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Leader Actions in Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs in K-12 Schools

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Leader Actions in Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs in K-12 Schools

A Thesis

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Contents

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the actions and perspectives of school leaders when implementing social emotional learning programs in their schools. Social emotional learning (SEL) has emerged as a topic for discussion and research in education. Schools all over the country are adopting programs and there is a need for research into how to implement them with fidelity. The main objectives were to understand what leaders value during implementation and what recommendations they have for future leaders implementing similar programs. This qualitative study used descriptive research methods to describe the phenomenon of SEL program implementation in one school district in rural Minnesota. The researcher designed an open-ended interview guide and interviewed a diverse group of school leaders in the district. Several key themes emerged including buy-in, resources, definitions, and school culture. The researcher connected the themes to previous literature and theoretical frameworks. Conclusions and implications were discussed in relation to the field of leadership in general. The research showed that school leaders are tasked with developing a strong school culture that is open to new innovations such as social emotional learning (SEL) programs.

Leader Actions in Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs in K-12 Schools

Introduction

Research documents that social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are beneficial to students and adults in K-12 schools. SEL, as defined by the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2021), is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021). SEL programs vary in content, scope, and sequence but address five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Stefanovic, Reyes-Guerra, and Zorovich-Godek, 2021). School leaders and their teams are charged with the successful implementation and sustainability of these programs.

Aspiring educators around the country learn about Maslow's' Hierarchy of Needs. Students' basic and psychological needs must be met before academic progress can be made. From John Dewey to Daniel Goleman, different theorists over the decades have arrived at similar conclusions. Students develop emotional intelligence in early life, and it can be improved with social and emotional Learning. Emotional Intelligence (EQ or EI) was popularized by Goleman in the mid-1990s. It is the idea that humans have a measurable ability to recognize and understand their own emotions and recognize and understand the emotions of others (Institute for Health and Human Potential, 2021). This emotional intelligence can be nurtured and improved in the school setting. Research shows that SEL programs are successful in addressing these needs.

Attendance, academic success, discipline rates, and instances of bullying can all be positively impacted by SEL.

This study explored the actions and perspectives of K-12 school leaders' experiences when implementing social emotional learning programs. Chapter 1 will define the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the background of the problem, the research questions, limitations and delimitations, the significance of the study, a definition of terms, and summarize the area of inquiry.

Problem Statement

Many studies show the effectiveness of SEL programs, yet it is not clear how school leaders implement SEL programs in schools. Principals believe SEL programs to be effective tools in building positive school culture. Principals agree that a comprehensive implementation plan is needed (Blad, 2017). SEL works when school-wide implementation is in place. Effective school leaders apply SEL norms to staff meetings, emails, and all interactions with students, staff, and community members (CASEL, 2021). This study aims to gather the perspectives of several types of leaders and their experiences implementing SEL into their schools.

More than 30 states are currently adopting SEL programs in the United States (Zhao, 2020). School leaders may be rushed into adopting such programs. Clear implementation strategies are necessary to ensure effective SEL programs. The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning created its own School Guide which includes implementation strategies. A study of 14 schools using CASEL's "School Theory of Action", found some success. The School Theory of Action is a guide for school leaders to help develop a vision and implement SEL programs effectively (Meyers, Domitrovich, Dissi, Trejo, and Greenberg, 2019).

However, the small sample size leaves out other school types. This study aims to collect data from K-12 school leaders in a Southeastern Minnesota school district. As school leaders all over the country are adopting SEL curriculum, they need a blueprint to do so effectively. This study will also attempt to identify implementation strategies by various school leaders in the school district.

Background of the Problem

A myriad of SEL programs are recommended by the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2021). The number of schools adopting SEL programs increased dramatically since 2015. Programs are currently in 67,000 schools affecting 35 million students (Zhao, 2020). School leaders are tasked with the successful implementation of the programs. Any newly adopted program faces challenges in implementation. Programs that aim to address the social and emotional health of the students in the school may take years to fully adopt, however, some schools cut programs after only one year (Bierman, Coie, Dodge, Greenberg, Lochman, McMahon, and Pinderhughes, 2010). Other challenges may include budgetary constraints, lack of administrative or community support, and buy-in of the members of the organization. SEL programs address other significant issues in schools today such as: equity and inclusion, students with adverse childhood experiences, and lack of academic and social-emotional growth due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Recently, K-12 education has had to confront issues regarding equity and inclusion. Schools are looking for frameworks to guide them as they navigate new initiatives or programs. The SEL curriculum and framework aim to address all students' needs by being culturally relevant and inclusionary. Many school leaders may only get one-time training regarding equity

or other short opportunities that are not sufficient in addressing the concern (Ngounou and Gutierrez 2017). A systemic approach is recommended to address equity. SEL programs support educational equity by supporting authentic school-family-community partnerships, fostering trusting and collaborative relationships, promoting rigorous and meaningful curriculum and instruction, and applying ongoing evaluation of policies, practices, and outcomes (CASEL, 2021).

Another set of needs that K –12 schools are attempting to meet is those of students with Adverse Childhood Experiences. Students who have high ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) scores are more likely to have chronic attendance issues, and lower academic success (Stempel, Cox-Martin, Bronsert, Dickinson, and Allison, 2017). This is another area that SEL programs can address. By specifically teaching the 5 competencies, students can increase the skills needed to be successful regardless of adverse childhood experiences.

In fact, the pandemic has exacerbated the perceived need for SEL programs for students and adults in schools. Not only are students behind academically, but "standing problems like bullying, suicidal ideation, and lack of social-emotional skills were likely to re-emerge" (Keelan, 2020). It is recommended that a strong social emotional learning component should be prioritized as schools re-open. SEL programs are intended to show students how to build relationships and self-manage. No doubt schools could see this as another reason to adopt SEL strategies.

School leaders should promote a school culture that addresses those needs. A national principal survey found that nearly all principals believe that SEL programs would positively affect school culture. Implementation varies, however, the report states that only 35% of principals have a "plan for teaching SEL and are systematically implementing it school wide"

(Blad, 2017). Effective implementation of SEL programs is also a matter of perceived and actual results. Recommendations for combatting this include considering intent, preparing for roadblocks, and listening to students (Soutter, 2019).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the actions of school leaders when implementing social emotional learning programs in K-12 schools. At this point, implementation of SEL programs is defined as the adoption of new SEL programs for students or adults in K-12 buildings and the strategies and perspectives of the school leadership. The study participants will include building principals and other school leaders in a Southeastern Minnesota school district.

Research Questions

The research questions supporting this study include:

RQ1: What factors are most important when implementing SEL programs in your organization?

RQ1: What suggestions do you have for future school leaders when it comes to implementing new programs?

Limitations/Delimitations

The limitations in this study include a small sample size, the implementation of the data collection methods, and the vulnerability of the participants. The small sample size could cause findings to be inaccurate. The participants are in current or former positions that may lead them to be unwilling to share their true perspectives. Participants may have had varying degrees of input into the implementation of the SEL programs. The data collection, in the form of interviews, may lead to biased or inaccurate information.

Participants in this study were delimited to current or former school leaders in one school district in Southeastern Minnesota. This will include male and female principals and assistant principals as well as superintendent and director of teaching and learning. The study will be delimited to the last three years of SEL programming in the district.

Definition of Terms

Social Emotional Learning – the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel, and show empathy for others, establish, and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021).

Emotional Intelligence - (EQ) is the ability to recognize, understand our own emotions and recognize, understand the emotions of others (Institute for Health and Human Potential, 2021).

School-leaders – a principal, assistant principal, or other individual who is an employee or officer of an elementary school or secondary school, local educational agency, or other entity operating an elementary school or secondary school, and responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in the elementary school or secondary school building (NAESP, 2021).

Implementation – is the transition period during which target organizational members ideally become increasingly skillful, consistent, and committed in their use of an innovation (Klein and Sorra, 1996).

Summary

The area of inquiry identified in chapter 1 is: Leader Actions in Implementing Social Emotional Learning Programs in K-12 Schools. SEL programs are on the rise across America's schools. Their scope touches many of the needs of today's students and community members. How to effectively implement SEL programs is unclear in the literature. Chapter 1 gave a brief introduction to the study, the problem and purpose statement, and background information on the topic. It also identified the following: research questions, limitations and delimitations, and terms. The chapter includes a summary. Chapter 2 will discuss and review the literature associated with this area of inquiry.

Review of Literature

Introduction

This chapter will review literature connected to the implementation of social emotional programs and the perspectives of school leaders during the process. First, a brief historical context will be discussed. Next, a theoretical framework will be described. Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory describes the need for SEL instruction for youth. The other is called the Innovation of Implementation Model. This model was constructed by Katherine Klein and Joann Sorra (Klein and Sorra 1996). It posits that innovations are best implemented with an organization-wide scope. Next, the chapter will focus on literature illustrating the importance of SEL curricula in schools. Another area analyzed is school leaders' perspectives on innovation implementation. The chapter then explores current SEL implementation strategies from the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning and other organizations.

Historical Context

The current term "Social Emotional Learning" was coined in the 1990s with a renewed scholarly interest in emotional intelligence by researchers like Maurice Elias and Daniel Goleman (Goleman 1995). Even though Elias is known as the "Godfather of SEL," the idea that schools should teach students how to handle emotions is over one-hundred years old (Osher et al, 2016). Jane Addams and others focused on social-emotional terms like "social competency" and "engaged citizenship". However, these efforts were not the school-wide, state-wide, or nation-wide programs they are today. Those changes started to occur at the turn of the most recent century.

By the 1990s and early 2000s, bullying and school violence were at the forefront of K-12 education. Lawmakers started to become more involved at the local, state, and federal levels (Osher et al, 2016). One such piece of legislation was HR 4223: The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act. This act gave the Secretary of Education the funds to create a national training center for SEL (Durlak et al, 2011). Today, SEL programs are being encouraged and endorsed by lawmakers across the country. For example, Wisconsin's state superintendent and legislators are heavily involved in implementing and sustaining state-wide SEL strategies within Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which uses CASEL's School Guide (Mahoney et al, 2020).

Much of the literature points to the results in a 2011 meta-analysis (Durlak et al, 2011) of SEL programs as a catalyst for the recent movement. Not only is SEL effective, but the idea that it can be taught in schools is promoted by the research findings (Schonert-Reichl, 2019). It is also referenced in an interview with one of the originators of current SEL practices, Dr. Maurice Elias (Potler-Lahayne, 2020). The results of the article showed a strong positive result for achievement in SEL in many schools. However, the authors recommend that more studies be done surrounding the implementation of the programs (Durlak et al, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

One theory that guides this area of inquiry is Daniel Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence (EI) Theory. A plethora of scholarly research has been done using Goleman's Emotional Intelligence theory since the mid-1990s when his first book was published. The theory posits that one's emotional intelligence can be measured and improved upon. It states also that IQ is a separate form of intelligence. Some researchers refer to emotional intelligence as "E.Q." (Emotional Quotient). This theory has been the basis for much of the work done by the

Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning and other SEL programs in schools across the country. Goleman's E.I. Theory has five elements: Emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills (Goleman, 1995). SEL programs backed by CASEL address five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Stefanovic, Reyes-Guerra, and Zorovich-Godek, 2021). These competencies are referenced in many scholarly sources pertaining to SEL.

Another theory that guides this area of inquiry is Klein and Sorra's Innovation of Implementation Model (1996). The model is relevant to SEL implementation because it focuses on the entire organization and the moving parts within it. Using a systems thinking approach is an effective way for school leaders to be proactive in the implementation of the SEL program. The model is a function of two things: an organization's climate, and the targeted members' perceptions of innovation to their values (Klein and Sorra, 1996). The theory argues it is better to have moderate consistency in the use of an innovation for all the members than it is to have a small group of members use it consistently. K-12 schools are "Siloed", teachers or small groups of grade level or subject-area staff are isolated. This isolation is not congruent with the organization-wide expectations of this implementation model (Klein and Sorra, 1996). School leaders must develop a true school-wide approach to developing any innovation, and especially social emotional learning programs because the scope encompasses the academic, behavioral, and emotional growth of the students.

A third theoretical framework is Robert Marzano's school leadership evaluation model. Marzano's work is applicable to this study by identifying specific actions that lead to effective leadership in schools. Most pertinent of his "Twenty-one Responsibilities of the School Leader" to this study include: Optimizer, Involvement in Curriculum and Instruction, Input, and Focus

(Marzano, 2005). If a leader is to invest resources into any new program, they must have the capabilities of these four responsibilities among many more. A line can then be drawn from the effective leader to social emotional learning. In fact, another one of the Twenty-one responsibilities is Relationships. Marzano defines this responsibility as "Demonstrating an awareness of the personal aspects of teachers and staff" (Marzano, 2005). Good leaders are using SEL practices when implementing any program in their organization. As the main player in the culture of the school, the leaders should have strong Emotional Intelligence, use a system approach to implementation, and possess the many qualities of effective school leadership.

The Importance of Social Emotional Learning

A meta-analysis of 50 years of SEL programs by Corcoran, Cheung, Kim, and Xie explored the effectiveness of SEL programs on academic achievement. The results of the review showed positive effects on reading, math, and science scores in K-12 schools. However, the report states more "randomized studies are needed to confirm these conclusions" (Corcoran, Cheung, Kim, and Xie, 2017). This study is important because it is measuring the effectiveness of SEL programs on *Academic* achievement rather than measuring things like behavior, school involvement, or attendance. It recommends that the U.S. Department of Education should invest in the creation and assessment of these programs and "work towards evaluating and creating a standard of effective SEL interventions" (Corcoran, Cheung, Kim, and Xie, 2017).

A consensus exists today in K-12 education that the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum (Berman, 2018). Although research has shown positive academic results, SEL is about building emotional intelligence. Berman argues that a strong SEL curriculum will improve the school climate and culture and therefore create a positive learning

environment. Not only do school leaders value SEL but other stakeholders do as well. Parents, students, and other community members believe it to be important as well (Mahoney, et al 2020).

The benefits of SEL programs are for all people. First, they engage the learner in building the 5 competencies laid out by CASEL which focus on understanding personal emotions and the emotions of others. In fact, the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and other global organizations have called for more SEL-type learning (Shonert-Reichl, 2019). SEL benefits are not just for students. Participating adults are more likely to have healthy relationships and more community engagement (Newman and Maroney, 2019).

School Leaders and School-Wide Implementation

Sheldon Berman is a superintendent in Massachusetts, and a member of the National Commission on Social, Emotional and Academic Development. Berman has explained his expertise in several "Lessons Learned." Number eight on his list involves developing a clear vision. Principals must be committed to the SEL program, and model it in everything they do (Berman, 2018). In an article titled *SEL starts at the top*, Stefanovic, Reyes-Guerra, and Zorovich-Godek show the results of a Florida Atlantic University course offered to current K-12 assistant principals about social emotional learning in schools. The program had 16 participants and took place in the summer of 2020. The article backs previous research that shows school leaders do think SEL can and should be taught in schools. They also find that implementation of SEL programs and their success is linked to the effectiveness of the school leader. Self-Reflective surveys were collected and found 90% of the participants would apply the SEL skills they learned into their schools. When school leaders and other school staff practice SEL in the

classroom, meetings, hallways, etc. They are creating a school climate that fosters effective implementation (Newman and Maroney, 2019).

DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland posit in a report that school leaders believe social emotional learning to important in schools. A national survey of over 800 principals found the following: 83% of principals believe it is very important to teach SEL, 98% believe diverse students would benefit, and 99% think it would have a positive impact on the school climate. These results mirror additional research on the topic of SEL. However, the survey found in this report also shows that principals feel they "need more guidance, training, and support to make a solid and effective school-wide implementation a reality" (DePaoli, Atwell, and Bridgeland, 2021).

Current SEL Implementation Strategy Guides

Currently, several organizations focused on social emotional learning have guides for SEL implementation. The two main organizations are the Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Recent literature comments regularly on the information put forth by these two groups. Mahoney and Weissberg draw on the extensive "CASEL School Guide" to develop an original theory on systemic implementation (Mahoney et al, 2020). In a podcast entitled "Move this World" Marice Elias draws on his experiences with CASEL and other programs as he talks about sustaining SEL programs in schools (Potler-Lahayne, 2020). Groups like Engaging Schools celebrate the National Commission stating they overwhelmingly support the recommendations put forth in the final report on SEL implementation (Targeted News Service, 2019). The implementation guides of both organizations are summarized below.

The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning

CASEL's School Guide is a rich source of information regarding the history, data, and implementation of SEL programs. CASEL is referenced most often in the literature. The school guide is broken down into four "focus areas." The recommendations for implementation are as follows: developing a shared vision schoolwide, developing goals, and using rubrics, staff models SEL, selecting an evidence-based program, and using SEL data (CASEL School Guide, 2021). The focus areas provide a pathway to school-wide implementation, yet many schools and school leaders who adopt one of the SEL programs that CASEL promotes are still unsuccessful.

National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development

Another program's guide referenced in the literature is the Aspen Institute's National Commission Final Report. A brief list of recommendations for implementation are set a clear vision, create safe and supportive learning environments in school and community settings, teach students social, emotional, and cognitive skills explicitly and embed them in all academic learning, build adult capacity, and work together as advocates and partners for student learning (Berger, Berman, Garcia, Deasy, 2021). These five building blocks are described in detail in the final report (Berger, Berman, Garcia, Deasy, 2021). The recommendations are similar to CASEL's School Guide. However, the guidelines themselves are not enough to ensure success. Schools need a system-wide implementation model that is thoroughly embedded into the school culture and climate (Schonert-Reichl, 2019).

Summary

The amount of literature in the field of social emotional learning is numerous, however much of the recent research is in the school setting. The literature review first looks at the historical context of the teaching of SEL-type competencies in schools. Over the last few decades, since the 1990's, SEL programs have been on the rise across the country and the world (Schonert-Reichl, 2019). Stakeholder groups including parents, community members, and lawmakers have emphasized the need for an improvement in emotional intelligence. Recent literature has addressed the implementation of SEL programs and the obstacles to success. School leaders' perspectives are documented in many cases as well. So, why do some SEL programs work and some fail? Three theoretical frameworks are discussed in this review: emotional intelligence theory, the innovation implementation model, and Robert Marzano's school leadership evaluation model. As a reference for the importance of SEL in schools and best practices for implementation, the frameworks guide the research. Chapter 3 defines the research methodology used in this study of perspectives of school leaders implementing SEL programs in K-12 Schools.

Research Methodology

Implementation of SEL programs in schools is complicated. SEL programs are shown to be effective using a variety of criteria. However, every school district, every school year, and every school leader are unique. The purpose of this study was to explore the perspectives of school leaders when implementing SEL programs in their schools. This chapter explains the research design, the sample, the setting, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, and a summary.

Research Design

This phenomenological case study included in-depth interviews with school leaders including principals, a director of teaching and learning, school counselors, and school social workers from a single Minnesota School district. The researcher analyzed data gathered in the interviews using a phenomenological approach.

Descriptive research is defined as "a research method used to describe the existing phenomena as accurately as possible" (Atmowardoyo, 2018). Nonexperimental descriptive methods might include tests, questionnaires, interviews, or observations (Atmowardoyo, 2018). The method used in this study is face-to-face and/or electronic interviews. This method has been shown to be an effective data collection tool to describe individuals, organizations, and events (Siedlecki, 2020). Several examples of this type of research in the field of education exist. By using interviews and other written feedback to describe the phenomenon of teaching English in a foreign country, researchers were able to describe the phenomenon accurately (Atmowardoyo, 2018).

Some limitations to this research design included willingness to participate and answer honestly, the sample size and population, the reliability of the questions in the interview guide, and the bias of the researcher (Siedlecki, 2020). The researcher designed the interview guide and purposefully selected the sample population to describe leader actions during implementation.

Sample

School principals, a curriculum director, and other school leaders were interviewed. These participants were diverse in title, age, sex, experience, and race. All participants chose to be part of the research. All participants in the study were employees of the same school district.

The participants were purposely selected because they were directly connected to the implementation of the SEL programs in the school district. It is important that the participants fall under the "school leaders" definition listed in the Definition of Terms section. Teachers and support staff were not included in the interview process because they were not necessarily directly involved in the implementation and decision-making process. The exception would be if there were teachers or staff who served on any of the committees that were indeed responsible for the implementation of SEL programs in the district.

The researcher used e-mail to ask for participation in the study. The semi-structured interviews took place during a scheduled meeting time at one of the district buildings or via video conference using Google Meet. The participants' contact information and their answers to the interview questions will only be used in this research and will be secured by password on a district computer.

Setting

The setting of the research was a small school district in southeastern Minnesota. The district consists of one high school, one middle school, and 3 elementary schools. The district office is housed in the high school building. The district has 2,671 students. 77.9% of those students are identified as white, 6.4% Black, 6% multi-ethnic, 5.9% Hispanic and 3.2% Asian. There are 252 licensed teachers in the district and 16 members of the District Administration. All data was collected face-to-face from school leaders at one of the school buildings or video conferences.

Instruments

The instrument used in collecting the data was an interview protocol used in both face to face and electronic interviews. The researcher developed a Semi-Structured Open-Ended Interview Guide or SOIG. The reason for the SOIG was to give the participants and researcher the opportunity to add additional information or anecdotal thoughts that add to the data. This method will assist in describing the existing phenomenon as accurately as possible (Atmowardoyo, 2018) The guide was based on a similar study done in 2020 by Olsen titled, What are the Perspectives of School District Staff on the Barriers & Benefits of Implementing the Second Step Curriculum within a School District?

Interview Guide (SOIG)

Question 1: What SEL programs has your district implemented during your time as a school leader? Which SEL programs do you currently have at your building?

Question 2: What implementation strategies or guides were used during the implementation stage of the SEL programs? What type of training or information was given to school staff prior to implementation?

Question 3: What barriers did you face when implementing SEL programs in your building?

Question 4: What short term goals were set when implementing SEL programs? What long term goals were set?

Question 5: What successes did you find throughout the implementation process?

Question 6: Do you believe that additional resources were/are needed to implement existing or future SEL programs?

Question 7: What decisions did you make when implementing the program? What actions did you take when implementing the program?

Question 8: What additional information or comments would you like to add based on your actions during the implementation process?

Data Collection Procedure

The data was collected through face-to-face interviews or electronic interviews using the interview guide. IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval was obtained from Winona State University prior to any contact with the participants. The researcher then contacted each potential participant individually using e-mail communication. An interview was scheduled with each participant and took place at one of the school buildings of the district.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis includes the examination, identification, and patterns and themes in the data and decides how these patterns and themes assist in finding the answers to the research question. Each participant was asked to take part in individual semi-structured interviews. The objective is to systematically decrease the information by constructing synopses, coding, memos, and abstracts. Several steps took place in the data analysis process for this study. The steps included first analyzing the data, identifying constructs or frameworks, and sorting the data into those frameworks. The frameworks were then used for descriptive analysis and to identify recurrent themes and patterns in the data. The qualitative data were analyzed by coding the school-leaders' responses and organizing the responses based on content.

A few key characteristics of qualitative research designs are further explained because of their importance in this study. Qualitative research is done in a natural setting: speaking directly to people and observing their behavior within the context of the phenomenon that is being studied is paramount when gathering data (Creswell, 2018). The researcher uses a protocol that is open-ended and will be analyzing the data themself. This is because the researcher is a key instrument in research design. The researcher will use both inductive and deductive analysis, first looking for patterns and themes and then working back and forth until the researcher is satisfied with the themes. Lastly, the qualitative design was emergent, meaning that the process may change as the study progresses. This is not a bad thing however, because the researcher is grappling with the data set and talking to participants in real time, changes in questions, setting or, participants may occur (Creswell, 2018).

The purpose of the analysis of the transcripts was to discover patterns in the study participant's responses and thoughts (Lewis, 2015). Once all data was collected, the information was recorded, transcribed, and coded for analysis. Transcriptions were coded based on themes

that developed from the interviews. The goal was to find similarities and differences among the various interviewees' comments. At the heart of qualitative data analysis is the task of discovering ideas. Upon analysis of the transcripts, a list of topics and sub-themes were identified. Qualitative data are analyzed using content analysis coding procedures (Yin, 2013).

Summary

This study used a descriptive phenomenological case study design that gathered data through face-to-face interviews of various school-leaders. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured open-ended interview guide with questions that every participant agreed to answer. This method was used to describe school-leader actions and perceptions throughout the implementation of social emotional learning programs in their respective school buildings.

Results

Introduction

The results of this descriptive phenomenological study were gathered by interviewing various school leaders. Each of the participants was involved in the implementation of social emotional learning curricula or programs in their school district. The researcher transcribed the interview responses, coded the data, and identified themes within the data.

Description of Sample

The participants were purposefully selected for this study. They represented a variety of school positions with the common purpose of implementing social emotional learning programs in their district. They included two principals, two school counselors, a director of teaching and learning, and a school social worker. These participants were selected and invited to participate by the researcher who gathered responses from interviews. The participants varied in age, sex, role, experience, and race.

Data Analysis

Two research questions guided the study.

Research Question One (RQ1): What factors are most important when implementing social emotional learning programs in schools?

Research Question Two (RQ2): What advice do you have for future school leaders when implementing social emotional learning programs in schools?

The following analysis followed the eight questions from the interview guide. The researcher may have combined similar responses and identified outliers throughout the description of the responses.

IQ1: What SEL programs has your district implemented during your time as a school leader? Which SEL programs do you currently have at your building?

Participants listed current and previous SEL programs, curriculum, books, videos, training, and groups. The Second Step curriculum was mentioned by all 6 participants as a recent implementation. This curriculum was purchased by the school's district and implemented in 2018. Participants shared the thought that SEL was an overarching theme and that many programs, past and present, addressed similar needs of the students. S2 and S3 mentioned PBIS as a previous program. This is a good example of how current SEL practices and definitions may be unclear in the district. PBIS (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports) is not specifically for social emotional learning, but rather, a three-tiered system for reinforcing behaviors. S4 and S5 mentioned DESSA which is a SEL data collection tool. S2 stated, "There is an umbrella of SEL-type practices such as: restorative practices, culturally relevant teaching, adult SEL, PBIS, Zones of Regulation, and Expected vs Unexpected Behaviors". There was some difference in responses between the elementary and secondary education participants. Multiple participants mentioned that SEL practices such as "Morning Meeting" have been in use at the elementary buildings in a consistent manner. Specific videos and books are used to teach SEL such as: Wonder Grove Kids and Howard B. Wigglebottom. The Secondary levels mentioned the other programs such as Second Step and PBIS.

IQ2: What implementation strategies or guides were used during the implementation stage of the SEL programs? What type of training or information was given to school staff prior to implementation?

There were a few guides mentioned. S1 mentioned that CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) does have a guide but was not sure if it was followed. S1, S3, S4, and S5 all mentioned that the school counselors were trained. They mentioned that there was a "train the trainer" phenomenon. However, most of the training was from online videos. The amount of training for various SEL programs was mentioned by all participants. Many thought there needed to be more training to make implementation successful. S3 and S5 responded that there were between 1-3 hours of professional development for Second Step training for the building staff members. Overall, the SEL programming in this district is constantly changing for various reasons. Earlier and more recent programs are at various stages of implementation. Leadership and other personnel changes also led to SEL programming becoming ambiguous.

IQ3: What barriers did you face when implementing SEL programs in your building?

Participants shared similar responses to this question. The three most mentioned barriers were: the schedule, training, and "buy-in." Other synonyms were used by participants but fell into these categories as well. For example, the researcher combined terms like, "resistance" and "push back" with "buy-in" in the analysis.

S3 and S4 stated lack of "buy-in" as a major barrier. S2 and S5 mentioned "resistance to change" as a major barrier. Lack of training and the schedule were other common barriers. S4 and S6 mentioned there was not enough professional development for SEL. S3 and S6

mentioned that the daily schedule changed, which made finding time for the teaching of SEL more difficult. Other barriers mentioned included lack of funds and lack of communication. S2 stated "there was no money". S4 stated, "it is 100% about the time and being well communicated". A final barrier also emerged with S6, S5, and S2 all mentioning there were too many programs in general in the district to implement any innovative programs with fidelity.

IQ4: What short term goals were set when implementing SEL programs? What long term goals were set?

The participants had the most difficulty with this question. All six participants struggled to identify specific short- or long-term goals. S6 mentioned that "everyone knows the kids are struggling" as a reason SEL became part of the district goals in the first place. There was not a specific entity or person that the idea came from, however. S3 and S5 mentioned they knew it was a "district goal". S6 stated they were "not sure if it was the state or the district". Several participants mentioned that the various SEL programming had goals to address issues such as attendance, academics, and behavior. S4 said, "behavior needs equals academic improvement, attendance, positive environment". S3 stated, "to use SEL to affect truancy, poor grades, academic achievement". S5 mentioned, "Stategic Planning Team had action cards ... to improve behavior and attendance". S1 mentioned the use of DESSA to gather data for the first time this year and before that there were "not really goals."

IQ5: What successes did you find throughout the implementation process?

The elementary schools were mentioned by multiple participants as a place of success when it came to SEL practices. The "Morning Meeting" and other practices such as PBIS and

Second Step were seen positively by some participants. S1, S2, and S4 all mentioned elementary level success. S1 mentioned, "there were less playground referrals and less fighting, and less counselor referrals" in the elementary schools. S2 stated, "PBIS started poorly but is in a successful spot in the elementary now."

S3, S5, and S6 all mentioned that Second Step was successful when there was consistent homeroom time in the daily schedule to directly teach SEL. S3 said, "Second Step daily lessons led to "aha moments" for the kids", and it "felt united." S5 said, "when homeroom was a thing it was good for relationships." Lastly, S6, the "First year of Second Step was good, the kids and teachers liked it."

IQ6: Do you believe that additional resources were/are needed to implement existing or future SEL programs?

Time and additional staff were the most mentioned resources mentioned by the participants. Time was mentioned both as a need in the daily schedule and time for time for training/professional development. S2, S3, and S6 mentioned there needed to be time in the daily schedule with S2 stating, "two times per week is not enough for SEL". S4 mentioned a need for time to "look at the data" once it is gathered.

The other main resource listed by the participants was additional staff to teach SEL. S5 said, "Yes. Money for more staff and more teachers. Smaller groups would equal less time for tiers two and three supports." S2 stated that effective implementation of SEL needs an "all hands on deck approach". S6 simply stated, "time in the schedule and staff".

Interestingly, only one participant (S5) mentioned the need for additional or higher quality SEL programs. In fact, S4 stated "we are SEL resource rich". However, despite the

difference in opinion on SEL resources, they both mentioned time and staff as the resources most needed.

IQ7: What decisions did you make when implementing the program? What actions did you take when implementing the program?

Depending on the subjects' position in the organization, some directly added to or altered the SEL resources such as gathering materials or creating lessons, others had to "find" money through grants or special requests. Others researched and decided what SEL programs to use. S1 stated, "Principals make more of the decisions". Additionally, S1 stated, "Counselors figure out curriculum, enhance it, make it fun, figure out what the kids need if they do not get it. Created posters, found books, found videos. Outside of the district found [school counselor] communities on Facebook."

Two responses involved gathering funds for SEL programs. S2 mentioned that they applied for and received grants for additional social workers. S3 mentioned an action of theirs as getting Foundation money. S4 stated they were responsible for, "Making the PD calendar, plugging in PD for training and data analysis". S6 talked about being careful when making decisions when implementing something new stating, "you cannot push too hard", and "try to talk privately to people who are resistant to change". S5 simply said, "I did what I was told".

IQ8: What additional information or comments would you like to add based on your actions during the implementation process?

During the first interview, this question evolved into a list of recommendations for effective implementation. S1 listed several "Dos and Don'ts," so the researcher worded it that

way for the remaining participants as well. Several consistent answers emerged in this final question. The most frequent advice for leaders who are implementing something new is to get "buy-in." All six participants mentioned getting input from people or getting "buy-in." S6 said, "Create buy-in somehow". S1 said everyone should "know the why". S4 and S5 mentioned assessing where people are at with their understanding. S4 and S6 said to "give people a voice".

Another response revolved around good planning. S5 gave the following advice, "Do copious amounts of planning, be thorough, plan for all levels (tier 1, 2 and 3). Assess "buy in"/resistance. Give things time (at least 5 years)". S4 said, "Do research. Have facts. Connect to show significance. Have a sustainable budget. Analyze current resources." S3 said to have, "Long term commitment and continuity." Finally, S1 summarized their advice, "People who are implementing should be the decision makers. Can't implement a program on your own – you need everybody."

Summary

The participants had many similarities in their responses to the interview questions. Many of the barriers and advice for future implementation were similar including getting "buy-in," having resources like time and staff, and having a thorough implementation plan. The results showed that SEL programming in this district is an ever-changing collection of various programs. Depending on the amount of time in the district, participants referred to several current and former programs that they considered to be SEL.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study is to explore the perspectives of school leaders when implementing social emotional learning programs in K-12 schools. This chapter will include discussion and conclusions which include a summary of the research findings into four themes and how they are related to the literature and theoretical frameworks. The chapter will also include the implications regarding the field of leadership. Recommendations for future research and a summary are included.

Discussion and Conclusions

The two research questions guiding the study were:

Research Question One (RQ1): What factors are most important when implementing social emotional learning programs in schools?

Research Question Two (RQ2): What advice do you have for future school leaders when implementing social emotional learning programs in schools?

The researcher identified four themes from the interview data. The four themes were: buy-in, resources, definitions, and school culture. These themes emerged based on the collective responses from all six interviews and in concert with previous literature and theoretical frameworks. The three frameworks that guided the research were Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence theory (1995), Klein and Sorra's innovation of implementation model (1996), and Robert Marzano's school leadership evaluation model (2005).

Theoretical Connections

Theme 1: Buy-in as a theme refers to the idea that organization members perceive the reasoning behind decisions that school leaders make. A principal responded from a leader's perspective, "Keep everyone informed" and "Get buy-in somehow." Another school leader said, "Get the 'Why.' Know what we are already doing. Get "Buy in." Similar responses came from all participants regarding this theme. The participating school leaders' comments relate to Daniel Golman's Emotional Intelligence Theory. Goleman's E.I. Theory (1995) has five elements: Emotional self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Not only is teaching emotional intelligence to the students a high priority, but also, school leaders should have the same skills and apply it to the implementation of programs. The "why" is connected to motivation and social skills. Members of organizations are much more open to change when they know the reasoning behind it and feel their voice is valued in the process.

Other theories highlight this theme. Klein and Sorra's innovation of implementation model is clearly rooted in systems thinking because *all* members of the organization should feel involved. The model is a function of two things: an organization's climate, and the targeted members' perceptions of innovation to their values (Klein and Sorra 1996). Regarding both RQ 1 and RQ2, the participants agreed that getting "buy-in" only comes from explaining the "Why". Robert Marzano highlights "input" and "involvement" as two of his most important traits for school leaders (Marzano, 2005). This theme was most prominent in the data the researcher collected and is considered particularly important in all three theoretical frameworks.

Theme 2: Resources emerged as a theme. Robert Marzano identifies multiple steps to effective school leadership. Step three is "Select the right work." Part of this step is the following three examples of responsible use of resources.

- Allocate resources based on instructional priorities. Be transparent in this work.

- Determine annual priorities for faculty learning.

- Provide staff development opportunities that are coordinated with the school's focus and mission. (Marzano, 2005)

RQ1 asked about the most important factors during implementation. RQ2 asked participants to give advice to future school leaders. Many of the participants mentioned the importance of the effective use of resources available. In response to interview Question 6, S5 mentioned they need "money for more staff". S1 mentioned more "training for teachers". S4 and S5 mentioned more time. S6 said the biggest resources needed were training, staff, and time. One response stuck out though. S4 thought that there were plenty of resources, "we are resource rich". It was not necessarily the lack of resources but the allocation of the resources that was the problem. Based on that response there may not be a clear understanding of who, what, where, when, and why resources are being used.

Theme 3: The third theme was definition of roles. All members of the organization need clear roles and responsibilities, especially during the implementation of any new program. Although the interview questions did not specifically ask what role or responsibilities each participant had, it was shown that there was a disconnect between the leaders. Even subjects who worked closely with one another were on the same committees or even had offices in the same part of the building still had different opinions on who oversaw what. Implementation is effective when the school climate is strong for innovation (Klein and Sorra, 1996). This confusion of roles led to confusion during the roll out of SEL programs in a district such as Second Step.

Many participants said that the school counselors were the ones who chose to implement certain SEL programs and others suggested it came from the district level or state level. When

asked who created goals for SEL, S6 responded, "not sure if it was the state or district". Robert

Marzano suggests the following pertaining to the communication of responsibilities.

- Communicate the transition plan to all stakeholders.

- Agree upon a consistent and uniform message.

- Help the staff understand the stages and implications of changes.

- Explicitly communicate the ways in which input informs decisions. (Marzano, 2005)

When school leaders clearly define the vision for innovative programs, and they clearly define

the roles of all who will be affected by it, they can become successful.

Theme 4: The final theme was the impact of school culture.

School leadership is a "set of coordinated actions that a school leader can take to enhance

the achievement of students in schools" (Marzano, 2005). Participants referred to the current

school culture and how a school culture should be regarding a successful implementation plan.

S2 responded to IQ3 that there was a "culture of resistance" in the school. S5 listed "staff attitude

and resistance to change" as components of the current school culture. And S4 mentioned that

SEL should help with behavior issues and therefore create a "positive environment". School

leaders are aware of their current school culture whether positive or negative. There is a need to

create a system wide approach to continuously nurture the school culture. As research suggests,

when successful implementation of programs occurs it strengthens the school culture and makes

members more receptive to change (Klein and Sorra, 1996).

In S*chool Leadership that Works* Robert Marzano posits that culture is one of the main

responsibilities of the school leader. His suggestions in this category are:

- Continually remind colleagues of the vision for the initiative and why it is important.

- Model a "we're all in this together" attitude.

- Find points of agreement that can serve as common ground.

- In staff meetings, work in small groups generating explicit ideas and connections on how the innovation can enhance the vision of the school.

- Provide differentiated support for teachers based on their response to the initiative.

These, along with many other points of emphasis from Marzano, reflect the need for positive school culture and how school leaders might do something to develop it. Just as the SEL programs teach students how to develop their emotional intelligence, they can also be a blueprint for leaders understanding their school, their staff, and themselves.

Leadership Implications

The themes identified in the data analysis produced several conclusions. The importance of social emotional learning for students and staff, the need for resources to be managed efficiently and fairly, the need for clear definitions of roles and responsibilities, and clear explanation of the reason for the program or the "why." Each conclusion has leadership implications that may be applied to current and future leaders as they implement SEL programs in their schools.

Conclusion 1: Social Emotional Learning is important for students and staff.

Implication: The research study concludes that SEL is a need for students of all ages and staff. From Daniel Goleman, it is understood that emotional intelligence is a skill that can be taught. Therefore, schools are a perfect place to address the growing needs of our society. Many of the significant issues that schools face such as poor attendance, negative behavior, and lackluster

academic performance can be addressed with effective SEL programming. School leaders are then tasked with creating an environment for innovative programs to be implemented well.

Conclusion 2: Resources need to be managed efficiently and fairly.

Implication: School leaders who create positive environments for change need to be transparent and fair in the eyes of the many stakeholders who are invested in the schools. It is clear from this research that resources are scarce in schools, so it is the job of the school leader to find and fight for resources. It is also the job of the leader to distribute resources in the most efficient and equitable way. This may include giving up on some programs to allocate resources to another. For many leaders, this is seen as a negative, but as many of the participants mentioned, their schools have "too much going on" which leads to inefficiency of time, money, and people.

Conclusion 3: Every organization member needs clear roles and responsibilities.

Implication: The vision and mission of any organization is deemed important. But the vision and mission statements are just words unless the school leaders are connecting everything the school does back to them. The school leader must define who is responsible for teaching SEL, who is responsible for researching SEL, who is responsible for data collection, and how it connects to the vision and mission. According to the CASEL school guide, leaders should use SEL strategies whenever possible, including their own meetings and conferences. These acts show that the leadership is bought into the program and that they value it.

Conclusion 4: Everyone needs to know the "why".

Implication: The most prominent theme in this research study was the "why." As the research interviews were conducted, the conversation kept coming back to this theme. School leaders know that staff and other stakeholders are only invested if they know the facts and the reasoning behind any innovation. It was mentioned that there was a culture of resistance in many of the participants' eyes. This can be fixed according to researchers like Robert Marzano who posit that the school leaders can and should take the time to explain why and create opportunities for people to feel valued. This is also connected to fostering a positive school culture that is open to change. If implementing systemic programs like SEL, school leaders really need to get to everyone in the community and keep telling the "why." They should use data from other schools, create presentations, develop talking points, and connect it all back to the vision and mission of the school.

Recommendations for Future Research

This descriptive study used interviews to gather perspectives from school leaders as they implement various social emotional learning programs in their schools. Future research could replicate this format in other school districts situations. Studies could be done to compare private and public or urban to rural etc. Future research is needed in terms of specific SEL programs and how they are implemented. Research could also be done into other new innovations outside of SEL and how school leaders implement them. SEL programs and their influence on public education has drawn political attention as well. Future research may include examining specific programs for bias. Social emotional learning and teaching in schools is a growing area of inquiry that will garner more research.

Summary

This research examined leader actions when implementing social emotional learning programs in K-12 schools. This area of inquiry is timely because many schools across the country are adopting various SEL programs, curriculum, and training. The purpose of the study was to understand what actions school leaders took and what decisions they made to effectively implement these programs in schools. The research design was a descriptive study that used face to face interviews with various school leaders from a single school district. A literature review showed the emergence of SEL programs in schools since the 1990's. It also showed there has been extensive research on the implementation of innovations but that school leaders still struggle when implementing programs for various reasons. Three theoretical frameworks guided the research. Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence theory, Klein and Sorra's innovation of implementation model, and Robert Marzano's effective school leadership. The results from the interviews showed several themes and conclusions. The four themes were: the "why," effective use of resources, clear roles and responsibilities, and school culture. The researcher made several conclusions based on the findings that led to four conclusions and implications for school leaders in the future. The research concluded that SEL is a skill that can and should be taught in schools because there is a growing need. It also concluded that SEL programs, to be implemented effectively, need school leaders who are dedicated to fostering a school culture that is open to change.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide (SOIG)

Date:

Interviewee:

Building at the time of Implementation:

Question 1: What SEL programs has your district implemented during your time as a school leader? Which SEL programs do you currently have at your building?

Question 2: What implementation strategies or guides were used during the implementation stage of the SEL programs? What type of training or information was given to school staff prior to implementation?

Question 3: What barriers did you face when implementing SEL programs in your building?

Question 4: What short term goals were set when implementing SEL programs? What long term goals were set?

Question 5: What successes did you find throughout the implementation process?

Question 6: Do you believe that additional resources were/are needed to implement existing or future SEL programs?

Question 7: What decisions did you make when implementing the program? What actions did you take when implementing the program?

Question 8: What additional information or comments would you like to add based on your actions during the implementation process?

Appendix B

Solicitation E-mail

[Recipients Name]

Good afternoon,

My name is Tommy Sawyer. I currently teach in the Winona Area Public Schools. I am writing to you because I am in the process of gathering data for my thesis paper. I have IRB approval and would love some more information if you are willing to share. My topic is on Implementing SEL programs in K-12 schools.

I am reaching out to you because you may have been involved with the implementation of SEL in the WAPS district. If this is the case, I would like to conduct a short interview with you.

I am trying to finalize my list of people directly involved in the implementation of Second Step or any other programs the district uses/have used in the last few years. For example, building principals, director of teaching and learning, school counselors, etc. Could you think of anyone else who was integral in that process?

Thank you,

Tommy Sawyer