Blase, 2000). As with setting direction, the impact of the principal’s actions in this area is tied to how well he or she communicates intentions to staff. A teacher’s perception of the social and academic engagement of their students can be influenced by how supported that teacher feels. This has clear implications on teacher actions in the classroom and student achievement. Price, 2015).

**Redesigning the organization.** This leadership practice centers around creating an organization that supports the work of students, teachers, and administrators, in order to create a strong school culture which offers opportunities for collaboration (Leithwood
et al., 2004). As discussed above, an effective school culture involves positive classroom environments where students feel connected not just to the teacher but also to one another. This environment is an essential condition for the success of SEL (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015).

In addition, successfully supporting the work of teachers can reduce attrition, which affects academic achievement (Barnes, 2007). Better teacher-student relationships predict greater teacher commitment and a more positive attitude about the teaching profession (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011). A principal’s relationship with staff also affects teacher satisfaction and professional commitment, in the context of shared expectations (Price, 2015). Therefore, supporting both of these relationships is in the best interest of school leaders attempting to redesign the organization.

**Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

The relationship between students and their teacher is foundational to the environment of the classroom (Allen et al., 2013; Baker, 1999). If the environment is positive, then academic and social growth can take place. “Effective, lasting academic learning and SEL are built on caring relationships and warm but challenging classrooms and school environments” (Elias, 2006, p. 7). Positive relationships with a teacher can also decrease negative behaviors while fostering a student's social-emotional well-being (O’Connor et al., 2011).

There are many factors that can influence a teacher student relationship. Teachers who show an interest in students’ lives both in and out of the classroom, offering more than just academic support, can have an impact on student attitudes (Casas, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015). Displaying cultural sensitivity also correlates with positive student
attitudes (Back et al., 2016). Specific teacher qualities that promote positive student relationships include the ability to understand a student’s emotional needs and react in supportive, sincere ways (Allen et al., 2013). It is also important for teachers to model appropriate socio-emotional behaviors and responses (Brackett et al., 2011). Interestingly, the research does not show a correlation between personality traits — such as friendliness and extraversion — or teacher self-efficacy and teacher-student relationships (Jong, Mainhard, Tartwijk, Veldman, Verloop, & Wubbels, 2014).

**Understanding the emotional needs of students.** Teachers need to be aware of and display sensitivity for the emotional needs of students (Allen et al., 2013), since their interactions and responses to students’ emotional states can impact those students in both positive and negative ways (Becker, Goetz, Morger, & Ranellucci, 2014). Teachers also need to understand the impact of being supportive to the class as a whole, avoiding the perception that they have favorite students. Teachers who understand students’ emotional needs can increase student enjoyment of school and reduce interpersonal issues in the classroom (Urhahne, 2015).

**Model appropriate socio-emotional behaviors and responses.** A teacher’s impact on students goes beyond what is in the daily lesson plan. As teachers deal with student emotions all day, the ability to manage those emotions and regulate their own feelings is important (Brackett et al., 2011). Teachers should be aware that challenges in the classroom can lead to emotional exhaustion, which in turn may increase negative attitudes towards students (Byrne, 1994). Understanding that and being able to model appropriate responses to challenging situations is both a learning opportunity for students and a key aspect of creating a positive classroom environment.
Positive Peer Relationships

Equally important to the task of building relationships with individual students is the need to build a classroom environment that supports positive interactions between students (Urhahne, 2015). Negative peer relationships can impact a student’s willingness to engage and participate in class, which can adversely affect academic outcomes (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). Peer groups can also influence the motivation and work habits of their members (Berndt & Keefe, 1995). Student motivation can be positively impacted if a student perceives his or her teachers and peers as “providing clear expectations for social and academic outcomes; providing help, advice, and instruction…. Creating a safe and non-threatening classroom environment and providing emotional support” (Wentzel, Battle, Russell, & Looney, 2010, p. 200). There is literature to suggest that students with poor peer adjustment skills are at higher risk for difficulties throughout their lives (Parker and Asher, 2017). Teachers can impact peer relationships through modeling and the use of cooperative learning strategies.

Modeling. Acting as a role model is one way teachers can help students build positive peer-to-peer relationships. Since teachers who emphasize positive interactions with all students send a strong message of inclusion, students observing this positive behavior may be more likely to see their peers in that same positive light (Casas et al., 2015). In contrast, teachers who show favoritism send a message to students that it is also acceptable to treat peers differently (Mikami, Gregory, Allen, Pianta, & Lun, 2011).

Cooperative learning strategies. The use of cooperative learning strategies that require all students to participate can break down some of the social barriers that impact peer-to-peer relationships, especially among students with different social statuses.
These strategies can also reduce the isolation that students with behavior issues often face in peer relationships (Mikami, Boucher, & Humphreys, 2005). In particular, for early adolescents, cooperative versus competitive structures are associated with positive peer relationships and higher academic achievement (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008).

Administrative support and teacher collaboration around issues of classroom management are important components in the work to improve academic achievement (Back et al., 2016). How a school leader supports a teacher in building positive relationships with and between students is a key aspect of this leadership practice.

**Methodology**

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the methodology. The following section contains details unique to this individual study.

**Design**

The purpose of my study was to explore how school leaders support teachers in creating a positive classroom learning environment. The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ 1:** How do school leaders define a positive classroom learning environment?

**RQ 2:** What do school leaders see as the skills teachers need to successfully build positive relationships with and between students?

**RQ 3:** How have school leaders supported teachers in building positive relationships with and between students?

This qualitative case study focuses on the experiences of multiple school leaders from different schools within the specific context of one district, a system bounded by
geography, time, and place (Creswell, 2015)

**Data Collection**

My study is part of a larger study conducted with four other Boston College doctoral students. As with the larger study, this research project encompasses semi-structured individual and teacher focus group interviews as well as a review of documents.

**Individual Interviews.** I chose to use a semi-structured interview format for this study. While I anticipated obtaining specific information from the questions asked, I also wanted the flexibility to allow interview subjects to explain their thinking in their own way, allowing me to follow their lead (Merriam, 2009). I believe this allowed me to gain the most authentic and descriptive data. A total of 13 school leaders were interviewed, representing eight elementary, middle, and high schools (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

*Interview and Focus Group Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Participation Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Leaders (3)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Semi-Structured Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leaders (5)</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Semi-Structured Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leaders (5)</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>Semi-Structured Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (5)</td>
<td>Elementary School</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (2)</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers (5)</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Focus Group</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interview protocol contained 13 questions (see Appendix A), three of which were unique to my study, though data was gathered from many of the questions asked. For example, while questions 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 were targeted to elicit information
regarding a positive learning environment, questions 1, 3, and 11 also provided data for my study (see Table 3.2).

Table 3.2

*Connections to the Interview and Focus Group Protocols*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions from the Administrator Protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1 What SEL initiatives has your school (or the district, for district leaders) implemented in the past two years?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3 What professional development has occurred regarding SEL?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6 How do you define a positive classroom learning environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#7 What skills do teachers need in order to build positive relationships with students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#8 What skills do teachers need in order to build positive relationships between students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#9 In what ways have you successfully supported a teacher struggling to build positive relationships with and between students? In what ways have you not been successful?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#10 What are the biggest challenges you've faced as you support teachers in this area?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#11 Can you talk to me about the ways you support staff or students social-emotionally?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Teacher focus group interviews.** Four teacher focus groups were conducted, with a total of 12 teachers across four schools (see Table 3.1). Three questions from the protocol were specific to my study. The full protocol is located in Appendix C. The purpose of the questions was to hear the teachers’ perspective on a positive learning environment and the strategies used by school leaders to support them in building positive relationships with and between students.

**Document review.** In addition to the documents described in Chapter 2 (see appendix D), I requested and received access to redacted evaluation documents, in order to best understand how school leaders use the evaluation process to support teachers in building a positive learning environment. The office of the Superintendent provided me
with 22 evaluations, all of which had identifying information obscured to ensure privacy and confidentiality. The evaluations were randomly selected by staff at the Superintendent’s office. Ten of the evaluations were formative, while 10 were summative. A formative evaluation is provided to all staff members halfway through their evaluation cycle (one or two years), while a summative evaluation is provided at the end of the cycle. In addition, a high school administrator gave me two formal observation reports -- direct observations of teaching practices conducted by administrators and provided to staff members throughout the cycle. These evaluations represent teachers from all levels and most schools (see Table 3.3).

Table 3.3

*Redacted Teacher Evaluations Review*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Total # of Evaluations</th>
<th>Type of Evaluations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2 Formal Observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Formative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2 Summative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 Formative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7 Formative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7 Summative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Analysis**

As soon as the data were collected from the documents, interviews, and focus groups, I began sorting it into three categories based on my research questions. I reviewed district-level documents (see Appendix D for list of documents) to get an overview of the district and the SEL goals, programs, and initiatives. Once the collection of data was complete, I began a first cycle of coding in order to begin the categorization
process (Saldaña, 2009). The first codes I established were based on my research questions. This process, known as structural coding (Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008), allowed me to organize the data for quick access. I then summarized passages in the data by key words and phrases. The second cycle of coding was conducted using Pattern Coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) as a way to combine similar or related key words and phrases looking for patterns. These patterns became the foundation of my findings.

My first research question asked how school leaders define a positive classroom learning environment. The following words or concepts were referred to multiple times throughout the interviews: Culture/norms, clear expectations/routines, growth mindset, connections, and safety. After multiple reviews and analysis of the data, I identified safety as the underlying concept.

The second research question had two parts, the first of which asked what skills a teacher needs to build a positive relationship with students. In the first cycle of coding, I identified the following list of words or concepts related to this question: philosophy/beliefs, lack of blame, expectations, growth mindset/reflection, patience, respect, and empathy. The second cycle of coding found three patterns: philosophy/beliefs, growth mindset/reflection, and connections. The second part of this research question asked about the necessary skills to build relationships between students. An analysis of the data generated the following codes: culture, norms, groupings, and modeling.

The third research question, which examines strategies school leaders use to support teachers in building relationships with and between students, required two
different sets of codes. One set of codes used for teacher-student relationships uncovered the following words: hiring/evaluation, modeling, difficult conversations, mentoring, and relationships. The second set of codes for peer relationships included teacher and administrator modeling and professional development.

Findings

I will outline the findings by first sharing how the school leaders conceptualized a positive learning environment. Secondly, I will review what school leaders reported as skills teachers need in order to build positive teacher-student relationships. I will also report on what strategies school leaders use to support teachers and the impact of those strategies from teachers’ perspectives. Finally, I will review the findings regarding strategies school leaders use to support teachers in building positive relationships among students.

Leaders’ Conceptualizations of a Positive Learning Environment

To answer research question one, I examined how school leaders describe a positive learning environment. The most common response described a place where students feel safe to learn. Safety was described in multiple ways, which can be distilled into three areas: academics, relationships, and routines.

Academics. The importance of academic safety was referenced by eight of the 13 school leaders as they discussed the need for students to know that the classroom is a safe place to fail. A school leader described the environment as one where “kids can really feel safe, a safe environment to talk, a safe environment to express their thinking.” Feeling safe to fail allows students to take risks, knowing their teacher and peers will support them. She explained:
If the teacher has built a positive culture, a positive environment and has relationships with those kids, you just know. You can just tell that this is a safe place for kids to be. If somebody answers a question, and two students whisper to each other and laugh, it’s not a safe place for kids to take risks. That doesn't happen in these rooms.

While the idea of risking failure was often described as a growth mindset or, as one administrator put it, “an environment that pushes you a bit past your comfort zone,” only three school leaders explicitly mentioned the need for students to be academically challenged as part of a positive learning environment. The focus on ensuring students feel safe to take risks implies that the work is challenging, but the value of challenging work in and of itself was not discussed by the majority of school leaders.

**Relationships.** Relationships were also listed by school leaders as a component of a positive learning environment. A strong pattern emerged showing the belief that students should feel connected to the school community through relationships with both peers and with their teacher. Nine school leaders spoke about the importance of students feeling connected to the teacher, while six referenced the need for students to have opportunities to interact with peers in a positive manner.

Another aspect of relationships mentioned was the need for students to feel like they are part of a community. One school leader spoke about the importance of an environment where “there is a sense of community, where the students feel a commitment to each other.” The other word used by many school leaders was connection, either in reference to the importance of students feeling connected to the teacher or to their peers. One administrator described this as a “palpable sense that the teacher was connected to students.” Many school leaders alluded to respect as a component of a positive relationship, with three school leaders mentioning it specifically.
As part of relationship building, one school leader spoke of the need to use positive reinforcement with students on a consistent basis.

**Routines.** Seven school leaders discussed the need for routines as a way to provide safety in the classroom. They expressed a belief in the importance of routines and clear expectations. They spoke about the importance of students knowing what is expected of them and the safety that results from consistency and follow-through. For example, one school leader stated “I think the kids need to know what the expectations are. If they don't know what the teacher wants from them that day, they’re not going to perform for you.”

**Positive Teacher-Student Relationships**

To answer the second research question, I examined what participants described as skills a teacher needs to build a positive relationship with students, as well as the strategies used by school leaders to support that work. I also reviewed 24 teacher evaluations to determine how they were used by school leaders to support the work. Finally, I examined teacher perceptions of the support offered by school leaders.

**Skills.** The Collins English Dictionary defines skill as “a type of work or activity which requires special training and knowledge” (collinsdictionary.com, 2018), while the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “a learned power of doing something competently: a developed aptitude or ability” (merriam-webster.com, 2018). In both definitions, a skill is something that can be learned and therefore taught. When asked to describe the skills a teacher needs to build positive relationships with students, school leaders did not speak to specific skills but rather listed personal characteristics or beliefs that act as barriers to better teacher-student relationships. For
example, words such as *patience, empathy,* and *respect* were used often. This focus away from skills was consistent across the interviews. In fact, one school leader, who did list necessary teacher skills, immediately made it clear that, without the right philosophy, those skills were not enough:

They may need additional classroom management skills, or language to help build that community, or they need instruction, that’s fine. I feel like that stuff people can learn, but [before that], you’ve got to have that basic underlying philosophy, or you're dead in the water. Similarly, another school leader spoke to belief systems when describing the importance of a growth mindset and “believing that all of the kids really can achieve.” Two other school leaders discussed the importance of a teacher’s ability to reflect on his or her own growth.

Other responses to this question focused on the ability of a teacher to connect with students. One school leader explained that teachers need “a genuine interest in the whole. Not just his TRA scores and such and such. They have to have that connection, to want to have that connection with a student”

One school leader talked about asking prospective teachers if they like students. While it was framed as a joke, her need to ask that question emphasized the importance she placed on teacher-student relationships.

“They have to be empathetic,” said one school leader. “They have to not take things personally, especially when dealing with parents. I always tell them, ‘Take it seriously, don't take it personally because when you start taking it personally then you get defensive and then everything breaks down’”

Respect for students was specifically mentioned by teachers and school leaders as important. Interestingly, this was framed in terms of building a culture of mutual respect
as a component of relationship building and as a teaching goal. “Kids have to learn to respect one another and that comes from teachers respecting them.”

The responses from school leaders indicate a focus on the personal characteristics or beliefs teachers need in order to build positive relationship with students. Unlike skills, these personal characteristic or beliefs are not easily impacted by professional development or support, which might explain why so many school leaders struggle to develop teachers in this area.

**Strategies.** Almost unanimously, school leaders admitted that finding ways to support teachers in building positive relationships with students is challenging. It was also clear that there is not a consistent plan across schools to respond to struggling teachers. School leaders mentioned a variety of strategies used in the past, though the success of those strategies was inconsistent. I have sorted the strategies into four general categories: conversation, modeling, evaluation, and hiring.

**Conversation.** Eight school leaders discussed the importance of continual conversations with teachers in order to enact change. For a few of the school leaders, the need for honesty and the willingness to have hard conversations with teachers was considered vital. “Being as honest as possible with people… you have to own those hard conversations or your school is not going to move forward.” School leaders were clear that this is an ongoing, time consuming process, rather than a one-time post-observation conversation. They need to invest in their relationships with teachers, engaging in multiple conversations over time to support teacher development. To illustrate the importance of building that relationship, one school leader explained: “I worked with an aide who I had nothing in common with, and she said she watched *Dancing With The*
Stars, so I watched it one night just to have something to talk to her about.” He believed the decision to find common ground, to make a personal connection with this teacher, helped their relationship in the same way it helps when adults find non-school interests to talk about with students.

**Modeling.** Seven of the school leaders shared their belief that modeling can be helpful. Some referenced modeling from the school leaders. An illustrative example is:

So, it's treating the staff in sort of the same ways that you want them to be treating the kids. If you want them to be listening to the kids, then you're listening to them. If you want the kids to feel safe taking risks, then you need to help teachers feel safe taking risks.

One school leader remarked on the importance of modeling lifelong learning if you want teachers to continue to be learners. Other school leaders discussed providing opportunities for a struggling teacher to visit a classroom of a peer as modeling. “When this is something that's a challenge for you [the teacher], here's a potential solution, or four potential solutions, or here's someone in your department who I know is awesome at that.” Some members of the teacher focus groups also listed modeling and mentoring from peers as effective strategies.

**Hiring.** Hiring the right staff was referenced as an important way to support teacher-student relationships, with four school leaders mentioning the importance of hiring staff with the appropriate philosophy or belief set. One school leaders explained:

When I do my interviews for teachers, I ask about building relationships with students and families. You have to have a toolkit because every situation is different. I always ask about philosophy around recognizing student achievement in all areas, not just academic.

A few respondents took it one step further by stating this is a skill a teacher either brings to the role or doesn’t. “I think there are some basic skills ... I don't know if I want
to say skills but, some basic philosophy and a basic approach that is sort of the baseline necessary, that you can't necessarily teach people.” The idea that part of what a teacher needs to build positive relationships with students is not something that is easily taught was not unique to this school leader. While three school leaders explicitly mentioned it, the idea was alluded to in multiple interviews, sometimes as an aspect of reflection: “It’s hard to change people’s mindsets, and in some people it’s impossible.” Or, “There are some teachers who are going to go into their rooms and shut their door and do what they are going to do. Those are the hard ones.” One school leader commented, “I think there are teachers who struggle and there are those who are not open to working to not struggle.” The idea that building a positive relationship with students is not a skill to be learned was not unique to school leaders. One teacher, in talking about the strong skills of a former student teacher, concluded with “she could be a really great teacher but you can’t teach certain parts of a personality. There are people who shouldn’t be teachers.”

*Teacher evaluations.* Three of the 13 school leaders talked about the use of the evaluation system as a tool to support conversation or, when necessary, have that staff member leave the role. One participant explained:

Sometimes, and I have got here a few times, if the stuff that we're working on, counselor and vice principal, to support the teacher isn't working because either they don't identify it as a struggle or they're not willing, that's when as an administrator I actually have to step in and say, “They have to, like this is no longer an option.” The evaluation tool actually does help in that.

While the number of school leaders who referenced the use of hiring (four) or the evaluation tool (three) was small, together they represent almost half of those interviewed. As both of these strategies implied a concern on the part of the school leader in the ability of the teacher to improve, inclusion in the findings was warranted.
A review of 24 teacher evaluations did not reflect a consistent use of this tool for supporting teachers in relationship building. Four evaluations mentioned teacher-student relationships, one of which contained suggestions for growth. The recommendation was for the teacher to cultivate relationships with his students. The lack of specific strategies and more recommendations could be due to the nature of the formative and summative evaluations reviewed. It is possible that more targeted comments were located in the formal observations. It is also possible that the lack of consistent feedback regarding the learning environments could be a reflection of sentiment expressed in two of the five teacher focus groups: “Feedback is never around classroom management,” it is on instruction.

**Mindset impacts strategy.** School leaders who believe a teacher can grow the right skills to build positive relationships with students might approach supporting struggling teachers differently than would those school leaders who believe a teacher either has the skill or does not. One strategy that reflects a growth mindset is conversation, which can be difficult and time-consuming. These conversations must be conducted on a one-to-one basis and, according to the school leaders interviewed, require a relationship of trust. There is research to suggest that teachers’ relationships with principals can have “lasting effects on the latent beliefs and perceptions that influence teachers’ work, and by association, students’ learning” (Price, 2015, p.130). Modeling, either by school leaders or a staff member, is another strategy identified by school leaders that illustrates their belief that a teacher’s skills can grow.

For those school leaders who do not believe building positive relationships with students is a teachable skill — and, therefore, do not see professional development as a
viable option — the solution is to ensure that teachers with the right beliefs are hired in the first place. If there are still issues, these leaders believe in using the evaluation tool to exit teachers from the school.

In Jamesberg, these two categories of beliefs are not exclusive. School leaders may have concerns about their ability to impact a teacher’s actions, yet they continue to try and find strategies to work with that teacher. Further studies might explore the impact school leaders’ beliefs have on the strategies they choose to support struggling teachers.

Interestingly, the majority of strategies offered to teachers for building relationships with students were reactive, rather than proactive. For example, school leaders talked about using conversations as a way to support a struggling teacher, while teachers spoke of administrators, guidance staff, department heads, or experienced colleagues they turn to for help with specific students. These interactions, however, took place after a problem developed. There was very little discussion from school leaders — outside of programs such as PBIS, Responsive Classroom, and others — that reflected ways to develop teachers before issues are identified.

Teacher perspective. When discussing support received for issues with individual students, teachers in the focus groups reported mixed feelings about support from school leaders. While four teachers specifically mentioned feeling unsupported by school leaders, most of the teachers reported knowing a colleague, guidance counselor, or department head to whom they could turn. Outside of support received when asked for, concerns were expressed from a number of teachers regarding the lack of district focus on the classroom environment. One teacher said, “I feel like we have been asking for so many years. We know this is our population now and still nothing.” She talked about
mindfulness training being offered this year but ended her comments with: “Why can’t they figure out how to get us something more substantial?” As the focus groups represented only a small number of teachers from multiple buildings, it is hard to generalize participant feelings. However, the sense of frustration and desire to do more for students among the participating teachers was clear.

**Peer-to-Peer Relationships**

To answer research question three, I examined the strategies school leaders use to support teachers in building positive peer-to-peer relationships: supporting student grouping, programs, and facilitated conversations/relationships.

**Student grouping.** Student grouping or collaborative work was mentioned by six school leaders as an important aspect of building peer relationships. Eight school leaders referenced the need for teachers to create opportunities for students to get to know one another in order to productively work together. One school leader explained the importance of encouraging teachers to spend time at the beginning of the year on activities where students get to know one another before formal grouping can be successful. Another school leader, describing grouping, stated, “It’s about how you set up your classroom and your instruction to give kids opportunities to practice that stuff.” He also talked about the role of a school leader in supporting teachers: “You can’t just [have teachers] set up groups; you need to actually help the teacher set up protocols and structure so the kids have jobs within the group.” There was an acknowledgement that not all teachers know how to do this, so the school leader might offer suggestions or direct them to visit a colleague’s room — a positive type of peer modeling that both teachers and school leaders emphasized should be done more often.
Programs. School leaders referenced the use of programs like Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS), Skillful Teacher, Responsive Classroom, and Restorative Practices as a way to support teachers. “I think these are the kind of things you would learn in Skillful Teacher or Responsive Classroom because it’s about responding to students in a way that other students are observing and then learning from.” Another school leader referenced the consistency of language that students gained from school-wide implementation of PBIS, which “helps them to build the relationship with each other and to hold each other accountable both positively and when challenges occur.”

Facilitated conversations/relationships. Four school leaders discussed the importance of facilitating conversations between students. In two cases, the reference was to how the school leaders work with students, while the other two cases focused on how teachers work with students. There was no discussion, however, of how school leaders support teachers in facilitating conversations outside of the programs mentioned above. Five teacher evaluations mentioned collaborative groupings as an aspect of a positive learning environment, using language directly out of the Massachusetts Teacher Evaluation Rubric. One of the five evaluations contained a suggestion for a teacher to create mixed ability groupings to allow students to learn from one another.

Interestingly, three school leaders noted the similarities in skill sets with building relationships between the teacher and student and between students, while also acknowledging the differences. As one school leader stated: “I think there are teachers who are good at building individual relationships with children, but that doesn't mean they absolutely know how to facilitate them between the children.” Another interesting
aspect of the discussions around peer-to-peer relationships is the clarity expressed by school leaders around the skills a teacher needs to build those relationships. There was no hesitation in naming skills, nor was the focus on qualities, personal characteristic, or beliefs — a focus which did exist in conversations regarding teacher-student relationships. This clarity and consistency of understanding necessary skills may have been why the strategies used to support teachers were concrete and more universal.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to understand how school leaders support teachers in building a positive learning environment. Key findings of the study include a difference in how school leaders perceive the capacity of adults versus students to learn relationship building skills. In some cases, school leaders are not confident that adults can build these skills and consequently struggle to provide clear and specific strategies. The findings also reflect the reactive versus proactive nature of support teachers receive in building relationships with and between students. The following section will discuss the implication of these findings and recommendations through the lens of three key leadership practices: setting direction, developing people, and redesigning the organization (Leithwood et al., 2004).

**Setting Direction**

Effective school leaders play a significant role in the academic achievement of students (Dinham, 2004; Kythreotis et al., 2010; Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins, 2008). They do this is a variety of ways, including setting a clear direction — a vision — for the school and the staff (Bryk, 2010; Dinham, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2004). They follow up by ensuring that vision is known and understood by all stakeholders and that
programming, financial, and other decisions are made with that vision in mind. During the course of research in Jamesberg, I saw signs of this vision in the commitment of school leaders to build a positive learning environment for students. Every school leader interviewed clearly articulated his or her idea of what a positive classroom environment looks like, providing examples of how students struggle when that environment is not positive and thrive when it is. As a group, these school leaders articulated a belief in the importance of positive teacher-student relationships and peer relationships.

Another aspect of a school leader’s responsibility in setting direction is ensuring that the vision is clearly articulated to the full community (Leithwood et al., 2004) so that all stakeholders know and understand what is valued. From that vision, goals are created that guide the work. Those goals need to be long-term, meaningful, and achievable, not simply short-term targets (Dinham, 2005). Recently Jamesberg, under the direction of a new superintendent, completed a strategic planning process that clearly articulates the commitment of the Central Office to social emotional learning, of which a positive learning environment is a part. The Strategic Plan was done by district and school leadership. However, at the time of my study, that planning process and the outcome had not yet been clearly communicated to all staff. Therefore, the commitment to supporting teachers in building a positive learning environment through relationships was not reflected in the teacher evaluation documents from the 2016-2017 school year, nor did teachers articulate an understanding of the high level of commitment expressed by school leaders.

Moving forward, it is important for school leaders to ensure that the vision and direction outlined in the strategic plan becomes more visible in their school and that staff
members understand how that will drive decision-making. Decisions regarding
programming, staffing, and budget made in the context of this vision will reassure staff
that this is in fact something that the district and school leaders value.

**Developing People**

The term professional development (PD) is often used to describe the support
given to teachers to increase their skills and capacity in the classroom. There are many
kinds of PD, ranging from formal presentations from outside agencies to one-on-one
work done with a trusted advisor or co-worker. PD can be especially powerful if it
includes collaboration with peers (Blasé et al., 2000) and if it is connected to the focus of
the school (Durlak et al., 2016). School leaders in Jamesberg did not reference formal
PD as a strategy to support teachers who struggle with building relationship with
students. Instead, they opted for a more personalized individual approach. This approach
does have support in the research, which suggests that teacher success with social-
emotional learning in the classroom is in part based on the coaching and organizational
support they receive (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009).
While almost half of the school leaders in Jamesberg indicated some concern with the
ability of teachers to grow in this area, research suggests change is possible. For
example, one study suggests that for teachers to change their interpersonal behavior, they
must first understand their beliefs and current habits (Morris-Rothschild, Brassard, 2006).
It is possible that the conversations, modeling, and mentoring provided by school leaders
provide this. Interestingly, when supporting teachers to build positive peer relationships
in the classroom, many school leaders suggested the use of specific programs rather than
one-on-one discussions.
It might be helpful for school and district leaders in Jamesberg to explore in more depth the difference in how student-peer relationships are viewed compared to teacher-student relationships. The clear difference in some school leaders’ perception of the capacity of adults versus students to learn relationship building skills is interesting and has larger implications, specifically in the area of how to support teachers. District leaders may wish to consider the need for administrative training in how to build capacity through specific skill development in order to foster this growth in teachers.

**Redesigning the Organization**

This category of leadership practices encompasses the creation of a culture and environment that supports the work of staff (Leithwood et al., 2004). Connections have been found between a positive school culture and other organizational conditions impacting teacher attrition, a factor in student achievement (Ingersoll, 2001). Research also shows a connection between a positive school climate, student relationships, teacher collaboration, and the level of commitment shown by the teacher (Collie et al., 2011). Therefore, as school leaders in Jamesberg work with teachers to ensure a positive classroom learning environment, they are supporting both students and teachers.

Jamesberg school leaders spoke often about the importance of building relationships with teachers in order to support them, especially in the context of teacher-student relationships. They also spoke about the importance of staff members learning from each other. While some schools have formal common planning time for teachers to work together, others do not. However, across the board, teachers believe that more collaborative time is needed. Due to the connection between a positive teacher culture and collaboration (Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, & Beatty, 2010), Jamesberg school
leaders may wish to consider ways to reorganize their resources to allow for even more collaboration. This time could also be used for proactive professional development in relationship-building versus the more reactive process currently in place.

**Limitations and Further Research**

This case study explores the practices of a group of school leaders in one district in supporting teachers to build a positive learning environment. The study provides insights into how school leaders contextualize their understanding of positive learning environments, while sharing information on how school leaders support teachers as they build relationships with and between students. As information about that support was obtained from school leaders during semi-structured interviews, answers rely on participant recollections and conceptualizations of their own practices. While the redacted teacher evaluations provide some context to the discussion, the limited sample size and the formal nature of the evaluation tool reduced their usefulness. Further study using feedback from observations, rather than formative and summative evaluations, may prove to be more useful. Data provided by the teacher focus groups, while helpful in providing a perspective of how teachers receive support from school leaders, was limited by the small number of teachers who participated. Further study using a survey may increase the amount of data and provide a deeper understanding of the teacher perspective.
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

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This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Michael A. Caira, Jr., Sarah Jean Hardy, Deborah Langlois, and Donna M. McGarrigle
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. 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 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.,
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).

**Recommendations 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 programing 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


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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