

DEEP IN THE HEART OF TEXAS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES IN THE
LONE STAR STATE'S PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, school administrators and teachers from around the nation have expressed a renewed interest in social and emotional learning (SEL). Studies indicate that implementation of SEL programs and practices can lead to improved academic achievement, reduced behavioral problems, and long-term employment benefits. However, there has been limited research on the adoption of SEL in school districts in any state. The purpose of this study was to inventory, categorize, and analyze the SEL programs and practices being implemented in many Texas public school districts and to determine their perceived impact. In addition, a database of the SEL programs and practices currently being utilized by responding districts was created and disseminated throughout the state. A descriptive, mixed methods research design was employed.

Utilizing a self-selection sampling technique, an online questionnaire was sent to all 1216 school district superintendents in Texas. Respondents were queried about which SEL programs and practices were being implemented in their respective districts, how and why they were selected, the perceived impact of the programs and practices, and recommendations for other school districts. The data collected were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Relationships between SEL program and practice implementation and school district characteristics (district size, type, expenditures per student, discipline rate, and academic rating) were examined. All of these data provided a thorough description of the SEL landscape in the Texas school districts that chose to respond.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

In the crowded hallways of an urban middle school, early adolescents head to their next class, some scurrying, others ambling, most chatting enthusiastically with each other. Rebecca just finished solving for 'x' in her algebra class, Luis wrapped up his lab experiment in science, and Kenara put the finishing touches on her persuasive essay in Language Arts. Although academic performance has always been a campus priority, the administration and faculty have been increasingly intrigued by students' social and emotional attitudes and behaviors. Why do some students maintain emotional control throughout the school day and others tend to melt down? Why is it that most students build friendships easily and others struggle with peer relationships? Why do some students make good decisions on a regular basis and others don't? What are the reasons many students handle adversity with poise and perseverance, while others are challenged in these areas? How can more students increase their self-awareness, build healthy relationships, and make good decisions?

As a middle school teacher and administrator for 35 years, I have observed the behavior of thousands of early adolescents, both inside and outside of the classroom. Over the past decade, I have been increasingly intrigued by the social and emotional skills and attributes some students possess that others do not. I have wondered about the connection between these social and emotional behaviors and mindsets and students' success in the classroom and later in life. Do instructional strategies and techniques exist

that can enhance the development of these desired outcomes? If so, how can they be effectively implemented by teachers, schools, and districts?

When our school district offered an opportunity for our middle school to participate in a social and emotional learning (SEL) initiative in 2011, I was reluctant to volunteer our campus. As principal of the school, and based on my past experiences with character education programs, I did not feel these types of programs would be age-appropriate or meaningful to our students. However, after learning more about the new initiative, I agreed to launch the SEL program at our school and began to see the benefits for our students and teachers. Years later, I became so passionate about SEL that I eventually was hired as the district's SEL Director.

After a few months in my director's role, my 94-year-old father was still having difficulty understanding the purpose of my position. He asked me an intriguing question: "Why aren't the parents taking care of the social and emotional learning of their children?" Quite eloquently, Pasi (2001) provides the rationale for including schools in the development of students' SEL skills:

In the end, the responsibility for teaching students how to deal with their social and emotional lives cannot be reserved solely to their families or strictly to the guidance or health departments of schools. All the professionals in the school have a responsibility for teaching young people that their minds must work with their hearts if they hope to live successful and fulfilled lives. (p. 5)

Over the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in SEL and it is now one of the most frequently discussed topics in education today (Lahey, 2014). A key challenge for 21st-century schools, families, and communities is to develop

knowledgeable, responsible, and caring students who are able to work well with others from diverse backgrounds in socially and emotionally skilled ways. Due to years of standards-based reforms and accountability systems focused almost entirely on high stakes testing of academic subjects, many schools have felt the pressure to forego a well-rounded education in order to meet performance targets and raise test scores. These assessments, however, have a limited scope in measuring the development of the whole child: “No test assesses the range of academic knowledge our students need, never mind additional attributes the public desires, such as civic responsibility, creative thinking, and the ability to use knowledge” (Jones, 2006, pp. ii-iii).

In a wide range of studies, however, many social and emotional skills “are shown to have a direct positive relationship to students’ concurrent school performance as well as future academic outcomes” (Farrington et al., 2012, p. 4). Studies have indicated that applying a comprehensive SEL framework can help improve test scores (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011); increase motivation and perseverance (Farrington et al., 2012); and decrease anxiety, depression, and stress (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). In addition, SEL programs have been linked to reduced violence and bullying (Ragozzino & O’Brien, 2009), which is especially significant given the numerous school shootings over the past several decades. Although some writers urge caution when drawing conclusions or making policy recommendations (Mayer & Cobb, 2000), a meta-analysis of research on SEL programs demonstrated that well-designed and well-implemented SEL programs are associated with “improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior and academic performance” (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 405).

Campus staffs care deeply about developing students' social and emotional competencies. Nearly all teachers (93%) believe that SEL is very or fairly important for their students (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, n.d.). Even more principals (98%) feel that SEL benefits their students (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, n.d.). Brain research supports how educators feel about integrating SEL into schools:

Since neuroscience confirms that the emotional and cognitive dimensions of learning are inextricably entwined, the long-standing debate as to whether learning institutions should be involved in learners' emotional development is no longer relevant—if institutions are responsible for cognitive development, they are inherently involved in emotional development as well and should promote emotional regulation skills. (Hinton & Fischer, 2010, p. 127)

Many educators believe that school-based SEL programs have the potential to enhance students' success in school and life (Durlak et al., 2011) and that both the attributes of the programs and the quality of their implementation are critical (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). As Lantieri (2001) asserts: "We need to insist that schools develop policies and approaches that enable all young people to have their emotional and social selves welcomed, spirits uplifted, and inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their education" (p. 4).

Statement of the Problem

Based on the review of the literature and interviews with various SEL leaders from around the nation, there seems to be a dearth of studies that systematically identifies SEL programs and practices utilized by school districts in any particular state. Some research has been done that assesses district leaders' and students' perceptions of SEL

implementation within a few states, but an inventory, categorization, and analysis of district SEL programs and practices have not, to my knowledge, been conducted in any state, including Texas.

The lack of statewide baseline information about SEL programs and practices being implemented in Texas school districts creates many challenges for internal and external stakeholders. For example, communication about SEL between different districts is hampered, which makes it difficult to wisely evaluate and select new SEL programs or practices. National SEL organizations, such as the Collaborative of Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), have limited knowledge of the Texas school districts that have adopted SEL programs, which hinders their efforts in connecting districts with each other. Finally, without accurate knowledge of what is actually happening with SEL in Texas school districts, research about these programs is difficult to undertake.

Historically, there exists a tremendous amount of data in Texas related to state assessment scores, attendance, and discipline, but nothing on SEL. Based on the positive impact SEL appears to have on students and the lack of district SEL data in Texas, it is important that we discover the scope and penetration of SEL implementation in the state's public school districts.

Purpose of the Study

This dissertation focused on the SEL programs and practices being implemented in Texas public school districts. The first goal was to discover which particular SEL programs and practices were being implemented around the state, how and why they were adopted, and what supports or barriers affected adoption and implementation.

Another goal was to determine at which grade levels SEL programs were being implemented as well as the frequency of SEL instruction. In addition, this research attempted to understand how districts perceived the impact of their SEL programs and practices and compile recommendations for other districts. This research also included an analysis of the relationships between SEL programs and practices and school district characteristics, such as size, type, expenditures per student, discipline rate, and academic rating. A final goal of this research was the creation of a statewide database of SEL programs and practices being implemented in different Texas school districts, so that school leaders can consult with each other about this important topic.

Significance of the Study

Based on correspondence with CASEL, American Institutes for Research (AIR), national experts in SEL, and the Texas Education Agency (TEA), there have been no attempts to conduct a study of SEL adoption and implementation in Texas public school districts. Nevada and Massachusetts have studied perceptions of students and administrators, respectively, but no data were collected that related to district implementation. A study of a few school districts involved with CASEL's Collaborating District Initiative (CDI) was completed in 2014, but this research was limited to eight districts from around the country (American Institutes for Research, 2015a).

By inventorying, categorizing, and analyzing the SEL programs and practices being implemented in Texas school districts, for the first time school leaders will be provided with information to make thoughtful and informed decisions about adopting and implementing SEL in their respective districts. Policy makers may be encouraged to

develop district or state standards for SEL. In addition, researchers will have some baseline data for future research in this area.

Research Questions

Primary Question

What are the perceptions of Texas public school districts regarding the impact of SEL programs and practices they have adopted and implemented?

Secondary Questions

1. What SEL programs and practices are being adopted and implemented in Texas public school districts?
2. What factors influence the adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices in Texas public school districts?
3. What is the relationship between adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices and Texas public school district characteristics?

Conceptual Frameworks

The Diffusion of Innovations Theory (Rogers, 2003) and CASEL's Comprehensive District Framework ("District-level SEL," n.d.) were used as a foundation for this study. The Diffusion of Innovations model offered a meaningful way to examine the process through which any new programs and practices are adopted and implemented in an organization. CASEL's Comprehensive District Framework provided an appropriate construct for exploring how school districts are implementing SEL programs in particular.

Conceptual frameworks are critical to grounding research. Without a research-based model to drive the inquiry, the foundation of the research will be unstable. As Miles and Huberman (1994) claim:

A conceptual framework explains either graphically or in a narrative form, the main things to be studied—the key factors, constructs or variables—and the presumed relationships among them. Frameworks can be rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven or commonsensical, descriptive or causal. (p. 18)

These structures provide a shared language for conducting research. They also outline the boundaries for the inquiry (Roberts, 2010); they are a mechanism for limiting the scope of the study. The frameworks act as a filtering mechanism to choose research questions and guide the data collection and analysis processes.

The Diffusion of Innovations theory attempts to explain how, why, and at what speed change occurs (Rogers, 2003). Rogers analyzed numerous cases of successful and unsuccessful adoptions of innovative practices across a wide variety of disciplines. Diffusion of a new idea or concept throughout an organization takes time and is adopted by stakeholders at different rates. Rogers defines diffusion as “the process in which an innovation is communicated thorough certain channels over time among the members of a social system” (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). As expressed in this definition, innovation, communication channels, time, and the social system are key components of this process of disseminating an innovation throughout an organization.

Rogers identifies a number of characteristics of innovations that affect the rate of adoption. Relative advantage refers to the level of perceived benefit an innovation will provide in regard to the present situation. Compatibility denotes the degree to which an

innovation aligns with an individual's current thinking or belief system; the more congruent the reform is with the person's principles and experiences, the greater the chance of quick acceptance of the change. Complexity represents how challenging the innovation is for an individual to comprehend or implement. Trialability indicates to what level the reform can be applied; it refers to the degree to which an innovation may be implemented on a smaller scale before infusion into the entire system. Observability is defined as how easily an individual can notice the outcomes of an innovation. Rogers states that the characteristics of relative advantage and compatibility should be prioritized, but the other three characteristics remain significant.

Individuals have varied perceptions of change which Rogers has categorized into five groups: innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Each group possesses different levels of comfort with the change process. The distribution of the adopter categories forms a normal, bell-shaped curve: innovator (2.5%), early adopter (13.5%), early majority (34%), late majority (34%), and laggards (16%) (Mahajan, Muller, & Srivastava, 1990). Being cognizant of how stakeholders perceive change closely relates to the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987), which advocates for providing necessary supports to all individuals affected by the change in order to ensure success of a new program.

According to Rogers, the process for adopting an innovation by an individual consists of five stages—knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation (Sahin, 2006). Although this process adds value to this research, his discussion of how change is adopted by a group of individuals is more applicable. At the organizational level, Rogers suggests five steps in the innovation process:

1. Agenda-Setting—a problem is acknowledged and subsequently defined by the organization. A needs assessment is conducted at this time.
2. Matching—the organization looks for an innovation that will resolve the identified problem.
3. Redefining/ Restructuring—the organization and/or innovation are adjusted in order for success to occur.
4. Clarifying—thorough communication about the innovation is disseminated in order for all stakeholders to understand what is happening.
5. Routinizing—the moment the innovation has become woven into the fabric of the organization.

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory is a useful lens for this research. The adoption of new SEL programs and practices may be a change for a school district. This research examined which SEL programs and practices have been adopted by Texas school districts, why they were adopted, and to what degree they have been implemented. What were the drivers of change (relative advantage, agenda-setting)? What led to the adoption of SEL (compatibility, complexity, trialability, and/or observability)? In addition, the degree to which SEL is implemented within the school districts may relate to Rogers' discussion of employees' varied comfort level with change (innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards). Using the Diffusion of Innovations theory as a framework for the research allowed for a deeper understanding of the adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices throughout Texas, as well as, in each school district.

Another conceptual framework that was used in analyzing the data from this research is CASEL's Comprehensive District Framework ("District-level SEL," n.d.). This model provided a guideline for specifically implementing SEL in a school district. Districts that are incorporating this model are observing gains in campus climate, behavior, grades, attendance, and graduation rates. The following are the ten steps included in the framework:

1. Communicate SEL as a priority to stakeholders—a systematic plan must be created to inform all internal and external stakeholders affected by SEL implementation.
2. Develop a district-wide vision and plan—using a collective strategic planning process, decision-makers provide a sense of urgency for adopting SEL based on research and data.
3. Align financial and human resources—in order for SEL to thrive in a school district, resources must be allocated to plan, implement, and evaluate the initiative.
4. Build expertise and capacity—instrumental leaders need to be trained in effective SEL practices in order for the program to permeate throughout the district.
5. Conduct SEL-related resources and needs assessments—early in the adoption process, district leaders analyze what SEL practices are already being utilized and which new ones should be adopted.

6. Design and implement professional development programs—ongoing training must be provided to central office and campus personnel in order for the SEL programs to be sustained over time.
7. Integrate SEL with district initiatives, such as academic curriculum and equity efforts—aligning SEL with other pre-existing programs leads to a greater chance of SEL being infused throughout the district over a long period of time.
8. Adopt and implement evidence-based programming—a multitude of high-yield, research-based SEL programs are widely available to school districts to employ.
9. Develop K-12 SEL standards—by establishing a scope and sequence for teachers to utilize in all grade levels, SEL can be integrated into daily lessons within all curricula areas.
10. Establish systems of continuous improvement—a structure for evaluating data related to SEL implementation provides a district with a formal way to assess the impact of the program.

CASEL’s Comprehensive District Framework offered a lens through which to analyze the data collected from this research. Participants were asked which SEL programs and practices they utilized; how, how long, and why they used them; and why they adopted them. They were also queried on the degree to which they have been implemented and their perceived impact. Finally, they had an opportunity to share the process they use to assess their SEL programs and practices.

Overview of Methodology

This study utilized a descriptive research design. A mixed methods approach was employed, as well, because the data collected could be analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. Open- and closed-ended questions from a self-created survey illuminated which SEL initiatives are being employed in Texas public school districts, their perceived impact, how they are being used, and why they were adopted, amongst other queries. Voluntary, follow-up interviews were conducted to provide more information and context for the survey responses. Quantitative data from the closed-ended questions were analyzed using a frequency distribution technique. A categorical aggregation strategy for coding the qualitative data from the open-ended questions was employed to describe the usage and causes of implementation of the SEL initiatives. Correlational analyses were conducted to determine if there was a relationship between adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices and certain Texas public school district characteristics. The collected data were analyzed through the lenses of the conceptual frameworks.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined:

Academic rating: the 2018 preliminary A-F district score based on student achievement,

student progress, and closing the gaps (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-a)

Adopt: “to accept formally and put into effect” (“Adopt,” n.d.)

Buy-in: “the acceptance of a concept or idea, such as a project or a design” (Rawes, 2017, para. 3)

Construct validity: “the degree to which an instrument measures an intended psychological construct, or non-observable trait” (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012, G-2)

Content validity: the degree to which the measures accurately assess what is desired to be known (Rubio, Berg-Weger, Tebb, Lee, & Rauch, 2003)

Discipline rate: the number of discipline infractions (including suspensions, in-school suspensions, and removals) in a Texas public school district divided by district student enrollment as reported by TEA for the 2016-17 school year (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b)

District size: the cumulative year end student enrollment in a Texas public school district as reported by TEA for the 2016-17 school year (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b)

District type: any one of the nine categories for Texas public school districts (major urban, major suburban, other central city, other central city suburban, independent town, non-metropolitan fast growing, non-metropolitan stable, rural, and charter schools) as reported by TEA in 2015-16 (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-c)

Equity: ensuring equally high outcomes for all participants in our educational system; removing the predictability of success or failure that currently correlates with any social or cultural factor (“National Equity Project,” n.d.)

Evidence-based: having “at least one carefully conducted evaluation that documents positive impacts on student behavior and/or academic performance” (“2013 CASEL Guide,” 2013, p. 7)

Expenditures per student: the total expenditures of a school district (as reported by TEA for 2016-17) divided by the number of students enrolled in the district

External validity: “the degree to which results are generalizable, or applicable to groups and environments outside the research setting” (Fraenkel et al., 2012, G-3)

Face validity: the degree that respondents or users judge that the items of an assessment instrument are appropriate to the targeted construct and assessment objectives (Anastasi, 1988)

Fidelity: the degree to which teachers and staff implement an SEL program or practice as intended by the program designers (Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco, & Hansen, 2003)

Frequency: how often SEL programs and practices are being implemented (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly)

Implement: “to put into effect according to or by means of a definite plan or procedure” (“Implement,” n.d.)

Non-evidenced based: not having any carefully conducted evaluation that documents positive impacts on student behavior and/or academic performance” (“2013 CASEL Guide,” 2013, p. 7)

Social and emotional competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (“Core SEL Competencies,” n.d.)

Social and emotional learning (SEL): the process through which children acquire social and emotional competencies (“What is SEL?” n.d.)

SEL practice: a strategy or initiative that promotes the social and emotional knowledge, attitudes and skills development of students (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). It may be evidence- or non-evidenced based.

SEL program: an explicit curriculum that promotes the social and emotional knowledge, attitudes and skills development of students (Durlak et al., 2011). It may be evidence- or non-evidenced based.

Statistical significance: the degree to which any differences observed between variables are due to chance, as measured by *p*-values. *P*-values of .05 are considered to be on the borderline of statistical significance; *p*-values less than .05 are considered statistically significant. (Institute for Work and Health, 2005; “P Values,” n.d.)

TEA: Texas Education Agency

Summary

In Chapter I of this dissertation, the statement of the research problem, purpose of the study, and significance of the study have been described. In addition, the research questions and theoretical frameworks were discussed. An overview of the methodology and definition of key terms concluded Chapter I.

Ch. II offers a review of the literature related to SEL. Included in Chapter II are an overview of the history of SEL, state SEL standards, a description of types of SEL programs and practices, and characteristics of effective SEL programs and practices. Also cited is research that discusses the effects that SEL has on academics, behavior, future success, and equity. Finally, segments on the challenges of assessing SEL effects and international perspectives of SEL are included.

Chapter III describes the descriptive, mixed methodology used in the study, including an explanation of the population and sample, survey instrument, and statistical and coding techniques being used. Epistemological considerations are offered as well as assumptions and limitations of the study.

Chapter IV describes the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses. First, the quantitative data collected from the closed-ended questionnaire responses is presented. Next, the correlational analyses of the school district characteristics are offered. Finally, the qualitative data collected from the open-ended questionnaire responses and interviews are shared. Tables are provided to organize and categorize the data.

Five sections are included in Chapter V. A summary of this study is provided, including the research problem, purpose of the study, and research questions, among other topics. Next, conclusions and implications from the research are described. Lastly, suggestions for future research and some final thoughts are shared.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical Perspectives

Social and emotional learning has existed since the beginning of civilization. In this section, a brief overview of the history of SEL is provided, outlining the evolution of the connections between thought and emotion.

We can trace back the origins of SEL to ancient civilizations, over two millennia ago (Baron, 2013). In ancient Egypt, the concept of Ma'at dictated the thinking and actions of its people. These moral principles guided the citizens in their everyday interactions with family, community, environment, and religion (Martin, 2008). Controlling one's anger and making ethical decisions are social and emotional components of the Ma'at philosophy (Budge, 1967). Ancient Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle also discussed the connection between ethics and emotions ("Ancient Greek Philosophy," n.d.). As Aristotle (as cited in Ostwald, 1999) asserted:

We can experience [emotions] either too much and too little, and in either cases not properly. But to experience all this at the right time, toward the right objects, toward the right people, for the right reason, and in the right manner – that is the median and the best course, the course that is a mark of virtue. (p. 43)

Eastern religions and philosophies have also emphasized the holistic connections between the mind and feelings. Confucius highlighted the importance of a person being cognizant of his/her thoughts: "To know when you know something, and to know when you don't know, that's knowledge" (as cited in Eno, 2015, p. 7). Confucius also discussed one's management of emotions: "The noble-minded are calm and steady. Little people are forever fussing and fretting" (as cited in Hinton, 2014, 7:37). Hinduism

also stresses controlling one's thoughts and feelings: "The mind acts as an enemy for those who do not control it" (as cited in Prabhakar, n.d., p. 23). And, likewise, in Buddhism, self-management of emotions is critical to personal development: "Inner peace begins the moment you choose not to allow another person or event to control your emotions" (as cited in Deschene, n.d.).

During the Middle Ages, a time when education was controlled in Europe by the Catholic church, a shift towards scholasticism occurred. This new way of teaching and learning, using dialectical thinking, attempted to reconcile the differences between Christian theology and ancient classical philosophy ("Scholasticism," n.d.). As human logic and reason became increasingly valued, the separation between thinking and emotions became more pronounced: "The pedagogic assumption of scholasticism in the West has been that education was for the rational mind; emotions were out of place – and, implicitly, unschoolable" (Goleman, 2007, p. ix). During the 17th and 18th century Age of Enlightenment, the focus on intellectual reasoning proliferated.

Since the birth of our nation, American policy-makers and educators have considered social, emotional, and moral traits to be worthy of attainment (Fairchild, 2006). Early leaders of the United States advocated for an education system that included character development, which would lead to obedience of laws, respect for the rights of others, and participation in community affairs (Sojourner, 2012). Consequently, one-room school houses in the 1800's valued "patriotism, hard work, honesty, thriftiness, altruism and courage" (p. 3). In the mid-19th century, Horace Mann championed character education, arguing that the aim of education should be social competence and civic values (Cubberley, 1947).

During the 20th century, the emphasis on affective education waxed and waned (Sojourner, 2012). According to Lickona (1993), logical positivism, Darwinism, a rise in personalism, and intensifying pluralism all became “barriers to achieving the moral consensus indispensable for character education in the public school. Public schools retreated from their once central role as moral and character educators” (p. 6). Amidst the early 1900’s mass immigration from other nations, Dewey (1909) advocated for the development of students’ social and emotional skills and character: “The individual must have the power to stand up and count for something in the actual conflicts in life. He must have initiative, insistence, persistence, courage, and industry” (p. 50). Dewey (1916) believed that the main role of schooling is to develop democratic character within students. Also during this time period, Montessori and Steiner launched schools that offered a holistic approach to teaching and nurturing students (Sliwka, 2008).

In the early 20th century, a period when racial segregation permeated American society, formal testing for cognitive abilities appeared, which resulted in a score called the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) (Antonson, 2010). Over time, IQ has become synonymous with cognitive acumen. However, Thorndike (1920), a renowned psychologist who was influential in developing the IQ measure of intelligence, believed that social aptitude was also a critical component of overall intelligence. He writes: “The best mechanic in a factory may fail as a foreman for lack of social intelligence” (p. 229). Toward the latter half of the 20th century, most IQ scholars downplayed the relational aspect of intelligence (Goleman, 1995).

Entering the second half of the 20th century, some scholars reinforced the social and emotional connections to learning. Maslow (1950) developed his hierarchy of

individual social and emotional needs and the concept of self-actualization. During the Cold War, Giles (1958) was one of several researchers who discussed the importance of social relations education: “Our main problem is not how to educate for mass destruction or for developing nuclear power. It is how to educate in the social relationships which will enable us to reach the goals of a free society” (p. 27). Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the role of social interaction in children’s cognitive development with his concept of zone of proximal development, often defined as the distance between what a child can learn with the assistance of a teacher or peer and what the child can learn without assistance. During the 1960’s, a time of political, social, and racial turbulence, a focus on community and mental health also took place (Baron, 2013).

Comer (2004) was one of several advocates for illuminating the roles of community and mental health in schools during this time period. With his background in public health and psychiatry, Comer took a holistic approach to ameliorating the dreadful societal conditions people of color were forced to tolerate in our country. By addressing health issues, economic disparities, and lackluster schools, minority students and their families could realize the American dream. According to Comer, schools must attend to students’ social, emotional, and physical needs in order for them to access a rigorous curriculum. He believed that learning can occur when meaningful personal connections have been fostered (Comer, 1995).

During the late 20th century, character education returned in the form of values clarification and Kohlberg’s moral dilemma discussions (Lickona, 1993). Gardner (1983) developed his theory of multiple intelligences, with two of the nine intelligences being interpersonal (communication with others and relationship-building) and

intrapersonal (self-awareness and reflection). He points out: “And in the day-to-day world no intelligence is more important than interpersonal. If you don’t have it you’ll make poor choices. . . . We need to train children in the personal intelligences in school” (as cited in Goleman, 1995, p. 42).

However, with the publication of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 1983), our nation’s schools focused much of their attention on winning the world-wide academic race. This led to standards-based reforms and “accountability provisions that reward or sanction schools or students on the basis of measured performance” (Hamilton, Stecher, & Yuan, 2008, p. 11). Although the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 included character education in its provisions, the main emphasis quickly became the meeting of standards in the core content areas (Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, & Seigle, 2004).

Although social and emotional knowledge and skills have been valued by many cultures around the world for thousands of years, the actual term “social and emotional learning” was first used in 1994 to describe the activities that promote the social and emotional development of students (Cherniss, Extein, Goleman, & Weissberg, 2006). In addition to the CASEL definition offered earlier in this dissertation, Jones and Bouffard (2012) define SEL as “a set of skills that individuals need to succeed in schooling, the workplace, relationships, and citizenship” (p. 4). Social and emotional learning competencies often are described using other terms, as well. They have been called *soft skills*, *non-cognitive skills*, *character traits*, *non-academic skills*, or *21st century skills* (Kamenetz, 2015).

In 1995, Daniel Goleman's best seller, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, popularized the concept of emotional learning by arguing persuasively that emotional intelligence and skills matter and can be taught, leading to a resurgence of interest in social and emotional learning (Mayer & Cobb, 2000). Citing the work of sociobiologists, Goleman discussed the evolutionary connections among emotions, cognition, and behavior:

As we all know from experience, when it comes to shaping our decisions and our actions, feeling counts every bit as much—and often more—than thought. We have gone too far in emphasizing the value and import of the purely rational—of what IQ measures—in human life. For better or worse, intelligence can come to nothing when the emotions hold sway. (1995, p. 4)

Over the past two decades, advances in neuroscience have paved the way for a more comprehensive understanding of the connections between emotion, social interaction, and learning. Cozolino (2013) asserts that human brains have become more receptive to our environments as we have evolved over millennia as social beings:

“Students and teachers are not uniform raw materials or assembly-line workers, but a diverse collection of living, breathing human beings with complex evolutionary histories, cultural backgrounds, and life stories” (p. xvii). The brain has developed over time as a social organ, wired to be stimulated by interfacing with other people. Oxytocin, a hormone and neurotransmitter, is released by the pituitary gland when people physically or socially interact, leading to feelings of pleasure and connectedness (Jones, 2014). Understanding that social interaction leads to emotional connectedness has implications for the impact of teacher-student relationships on increased learning in the classroom.

Emotion and cognition are also intimately connected due to the brain's two-hemisphere design. The left hemisphere coordinates language comprehension, linear thinking, and pro-social functions, while the right hemisphere manages visual-spatial senses, emotions, and experience (Gray, 1980). Teachers can enhance learning by keeping both sides of their students' brains in mind when creating and implementing lessons (Hart, 1978).

Based on the observations of educators and mental health professionals, high school and higher education students seem to be facing more and more social and emotional challenges (Leider, 2017). Increases in the possession of weapons, substance abuse, and sexual activity have been observed. Since 2007, anxiety is now the most commonly reported reason why college students pursue counseling support, while the number of hospital admissions for teen suicide attempts has doubled (Denizet-Lewis, 2017).

In summary, social and emotional competencies have been an integral component of global societies throughout history. In the United States, the importance of SEL has ebbed and flowed since the inception of our nation, with a resurgence occurring in the past two decades. The advances in brain research provide additional evidence for promoting SEL in schools. In addition, the increase of mental illness among our teenagers brings a sense of urgency for addressing the social and emotional needs of our youth. Because of recent emphasis on SEL, some states have adopted standards that address the social and emotional competencies of students.

State Standards

During the past decade, there has been an increase in policymaking and research related to SEL programs (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Virtually every state has adopted SEL standards for pre-school students (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013), most of which include guidelines on how to make instruction culturally and linguistically relevant (Dusenbury, Weissberg, Goren, & Domitrovich, 2014). However, while many states have integrated SEL standards into existing academic standards at the K-12 level, they are often scattered, not comprehensive, and not “systematically and developmentally sequenced across grade levels” (Dusenbury et al., 2014, p. 2). Fourteen states—Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Dakota, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin—have adopted comprehensive SEL standards for their elementary, middle, and high schools (Dusenbury, Dermody, & Weissberg, 2018). It is interesting to note that most of the states that have adopted K-12 SEL standards are located in the northern and western parts of the country.

The major components of model SEL standards have been developed by researchers (Dusenbury et al., 2014) who have stated that the standards should be age-appropriate benchmarks for social and emotional competency attainment and aligned with standards from other content areas. Training in instructional strategies that create a positive school culture and climate should be provided, including direction on how to respond to cultural and linguistic differences. In addition, guidance on implementing and measuring evidence-based SEL programs and practices should be offered. States can use these recommendations to develop their own SEL standards.

Massachusetts serves as an excellent example for studying the complexity of adopting state standards. A team of researchers first interviewed leaders from cities and states that had already made progress in their SEL implementation. The focus of the interviews was on successful tactics, pitfalls, and the process of putting SEL into practice. The respondents stressed the roles of local district leaders in advancing the SEL work. Major recommendations included creating a universal language around SEL throughout the state, establishing a rationale for state SEL standards, providing adequate training, and acknowledging the tensions between state accountability and SEL assessments (Rennie Center & ASCD, 2016).

Social and emotional learning has an opportunity to be more widely adopted by states under the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Grant et al., 2017). The federal law requires states to incorporate nonacademic indicators into their school assessment systems (Blad, 2016). States can use ESSA funding to measure students' social and emotional competencies in order to improve school climate, although this has not happened in the first three years since ESSA's enactment (Blad, 2017a).

Most states have also passed legislation that regulates charter schools (Lawton, 2009). These publicly-funded schools operate with more freedom and flexibility than other public schools, with a heavy emphasis on innovative ways to teaching children (Lubienski, 2003). Currently, many of these schools, like KIPP and YES Prep, integrate social and emotional learning into their daily operations (Felton, 2016).

In summary, policy makers, administrators, teachers, and parents are recognizing the importance of SEL policy at the state level. Educators and parents want children to attend safe, supportive schools that use sound methods to enhance students' academic,

social, emotional, and ethical growth (Learning First Alliance, 2001). In a recent study of principals from around the country, 73% of the school leaders advocated for SEL to be a part of their state regulations (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, n.d.). As a recent study (Mead, 2015) recommends: “All states should implement high-quality social-emotional standards that cover the period from preschool through high school. If social-emotional learning is a fundamental responsibility of schools, then logically we need learning standards to guide instruction that promotes SEL” (p. 60).

SEL Programs and Practices

Based on the review of SEL literature, it is apparent that social and emotional learning can be characterized in a variety of ways. Quite often, the vocabulary around SEL is confusing and fine distinctions between terms are not clearly evident.

For this research, the terms SEL programs and SEL practices are used to describe the social and emotional learning curricula and strategies being implemented in school districts. An SEL program is an explicit curriculum that promotes the development of social and emotional competencies of students. The curriculum provides a scope and sequence of the lessons that will be taught by the instructor. Examples of two popular SEL programs include Second Step (“Second Step,” n.d.) and Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Limber, 2004). SEL programs can be either evidence-based or non-evidenced-based. An SEL practice (i.e., building relationships with students) is defined as a strategy or initiative that promotes the development of social and emotional competencies of students. They also may be evidence-based or non-evidence-based. With these definitions in mind, Figure 1 depicts the relationships between and among these SEL components.

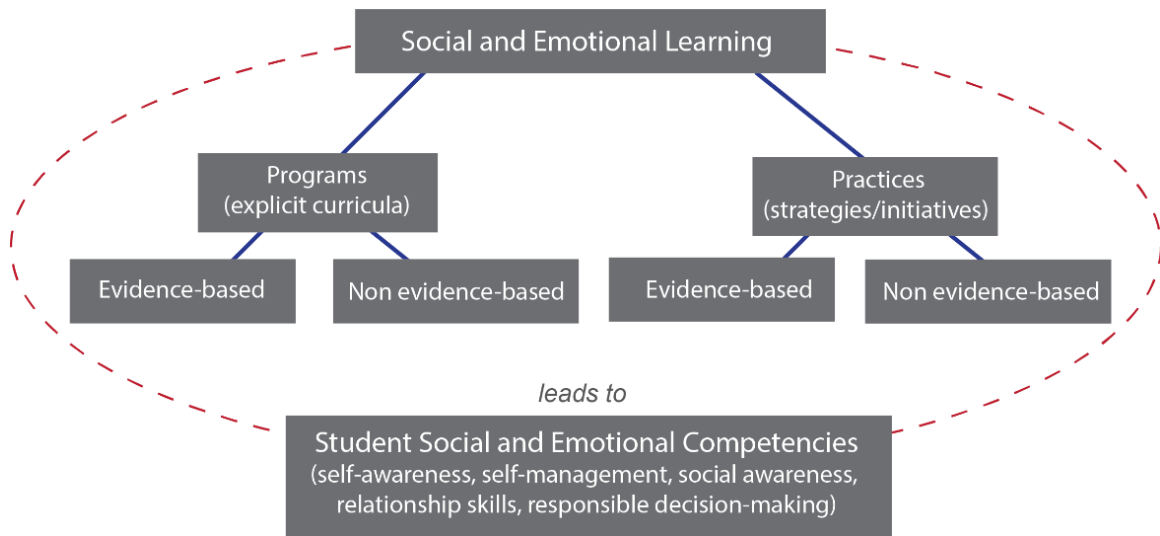


Figure 1. SEL Programs and Practices.

A large number of evidence-based SEL programs are available to educators to use with their students (“2015 CASEL Guide,” 2015; Grant et al., 2017). An evidence-based program includes “at least one carefully conducted evaluation that documents positive impacts on student behavior and/or academic performance” (“2013 CASEL Guide,” 2013, p. 7). Marketed widely around the nation, some of these programs are published by non-profit organizations, while others are published by for-profit organizations. In order for the reader to better understand the number and kinds of the evidence-based programs available to school districts, Table 1 outlines the names of some of the programs and their publishing companies, the grade levels included, and the areas of focus. Most of them are designed for elementary school usage, but there are a number of programs for middle and high school implementation. Some of the common focus areas include self-management, social skills, bullying/violence prevention, and academic achievement.

Table 1

Examples of Evidence-based SEL Programs

School Level	Program	Publisher	Grades	Focus Areas
Elementary School	PATHS	Channing Bete Company	1-6	Academics; aggressive behavior
	Open Circle	Wellesley Centers for Women	4	Problem behaviors; social skills
	RULER	Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence	5-6	School problems; social adaptability
Middle School	Second Step	Committee for Children	6-8	Self-management; learning skills; violence prevention
	Go Grrrls	Child Trends	7	Self-efficacy; self-esteem; assertiveness; friendship
	Olweus Bullying Prevention Program	Hazelden Publishing	6-8	Bullying prevention
High School	School Connect	School Connect	9-12	Social and emotional skills
	Peer Mediation	Various organizations	9	Conflict resolution

Note. Adapted from “Social and Emotional Learning Programs Under the Every Student Succeeds Act: Evidence Review,” S. Grant et al. Copyright 2017 by the RAND Corporation.

SEL practices are also used to develop students’ social and emotional competencies in schools. These strategies or initiatives include building relationships with students, Restorative Practices, mindfulness, and service learning. These practices can be implemented in elementary, middle, or high schools, either formally or informally.

Characteristics of Effective SEL Programs and Practices

In 2003, CASEL began evaluating SEL programs and practices, in order to gauge their impact and make informed recommendations to school districts interested in

adopting SEL (“Safe and Sound,” 2003). The research team reviewed 80 multiyear, sequenced SEL programs (including violence/substance abuse prevention, character education, and sexuality/health education) from around the nation and rated them in the areas of being school-based, relevant to the general student body, number of lessons, number of grade levels offered, and availability. Upon completion of the study, 22 of the programs analyzed were highly rated for their evidence-based curriculum, exemplary instruction of SEL competencies, and professional training provided to teachers:

They increase children’s sense of connection or attachment to school, and they also teach children skills for setting goals, solving problems, achieving self-discipline, and developing character and responsibility. Many have also shown that they help to improve students’ academic success. (p. 10)

In 2013 and 2015, CASEL expanded their study of evidence-based programs for elementary, middle and high school students, adding more rigor to the review process (“Review Process,” n.d.).

Berkowitz and Bier (2007) studied 109 evidence-based, PreK-12 programs focused on the social, emotional, and character development of students. Through examining these programs against quality standards they created, 33 programs were identified as highly effective. The similarities among those programs included explicit SEL curricula, academic integration, professional development, and family/community engagement. The researchers discovered two keys factors that led to the successful implementation of these programs: widespread usage throughout the school and implementation with fidelity.

Many well-intentioned school-based SEL initiatives are being utilized around the country, with little or no evidence that they actually work. According to Weisberg and O'Brien (2004), it is paramount for schools to launch their SEL initiative with an evidence-based program. The researchers also point out that integrating the SEL curriculum with established curricula from other content areas, support from district leadership, and ongoing professional development cannot be over-emphasized.

In summary, SEL program and practice implementation, like other educational reforms, takes time and effort. Results won't happen overnight; most new school initiatives take 5-7 years to produce results (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). Many of the articles stressed the importance of district leadership advocating for SEL and guiding the implementation process. Strong instruction using evidence-based SEL curricula and ongoing training for teachers and administrators were critical components of effective SEL programs and practices. For SEL programs to reap significant educational dividends, they must be "planned, systematic, monitored, improved, and refined over time" (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004, p. 94).

Effects of SEL Programs and Practices

Many of the published studies reviewed for this dissertation suggest a positive relationship between SEL programs and practices and academic achievement, student behavior, and equity. However, there are studies that do not show correlation with positive outcomes, and there are also individuals who have concerns about implementing SEL in schools.

Academics

An emerging body of research suggests the empirical interconnectedness between SEL programs and practices and academic achievement (Zins & Elias, 2007). In their seminal SEL study, Durlak et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 SEL programs and practices, involving over 270,000 K-12 students. The students who were exposed to SEL programs demonstrated an 11% increase in academic test scores as well as significant improvements in their social behavior and decrease in mental stress. An overview of SEL research from 2001 to 2013 (Price, Biehl, Solomon, and Weir, 2014) indicates there is a strong association between social and emotional programs and academic growth. This meta-analysis demonstrated that SEL programs can lead to improved school grades, standardized test scores, and grade point averages. In addition, students' study skills were enhanced, with noticeable increases in on-task learning, better use of time, and gains in goal setting and problem-solving skills. The research also indicated a decrease in absenteeism and suspensions.

Battistich, Schaps, and Wilson (2004) studied the effects of an SEL program with elementary school students and how connected they felt to the middle school they would attend later. The researchers analyzed the effects on 1246 students participating in the Child Development Project, a program created to decrease substance usage and violence, as well as the development of self-management and self-responsibility. Results demonstrated an increase in middle school academic performance in math, science, reading, and social studies as well as local standardized assessments for the students participating in the SEL program.

A meta-analysis of 33 SEL programs and practices indicated that grades and test scores were elevated when a social and emotional learning curriculum was implemented, professional development opportunities were offered to teachers, and service learning was prioritized (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). After-school programs that integrate SEL practices into their activities and lessons can also lead to increased academic success (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Payton et al., 2008).

Some studies have found correlations between the implementation of SEL programs and practices implementation and academic growth in specific subject areas. Elementary students who participated in Positive Action or Responsive Classroom experienced an increase in their math and reading scores (Bavarian et al., 2013; Rimm-Kaufman, Fan, Chiu, & You, 2007; Snyder et al., 2010). Math scores increased with fourth grade students who were involved with the Unique Minds Program, which focuses on students with learning disabilities (Linares et al., 2005). A meta-analysis of over 2000 studies between 1990 and 2006 indicated that reading, writing and math grades improved when SEL was implemented (Hoagwood et al., 2007).

SEL programs that include a family component have led to academic gains for students. Catalano et al. (2003) led a study of first and second grade students who participated in Raising Healthy Children (RHC), an SEL program that employs cooperative learning techniques and promotes personal motivation and skills. RHC also provides training for parents to help their children thrive in school as well as more intensive, in-home support for students struggling at school. The research found that the students who were randomly assigned to RHC had significantly increased teacher- and parent-reported gains in academic achievement.

Although many scholars doing research are proponents of SEL and have found positive results, not all research on SEL has demonstrated a relationship between program implementation and academic performance. A study of 4th and 5th grade students indicated that academic growth did not occur after being exposed to regular character education lessons (Hanson, Dietsch, & Zheng, 2012). Another study of seven different SEL evidence-based programs did not show any academic gains nor decreases in negative behavior (“Social and Character Development,” 2010). In spite of mixed results from the SEL research, a preponderance of evidence seems to suggest evidence-based programs have a positive effect on academic outcomes.

Behavior

In addition to the positive impact many SEL programs have on academic achievement, there seems to be an even greater behavioral benefit from social and emotional instruction. SEL appears to positively affect a wide range of student behaviors.

Students who are exposed to SEL programs appear to have an increase in motivation and perseverance (Farrington et al., 2012). They have a greater resilience, ability to advocate for themselves, and dedication to school when transitioning from grade levels (Price et al., 2014). In the Bavarian et. al study (2013), the Positive Action program was associated with an increase in academic motivation and attendance.

SEL implementation can assist with the development of social skills, as well (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes & Salovey, 2012; Durlak et al., 2011; Rimm-Kaufman, Fan, Chiu, & You, 2007). Students learn to work cooperatively in groups, communicate politely with each other, and build productive relationships (Hennessey, 2007). Sklad,

Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, and Gravestijn (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 75 research studies and found that students demonstrated an increase in social skills after being exposed to SEL programs.

SEL not only seems to increase positive behaviors but also can decrease negative feelings and emotions. Brackett and Rivers' (2014) research indicates that SEL can reduce anxiety, depression, and stress. SEL programs can lessen feelings of hostility, aggression, and self-doubt with elementary school children (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011; Payton et al., 2008). Mental health issues also diminish with SEL adoption in schools (Hoagwood et al., 2007).

Numerous studies show that student discipline issues are reduced after SEL programs are introduced (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2012; Lewis et al., 2013; Wyman et al., 2010). SEL implementation has been linked to reduced violence and bullying (Ragozzino & O'Brien, 2009), which is especially significant given the numerous school shootings over the past several decades where the perpetrators had been subjected to teasing, bullying, or other types of social rejection (Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003). Price et al. (2014) also reports less violence, bullying, and other problem behaviors among students in schools where SEL is included in the curriculum.

However, similar to the academic results of SEL, not all social and emotional supports produce positive outcomes with student behavior. A meta-analysis of 29 SEL programs and practices indicated that these programs did not make a significance difference in students' level of social skills or substance abuse (Farahmand, Grant, Polo, & Duffy, 2011). Some individuals have expressed concerns about implementing SEL in schools:

To teach a child to practice non-judgmental awareness is to risk interfering with the child's ability to heed his sense of right and wrong. A child must make judgments to choose between right and wrong actions. When he acts in accordance with his sense of what is right, he grows in moral character, and develops greater self-control. (Wickelgren, 2012, para. 3)

Opponents of SEL argue that social and emotional practices like mindfulness do not promote moral development; authentic self-control comes from a loving adult instilling ethical principles in a child over a period of time. Other researchers like Baron (2013) also advocate for more integration between the teaching of SEL and character development: "Failing to acknowledge and embrace the moral nature of SEL will keep students from developing the kind of self-control and empathy Maslow, Damasio, Goleman, and Bar-on describe as so essential to enhancing one's emotional intelligence and society's well-being (p. 49)."

Equity

One key consideration of implementing SEL, especially in urban and high-poverty, population-diverse districts, is its effect on equity. Sinclair, Christenson, and Thurlow (2005) conducted a five-year study of a diverse group of urban 9th graders who were exposed to the Check and Connect SEL program, which resulted in a significant decrease in their drop-out rate from high school. Another longitudinal study conducted in low-income, urban schools (Bavarian et al., 2013) produced positive academic and attendance results for 3rd-8th grade students who participated in Positive Action. Talking with TJ, another SEL program, appeared to assist low-income 5th and 6th graders in their academic transition to middle school; students involved with the program

saw a lower drop of their grades than the control group (Rosenblatt & Elias, 2008). Finally, a study concluded that all 3rd grade students benefitted academically from an SEL program in an urban community, with African-American students making more progress (Elias & Haynes, 2008).

Although it appears from this research that students of color benefit from SEL programs and practices, experts in the field have concerns about how educators address the social and emotional needs of students who come from different cultures and backgrounds. Hoffman (2009) advocates for more attention to be paid to the disconnect between the lofty ideals espoused in SEL and the political and social inequities in our society:

SEL has failed to engage in a deep way with questions of cultural diversity, with the politics of power, and with the real risks to educational opportunity of assuming yet another lens that defines educational problems in terms of individual deficits and remediation. (p. 549)

Some scholars assert that SEL programming and research need to be more cognizant of the culture and developmental needs of historically-marginalized students and that one size does not fit all (Blad, 2017b).

In summary, although some SEL programs seem to be making an impact with underserved communities, there is still room for improvement. Researchers from the American Enterprise Institute and Brookings Institution (Mead, 2015) have conducted a study on poverty in America and support the implementation of SEL in all schools: “Despite their importance to education, employment, and family life, the major educational and school reforms of the K–12 system over the last few decades have not

focused sufficiently on the socioemotional factors that are crucial to learning” (p. 60).

According to these experts, integrating SEL with rigorous, academic curricula will help narrow the academic achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Impact of SEL Competencies on Future Success

Researchers have identified some long-term benefits of SEL. Goleman (1995) asserts that there is a relationship between emotional skills and prosocial behavior, suggesting that emotional intelligence is “as powerful and at times more powerful than IQ” (p. 34) in predicting success in life.

Emotions have been shown to have a strong impact on the performance of employees in their jobs (Amabile & Kramer, 2007; Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998). Teams of employees perform at a higher level when there is evidence of cooperation, work ethic, and emotional balance. Groups that are supportive, diligent, and emotionally steady experience more success.

Social and emotional competencies are increasingly becoming more desirable in the work place. In the early 1990’s, a study of work skills necessary for success in the American job market was conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). Basic academic skills like reading, writing, and mathematics were identified, but also social and emotional competencies like personal responsibility and self-management (Packer, 1992).

Teamwork and customer service were also mentioned as important work place aptitudes.

Heckman (2004) believes that policies regarding education and job training too often exclude the “critical importance of social skills, self-discipline and a variety of noncognitive skills that are known to determine success in life” (p. 1). Heckman argues

that investing in teaching emotional management is a cost-effective approach to increasing the quality and productivity of the workforce through fostering workers' motivation, perseverance, and self-control.

Other researchers suggest that success and satisfaction in the workplace is heavily dependent on the emotional quotient of the employees, how well they build relationships with their co-workers, and how capable they are at utilizing techniques to handle conflict and pressure (Ashkanasy & Daus, 2005). In a study of a health insurance company, professional and clerical workers from the finance department who had high emotional intelligence scores were promoted to higher positions and earned better performance reviews and larger bonuses than employees with lower emotional intelligence scores (Lopes, Grewal, Kadis, Gall, & Salovey, 2006). O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, and Story (2011) also assert that emotional competencies affect employees' performance and leadership roles in their jobs.

Emotional intelligence has been a reliable predictor of executives' impact on leading organizations (Rosete & Ciarrochi, 2005). Supervisors with strong emotional skills align themselves with the goals and objectives of their organization more often than those who do not (Côté & Miners, 2006). It is estimated that 90% of the difference between a good and excellent leader can be credited to emotional qualities (Freedman & Everett, 2004).

Recent research suggests that significant associations exist between students' SEL attainment and future outcomes. Kindergarteners who displayed advanced SEL competencies had a greater chance of graduating from high school and college, obtain a stable job as young adults, and less likely to live in low income housing (Jones,

Greenberg, & Crowley, 2015). Analyzing the economic costs and benefits of six prominent SEL programs, researchers found that on average, benefits outweigh the costs by a factor of 11:1, based on factors such as reduced substance abuse and violence, improved mental and physical health, and higher potential earnings (Belfield et al., 2015).

Finally, although research on SEL has accelerated in the past decade, much more work needs to be done, especially in regards to gauging the long-term effects of SEL. We know that social and emotional skills are critical for success in the workplace, but we don't know for certain whether or not the skills are the by-product of SEL programs implemented in schools. As one writer explains:

It's also still unclear whether S.E.L. programs create the kind of deep and lasting change they aspire to. The history of education reform is rife with failures: promising programs that succeed in studies, only to falter in the real world. (Kahn, 2013, para. 20).

Some experts in the field are concerned that the excitement over SEL may be getting ahead of itself: "There are people who want to write this into the Common Core right now. But before we institutionalize this, we'd better be sure that it makes a difference in the long run." (Kahn, 2013, para. 21).

Challenges of Assessing SEL

As more states adopt SEL standards, attempts to assess the impact of these programs become increasingly critical (Kendziora, Weissberg, Ji, & Dusenbury, 2011). The question of assessing both SEL program impact and SEL competencies, however, is a delicate one. How can we accurately measure the short- and long-term impact of affective skills? What are the costs, benefits, and unanticipated consequences of testing

these types of programs? Though researchers and practitioners advocate for the development and usage of tools to gauge the impact of SEL programs, they are hesitant to use SEL assessment results for state accountability or teacher evaluation purposes (Glennie, Rosen, Snyder, Woods-Murphy, & Bassett, 2017). As a recent study from Massachusetts points out: “Although measurement and accountability are crucial elements of progress, additional assessments—especially any that are high stakes in nature—can become obstacles, rather than supports, to SEL work at the district and school levels” (Rennie Center & ASCD, 2016, p. 5).

Recently, the American Institutes for Research (2015b) developed guidelines for when and how schools and districts should evaluate their students’ social and emotional knowledge, attitudes, and skills. According to the guidelines, five major questions should be answered when deciding whether or not to assess SEL:

1. Purpose—what is the reason for the evaluation?
2. Rigor—what is the level of rigor for the evaluation?
3. Practicality—how reasonable is the evaluation (based on how long the program has been implemented and how many students are involved)?
4. Burden—how user friendly is the evaluation, how long will it take for staff and students, and how much will it cost?
5. Ethics—what are the risks and benefits of conducting an evaluation?

Dozens of assessment tools have been developed over the past two decades for schools to use to evaluate their students’ social and emotional learning skills and attitudes (American Institutes for Research, 2015b). When utilizing these tools, there is a heavy emphasis on students self-reporting their SEL skills and mindsets, teachers evaluating

their students' SEL skills and mindsets, or teachers observing students involved in a performance task (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Teachers may have a propensity to inaccurately identify the students' SEL competencies, because of implicit biases or pressure from administrators.

In summary, evaluating SEL programs and competencies remain a challenge for everyone involved in the field. Since some states are beginning to formally test for SEL, many SEL advocates and researchers argue that this process is wrought with challenges (Walker, 2016), including untrustworthy data and unintended consequences (Zernke, 2016). In an interview with a nationally-recognized SEL researcher (D. Osher, personal communication, February 20, 2017), he stated, "There currently is no gold standard with SEL assessment, but we're working on it." Although SEL evaluation resources are available to schools, experts in SEL research, like Duckworth and Yeager (2015), stress the future use of a "plurality of measurement approaches" (p. 245). Since no universally-accepted method for measuring SEL exists, more research is needed to determine how to accurately assess students' social and emotional skills (Dirks, Treat, & Weersing, 2007).

International Perspectives

The United States is one of many countries around the world implementing SEL programs and practices, including Australia, Finland, Singapore, and Canada (Fundación Botín, 2011). One country that has taken a special interest in SEL is Portugal. Beginning in 1986, Portugal's educational system has initiated numerous school improvement efforts related to SEL (Cristóvão, Candeias, & Verdasca, 2017). Positive Action appears to be the prevalent SEL program implemented in the Portuguese schools. Coelho, Sousa, Raimundo, and Figueira (2017) conducted a study on this program with 7-9th grade

students, reporting gains in social awareness and self-management as well as a decrease in social anxiety.

The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Limber, 2004) is the most researched and utilized anti-bullying program in the world. Launched in 1983 in 42 Norwegian schools, the program includes both a school-wide and individualistic approach to preventing student mistreatment. It focuses on warm, positive behavior of the adults in the school organization and clear behavioral expectations of the students. Extensive training is provided to the staff, so that they can handle bullying situations in a proactive, systematic manner.

Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017) directed a meta-analysis of 82 campus-based SEL programs with approximately 100,000 K-12 students from the United States and 38 other nations. Students who participated in the SEL programs demonstrated more advanced social and emotional competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social problem-solving), attitudes (self-esteem, self-efficacy, connection to school), and well-being (reduced discipline issues, emotional duress, substance abuse). Graduation rates and safe sexual behaviors increased due to the engagement with SEL programs.

A study of 72 countries by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2017) suggests that more support for the social and emotional development of students is necessary. Students in various countries reported that the relationship they have with their teachers is important to them; students are more satisfied in school when they have built a positive connection with their teachers. The researchers made suggestions on how to build a more supportive classroom environment:

Students were less likely to report anxiety if the science teacher provides individual help when they are struggling. Teachers need to know how to help students develop a good understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and an awareness of what they can do to mitigate those weaknesses. (p. 6)

Summary

The review of the SEL literature indicated that social and emotional learning has existed throughout history in many cultures around the world. An emerging body of research suggests that social and emotional competencies matter in school and in life and that instruction in SEL is positively correlated with improved academics, behavior, future success, and equity, although there are differing opinions and results. With the support of this research, states are beginning to adopt SEL standards, as SEL programs and practices are being implemented in schools in order to teach these skills and attitudes to students. Whether the programs and practices are evidence- or non-evidence-based, the way they are implemented matters. However, measuring results is difficult and problematic. There is also an international perspective to consider.

Despite the increase in SEL research, gaps do exist in the literature. Studies of SEL program and practices at the district and state levels are minimal. Most of the research is conducted at the school level, primarily elementary, and very little research has been done with secondary institutions. Lastly, although some research has been conducted on the long-term benefits of SEL in K-12 schools, more studies need to be done to find out whether or not students' SEL skills continue in college or the work place after they leave their primary and secondary schools.

III. METHODOLOGY

Overview

This study utilized a descriptive, mixed methods research design. According to Sandelowski (2010), all research includes some amount of description, which must be interpreted. Descriptive research can be effectively utilized "to describe systematically the facts and characteristics of a given population or area of interest, factually and accurately" (Isaac & Michael, 1997, p. 50). The focus of this research methodology is on the present—not the past nor the future—and any relationships that may be occurring (Salkind, 2009). Descriptive research is a snapshot at a point in time. In short, "a descriptive study determines and reports the way things are" (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 113).

Descriptive research can employ both qualitative and quantitative techniques and measures (Babbie, 2011). Data can be collected to describe what is happening and then can be organized in a numerical manner (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). Surveys, observations, and interviews can be conducted and the results can be analyzed through qualitative coding or quantitative statistical methods.

Because of the nature of this research, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (mixed methods) were employed. A mixed methods approach is beneficial because it can "capture the best of both quantitative and qualitative approaches. . . . The advantages of collecting both closed-ended quantitative data and open-ended qualitative data prove advantageous to best understand a research problem" (Creswell, 2003, p. 22). This approach connects the two traditional methodologies in a commonsensical, instinctive manner (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). By employing a

mixed methods design, unanticipated patterns or themes can arise (Driscoll, Appiah-Yeboah, Salib, & Rupert, 2007). Finally, by including multiple sets of data in a study, the research is enhanced (Migiro & Magangi, 2011).

Before adopting a mixed methods research model, Creswell (2013) suggests answering the following four questions:

1. Is there a quantitative database?
2. Is there a qualitative database?
3. Is there a plan to bring the two databases together?
4. What procedures (design) will be used?

In this study, quantitative data included responses from the closed-ended questions from the survey distributed to the Texas school districts and the information regarding school characteristics found on the TEA website. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in order to summarize the data in a meaningful way as well as using correlational analyses in order to determine possible associations between the survey data and district characteristics. The qualitative data were collected from the responses to the open-ended survey questions and the follow-up interviews with voluntary participants. They were analyzed using a categorical coding method. The two sets of information were integrated at the completion of the data collection, highlighting the themes and patterns that emerged.

Epistemological Considerations

This study was conducted through the epistemological lens of interpretivism. Interpretivism suggests that reality is based on an individual's personal experiences with the world and is therefore socially constructed (Mutch, 2005). This paradigm "looks for

culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Interpretivists do not believe there is one single path to the acquisition of knowledge (Willis, 1995). There are no right or wrong ways of conducting research (Walsham, 1993).

The interpretivist epistemology aligned well with this descriptive, mixed methods study. The primary research question focused on the perceptions of school district leaders regarding the impact of the SEL programs and practices they have adopted and implemented. The responses of each participant were based on their subjective interpretation of what is happening with these programs and practices. In addition, the participants were queried about their perceptions of why and how these programs and practices were adopted and implemented, the roadblocks encountered along the way, as well as, their personal recommendations for other districts interested in adopting SEL programs and practices. All of these responses were subject to interpretation, based on the unique viewpoints of the participants in the study. Finally, my analysis and meaning-making of the participants’ responses were affected by my own worldview and biases.

My positionality as a former principal and current SEL director should be noted. Based on my intensive experiences with SEL on one campus, observations of SEL on many campuses, and as leader of SEL programs in a large school district, I firmly believe that SEL can make a powerful contribution to students and teachers. Because of the positive results I have witnessed, I am a passionate advocate for thoughtfully increasing SEL programs and practices in school districts around the nation.

Although I am supportive of SEL, I possessed healthy levels of curiosity and skepticism as I researched the topic. With close to four decades of experience in

education, I realize no silver bullets for school improvement exist. There are plenty of gaps in the SEL research; one SEL expert claims that the literature is vague and incoherent (B. Smith, personal communication, September 3, 2017). Although it is not possible to completely remove my experiences and beliefs from the study, I have done the best that I can to describe and analyze the collected data with minimal bias.

Population and Sample

Sampling is an important component of mixed methods research (Fraenkel et al., 2012). There are 1216 public school districts in the state of Texas. This number (which includes charter schools) served as the population for this study. A self-selection sampling technique, where subjects of a study volunteer to participate (Colman, 2008), was used. The sample was the number of districts that completed the questionnaire, regardless of whether or not they actually implemented any SEL programs or practices. A sample size of 10% of the population was the target for this particular descriptive research study (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006).

Instrument Design

A questionnaire aligned with the primary and secondary research questions was created (see Appendix A) using Qualtrics, a software for designing surveys. The survey included 12 closed-ended and nine open-ended questions. When previously-validated survey instruments cannot be meaningfully employed in a research study, it is advisable to have experts in the field review the newly-created instrument (Gay et al., 2006). Since I designed the instrument, I consulted with local and national SEL researchers in the construction of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was disseminated first to colleagues

who had expertise in SEL and then sent to a pilot group of SEL leaders in a variety of Texas school districts in order to receive their input.

The key to creating an effective data collection instrument is the amount of time taken to carefully construct it (Salkind, 2009). Questions should be clear and easy to comprehend. The respondent should be able to complete the questionnaire in a reasonable amount of time (10-15 minutes). By maximizing usability of the instrument, the response rate should increase (Gay et al., 2006).

Validity considerations also needed to be addressed. To increase external validity, the pilot questionnaire was sent to various types of districts from different geographic areas of Texas. Content and construct validity were addressed through conversations about the questionnaire with experts in SEL. Pilot group respondents provided important feedback regarding face validity, helping me to determine if the questionnaire aligned with the research questions.

Data Collection

Data regarding SEL program adoption and implementation in Texas public schools were collected through the questionnaire. Qualtrics compiled each respondent's answers in an easy-to-view format. After adjusting the questionnaire based on the feedback from colleagues and the pilot group, it was emailed to all 1216 public school districts in the state of Texas. After ten days, a follow-up email was sent to districts that had not completed the questionnaire, with the purpose of increasing the number of responses.

One of the survey questions asked respondents if they would like to participate in a voluntary follow-up phone interview. I planned to conduct follow-up interviews with

approximately 8-10 superintendents or their designees, with attention placed on choosing participants from varied geographical regions and types/sizes of school districts. The purpose of these 30-40 minute interviews was for the participants to add more context and detail to the open-ended responses they provided in the questionnaire. A semi-structured interview format was utilized in order for the participants to have more freedom to share their thoughts and opinions (Drever, 2003). Some of the questions that were asked included:

- Could you elaborate on the reasons for adopting SEL programs or practices?
- Could you elaborate on the process you used to select the SEL programs or practices? Why did you choose that process? Was there resistance from any stakeholders? Was it a campus-based or central office process?
- Could you elaborate on the factors most helpful or important in the implementation of SEL programs or practices? Why were they helpful or important?
- Will you please elaborate on the challenges or difficulties in implementing SEL programs or practices? Why were they so challenging? How did you overcome them?
- You indicated in the questionnaire that your SEL programs or practices were _____ (very effective, moderately effective, slightly effective, ineffective, or unsure). Could you tell me more about why you chose that response? What would make them more effective?

- How do you measure SEL implementation? Is it meaningful? Was there any resistance from stakeholders?

Another question on the survey asked whether or not the participants wanted to voluntarily be included in a statewide SEL database. The database included the name of each school district, SEL programs and practices being implemented, the grade levels in which the SEL programs and practices are being implemented, the length of time the SEL programs and practices have been implemented, and participants' contact information. Responses to questions regarding perceived impact, reasons for adoption, selection processes, challenges, or recommendations for other districts were not included in the database. At the completion of the research, the database was shared with all Texas public school districts and posted on the Internet.

Data about the district characteristics were accessed through the TEA website. The data that were collected included the district size, type, expenditures per student, discipline rate, and academic rating. Since one of the survey questions asked for the county/district number, I was able to search the TEA website for this specific information about each district that responded to the questionnaire.

Data Screening

Data preparation is an important step before data analysis can occur (Kline, 2016). If data are not carefully scrutinized, the research findings and conclusions may be invalid (Fitrianto & Midi, 2011). Data screening can identify substandard responses from participants (DeSimone, Harms, & DeSimone, 2015).

Upon completion of the data collection stage, the respondents' answers to the questions were transferred to an Excel spread sheet. Locations of respondents were

examined to determine if any geographic areas of Texas were being under- or over-represented. Outliers in the data were highlighted. Since data-entry errors and unreasonable answers must be identified and resolved before data analysis can be initiated (DeSimone et al., 2015), a significant amount of data cleaning was required. Some respondents did not know their county/district number or it was incorrect. Any responses that did not have the name of the school district nor county/district number were not included in the study.

Data Analysis

The initial stage in examining data is to describe them (Salkind, 2009). After the data from the questionnaire had been compiled in a spreadsheet, the data were aggregated and disaggregated based on the methods described in the following paragraphs.

The data collected from the closed-ended questions were quantified using descriptive statistics (frequency tables). Using the Statistical Analysis System (SAS) software, correlational analyses were conducted to examine the responses to the closed-ended research questions, with the goal of determining if there was a relationship between implementation of SEL programs and practices and Texas public school district characteristics. Tables were created to report some of the findings.

In order to determine if there was a relationship between the adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices and Texas public school district characteristics, the following inferential statistical tools were used:

1. Regression, which is used to explain the relationship between a dependent variable and one or more independent variables (Statistics Solutions, 2013)

2. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), which is utilized to determine whether or not a statistically significant difference exists between the means of two samples (Hurlburt, 2003)
3. Pearson's Correlation Coefficient, which is used to measure the linear relationship between two variables, resulting in a coefficient between -1 and + 1 (Fraenkel et al., 2012)

The Texas Education Agency compiles data on public school districts using a variety of factors. The factors that I used as independent variables in the correlational analysis were district size, type, expenditures per student, discipline rate, and academic rating, while the dependent variable was SEL implementation. District size, a numerical variable, represented the cumulative year-end student enrollment within the school district during the 2016-17 school year (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b). District type was broken down into nine nominal variables: major urban, major suburban, other central city, other central city suburban, independent town, non-metropolitan fast growing, non-metropolitan stable, rural, and charter schools (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-c). Expenditures per student was determined by dividing the total district expenditures (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-d) by the number of students enrolled in the district and was analyzed as a numerical variable. The discipline rate in the district, a numerical variable, was determined by dividing the number of discipline infractions by student enrollment for the 2016-17 school year (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-b). Finally, the academic rating, based on an A-F scale determined by a variety of factors (Texas Education Agency, n.d.-a), was analyzed as an ordinal variable. These factors

were chosen for this study because of the importance districts place on them and their public accessibility with the TEA.

The open-ended, qualitative responses from the questionnaire were analyzed using categorical aggregation (Creswell, 1998), a data-driven coding and categorizing technique. This process is effective when the researcher has no preconceived ideas of the participants' responses; the collected data leads to patterns or themes. Using this strategy, the researcher compiles and then codes the data, identifying patterns or themes in order to make observations and draw conclusions. This strategy was also used to analyze the responses from the follow-up interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed. Upon completion of the transcription, the text was coded.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

One of the assumptions made in this study was that the participants would complete the questionnaire honestly and accurately. Numerous researchers have written about the complexity of information accessed from surveys, based on the participants' memories and experiences (Tanur, 1992). Although I assumed participants would answer the questions truthfully, there may have been an inclination to over-report the amount of SEL taking place in one's school district, to suggest that a well-rounded education was being emphasized.

Another assumption of this research was that the questionnaire sent to the school districts was forwarded to the person best suited in the district to complete it. Large, urban school districts may have individuals who have some knowledge of SEL or are leading the SEL implementation in their district. Much smaller, rural districts may not have a formal SEL program or may not even know what it is. Respondents' lack of

knowledge about SEL programs and practices being implemented in their districts may have affected the results of this study.

A limitation of the study was the sampling technique employed. Using a self-selection methodology, the data collected only came from districts that chose to participate in the study, which added potential bias to the research. Self-selection sampling bias occurs when the respondents don't necessarily represent the entire population (Lavrakas, 2008). It should be noted, though, that the percentage of responding school districts was quite representative of the percentage of the nine different types of school districts in Texas, as indicated in Table 2.

Being involved in a research study can modify the behavior of the participants (MacNeill, Foley, Quirk, & McCambridge, 2016). The act of sending a questionnaire to the school district leaders may alter their future behavior related to SEL programming. The leaders may question why or why not they are offering these programs to students, which may generate conversation around this topic within the district. They may also contact other districts to find out whether or not they are implementing any SEL programs or practices. Though the focus of this research was to identify what is taking place with SEL in Texas public schools at this point in time, in my view, this potential increased attention towards SEL would be a positive, unintended consequence of conducting this study.

Poor design of a survey questionnaire can lead to invalid results of a research study. Gay et al. (2006) have identified key reasons that can diminish the validity of survey tools: "unclear test directions, confusing and ambiguous test items, using vocabulary too difficult for test takers, overly difficult and complex sentence structures,

and inconsistent and subjective scoring methods” (p.138-139). By working closely with SEL scholars and honoring the feedback from the pilot study, I attempted to minimize these common errors in questionnaire design.

Another limitation of the study related to how the respondents gauged the success or failure of the SEL programs and practices being implemented. The effectiveness of their SEL initiative was based on respondents’ perceptions; I did not provide them with a common rubric or standard to assess SEL effectiveness. Responses reflected each district’s unique experiences with SEL.

Finally, some of the respondents knew me personally, however, I do not believe that this connection affected their responses in any significant manner. The questionnaire was designed to be neutral; it didn’t advocate for or against SEL. I believe that my relationship with participants in the research had a negligible effect on the results.

Summary

This chapter provided an explanation of the descriptive, mixed methodology used in this research of the SEL programs and practices adopted and implemented in Texas public school districts. Using a self-selection sampling technique, leaders from all 1216 school districts around the state had the opportunity to complete a questionnaire. The qualitative data collected were coded and sorted using a categorical aggregation coding strategy. The quantitative data were analyzed using a variety of statistical tools. For districts that chose to publicly share information about their SEL programs and practices, a database was compiled that was made available to all districts in the state. Lastly, assumptions and limitations of the study were offered.

IV. RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of this descriptive, mixed methods study was to inventory, categorize, and analyze the SEL programs and practices being implemented in many Texas public school districts and to determine their perceived impact. In addition, a database of the SEL programs and practices currently being utilized by districts was created and disseminated throughout the state. The primary research question aimed to determine the perceptions of Texas public school districts regarding the impact of SEL programs and practices that have been adopted and implemented. The secondary questions focused on which SEL programs and practices have been adopted and implemented in Texas public school districts, the factors that influenced the adoption and implementation of the SEL programs and practices, and the relationship between adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices and Texas public school district characteristics.

Quantitative Data

Introduction

An initial and follow-up email was sent to all 1216 public school superintendents in Texas. Most participants responded within 48 hours of receiving each email. After three weeks, 144 completed responses had been submitted, which is 11.8% of the total number of school districts in Texas. After cleaning the data, 131 districts were included in the study, including those that said they were not implementing any SEL programs or practices and those that did not answer all of the questions. Thirteen responses were excluded because neither the name of the district nor country/district number was

provided, making it impossible to include these responses in the statistical analyses..

Throughout Chapter IV, the number of respondents in each table varies considerably because not all respondents answered each question. The number of respondents is indicated in the Note section below each table.

Closed-Ended Questionnaire Responses

A wide variety of school districts participated in this study. Over half of them represented suburban (29%) or rural (28%) areas. A considerable number of them were charter school districts (17%) and stable, non-metropolitan districts (13%). Two of the school districts serve incarcerated individuals. As indicated in Table 2, the percentage of responding school districts is quite representative of the percentage of the nine different types of school districts in Texas.

Table 2

Texas School District Types and Survey Respondents

School Type	Texas		Respondents	
	#	%	#	%
Major Urban	18	1	3	2
Major Suburban	79	7	11	9
Other Central City	41	3	3	2
Other Central City Suburban	161	13	26	20
Independent Town	68	6	7	5
Non-Metropolitan: Fast Growing	31	3	4	3
Non-Metropolitan: Stable	174	14	17	13
Rural	459	38	36	28
Charter School Districts	183	15	22	17
Total	1,214	100	129	99

Note. $N = 129$. The number of school districts in Texas is calculated using 2015-16 data. Two special school districts (prisons) were not included in this table. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

As illustrated in Table 3, most respondents (69%) reported that their school district is implementing SEL programs and practices. Twenty-two districts (17%) said

they were not implementing SEL programs and practices and 18 districts (14%) were unsure whether or not they were implementing SEL programs and practices.

Table 3
Districts Implementing SEL Programs and Practices

Response	#	%
Yes	90	69
No	22	17
Unsure	18	14
Total	130	100

Note. *N* = 130.

When asked if someone was responsible for leading SEL in their district, 69% of respondents said yes. As indicated in Table 4, the roles of the individuals who are supervising district SEL initiatives varied significantly. Seventeen percent of the districts reported that counseling directors or campus counselors led their SEL initiative. Campus administrators and SEL Directors/Coordinators also played a prominent role guiding the implementation of SEL programs and practices. Eighteen respondents indicated that no individual was currently guiding SEL implementation.

Table 4
Roles of District Employees Responsible for Leading SEL

Response Options	#	%
Counseling department (district or campus)	14	17
Campus administrator	13	16
SEL director/coordinator	13	16
Other (e.g., student services, staff development)	11	14
Assistant superintendent	10	12
Superintendent	7	8
Curriculum coordinator	5	6
Teacher	4	5
Unsure	4	5
Total	81	99

Note. *N* = 81. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Based on the participants' responses, a plethora of SEL programs and practices are being implemented in Texas public school districts. Table 5 highlights the five SEL

programs and practices which were the most widely reported by districts. The respondents listed 28 other SEL programs and practices being implemented in their respective districts. A complete list of SEL programs and practices reported by responding school districts can be found in Appendix C.

Table 5
Most Widely Reported SEL Programs and Practices

Program or Practice	#	%
Restorative Practices	38	38
Capturing Kids' Hearts	36	36
Conscious Discipline	21	21
Mindfulness	21	21
Second Step	12	12

Note. $N = 100$. Each of these most widely used programs and practices are evidence-based. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to district respondents being able to select multiple programs and practices.

Although respondents had the opportunity to provide a specific number of years and months that their district had been implementing SEL programs and practices, I organized their responses into more general categories: 0 years, 1-3 years, 4-5 years, 5+ years. As shown in Table 6, 5% of the districts are not implementing SEL, 61% have been using SEL programs and practices for 1-3 years, and 23% of the districts have been implementing SEL for over five years. Some respondents stated that their district implemented different SEL programs and practices over a span of several years.

Table 6
Duration of SEL Implementation

Time Period	#	%
0 years	4	5
1-3 years	49	61
4-5 years	7	9
5+ years	17	23
Total	77	98

Note. $N = 77$. Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

SEL programs and practices are being implemented in many different grade level configurations. As illustrated in Table 7, over half of the districts (52%) are incorporating SEL programs and practices across all K-12 grade levels. Approximately one fourth of the districts (24%) are implementing SEL programs and practices at only the elementary, middle, or high school level. Thirteen percent of the districts reported that SEL is being implemented at both elementary and junior high/middle schools.

Table 7
Grade Levels In Which SEL is Being Implemented

Grade Level	#	%
K-12	48	52
Elementary only	16	17
Junior High/Middle School only	5	5
High School only	2	2
Elementary and Junior High/Middle School	12	13
Other	10	11
Total ^a	93	100

Note. N = 93.

As indicated in Table 8, over half of the districts (59%) are implementing SEL programs and practices in core content classes. Almost half of the districts (46%) offer SEL during school assemblies. Advisory and elective classes are additional settings where students are exposed to SEL instruction. Over 50% of the respondents reported that multiple settings are utilized for SEL instruction.

Table 8
Instructional Settings Where SEL Programs and Practices Are Implemented

Response Options	#	%
Core content classes	59	59
Multiple settings	53	53
School assemblies	46	46
Elective classes	41	41
Advisory classes	33	33

Note. N = 100. Percentages are greater than 100% due to district respondents being able to select multiple instructional settings where SEL programs and practices are implemented.

Table 9 illustrates the frequency of SEL implementation. Most districts are implementing SEL weekly (46%) or daily (44%). One third of the respondents stated that SEL programs and practices are implemented at various frequencies, including monthly, twice/month, every six weeks, or once/twice per semester.

Table 9
Frequency With Which SEL Programs and Practices Are Being Implemented in Districts

Response Options	#	%
Weekly	41	46
Daily	39	44
Monthly	10	11
Other (e.g., twice/month, every six weeks, once/twice per semester)	20	22

Note. $N = 89$. Percentages do not add up to 100% due to district respondents being able to select multiple frequencies.

To gauge fidelity of SEL implementation, the school districts were asked if their SEL programs and practices were implemented as intended. As shown in Table 10, almost 80% of the respondents stated that they either strongly agreed or agreed that SEL programs and practices were being implemented as intended in their district, while approximately 20% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed. Several respondents reported that implementation fidelity depends on the specific SEL program or practice being discussed.

Table 10
Responses to the Questionnaire Item “The SEL Programs and Practices in our District are Being Implemented as Intended”

Response Options	#	%
Strongly agree	10	11
Agree	59	68
Disagree	12	14
Strongly disagree	6	7
Total	87	100%

Note. $N = 87$.

Respondents were also queried about the perceived effectiveness of their SEL programs and practices. As indicated in Table 11, almost three-quarters of the school districts (70%) reported that their SEL programs and practices were very or moderately effective. Fifteen percent of the districts indicated that their SEL programs and practices were slightly effective, while one district stated that its SEL implementation was ineffective. Interestingly, eleven districts (13%) responded that they were unsure about the perceived effectiveness of their SEL programs and practices.

Table 11
Responses to the Question “How Would You Describe the Effectiveness of the SEL Programs or Practices?”

Response Options	#	%
Very effective	13	15
Moderately effective	47	55
Slightly effective	13	15
Ineffective	1	1
Unsure	11	13
Total	85	100

Note. $N = 85$.

School districts evaluate the effectiveness of their SEL implementation in an assortment of ways. Table 12 shows that student discipline data is the primary method districts use to evaluate SEL implementation (67%). Climate surveys are also often used to measure effectiveness. Some districts administer SEL assessments while others use data sources such as attendance, grades, or teacher feedback. Fourteen percent of the respondents reported that no SEL evaluation is conducted.

Table 12
Methods Districts Use to Evaluate SEL Implementation

Response Options	#	%
Student discipline data	62	67
Climate surveys	54	59
SEL assessments	13	14
No assessments	13	14

Note. $N = 92$. Response totals are greater than 92 and percentages are greater than 100% due to districts being able to choose multiple options.

One of the final questions in the survey asked respondents if they would like to be part of a statewide SEL database that would include the name of their district, the SEL programs and practices being implemented in their district, the grade levels the SEL programs and practices are being implemented, the length of time the SEL programs and practices have been implemented, and the districts' contact information. Twenty-four of 131 respondents (18%) indicated that they would like to be included in the SEL database. The districts that chose to be included in the database and the information about their SEL programs and practices can be found in Appendix D.

Correlational Analyses of School District Characteristics

Statistical Analysis Software (SAS) was used to analyze the relationships between various school district characteristics (size, type, discipline rate, expenditures per student, and academic rating) and SEL implementation. Specifically, statistical tests such as regression, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and Pearson's Correlation Coefficients were utilized based on the type of data collected (University of Minnesota, n.d.).

A regression model was used to determine which school district characteristics and survey items were most related to perceived SEL effectiveness. District size, the degree to which district staff believed that SEL programs and practices were being implemented as intended, and the discipline rate were regressed on perceived SEL

effectiveness. Together, the overall model explained 22% of the variance between variables. As indicated in Table 13, the positive correlation between district size and perceived SEL effectiveness was statistically significant ($p = .01$). The association between the degree to which district staff believed that SEL programs and practices were being implemented as intended (fidelity of implementation) and perceived SEL effectiveness was on the borderline of statistical significance ($p = .05$). Additionally, the discipline rate was negatively correlated to perceived SEL effectiveness, also approaching statistical significance ($p = .05$).

Table 13
Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting Perceived SEL Effectiveness

Variables in the Model	B	SE(B)	β	t	p
District size	.29	.00	.00	2.55	.01
Fidelity of SEL implementation	.24	.10	.20	2.53	.05
Discipline rate	-.23	.35	-.70	-2.00	.05

Note. Variables were included in the regression model based on strength of correlation with perceived SEL effectiveness.

To determine if there were differences between school districts with high and low perceived SEL effectiveness and high and low fidelity of SEL implementation, quartiles were created with both variables, although only the highest and lowest quartiles were compared. First, school districts reporting perceived SEL effectiveness ratings in the top quartile ($M = 3.00$) were coded as 1. Second, school districts in the top quartile of fidelity of implementation ($M = 3.00$) were also coded as 1. Two separate analyses—predictors of high effectiveness and predictors of high implementation—were then conducted. As indicated in Table 14, results from the analysis exploring relationships with high perceived effectiveness found that the degree to which schools were

implementing SEL programs and practices as intended was the only variable that had a statistically significant association with high perceived effectiveness ($\beta = .27$, $t(65) = 4.31$, $p < .01$).

Table 14

Standardized Regression Coefficients Predicting High Levels of Perceived SEL Effectiveness

Variables in the Model	B	SE(B)	β	t	p
District size	.09	.00	.00	.27	.79
Discipline rate	-.09	.00	-.00	-.15	.88
Length of time implementing SEL	-.18	.02	-.03	-1.52	.13
Fidelity of SEL implementation	.50	.06	.27	4.31	<.01

Note. Variables were included in the regression model based on strength of correlation with perceptions of SEL effectiveness in the top quartile.

An exploratory ANOVA was conducted to determine if the most common school types represented in the survey (major urban, rural, charter, and other central city) influenced the degree to which school districts implemented SEL programs as intended, believed SEL programs were effective, had school staff devoted to coordinating SEL, and the frequency with which SEL was implemented. As illustrated in Table 15, results found that respondents from other central cities reported that SEL programs and practices were implemented with less fidelity than did respondents from major urban, rural, and charter school districts ($F(3, 36) = 6.9$, $p < .01$).

Table 15

Fidelity of SEL Implementation by School District Type

School District Type	#	Mean	SD
Major urban	3	3.00 ^a	.00
Other central city	3	1.67 ^{a,b,c}	.57
Rural	18	3.11 ^b	.32
Charter	16	2.94 ^c	.68

Note. Post-hoc analyses were conducted using Tukey's test for post-hoc comparisons. Means sharing the same superscript are significantly different from each other, $p < .05$. Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*.

Table 16 illustrates the relationship between district type and frequency of SEL implementation. Due to the fact that there was a small sample size representing each school district type, new categorical variables were created using TEA's district type codes (which are primarily based on student enrollment). The new categories were as follows: Larger Districts, which included major urban, major suburban, other central city, and other central city suburban districts; Smaller Districts, which comprised independent town, non-metropolitan fast growing, non-metropolitan stable, and rural districts; and Charter Districts, which included charter school districts. An ANOVA found a trend for Larger and Charter Districts ($M = 3.48$, $SD = .63$; $M = 3.43$, $SD = .85$; respectively) to implement SEL more frequently (e.g., daily, weekly) than did Smaller Districts ($M = 3.05$, $SD = .94$; $F(2, 79) = 2.56$, $p = .08$).

Table 16

Frequency of SEL Implementation by Recoded School District Type

School District Type	#	Mean
Larger Districts	29	3.48 ^a
Smaller Districts	39	3.05 ^{a, b}
Charter Districts	14	3.43 ^b

Note. Post-hoc analyses were conducted using Tukey's test for post-hoc comparisons. Means sharing the same superscript resulted in a trend toward statistical significance, $p < .10$. Response options ranged from 1 = *once/twice a semester* to 4 = *daily*.

An ANOVA was conducted to determine if the role of the individual in charge of SEL was associated with perceived effectiveness of SEL implementation. As illustrated in Table 17, districts where the person leading the SEL initiative was the SEL Director/Coordinator had the highest ratings of perceived effectiveness when compared to districts where other individuals were in charge of implementing SEL.

Table 17

Relationship Between Perceived Effectiveness of SEL Implementation and Individuals Leading the SEL Initiative

Individual Leading the SEL Initiative	#	Mean
Assistant/associate superintendent	9	2.89
Campus administrator	11	2.73 ^a
Curriculum coordinator	5	2.80
SEL director/coordinator	9	3.44 ^a
Superintendent	5	3.00

Note. Post-hoc analyses were conducted using Tukey's test for post-hoc comparisons. Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*. Means sharing the same superscript are significantly different at $p < .05$.

As shown in Table 18, results from using Pearson's Correlation Coefficients found that school districts with higher perceived SEL effectiveness had higher student enrollments, lower discipline rates, and higher academic ratings. Expenditures per student were not associated with perceived effectiveness. Examinations of the data did not find a strong association between how long a school district had been implementing SEL and district size, discipline rate, and expenditures per student; however, there was a positive relationship between academic rating and longevity of SEL implementation. Interestingly, the degree to which respondents believed SEL programs and practices were implemented in their school district as intended was not associated with any of the four school district characteristics. Finally, the frequency with which school districts implemented SEL was not related to district size, expenditures per student, or academic

rating, although discipline rates appear to be lower in districts implementing SEL more frequently.

Table 18
Correlations Between School District Characteristics and Survey Question Responses (Using Pearson's Correlation Coefficients)

School District Characteristics	Survey Questions			
	#6	#9	#10	#12
District size	.08	.13	.03	**.32
Discipline rate	-.01	*-.23	-.17	*-.29
Expenditures per student	-.04	-.13	.06	-.07
Academic rating	.22*	.11	.09	**.39

Note. ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Survey questions are as follows:

6) How long have you been implementing the programs or practices?

9) How often are the SEL programs or practices being implemented in the district? (response options ranged from 1 = *once/twice each semester* to 4 = *daily*)

10) The SEL programs and practices in our district are being implemented as intended. (response options ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 4 = *strongly agree*)

12) How would you describe the effectiveness of the SEL programs or practices? (response options ranged from 1 = *ineffective* to 4 = *very effective*)

Finally, a negative relationship was observed between district expenditures per student and SEL implementation; the greater the amount of money spent on each student, the less chance that SEL was implemented in the district ($r = -.37, p < .01$). However, there was a positive relationship between district expenditures per student and having a person in charge of implementing SEL in a given district ($r = .20, p = .05$).

Qualitative Data

Introduction

In addition to the quantitative data analyses, qualitative data from the survey questions and interviews were also studied. The respondents were asked six open-ended questions on the survey:

1. What were the reasons for adopting SEL programs or practices?
2. What process did you use to select the SEL programs or practices?

3. What factors were the most helpful or important in the implementation of SEL programs or practices?
4. What have been the challenges or difficulties in implementing SEL programs or practices?
5. What recommendations do you have for other districts considering implementation of SEL programs or practices?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share about the SEL programs and practices in your district?

In addition, four of the closed-ended survey questions provided an opportunity for respondents to include additional comments. These questions focused on the length of time SEL had been implemented in the district, fidelity of usage, evaluation tools, and perceived effectiveness of the initiative.

Twenty-one respondents indicated that they would be interested in a voluntary, follow-up interview. Based on their varied geographic location and district type, nine of the 21 respondents were selected to be interviewed. Using a semi-structured interview technique, participants were asked to elaborate on their questionnaire answers. The interviews lasted 20-40 minutes and were digitally recorded. The responses were transcribed after the interviews took place.

The responses from the open-ended questions, additional comments sections, and interviews were analyzed using categorical aggregation, a data-driven coding and categorizing technique. Responses were coded and sorted, and then organized into categories and themes.

Open-Ended Questionnaire and Interview Responses

After analyzing the qualitative data, four different, though related, categories emerged: reasons for SEL adoption, process of SEL adoption, supports and barriers, and perceived effectiveness of implementation. These categories provided a foundation for explaining why and how SEL was adopted, the challenges and opportunities of the implementation process, and how districts measured the outcomes. Themes within each category became apparent, many of them connected to other themes and surfacing across several categories.

Reasons for adoption.

Four key themes related to the reasons districts adopt SEL programs included an emphasis on the whole child, discipline and safety, equity, and the perceived importance of SEL to preparation for future life.

Whole child focus. Many respondents cited the importance of providing an educational experience that concentrated on developing the social, emotional, and academic competencies of each student. One district advocated for “shifting the focus away from purely academics to a more whole child approach.” Another respondent stated that “SEL ensures we create well-rounded students.” Other school districts wanted to teach students how to build relationships, develop leadership skills, and be kind.

Addressing the social and emotional needs of students was another impetus to adopting SEL programs and practices in school districts. A number of respondents mentioned the lack of compassion by students as a major concern: “Students don’t come to school with much empathy . . .” Other districts were experiencing an increase in at-

risk student populations. Stress and anxiety were also mentioned as significant issues for students:

A lot of our kids at the high school level are having a lot of anxiety, because it is such a high performing district. Kids are very stressed out and have a lot of anxiety about grades and performance and juggling all of the modern technology.

There are a few unique school districts incorporated in the study that serve students who are incarcerated or have severe mental health issues. A superintendent of one of those districts stated that SEL is interwoven into all aspects of their school day:

So there are days . . . we spend 80% of the day on academics and 20% on social/emotional. There are days Susie found out her parental rights are terminated by court, so now we're spending 80% of the hours on social/emotional and 20% on academic. I didn't feel I could ever change or shift the achievement gap if I couldn't meet the mental health need first.

Another district stated that a recent hurricane, which completely destroyed their schools, obliged them to focus heavily on meeting the social and emotional needs of their students (and families) during this traumatic time period.

Discipline/safety. Discipline and safety issues were also key reasons for SEL adoption. School leaders had observed high levels of office referrals for violence and bullying. The recent school shootings were also mentioned as a concern. Districts have turned to SEL programs and practices to take a different approach to handling negative student behavior: “We wanted to help our teachers understand that they had options and strategies for dealing with behavior.” Respondents wanted to teach students “civility”

and believed that SEL programs and practices can reduce inappropriate student behavior. The goal is “to provide a safe and secure environment where students can thrive.”

Equity. Some districts mentioned equity issues as being a driver for adopting SEL programs and practices. Districts expressed concerns about the disproportionality of discipline referrals for students of color and those served in Special Education. Restorative Practices were implemented in these districts “to address punitive and exclusionary” practices, both in discipline and academics. As one respondent wrote, changing the adults’ mindsets and school environment were the first steps to addressing equity issues:

Our data indicated that students were being referred to the office and placed in alternative settings at an alarming rate. We reflected and discussed the findings and determined that the students were not the issue but rather our approach to student discipline and culture and climate was the issue. It was then that we committed to finding a model that allowed us to be proactive by explicitly teaching expectations and social-emotional competency.

Preparation for college, career, and life. Multiple respondents indicated that the motivation for adopting SEL programs and practices was the belief that SEL is important for preparing students for college, career, and life. SEL can be an “opportunity for students to learn some life lessons and skills.” Another district stated that SEL is “critically important for students . . . to have strong character as well as academic skills.” As a school district was creating its profile of a high school graduate, SEL was identified as an invaluable component for future success. One respondent summed up the importance of offering SEL to their students: “How can we not?”

Process of adoption.

Four themes related to the process of adopting SEL programs were advocacy, decision-making authority, the use of a steering committee, and the process by which programs were selected.

Advocacy. Respondents indicated that it was important to have the support of central office when considering SEL programs and practices. One way districts garnered this support was to align the SEL initiative with the district's mission. As one rural district reported, "The concepts were aligned with the cultural and social beliefs of our school community". Having the school board and superintendent championing SEL also yielded positive results:

The board and superintendent request updates and they continue to see the importance of this effort. Their support and the strategic plan, sends a clear message to central office leadership, the community, administrators and staff that SEL is a priority.

In addition, transparent communication from central office was mentioned as a way to demonstrate support for SEL from district leaders.

Decision-making authority. Amongst districts that responded to the questionnaire there appears to be a varied degree of decision-making authority for individual schools within each district to choose their own SEL programs and practices. A number of districts reported that their SEL initiative was mandated by the school board or superintendent, due to interest on the part of central office leadership, core values of the district, or policy. One respondent reported, "It's a part of our charter's mission." Another district said that SEL is included in its strategic plan, based on a graduate profile

that was created. Some districts have included SEL in Board policy; as one SEL coordinator stated during a follow-up interview:

In 2016 our Board of Trustees adopted SEL into policy and that was initiated after our SHAC [School Health Advisory Council] committee [studied] the whole school/whole child/whole community model. After that effort had really shed some light on the need to focus on social-emotional learning and the more our Board members learned about that, they said, "You know we really need to spend some time here and really need to make sure that this is happening in all of our schools, all of our classrooms."

One district adopted the SEL programs and practices based on a central office decision: "The elementary program was chosen by our Executive Director of Academics who had used it in her prior assignment as a principal at a charter school." One respondent indicated that the entire district was directed to use Positive Action, and another district reported that all campuses were required to implement Capturing Kids' Hearts.

Most school districts, though, employed a more decentralized approach to adopting SEL programs and practices. Principal or campus leadership teams had the freedom to explore options and choose whichever programs and practices best fit their campus needs. As one respondent from a large, urban district stated:

We also have a culture of really individualizing by campus and for students. So we knew we didn't want to do one thing. Like, we weren't going to say, "Okay, Second Step for everybody." We were going to let campuses make that decision after they had some information brought to them.

A few districts developed their own SEL programs and practices based on their unique needs.

Steering committee. Multiple respondents indicated that creating and maintaining an SEL steering committee of district stakeholders was an important step in the adoption of SEL programs and practices. Establishing an inclusive team for spearheading SEL in the district was highly recommended:

Just to have that advocacy and then that ownership of this, because . . . it's not a practice that just sits within the district. It's a practice that really the community needs to own. I think that just starting with that advisory, having an advisory involving stakeholders from within, in, and out of the district I think is critical and was really helpful to us. It still is today.

The committees had a multitude of names: *leadership team*, *administrative team*, *stakeholder group*, *task force*, or *PBIS team*. Quite often, members of the counseling staff were included. One district included students. The following is an example of a comprehensive group of district representatives participating on an SEL steering committee: “We established an SEL Advisory Team with representation from parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, central office staff, and central office leadership to provide recommendations for evidence-based programs for elementary and middle schools.”

Selection of programs and practices. When selecting SEL programs and practices, many districts addressed district and campus needs using data and research. Adopting a program that “fit with our perceived needs” and “fit well within our current curriculum” was meaningful to districts. Another district was interested in adopting an

SEL program or practice “that provided a focus for the entire district—all ages, employees and students.” Numerous districts selected SEL programs and practices because of their “effectiveness”, whether that be with relationship-building, curriculum integration, or student outcomes.

Districts researched potential SEL programs and practices in a variety of ways. Some districts reached out to national experts: “Our CASEL consultants guided us and provided options for the initial SEL practices.” Others attended SEL conferences or visited schools that were implementing SEL. Some districts received SEL recommendations through “word of mouth.” Still others used district or campus data (needs assessments, student/parent surveys, discipline referrals) to drive their decisions. One charter school superintendent was very candid about the uncertainty of choosing SEL programs and practices:

And so just to be honest, I didn't know what I was doing. So we just really reached out. And the next summer we did a book study on Restorative Practices. And while the teachers and administrators were doing the book study, we started with a circle. I shifted to mental health trauma-informed care type stuff, because I still was seeing a missing piece in Restorative Practices.

A unique review process has occurred in a Texas prison school district. Because of the specialized needs of the incarcerated students, the leaders took a different tack when choosing SEL programs and practices:

We went through the process of looking at how those classes, what kind of results they were getting, and we measure our success by individual's ability to, first of all, be released from prison and not come back, not go into the same type of bad

choices and behaviors that got them into prison to begin with. We call that recidivism. We measure recidivism three years after someone is released from prison. They go through the treatment programs that we have, and then once they're released, if they stay out of prison for three years, then they're considered a success as far as no recidivism.

The review process in this prison school district also included feedback from state legislators and advocacy groups, stakeholders that are not commonly included in typical school districts.

Finally, during the selection process, a number of districts wanted to be sure that the SEL programs and practices were not difficult to implement. Simplicity of usage for campus principals and teachers was cited by numerous respondents. The practicality of implementation seemed to be important to district employees. Easy access to materials and training were also mentioned.

Supports and barriers of implementation.

Supports and barriers to SEL program and practice implementation included buy-in, professional learning, funding, and time.

Buy-in. Acquiring support from stakeholders was mentioned numerous times by respondents as a critical factor for implementing SEL successfully in school districts. These districts indicated that buy-in was needed from central office, campus administrators, teachers, and parents. “Make sure all kids are on board,” was also recommended by one respondent from a rural district.

One way to maximize buy-in is to begin SEL implementation with campuses that express interest in doing so:

We had schools come in by vertical team and it was kind of expected that the entire vertical team, all of the principals be on board and opt in together to being a part of the programming. And we went with schools, we went with vertical teams that were really wanting to do it themselves in the beginning. . . . We definitely wanted to start with those who were really open to it, and ready to see how it was gonna [*sic*] work.

Allowing schools—not forcing them—to adopt SEL programs and practices when they were ready seemed to be an effective way of launching an SEL initiative.

Respondents reported that universal support for SEL did not happen, however. Before, during, and after the selection process, opposition to the adoption of SEL program and practices occurred. A few of districts indicated there was no resistance, but most districts encountered some degree of opposition from stakeholders.

Some districts struggled with resistance from campus leadership. If school administrators—who usually have the most influence on their campuses—don’t advocate for SEL, this can be problematic: “Principals have control over their schedule, they have control over how the curriculum is put out into the school.” Even when campuses had committed to SEL, other priorities—most often, standardized testing—distracted them from implementing SEL. When asked about barriers to implementation, one SEL coordinator responded:

If [the campus] had even tried to implement SEL lessons . . . that would get preempted every time by needing to do more test prep. And so, even though research shows us, or has indicated or suggested, that you're gonna [*sic*] buy back a lot more instructional time if you do social and emotional learning and give

some time to that and that kids do benefit academically from SEL, some of [the principals] have been very reluctant to embrace that research, or they feel that the positive outcomes are gonna [*sic*] take too long and they don't have enough time to let that happen because they're under the gun for testing.

Besides testing, other district initiatives can sidetrack administrators from moving SEL forward. One respondent indicated that their district is now focusing on technology and Project Based Learning, at the expense of their SEL programs. As one charter school superintendent stated:

Our efforts have been diverted on to other things. . . . [SEL] does need to be a priority, but for a lack of time and lack of money and all of those things, it's become on the back burner to all of these other big initiatives.

Likewise, SEL implementation is difficult when teachers are unsupportive of the programs and practices. As one superintendent reported, the faculty was resistant to the new SEL programs, especially at the high school level: “One of the biggest complaints was coming from your high school friends, and they just said this doesn't apply to high school, this is little kid stuff—blah, blah, blah.” Another respondent discussed the opposition from teachers who did not want to alter their traditional discipline management techniques:

Probably the biggest resistance is from the teachers that have a more old school, if you will, philosophy of consequences. Punishment consequences, whatever. And if I hear the word consequences at other times from certain people, it just makes me want to bang my head against a wall, because it's like, how is that working for you? You're going to still keep giving the same consequence to the same kid and

it's not going to change their behavior, because that doesn't work. . . . So, trying to facilitate those hard conversations with those individuals about what will work . . . and trying to get their buy-in is often very difficult.

One respondent reported that teachers believe there needs to be a punishment for every discipline infraction and that Restorative Practices meant “doing nothing.”

Finally, many districts mentioned how the scope and speed of the SEL implementation process can affect buy-in. “Start small, go slow” was reported numerous times. “Don’t try to do everything at once,” advised one respondent. Teacher buy-in can’t be hurried: “I would definitely encourage them to take time on the front. Be super proactive in terms of really getting the commitment level of their staff. They need to be committed.” One respondent advised districts to be persistent: “Keep trying until it can be established. Something is better than nothing.”

Professional learning. A number of districts minimized resistance from administrators and teachers by focusing on adult learning throughout their SEL journey. Professional development in SEL was considered a non-negotiable aspect of successful implementation:

Professional development is a must. . . . One of the things that we did not do as well the first year is have ongoing professional development. . . . PD is a biggie. We've got to make sure that we have ongoing professional development and we've done such a better job of that the second and third year.

Training can come from SEL vendors, central office, or the campus. One school found it helpful for teachers to lead the professional development:

Engaging teachers into the delivery of professional development was recommended, as well. They did the training. They took the bull by the horn. Because bringing a consultant from the outside is just that, then they're gone. We wanted people to be part of the process.

Coaching from outside groups (like CASEL) can also assist in moving SEL forward on campuses. One district stated that coaching and training must be ongoing: “You have that first two years of great training and everybody's on board and it seems to be going great, but just like other things, if you don't continuously support it, it fizzles out.”

Districts indicated that a primary component of SEL training should focus on the definition of SEL, since administrators and teachers often misunderstand what SEL actually encompasses. As one SEL director stated:

So what we're really trying to communicate is that SEL is not a program. I mean, there are programs and resources that you use to teach the skills, but it's not a one-time thing that you just teach it one time, teachers have it down . . . it's something that's ongoing and how we're modeling.

A superintendent shared a similar sentiment:

I think before [teachers] will integrate it, they need to understand what SEL is, so we do need some more time around just the competencies themselves . . . kind of an SEL 101 to get the initial buy-in, and then we need to again just provide time for ongoing training and revisiting around it.

Some districts spent months on professional development for employees to build “adult awareness, adult understanding, and adult acquisition.” As one respondent stated, “You

need to be able to say to them, ‘We understand it's a change in your philosophy, but try it. I think you'll like it.’”

In addition to providing training on the definition of SEL, districts reported that a heavy emphasis of the professional development should be related to the rationale for implementing SEL programs and practices. One district indicated there was a “lack of urgency” on the part of the faculty because they did not fully comprehend how SEL contributes to student development and achievement. An SEL coordinator stressed the importance of campus administrators and staff clearly understanding brain research and how it affects teaching and learning:

And so you have to help people understand the “why” of it all. And neuroscience, we didn't have nearly as much information when we first started this work as we do now. It's been seven years, and the research on the human brain has continued the whole time we've been doing this. And the more we know, the more we're able to see the benefits of building these safe, inclusive learning environments for kids where they feel confident in their permission to take risks.

Respondents also recommended that SEL training should be integrated with other district training so that teachers can see the connections between SEL and various district initiatives. One respondent commented that SEL has a greater chance of being more meaningful when it is aligned with current district programs and practices:

I just think something really important is just to also anchor it [SEL] into your other efforts, into the work of as many departments at the district level as possible so that people understand that these five competencies are how we can go about our work, be helpful and prosper at that. How do you crosswalk SEL with other

key initiatives like dual language or our academic learning framework, things of that sort? I think the better those connections that we can make from the onset, the more meaningful and impactful the [SEL] implementation will be from the start.

As one respondent suggested: “Collaborate with other departments. Don't try to do it all yourself.”

Funding. School districts identified financial support as an important factor in implementing SEL programs and practices. Having “available resources”—including grants—allowed districts to purchase SEL programs that charged a fee. With tight campus budgets, financial assistance from district leaders to purchase SEL programs was necessary: “Cash-strapped schools are better able to prioritize SEL when we have district-level experts to . . . help schools acquire materials needed for implementation.”

Finding the necessary funding to implement and support SEL, however, is difficult for most districts. The challenge of purchasing SEL programs was cited as an obstacle by many respondents:

We have to have something to be able to offer them. And staff development costs money. Materials cost money. Second Step is not cheap, if that's the way we wanted to go. So we knew that money would be a factor.

In addition, competing priorities made it difficult for districts to commit funding to SEL:

Although we are blessed to have the support of our district and we have a dedicated budget, we support other key initiatives with that same budget and as costs for supporting services have risen, our allocation has remained the same. . . .

That has crippled our ability to support the effort with concrete resources such as an evidence-based [SEL] program.

Sometimes SEL leaders had to choose between funding SEL programs or SEL personnel:

“As the administrator of our budget, I have decided to invest the resources in personnel that can go to campuses to support the implementation efforts as opposed to resources that may or may not be used with fidelity.”

Time. Finding time in the daily schedule to incorporate SEL was cited as a significant challenge to SEL implementation. Again, standardized testing pressures make it difficult for some districts to regularly integrate SEL into their campus routines:

Time is always such a biggie. I'm looking at the new accountability system and talk about needing some social-emotional yoga breaks. . . . It's just horrible, and it's the push/pull what you have to do for state accountability, but yet trying to make time . . . for what some people would consider fluff, or unimportant activities.

Also, building time into a master schedule to allow for SEL planning and evaluation is difficult:

Taking the time to reflect and going back to opportunities to learn and improve our practices [is important]. Acknowledging that and making time for that, making time for that discussion, making time . . . to look at data around how we're doing with the implementation and its impact, its effectiveness to determine what we need to do to improve in these practices.

Some districts indicated that these challenges with time were mitigated when SEL was explicitly scheduled into a campus' master calendar. One respondent emphasized the importance of having a set time to teach SEL lessons during the school day.

Perceived effectiveness of implementation.

Key themes related to the perceived effectiveness of SEL implementation included the use of measurement tools and outcomes and the perceived fidelity of program implementation.

Measurement tools and outcomes. Survey participants were asked the question, “How would you describe the effectiveness of the SEL programs or practices?” Most respondents indicated their SEL programs or practices were very or moderately effective, while others stated that they were slightly effective or ineffective. The following paragraphs explain the ways that districts evaluated the effectiveness of their SEL programs and practices.

Assessment tools assisted school districts in determining the effectiveness of their SEL programs and practices. Staff, student, and parent surveys provided valuable data regarding the value of SEL. One charter school district used an SEL program that includes an assessment for all three groups:

The Leader in Me has a survey that we do. . . . It's really nice because not only do we get student feedback, we get staff feedback and then we also get parent feedback, so it's really lovely that we're able to measure the progress of how we're doing.

Some district surveys indicated the extent to which students felt safe at school and are comfortable going to an adult on campus when they need help. Other surveys queried

teachers about the degree of classroom autonomy and administrative support they experienced. One district used an evaluation rubric at the end of each year to assess SEL growth on each campus:

Our [SEL] specialists sit down every year with their principals and/or their SEL campus facilitators who are on site, teachers or counselors or sometimes AP's who serve as the SEL leads for the campus. And they just do an assessment of where is our campus in these four areas. And when we see campuses that have high implementation rates in all four areas, which gives them kind of a higher score overall, we're seeing gains in test scores in reading and math. In many instances, we're also seeing decrease in discipline referrals and increase in attendance.

Another district reported that campus administrators regularly visit classrooms to assess the level of SEL implementation.

Analyzing attendance data and discipline referrals also offered school districts helpful information regarding the effectiveness of their SEL programs and practices. As a respondent stated: "Already some of the initial data that we've seen is a huge reduction in discipline data . . . this year compared to last year." One district looked at student retention rates, with the goal of not losing students to charter schools. Some districts have not yet implemented SEL at all of their campuses, so they are planning to compare student data between the schools that have already adopted SEL and those that have not.

Sometimes the implementation of SEL programs and practices can lead to unintended, positive consequences. One charter school district completely turned around its teacher retention rate after adopting an SEL focus: "We converted going from . . . 85-

90% teacher turnover annually to 90-95% retention now in the last six years.” A school district that was hit by a hurricane witnessed a surprising result regarding their academic data. Despite the closure of their schools for over four weeks, using alternative locations to house their students, and the trauma experienced by students, families, and teachers, the students’ test scores at the end of the year were the *highest* in district history. The cause for these academic gains was attributed to the district’s focus on the social, emotional, and physical needs of their stakeholders during and after the natural disaster:

I mean, [the students] just had lost everything. . . . I just think the kids were so appreciative to have a clean, dry place to come to every day, that loved them, and knew that we cared about them, that when it was time to focus on academics, they just focused. . . . I just think they could learn because their social-emotional needs were met.

SEL effectiveness can be hampered by a number of variables. A district reported that its high degree of student mobility made it difficult to fully implement SEL programs and practices. Rapid student growth can also make SEL implementation challenging. One district said its SEL implementation was moderately effective since it is experiencing an overwhelming increase in student enrollment:

I mean you're constantly having to educate kids when your high school goes from 1200 to 1500 in one year where there's 300 kids that didn't start the year with that social contract. Those teachers have to make sure that they have buy-in into the program to say, "All right. Let us acquaint you with that." . . . It's very difficult to have a high level of success when [you have] new kids in the classroom, new kids in the halls, new kids in the lunchroom.

Fidelity of implementation. Many respondents stated that a significant challenge to SEL effectiveness is lack of program fidelity. Consistent SEL implementation throughout the districts was rarely reported. SEL implementation varied tremendously from school to school and from classroom to classroom. The main causes cited for this lack of fidelity were teacher turnover and lack of updated training. One district mentioned that irregular monitoring had hindered program fidelity in the past, but since administrators have been regularly visiting classrooms and supervising in the hallways, SEL consistency had increased.

Some long-term challenges to SEL effectiveness were cited by respondents. Developing a meaningful system of SEL evaluation still needed to happen in a number of districts. Some districts were struggling with scalability, specifically, how to expand SEL to more schools or incorporate SEL at other grade levels. One respondent stated that SEL effectiveness would increase if an SEL program or practice that spans across K-12 grade levels would be adopted:

I feel like if a district could pick one program that could be appropriate for all levels and implement that. . . . If everyone is talking the same language, then our kids would be much more equipped to be successful moving . . . from the elementary to the middle schools to the high school.

Another respondent concurred: “If you have one way of dealing with issues, one way of solving problems, it allows [the students] to trust the system.”

Summary

Chapter IV described the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses. The data collected from the questionnaire responses and follow-up interviews were

categorized and described. In addition, the correlational analyses of the school district characteristics were shared. The data were illustrated through tables. The qualitative data were organized into four categories: reasons for adoption, process of adoption, supports and barriers of implementation, and perceived effectiveness of implementation.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Overview

Five sections are included in Chapter V. A summary of this study is provided, including the research problem, purpose of the study, and research questions, among other topics. Next, conclusions and implications from the research are described. Lastly, suggestions for future research and some final thoughts are shared.

Summary of the Study

Research Problem

Based on the review of the literature and interviews with various SEL leaders from around the nation, there seems to be a shortage of studies that systematically identifies SEL programs and practices utilized by school districts in any particular state. An inventory, categorization, and analysis of district SEL programs and practices have not, to my knowledge, occurred in any state, including Texas. Without statewide baseline information about what SEL programs and practices are being implemented in Texas school districts, it is difficult for districts to wisely evaluate and select new SEL programs or practices. Considering the positive influence SEL appears to have on students and the lack of comprehensive SEL data in Texas, it is worthwhile to examine the degree of SEL implementation in the state's public school districts.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to inventory, categorize, and analyze the SEL programs and practices being implemented in many Texas public school districts and to determine their perceived impact. In addition, a database of the SEL programs and practices currently being utilized by districts was created and disseminated throughout

the state. The first goal was to discover which particular SEL programs and practices were being implemented around the state, how and why they were adopted, and what supports or barriers affected adoption and implementation. Another goal was to determine at which grade levels SEL programs were being implemented as well as the frequency of SEL instruction. In addition, this research attempted to understand how districts perceived the impact of their SEL programs and practices and compile recommendations they had for other districts. This research also included an analysis of the relationships between SEL programs and practices and school district characteristics. A final goal of this research was the creation of a statewide database of SEL programs and practices being implemented in different Texas school districts, so that school leaders can consult with each other about this important topic.

Research Questions

The primary question for this study was “What are the perceptions of Texas public school districts regarding the impact of SEL programs and practices they have adopted and implemented?” The secondary questions were “What SEL programs and practices are being adopted and implemented in Texas public school districts?”, “What factors influence the adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices in Texas public school districts?”, and “What is the relationship between adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices and Texas public school district characteristics?”

Review of the Literature

The review of the literature indicated that SEL competencies have been valued by societies since ancient civilization. In the United States, the emphasis schools have

placed on SEL has fluctuated over two centuries, with a resurgence occurring during the past twenty years. Numerous studies suggest that SEL has a positive effect on academics, behavior, equity issues, and future success. Because of these results, eighteen states currently have adopted K-12 SEL standards for their school districts. Although SEL implementation is increasing around the nation (as well as other countries), finding meaningful ways to measure SEL effectiveness remains a challenge.

Methodology

This study utilized a mixed methods, descriptive research design. A self-created questionnaire was sent to all superintendents in Texas' 1216 school districts and 144 (11.8%) districts responded. Open- and closed-ended questions from the survey provided information such as what SEL programs and practices were being implemented in Texas public school districts, why they were adopted, where and how often they were being used, and their perceived impact. Voluntary, follow-up interviews were conducted with nine school districts to provide more information and context for the survey responses. Quantitative data from the closed-ended questions and TEA website were analyzed using a variety of statistical tools. A categorical aggregation strategy for coding the qualitative data from the open-ended questions and interviews was also employed.

Results

A majority of the survey respondents (57%) worked in suburban or rural school districts. Approximately 70% of the districts indicated they were implementing SEL programs and practices and an individual was assigned responsibility for leading SEL in the district. Sixty percent of the respondents stated that they had been implementing SEL for 1-3 years.

Thirty-three different SEL programs and practices have been adopted by school districts, with five of them most widely reported. Approximately half of the districts utilized SEL across K-12 grade levels, primarily in the core content areas. Most districts have been implementing SEL daily or weekly. Eighty percent of the respondents indicated that the SEL programs are implemented as intended and 70% of the respondents said the programs were effective. Two-thirds of the districts (67%) used discipline data to measure SEL effectiveness.

The inferential statistical analyses suggested that there was a statistically significant positive correlation between district size and perceived SEL effectiveness. The discipline rate was negatively correlated with perceived SEL effectiveness, also approaching statistical significance. The degree to which schools reported implementing SEL programs and practices as intended was the only statistically significant variable that was associated with perceived effectiveness. Major urban districts, rural, and charter schools were more likely to report implementing SEL programs and practices as intended than were other central city school districts. There was a trend for urban/suburban school districts to implement SEL more frequently than rural school districts. Districts where the person leading the implementation of SEL was the SEL Director/Coordinator had higher ratings of perceived effectiveness than did districts where a campus administrator was in charge of implementing SEL. Districts with higher perceived SEL effectiveness also had a higher student enrollment, lower discipline rate, and higher academic rating. There was a positive relationship between academic ratings and longevity of SEL implementation. Finally, a negative relationship occurred between expenditures per

student and SEL implementation, as well as, a positive relationship between expenditures and having an individual assigned to lead SEL programs and practices.

The qualitative data were collected from the responses to the open-ended survey questions and follow-up interview questions. The results were organized into four categories—reasons for SEL adoption, process of SEL adoption, supports and barriers, and perceived effectiveness—and supporting themes.

Conclusions

In this section I will offer my explanations of the quantitative and qualitative results from the research, basing my descriptions around the four research questions of the study. Although much was gleaned, drawing definitive conclusions from the data collected may not be appropriate. A study like this often raises more questions than it answers, but certain themes and patterns have arisen.

Research Question #1

The primary question for this study was “What are the perceptions of Texas public school districts regarding the impact of SEL programs and practices they have adopted and implemented?”

Most of the respondents (70%) indicated that their SEL programs and practices have yielded favorable results. The reasons that districts had a positive perception of their SEL initiatives are numerous and varied. Some stated that their reading and math scores have increased. Several districts, especially those serving primarily students with mental health challenges or who are incarcerated, believe that their SEL programs and practices are helping to ameliorate students’ anxiety and aggressive behavior. Other districts believe that Restorative Practices and Mindfulness have had an impact on

reducing the disproportionality of discipline referrals for students of color. These results align with research that suggests SEL has a positive effect on academics (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011), behavior (Ragozzino & O'Brien, 2009; Farrington et al., 2012; Brackett & Rivers, 2014;), and equity issues (Sinclair, Christenson, & Thurlow, 2005; Bavarian et al., 2013).

As shown in Table 12, 86% of the respondents are using various types of methods to evaluate SEL implementation. Since a high percentage of the districts are measuring SEL, it appears that they feel it is important to assess the results of their SEL initiatives. Most districts use student discipline data and climate surveys to evaluate their SEL programs and practices. Although these data can inform districts to some degree, they have limitations due to teacher or student bias (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). Despite the fact that most districts are measuring SEL implementation in some capacity, many of them are unsatisfied with their current method(s). One respondent was quite candid about his district's uncertainty with its SEL assessment results: "Although we do monitor discipline referrals and often adjust lessons accordingly, I can't say that there is any real data to support the success of the practices." Even though quantitative and qualitative SEL evaluation is happening in most districts that responded to the questionnaire, a comprehensive system for assessing SEL's value remains elusive. As Duckworth and Yeager assert: "Perfectly unbiased, unfakeable, and error-free measures are an ideal, not a reality" (p. 243). These challenges with assessing SEL implementation may be the reason why 14% of the districts are not currently evaluating their SEL programs and practices.

Research Question #2

One of the secondary questions for this research was “What SEL programs and practices are being adopted and implemented in Texas public school districts?”

As shown in Appendix C, respondents indicated that 33 different types of SEL programs and practices are presently being implemented in the districts that participated in the study. This number might suggest that the values and priorities of Texas school districts are varied, since Texas has 1216 independent school districts, ranging from urban to rural districts. Districts may have also chosen SEL programs and practices based on their exposure to them, their cost, or their ease of usage. In addition, most of the 33 SEL programs and practices are evidence-based, which means having “at least one carefully conducted evaluation that documents positive impacts on student behavior and/or academic performance” (“2013 CASEL Guide,” 2013, p. 7). This finding may suggest that school districts value research-based programs or are unaware of other options.

One of those options that some districts have chosen is to customize the evidence-based program or practice based on their unique culture or alter it when more pressing issues or needs arise. Another option is for districts to create an entirely new SEL program and practice, even though research on the new SEL initiative has not been conducted. These options create a tension for school districts: should they implement evidenced-based programs and practices with fidelity, customize these programs and practices based on different settings and circumstances, or create entirely new programs and practices? Although Weisberg and O’Brien (2004) are emphatic about districts using

evidence-based programs, some researchers (Jones, as cited in Shafer, 2016) argue that there should be space for new and innovative SEL initiatives:

While a few of SEL programs have been tested and shown to improve children's SEL skills as well as academic, mental health, and behavioral outcomes, the effect sizes are smaller than we would expect. This suggests that existing programs aren't capitalizing on the potential to improve student outcomes. This could result from implementation challenges, or it could suggest that traditional SEL programs need a different approach. (para. 6)

Lastly, as indicated in Table 3, 17% of the districts reported that they were not implementing SEL programs or practices at this time. Some districts had little or no understanding of SEL: "Never heard of it", "Do not know about SEL", and "I am not sure what all an SEL program entails." In addition, 14% of the districts were unsure if they were implementing SEL or not. These data suggest that many Texas school districts lack knowledge about SEL programs and practices. With increased exposure to SEL, more districts might adopt SEL programs and practices. The database created from this research will assist with providing districts with additional information about SEL.

Research Question #3

Another secondary question for this study was "What factors influence the adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices in Texas public school districts?" Based on this research, multiple supports and barriers affected the adoption and implementation of SEL in school districts.

District leadership appears to be very important in the process of adopting and implementing SEL. An SEL initiative seems to have a greater chance of thriving if

district leaders are championing the initiative (Hinton, 2017). As one SEL director stated:

I think the superintendent's advocacy was absolutely huge, or continues to be huge, and the way he speaks to it . . . it's not like it's something separate. He will speak to, these are skills that our students need in order to be successful in life . . . these are the characteristics that we look for when we are hiring staff. . . . These practices are expected of us as well as providing our services to our customers, to our students.

Training and guiding central office personnel and campus principals in this work is also vital: "Make sure the administration knows, sees, respects, and understands the significance of SEL."

As noted in Table 4, leadership responsibility for SEL programs and practices varied from district to district. Although some campus administrators and teachers coordinated the district SEL programs and practices, usually district leaders such as counseling supervisors, assistant superintendents, or SEL directors spearheaded the initiative. Based on the responses from some districts, one explanation for this outcome is that district leaders had been exposed to SEL at a conference or training and now have the knowledge to guide the SEL initiative.

In addition to district leaders championing and leading SEL initiatives, the importance of assembling an inclusive steering committee to plan for the adoption of SEL was mentioned by many respondents. A steering committee can build a roadmap for the SEL initiative. One respondent emphasized how critical it was to craft a comprehensive plan:

Number one, I think you have to have a very solid plan in place first. The plan that revolves around people, programs, and processes, and have an end in mind. What are we shooting for because for us, there is no doubt . . . we know why we're doing it and what our district wants to achieve.

Both Rogers (2003) and CASEL (“District-level SEL,” n.d.) advocate for this type of deep planning in the adoption stage of a new SEL program or practice.

Numerous districts indicated that getting the educators on board at the beginning of the SEL initiative cannot be overstated. Teachers and counselors must have input into what SEL programs and practices are adopted, since they will be primarily responsible for implementing SEL with students. Their support must be actively garnered through information sharing and conversation. As Elias (2017) asserts: “Buy-in never happens through compliance, command, and control. It happens through understanding” (para. 5). This support, however, can be difficult to obtain; as a respondent stated, “We realize that changing the mindsets of some adults in the organization is the most challenging part of the process.”

Obtaining funding for implementing SEL programs and practices was mentioned by respondents as a barrier. This finding might be explained because some districts indicated that they lacked knowledge about the cost of funding SEL programs and practices. Although some SEL programs and practices cost money, others are free for schools to use. In addition, SEL practices like building a positive campus culture and climate are not dependent on financial resources. Multiple respondents stated that the most important resource that schools can provide to teachers who are utilizing SEL

programs and practices is time for planning, implementing, and evaluating the SEL programs and practices taking place on the campus. As one urban district responded:

SEL takes time out of the schedule for the expressive instruction piece . . . it takes time for a group of people to meet and to plan around SEL and analyze the data that they have in order to set goals and all of that, and then it just takes time to plan and put into practice SEL practices for an entire campus. Aside from explicit instruction, if you're gonna [*sic*] do things to build a positive climate and culture, those things take time.

Fidelity of implementation was cited often by the respondents as a challenge to fully integrating SEL into their district. Respondents indicated that they are struggling to implement SEL in all of their schools. At the same time, schools find it difficult to ensure consistency from one classroom to another. These challenges are similar to implementing a new reading or math program across a district or within a school. It takes time for new initiatives to become fully established in a district (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003).

Similarly, sustainability of SEL programs and practices remains a formidable challenge for school districts. Some respondents indicated that their SEL initiative was waning because of competing priorities, usually standardized testing. To ensure SEL remains viable throughout the school district, districts recommended integrating SEL training with other professional development in the district and to explicitly highlight the connections between SEL and other subject areas (Berman, 2018). In addition, some respondents advised that the same SEL programs and practices be implemented across all

K-12 grade levels, in order to provide continuity among elementary, middle, and high schools.

Finally, some districts indicated that a barrier to their SEL implementation is their lack of knowledge about SEL. They are interested in learning more about SEL from other districts. To assist in addressing this need, this research has led to the creation of a publicly accessible, statewide SEL database. This tool may provide Texas educators an opportunity to learn from other districts' implementation of SEL programs and practices. However, only 18% of respondents said they would like to be included in the database. The low response rate was a surprising outcome and raised multiple questions: Don't districts want more information about SEL? If not, why not? Are they concerned about their information being publicly accessible? Are they worried about the perception that they are not implementing SEL at a high level? The answers to these questions are unknown at this point in time and may be appropriate for further research and investigation. One suburban district was adamant, though, about creating an SEL network within Texas:

I just think it would be really awesome to have like a cadre or a group regionally or even across the state of campuses, districts that are in different points along the way . . . just some way to network better with each other, to help each other along the way, would be awesome. People are kind of in small districts like I am and just kind of figuring this out and being able to learn from people who are a couple of steps ahead of you . . . would be amazing.

Another respondent concurred with this statement, emphasizing the importance of connecting with other districts that are implementing SEL programs and practices:

“Arrange for schools to learn from each other. Organizing site visits for school leaders to visit nearby schools to see SEL in action and to work collaboratively [with districts who] have given lots of mileage to SEL efforts.” These comments by respondents suggest that some districts are eager to learn more about SEL so that their initiatives can be effectively implemented.

Research Question #4

The final question for this research was “What is the relationship between adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices and Texas public school district characteristics?”

Using a regression model, an analysis was conducted to explore which school district characteristics and survey items were most related to perceived SEL effectiveness. Student enrollment, the degree to which district staff believed that SEL programs and practices were being implemented as intended, and the discipline rate were regressed on perceived SEL effectiveness. Together, the model explained 22% of the variance between variables. This small association suggests that these district characteristics had little collective effect on perceived SEL effectiveness. Over three fourths of the variance (78%) could be attributed to factors not analyzed in this research, such as superintendent leadership, tenure of teachers and administrators, other district initiatives, or socio-economic status of the students.

A statistically significant correlation between district size and perceived SEL effectiveness was observed. Based on the responses from districts, this possible association may have occurred because larger districts often have more financial and personnel resources to effectively implement programs; some rural and charter districts

indicated that they struggled to find the money to pay for SEL programs. Another possible explanation for this result would be that smaller districts might not have the financial or personnel resources to allocate towards evaluation of their SEL programs and practices. Most of the districts that reported they were not evaluating their SEL initiatives were rural or charter districts.

One finding that should be noted is the negative correlation between the discipline rate and perceived SEL effectiveness. Although the association does not reflect a causal relationship, some respondents attributed their lower discipline rates to SEL implementation. Based on the responses of districts with high discipline rates, this outcome may have also occurred because these districts may be not be consistently implementing their SEL programs and practices.

The degree to which districts were implementing SEL programs and practices as intended was the only variable that was associated with high perceived effectiveness. This is a logical outcome: districts that believe they are implementing SEL with fidelity would most likely also believe that their SEL programs and practices are effective. Conversely, a district that did not feel that they were implementing SEL consistently was more likely to state that their SEL initiative was ineffective.

There was a trend for urban/suburban school districts to implement SEL more frequently than rural school districts. Based on the responses of some rural districts, this outcome may have occurred because some of these smaller districts were unaware of SEL programs and practices. Other rural districts stated they were in the process of beginning their SEL initiative.

Results from using Pearson's Correlation Coefficients suggested that school districts with higher perceived SEL effectiveness also had a higher student enrollment, lower discipline rate, and higher academic rating. As previously mentioned, higher student enrollment may be associated with higher perceived SEL effectiveness because larger districts might have more resources to allocate towards an SEL initiative. Regarding the higher academic rating, SEL programs and practices can yield increased academic scores (Zins & Elias, 2007; Durlak et al., 2011), which may be the reason why these districts scores are higher. Similarly, the lower discipline rate may also be the result of the SEL initiative (Bradshaw, Waasdorp & Leaf, 2012; Lewis et al., 2013; Wyman et al., 2010).

The degree to which respondents rated the perceived effectiveness of SEL in their district was unrelated to expenditures per student. One possible explanation for this result is that financial resources are not a key component of effective SEL implementation. According to Jones, Bailey, Brush, and Kahn (2017), social and emotional competencies can be taught effectively with little or no financial support.

Finally, a negative relationship was observed between district expenditures per student and SEL implementation. At first glance, this finding appears to be counterintuitive; most people might assume that districts with greater financial resources would be more likely to fund SEL programs and practices. However, it is important to note that expenditures per student may have no relationship with expenditures on SEL programs and practices. One possible reason for this finding was the high level of perceived effectiveness by charter school districts participating in this study; most often,

these districts spend a lower amount per student than non-charter school districts (Nix, 2017).

Connections to Conceptual Frameworks

The conceptual frameworks described in Chapter I provided a foundation for this research. The steps many districts took in the adoption and implementation process of their SEL programs and practices corresponded with the stages of the Diffusion of Innovations theory for organizations (Rogers, 2003):

1. Agenda-Setting—multiple school districts indicated that they adopted SEL programs and practices because of students’ emotional or behavioral issues. A problem was acknowledged and a needs assessment was administered.
2. Matching—many school districts indicated that they took ample amount of time to research the best SEL programs or practices that would align with their district mission/vision and community values. Quite often an inclusive committee was formed to drive and coordinate the decision-making process.
3. Refining/Restructuring—once the SEL program or practice was adopted, school districts often adjusted their SEL implementation based on pertinent factors or challenges. District leaders needed to address different degrees of acceptance of the new SEL initiative by stakeholders; innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards (Rogers,2003) experienced varied comfort levels with the SEL innovation.
4. Clarifying—thorough communication throughout the SEL adoption and implementation process seemed to be an important step for school districts to take. This transparent communication led to more buy-in from stakeholders.

5. Routinizing—fidelity of SEL implementation was a priority of many school districts. Consistency of implementation between and within schools continues to be a challenge. Sustainability was often mentioned as a goal.

Other tenets of the Diffusion of Innovations theory parallel the components of this study. The adoption of new SEL programs and practices was a change (innovation) for school districts, with most of them having launched SEL initiatives over the past three years. Relative advantage (the level of perceived benefit an innovation will provide in regard to the present situation) was discussed during the initial planning stages; districts carefully examined evidence-based programs and practices, talked to other districts, consulted with national experts, and visited model schools to ensure they chose SEL programs and practices that would address the needs of the campuses. Compatibility (the degree to which an innovation aligns with current thinking or belief system) was also a factor in the SEL adoption process; respondents stated how important it was for the SEL programs or practices to align with district goals and community values. Complexity (how challenging the innovation is to comprehend or implement) and trialability (the degree to which an innovation may be applied on a smaller scale before infusion into the entire system) were often mentioned as significant factors in choosing SEL programs and practices; “ease of implementation” and “practicality” were cited by districts as reasons for adopting certain programs or practices. Observability (how easily the outcomes of an innovation can be noticed) was taken into consideration when adopting SEL; whether or not the programs and practices could be assessed was a factor in the selection process.

The SEL adoption and implementation process that many districts utilized also aligned with the components of CASEL’s Comprehensive Framework (CASEL, 2013), the other conceptual model for this research:

1. Communicate SEL as a priority to stakeholders—multiple respondents highlighted the importance of creating a sense of urgency for implementing SEL. Districts reported that teachers, administrators, and parents should first understand the “why” of adopting SEL programs and practices in order to secure buy-in. Communication must be clear and ongoing.
2. Develop a district-wide vision and plan—school districts highlighted the significance of assembling an inclusive team to thoughtfully craft a long-term roadmap for implementing SEL programs and practices. Focusing on district and community principles, as well as student data, were recommended by the districts. “Go slow to go faster later” was a common theme expressed by the respondents.
3. Align financial and human resources—although money is tight in most school districts, some survey respondents stated that financial resources must be allocated to the SEL initiative in order for it to thrive. As one district reported, “We can’t ask teachers to do something without any resources behind it.” Funding is necessary for professional development and materials.
4. Build expertise and capacity— a number of respondents talked about how critical it is for someone to be leading the SEL programs and practices at the central office level. Other districts utilized SEL coaches or specialists to coordinate the SEL efforts at each campus. Implementing SEL programs and

practices with fidelity within the district and expanding SEL program at different grade levels were goals of many districts.

5. Conduct SEL-related resources and needs assessments—respondents indicated that the administration of needs assessments to students, teachers, and parents was helpful in determining what type of SEL programs or practices would be most effective within the school district.
6. Design and implement professional development programs—districts mentioned how invaluable ongoing SEL training was for sustaining the programs and practices over a long period of time.
7. Integrate SEL with district initiatives, such as academic curriculum and equity efforts—respondents emphasized the importance of making SEL connections with academic content areas in order for the SEL initiative to have a greater chance of being infused throughout the district. Districts also mentioned that reducing the inequities with under-served populations of students was an impetus for SEL adoption.
8. Adopt and implement evidence-based programming—respondents placed a high value on choosing SEL programs and practices that were supported by research.
9. Develop K-12 SEL standards—none of the school districts mentioned K-12 SEL state standards specifically (Texas does not currently have K-12 SEL standards), but a few respondents stated that implementation of the same SEL programs and practices across K-12 grade levels provided consistency for administrators, teachers, and students.

10. Establish systems of continuous improvement—while many respondents stated that they have a process for evaluating the effectiveness of their SEL implementation, some of them were not satisfied with the quality of the process. Others reported that they have not adopted a process at this point in time.

Implications

As I reviewed the data collected from the questionnaire and statistical analyses, I was searching for over-arching commonalities that would become the foundation for the implications of this study. I repeatedly asked myself the following question: What did the respondents keep emphasizing—over and over—either explicitly or implicitly? After much thought, I landed on the following three key ideas for the implications of the study: leadership, change process, and campus and district culture. Although each idea will cover unique topics, there are connections among all of the ideas.

Leadership

Based on the quantitative and qualitative outcomes of this research, leadership of the SEL initiative appears to be a critical component of successful implementation. Effective management of programs and practices by district leaders can lead to school improvement (Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). As indicated in Table 17, having a district SEL coordinator was associated with the highest level of perceived SEL effectiveness compared to other individuals leading the initiative. For those districts with many central office staff and substantial resources, it is recommended that they create a position focused on SEL in order to organize and synchronize the SEL programs and practices being implemented. For other districts, it is suggested that responsibility for SEL

programs and practices be explicitly assigned to an individual within the district who has the credibility and capacity to successfully lead the SEL initiative. Since district leaders can often be preoccupied with other initiatives, specific expectations for this role should be clearly communicated to the SEL leader and shared with the community.

Leadership of the SEL initiative affects many stages of the adoption and implementation process. Before the adoption process begins, SEL leaders can assist in the formation of an inclusive SEL steering committee in order to hear the voices of all stakeholder groups. During the adoption process, they can help guide the committee in aligning the community's core beliefs with potential SEL programs and practices. In addition, the SEL leaders can support the steering committee's administration of needs assessments of staff, parents and students, which may provide a rationale for adopting SEL programs and practices.

SEL leaders can also influence the supports and barriers of SEL implementation. In order to maximize buy-in, SEL leaders can set up two-way communication systems within and outside the district in order to keep everyone informed and solicit feedback. They can assist in developing a comprehensive, on-going system for delivering SEL training to staff and parents. The leaders may be able to allocate funding for the SEL programs and practices. They can also advise campus administrators on how to build time into campus calendars to regularly plan and monitor SEL implementation. Lastly, SEL leaders have the opportunity to adopt meaningful tools to measure the effectiveness of the district's SEL programs and practices.

Change Process

As leaders guide the SEL initiative, they must be cognizant of the change process involved with implementation of new programs and practices. Change affects all aspects of an organization and leaders must be skilled in orchestrating the scope and pace of the change (Hughes, Beatty, & Dinwoodie, 2014). Leaders must create an environment that values the individuals who work in the organization as well as the policies and procedures of the system.

One of the key steps in the change process is to first address the needs of the adult stakeholders in order to ensure buy-in and successful implementation (Rogers, 2003; Hord et al., 1987). Many respondents stated that it is imperative that any SEL initiative starts with a focus on the adults in the school district. Central office leaders, campus staff, and parents must understand why SEL matters and how SEL will be implemented in the district. Most of the districts shared the opinion of this respondent:

Something that was effective was to focus on adults first. . . . I think it was helpful for everyone to really just spend some time hearing about SEL, just getting comfortable with social-emotional learning as a practice and not as a one-time thing or a program.

Even though the end result of an SEL initiative is to implement SEL programs and practices with students, districts must take adequate time to create a sense of urgency with campus staff and to provide thorough professional development on how SEL can impact student behavior, academic achievement, and future success. Being proactive and providing training up front about why SEL is so critical to student development creates

buy-in, which was mentioned many times by respondents as being crucial to long-term SEL sustainability. As one SEL coordinator stated:

By the time we started implementing SEL it was actually very little resistance. . . . People understand why we're doing it. We're very big on providing the research behind it. We give people context and we try to be proactive that way to make sure everybody understands why we're doing the work that we're doing and how it's connected to the other things that we're doing as a district and how important it is.

A key element in the change process is providing appropriate and timely professional development, which must not only provide the rationale for SEL but also offer skill training for staff. For example, teachers must be taught why building relationships with students is important and also *how* to build relationships with students. One respondent mentioned why teachers must be trained in this area:

We've been so test driven that a lot of the times we forget to be empathetic and we forget the things that our kids are going through and the challenges and the assets that they bring. And we're so fixated on the things that we have to do. Again, we spend about a year and a half just teaching you how to build relationships.

In addition, a district SEL initiative must prioritize concern and compassion for campus staff. Working in a school can be very stressful and demanding (Will, 2017b). A respondent believed it should be a district priority to focus on the “self-care” of employees. School administrators and teachers must feel empowered to attend to their own social and emotional needs (Will, 2017a). As one SEL coordinator stated:

One of the things that . . . was going to be really important was not expecting teachers to teach something that they weren't fluent in themselves. That they weren't doing for themselves already. So . . . learning how to take care of themselves emotionally before they were able to take care of the kids.

The district that was devastated by the hurricane dedicated time to addressing the teachers' social and emotional needs during and after the crisis.

During the SEL change process, leaders must pay close attention to which SEL programs and practices are selected by the district. In my current role as SEL Director in a large, public school district, every week I receive one or more emails from vendors wanting to sell our school district a new SEL program or practice. Districts must remain vigilant to only adopt an SEL curriculum that aligns with their needs. Utilization of a certain SEL program or practice may not solve a particular problem identified by the district. It is critical to match the appropriate SEL program or practice with the right problem.

The change process must also be closely monitored and regulated by leaders so that administrators and teachers do not become overwhelmed with the SEL initiative. To ensure that the initiative is manageable, many respondents suggested that districts limit the number of SEL programs and practices being adopted at the beginning of their SEL journey. As one respondent stated: "Start small and build over the years. Don't try everything at once." Another way to ensure the SEL initiative is manageable is to simplify the number of SEL competencies being taught. One researcher points out the rationale for doing this:

Currently, leaders of social-emotional-learning and character education programs are making big demands on educators' time and attention. They argue that schools must help students cultivate aspirations, belonging, curiosity, decency, engagement, flexible thinking, grit, happiness, intrinsic interest, and so on. Meanwhile, teachers must try desperately to squeeze 365 days of academic content into 180-day school years. (Gehlbach, 2017, para. 2)

Instead of teaching a large number of SEL competencies, districts can choose a few of them—like social connectedness, motivation, and self-regulation—which the teachers will highlight throughout the school year. One issue with this idea is that it may affect the implementation of the SEL programs and practices as they were originally intended.

Finally, the change process must address the consistency of SEL implementation. Many respondents reported that their districts struggle with implementing SEL regularly across the entire district and/or within schools. All classrooms are not implementing the explicit SEL curriculum as intended, which means following the prescribed scope and sequence. As mentioned in Chapter IV, a tension exists between implementing SEL with fidelity and customizing the programs and practices based on the unique contexts and settings of each school. By acknowledging this tension, campus and district leaders can have meaningful discussions with teachers about how to maintain the integrity of the principles of the SEL curricula while having the flexibility to adjust as needed.

A cautionary note should be offered regarding the difference between implementing SEL with fidelity and standardizing SEL. School leaders believe that some degree of SEL consistency from school to school and classroom to classroom is important to advancing an SEL initiative but worry about overly-restrictive mandates that

could actually be counterproductive to SEL implementation (Rennie Center & ASCD, 2016). Some educators are concerned that SEL may lead to another standardized test, even though research suggests that SEL implementation should not be included in state accountability systems (Melnick, Cook-Harvey, & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Finding the balance between ensuring all teachers commit to SEL instruction and allowing them the professional latitude to differentiate SEL lessons based on students' individual needs should be an ongoing source of dialogue amongst educators.

Campus and District Culture

The culture of a campus or district is determined by its “norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals” (Peterson & Deal, 1998, p. 1). Culture is also affected by what leaders notice and communicate to their stakeholders (Schein, 2004); what leaders acknowledge, measure, or reward can dictate the behavior and beliefs of their employees. Knowing the importance of embedding SEL into a campus and district culture (Aspen Institute, 2017), SEL leaders can explicitly or subtly communicate their expectations for SEL implementation by what they promote and highlight. SEL programs and practices can be woven into campus and district culture in a variety of ways under the guidance of SEL leaders.

The effectiveness of an SEL initiative can increase when the SEL programs and practices are integrated throughout the school day (“SEL Integration in Schools,” n.d.). Social and emotional learning has a better chance of being embedded into a campus or district culture when it is connected to other programs and practices that have already been established (Weisberg & O’Brien, 2004; Berkowitz & Bier, 2007). Students need an opportunity to apply their SEL knowledge and skills in other school settings besides

the class where they are receiving their regular explicit SEL instruction. As one national SEL researcher asserts:

I'd suggest that the biggest gap is taking SEL from the specific lessons and figuring out how to infuse it into the rest of the school day, week, and environment. You can teach kids anything you want . . . in one short lesson a week, but it's only going to get . . . maximum effect if kids are cued and reminded and reinforced throughout the day, in class, at lunch, recess, hallways, etc. I honestly don't think we've done enough on that. (B. Smith, personal communication, September 3, 2017)

Teachers can embed SEL concepts into their teaching in a variety of ways. For example, teachers can promote a growth mindset in math class. During an English/Language Arts class, teachers are able to relate literature themes to friendship and empathy. Cafeteria monitors can promote cooperation and respect during the lunch period. By weaving SEL concepts into all aspects of the school day, students' social and emotional competencies can develop at a higher level (Aspen Institute, 2017). As one respondent stated, "It's not just a program, it's how we do business. This is how we conduct ourselves." As indicated in Table 8, many of the SEL initiatives in Texas school districts are currently being delivered in core and elective classes.

Conversely, the explicit SEL lessons will not have their intended effect if teachers do not demonstrate their own social and emotional competencies. In one district, students were taught a lesson on anger management in advisory class. During the next class period, an administrator noticed that a teacher—who had just taught the anger management lesson—was *yelling* at her students to behave. In order for SEL to take deep

root into a campus or district culture, educators must model the SEL skills they are teaching their students.

Another way to assimilate SEL into a campus or district culture is to prioritize professional development on the connections between SEL and academic achievement. Both administrators and teachers must receive extensive training in the cognitive science of learning, which suggests that academic attainment and social/emotional knowledge and skills are intimately related. One district emphasized this point:

One of the greatest challenges that we have faced has been the misperception that schools and their leaders have to choose between SEL and academics. This is usually the case as schools begin the work because they may not have context at that point and don't understand that SEL and academics are complementary efforts.

Teachers may implement SEL more consistently when they value socially and emotionally safe learning environments as precursors for student achievement: “[SEL] isn’t something else on the plate—this is our plate. Once you get the plate established, everything else flourishes” (Rennie Center & ASCD, 2016, p. 27).

A campus and district culture can also be positively affected by including student voice (Smyth, 2006). Honoring student input may assist a campus or district in embedding SEL into their culture, since students in elementary, middle, and high schools have a unique perspective of their educational setting (McKibben, 2004). When students are involved in the planning of SEL programs and practices, there is a strong possibility that the SEL lessons and activities will resonate with them. One respondent stated how

powerful it was for students to actively participate in the instructional component of their district's SEL initiative:

I think the [SEL programs and practices] are very effective . . . because the kids are leading it. If you can get to the point of anything where students are the ones teaching and we're all just facilitators, helping them be present and keep things moving, you know you've reached where you want to be.

Lastly, SEL programs and practices may be integrated into a campus or district culture at a higher level if and when the Texas State Board of Education adopts K-12 SEL standards. Currently, Texas provides standards for core and elective courses in all grade levels, but there are no expectations for teaching social and emotional competencies. Without SEL standards in place, some Texas school districts may not be implementing SEL because they know it is not a state mandate. Recently, the state legislature has demonstrated some interest in SEL (mainly because of the increase in school shootings) which may someday lead to the adoption of K-12 SEL standards. Having state SEL standards that are equally as important as current academic standards may result in increased SEL implementation in Texas school districts. As mentioned earlier, nearly 75% of principals nationwide advocate for state SEL standards (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, n.d.).

Future Research

Although this study provided an initial examination of the SEL programs and practices that have been adopted and implemented in Texas public school districts, there are many opportunities for additional research on this topic. Since approximately 10% of the 1216 public school districts in Texas participated in this study, further research to

gauge the implementation of SEL programs and practices in the other 90% of the districts could provide a more comprehensive understanding of this topic and a more complete database that might be collected and compared over time. For the districts that participated in this study, a follow-up survey in the next 3-5 years might offer insight into the rate of SEL adoption and sustainability of the programs and practices currently being implemented.

This study focused on SEL implementation in public school districts in Texas. A replication of this research in other states could add perspective to this study. A comparison of the levels of SEL adoption and perceived effectiveness between states with and without explicit K-12 standards might have value.

Another potential topic of research relates to the disparity of district discipline rates. The number of discipline referrals reported on the TEA website totaled less than 10% of some districts' student enrollment, while other districts' referral numbers were over 100% of their enrollment. Since Texas is one of fifteen states that allows corporal punishment in its school districts (Beale, 2017), some of the responding districts may also be utilizing this discipline consequence. Although 70% of the respondents indicated that they are implementing SEL programs and practices, a tension may exist between some districts' punitive disciplinary systems and SEL philosophy. Having state SEL standards could potentially increase the conversation about disciplinary practices across the diverse landscape of Texas, which might even lead to changes in district policy. Research on the connections between disciplinary practices, equity issues, and SEL implementation may yield meaningful outcomes.

Case studies focused on one or a few districts' SEL initiatives could be conducted, as well. These studies could hone in on the experiences of the entire district or individual schools related to the adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices. Case studies could also concentrate on the perspectives of different stakeholders in a district, including principals, teachers, students, or parents.

The role of the superintendent in the adoption and implementation of SEL programs and practices might also be an interesting research topic. Given the importance of leadership that emerged from this study, superintendent experiences with SEL initiatives could add value to this body of research.

Many districts reported that assessment of SEL in their district has been challenging. Additional research could be focused on the supports and barriers for implementing a meaningful system for evaluating SEL programs and practices. An investigation into the types of assessment systems that are yielding the most positive results could occur, as well.

As mentioned earlier, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) offers funding to state education agencies to measure students' SEL competencies, even though no state (including Texas) has done so at this point in time (Blad, 2017a). Research could be conducted on why states have not used this federal aid for SEL assessment and what plans they have for the future.

Finally, although 70% of the respondents stated that their SEL programs and practices were effective, these responses were based on their personal experiences and perspectives. No criteria for determining effectiveness was provided in this study. More research, especially quasi-experimental research, can always be done investigating the

impact of different SEL programs and practices in different districts and campuses, across a wide variety of settings and contexts.

Final Thoughts

As noted in the literature review, societies have valued social and emotional competencies for over two millennia, spanning as far back to the ancient civilizations of Egypt, China, India, and Greece. I believe it is important to share this historical fact with educators. SEL is not a new phenomenon; it has been around for a long time. What is new, though, is the recent interest in SEL over the past two decades due in part to the growing body of research in the field of cognitive development:

After an approximately 400-year separation, armed with new empirical data, a growing number of educators and scientists are now advocating for an end to the schism between reason and emotion. Recognizing that emotion plays a critical role in problem-solving and decision-making, they argue that SEL is an essential component for developing one's full potential. (Baron, 2013, p. 40)

Based on my interactions with dozens of school districts from around the nation, educators and parents are extremely eager to adopt SEL programs and practices. They are exasperated with the overemphasis placed on high stakes testing and desire a more balanced, child-centered approach to teaching and learning. As mentioned earlier, over 90% of principals and teachers believe that SEL benefits their students (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, n.d.; DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, n.d.). The interest in SEL has united these stakeholders in a unique way that has infrequently occurred in our nation's past:

The idea of integrating the social, emotional, and academic dimensions of learning—and the promise of improving our children’s outcomes and unleashing the power of schools and communities as spaces that nurture their full development—has galvanized the educational community’s interest with an enthusiasm rarely seen in the history of American education. (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, n.d., para. 1)

School districts must understand that they do not have to choose between academics *or* SEL. Because of the symbiotic relationship between cognitive, social, and emotional learning (Goleman, 1995; Hinton & Fischer, 2010), both rigorous content and SEL can be prioritized. Since academic achievement is typically a primary goal of school districts, traditional subject matter is rightly emphasized; however, SEL can enhance the teaching and learning of academic content that takes place in each classroom. In addition, the attainment of strong social and emotional competencies *and* academic knowledge and skills can assist students later in college, careers, and life:

Students who have a sense of belonging and purpose, who can work well with classmates and peers to solve problems, who can plan and set goals, and who can persevere through challenges—in addition to being literate, numerate, and versed in scientific concepts and ideas—are more likely to maximize their opportunities and reach their full potential. (Jones and Kahn, 2017, p. 4)

In order for districts to incorporate both academics and SEL, we need an updated blueprint for teaching and learning in our schools, based on meeting the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of every student. Schools must offer comprehensive SEL

programs and practices to *all* students throughout the school year. As Goleman (1995) wrote over twenty years ago:

At present we leave the emotional education of our children to chance, with ever more disastrous results. One solution is a new vision of what schools can do to educate the whole student, bringing together mind and heart in the classroom. (p. xiii)

By uniting the mind and heart in classrooms, the SEL movement has the potential to truly alter the trajectory of schooling in the United States. As one respondent asserted in an interview:

SEL is transformation work . . . you are transformers . . . and until you see yourselves that way, you're gonna [*sic*] be stuck in this widget factory, you know? And I think that's what our brain science is teaching us right now, is that we should give ourselves permission to be transformational. In education, in therapy, in whatever it is that we're doing to try and help other human beings be better people.

I look forward to the day when SEL has truly transformed public school districts . . . deep in the heart of Texas.

APPENDIX SECTION

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Appendix A

Request for Participation and Questionnaire

My name is Peter Price and I am a doctoral student at Texas State University and the Director for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) in Austin ISD. For my dissertation, I am conducting a research study to examine the SEL programs and practices being implemented in Texas public school districts. You are being asked to complete this questionnaire because you are a superintendent in one of those districts. You may choose to have a designee complete the questionnaire on your behalf. Participation is voluntary. The questionnaire will take 10-15 minutes to complete. There are no anticipated risks to participation in this study. I ask that you try to answer all questions; however, if there are any items that you prefer to skip, please leave the answer blank.

Your responses will remain confidential. Your identity and the name of your school district will not be disclosed unless you choose to participate in a voluntary, statewide SEL database. The publicly accessible database will include only the name of your school district, SEL programs and practices being implemented, the grade levels the SEL programs and practices are being implemented, the length of time the SEL programs and practices have been implemented, and your contact information. There will also be an opportunity to participate in a voluntary, follow-up phone interview. If you choose to participate and are selected to be interviewed, your name and the name of your school district will not be disclosed in the research.

It is anticipated that the data collected from this research will be published in a statewide SEL database in order to provide district and campus leaders, such as yourself, with useful information regarding the SEL programs and practices being implemented in

Texas. It is hoped that this information will help you and other leaders make informed decisions as well as assist you in networking with other districts across the state about SEL programs and practices. As a participating district in this research, I will share the results of this study and the SEL database with you as soon as they are available.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, feel free to contact me, Peter Price (php10@txstate.edu) or my faculty advisor, Dr. Barry Aidman (bja14@txstate.edu).

This project #2018651 was approved by the Texas State Institutional Review Board (IRB) on May 29, 2018. Pertinent questions or concerns about the research, research participants' rights, and/or research-related injuries to participants should be directed to the IRB chair, Dr. Denise Gobert 512-245-8351 (dgobert@txstate.edu) or to Monica Gonzales, IRB Regulatory Manager 512-245-2334 (meg201@txstate.edu).

If you would prefer not to participate in this study, please do not fill out the questionnaire. If you consent to participate, please open the link to the questionnaire below. My hope is to have completed questionnaires submitted by June 15, 2018.

Questionnaire on Social and Emotional Learning

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Deep in the Heart of Texas: An Examination of the Social and Emotional Learning Programs in the Lone Star State's Public School Districts

Thank you for agreeing to complete this questionnaire.

1. What is the name of your school district?
2. What is your school district's county/district number?
3. Is your district implementing any social and emotional learning (SEL) programs or practices?
 - Yes
 - No. (If you respond "No", please elaborate in the space provided. Are there reasons your district has not implemented SEL programs and practices? Have

you considered implementing any SEL programs and practices? If so, where are you in the process? Your comments will be helpful in my analysis.)

- ☐ Unsure
- 4. Is there someone responsible for leading SEL in your district?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
 - ☐ Unsure
- 5. Who is primarily responsible for leading SEL in your district?
 - ☐ Superintendent
 - ☐ Assistant/Associate Superintendent
 - ☐ Curriculum Coordinator
 - ☐ SEL Director/Coordinator
 - ☐ Campus Administrator
 - ☐ Teacher
 - ☐ Unsure
 - ☐ Other
- 6. What SEL programs or practices have been adopted by your district? (An SEL program or practice is a curriculum or strategy that promotes the social and emotional knowledge, attitudes and skill development of students.) Check all that apply and add others as appropriate.
 - ☐ Second Step
 - ☐ School Connect
 - ☐ Capturing Kids' Hearts
 - ☐ Responsive Classroom
 - ☐ Conscious Discipline
 - ☐ Positive Action
 - ☐ Open Circle
 - ☐ Lions Quest
 - ☐ Restorative Practices
 - ☐ Mindfulness
 - ☐ Other
- 7. How long have you been implementing the programs or practices?
 - ☐ Years
 - ☐ Months
 - ☐ Additional comments
- 8. At what grade levels are the SEL programs or practices being implemented? (check all that apply) Write the name of the programs or practices that are being next to the appropriate grade level.
 - ☐ Elementary School
 - ☐ Junior High/Middle School
 - ☐ High School
 - ☐ Alternative Campuses
 - ☐ Other
- 9. Where are the SEL programs and practices being delivered? (check all that apply)
 - ☐ Core content classroom
 - ☐ Elective classroom

- Advisory classroom
 - Assemblies
 - Other
10. How often are the SEL programs or practices being implemented in the district?
- Daily
 - Weekly
 - Monthly
 - Once/twice each semester
 - Other
11. The SEL programs and practices in our district are being implemented as intended.
- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Additional comments
12. How do you evaluate the results of your SEL programs or practices? (check all that apply)
- SEL assessments
 - Climate surveys
 - Discipline data
 - We don't evaluate the results.
 - Other.
 - Additional comments
13. How would you describe the effectiveness of the SEL programs or practices?
- Very effective
 - Moderately effective
 - Slightly effective
 - Ineffective
 - Unsure
 - Additional comments
14. What were the reasons for adopting SEL programs or practices?
15. What process did you use to select the SEL programs or practices?
16. What factors were most helpful or important in the implementation of SEL programs or practices?
17. What have been the challenges or difficulties in implementing SEL programs or practices?
18. What recommendations do you have for other districts considering implementation of SEL programs or practices?
19. Is there anything else you would like to share about the SEL programs and practices in your district?
20. Our district would like to be included in a statewide SEL database that includes only the name of our district, the SEL programs and practices being implemented in our district, the grade levels the SEL programs and practices are being implemented, the length of time the SEL programs and practices have been implemented, and our contact information. (Your district will be contacted prior to the publication of the database in order to verify accuracy of the data.)

- Yes.

Please include the name of your school district, person to contact, email address, and telephone number below.

- No

21. If you would like to be considered for a voluntary, follow-up phone interview, please provide your name and phone number below.

Thank you for participating in the questionnaire. Your responses have been recorded.

Appendix B

IRB Certificate of Approval



In future correspondence please refer to 2018651

May 29, 2018

Peter Price
Texas State University
601 University Drive.
San Marcos, TX 78666

Dear Peter:

Your IRB application 2018651 titled "Deep in the Heart of Texas: An Examination of the Social and Emotional Learning Programs and Practices in the Lone Star State's Public School Districts" was reviewed and approved by the Texas State University IRB. It has been determined that risks to subjects are: (1) minimized and reasonable; and that (2) research procedures are consistent with a sound research design and do not expose the subjects to unnecessary risk. Reviewers determined that: (1) benefits to subjects are considered along with the importance of the topic and that outcomes are reasonable; (2) selection of subjects is equitable; and (3) the purposes of the research and the research setting is amenable to subjects' welfare and producing desired outcomes; that indications of coercion or prejudice are absent, and that participation is clearly voluntary.

1. In addition, the IRB found that you need to orient participants as follows: (1) signed informed consent is not required as participation implies consent; (2) Provision is made for collecting, using and storing data in a manner that protects the safety and privacy of the subjects and the confidentiality of the data; (3) Appropriate safeguards are included to protect the rights and welfare of the subjects. (4) Compensation will not be provided for participation in this study.

This project is therefore approved at the Exempt Review Level

2. Please note that the institution is not responsible for any actions regarding this protocol before approval. If you expand the project at a later date to use other instruments, please re-apply. Copies of your request for human subjects review, your application, and this approval, are maintained in the Office of Research Integrity and Compliance.

Report any changes to this approved protocol to this office. All unanticipated events and adverse events are to be reported to the IRB within 3 days.

Sincerely,

Monica Gonzales
IRB Regulatory Manager
Office of Research Integrity and Compliance

CC: Dr. Barry Aidman

OFFICE OF THE ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH
601 University Drive | JCK #489 | San Marcos, Texas 78666-4616
Phone: 512.245.2314 | fax: 512.245.3847 | WWW.TXSTATE.EDU

This letter is an electronic communication from Texas State University-San Marcos, a member of The Texas State University System.

APPENDIX C

SEL PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES IMPLEMENTED BY DISTRICT RESPONDENTS

Alcohol and Drug Abuse program
AVID
Bucket Filling
Capturing Kids' Hearts
Character Traits Curriculum
Choose Kind
Choose Love
Choose to be Nice
Cloud 9
Conscious Discipline
Core Essentials
EarlyActFirstKnight
Feuerstein FIE
HUDDLE
Lions Quest
Mindfulness
Panorama
Positive Action
Positive Behavior Supports Intervention
Project Class
Project Wisdom
Rachel's Challenge
Responsive Classroom
Restorative Practices
RISE Mentoring
Sandford-Harmony
School Connect
Second Step
Solution Focused Counseling and Discipline
Stop and Think
Trauma Informed Practices
W.H.I.M
Why Try

APPENDIX D

DATABASE OF REPORTING DISTRICTS IMPLEMENTING SEL

District	SEL Programs and Practices	Length of Implementation as of 2018	Grade Levels	Contact Information
Arp	Choose Love	Just starting	K-12	John Arrington ar@arpsd.org
Austin Discovery School	Second Step, Conscious Discipline, Restorative Practices, Mindfulness	12 years	K-8	Kelly McRee kmree@austindiscoveryschool.org 512-674-0700
Austin	Second Step, School Connect, Capturing Kids' Hearts, Responsive Classroom, Conscious Discipline, Restorative Practices, Mindfulness	7 years	K-12	Caroline Chase, caroline.chase@austinisd.org 512-414-9690
Bullard	Capturing Kids' Hearts, Choose Love	Just starting	K-12	Todd Schneider todd.schneider@bullardisd.net 903-894-6639
Dripping Springs	Restorative Practices, Mindfulness, Second Step	1 year	K-12	Jenny Sprague jennifer.sprague@dsisdtx.us 512-858-3912
Edgewood	Capturing Kids' Hearts, Conscious Discipline, Mindfulness	3 years	K-8	Judith Torres judith.torres@eisd.net 210-444-1033
Edna	Capturing Kids' Hearts, Restorative Practices	2.5 years	K-12	Robert O'Connor roconnor@ednaisd.org 361-782-3573
El Paso	Second Step, Restorative Practices, Mindfulness, Sanford-Harmony	2 years	K-8	Ray Lozano rslozano@episd.org 915-230-3017
Frenship	Conscious Discipline, Restorative Practices, Character Education	1.5 years	K-12	Cindi Cobb ccobb@frenship.us 806-866-9541
Georgetown	Capturing Kids' Hearts, Mindfulness, Trauma Informed Practices, Core Essentials	3 years	K-12	Jennifer Ashman-Porter ashmanporterj@georgetownisd.org 512-943-5000
Grapevine Colleyville	Capturing Kids' Hearts, Restorative Practices	5 years	K-8	Emberly Hill emberly.hill@gcisd.net 817-251-5415
Greenville	Capturing Kids' Hearts	7 months	K-12	Sharon Boothe boothes@greenvilleisd.com 903-457-2500

Judson	Second Step, Mindfulness, State Comprehensive Model	+5 years	K-12	Monica Garcia mgarcia083@judsonisd.org 210-945-5215
Lubbock	Second Step, School Connect, Conscious Discipline, Restorative Practices	5 years	K-12	Martha Dodge martha.dodge@lubbockisd.org 806-219-0383
Meadowland Charter	Restorative Practices, Mindfulness	3 years	K-12	Donald L. Mills dmills@mlcs.org 830-331-4095
Odyssey Academy	Why Try, The Leader in Me	3 years	K-12	Jennifer Goodman jgoodman@odyssey-academy.com 409-750-9289
Pettus	AVID	1 year	K-12	Jaime Velasco jvelasco@pettusisd.com 361-375-2296
Port Aransas	Restorative Practices, Choose to be Nice, PBIS	2 years	K-12	Sharon McKinney mckinney@paisd.net 361-749-1205
Roscoe Collegiate	Conscious Discipline	2 years	1-5	Andy Wilson awilson@Roscoe.esc14.net
Round Rock	Second Step, Capturing Kids' Hearts, Responsive Classroom, Conscious Discipline, Positive Action, Restorative Practices, Mindfulness	2 years	K-12	Rachelle Finck rachelle_finck@roundrockisd.org 512-464-5631
Salado	Restorative Practices, Mindfulness	2 years	K-12	Beth Aycock, beth.aycock@saladoisd.org
Seguin	Conscious Discipline, Positive Action	1 year	K-5	Seguin ISD 830-372-5771
Somerset	Other	2 years	Alt. campuses	Manuel Campos manuel.campos@sisk12.net
Spring Branch	Capturing Kids' Hearts, Restorative Practices, Mindfulness, Project Class, Cloud 9	3 years	K-12	Natalie Fikac natalie.fikac@springbranchisd.com 512-332-1731

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