THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

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THE ROLE OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS IN SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAMS

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Parents’ and educators’ concern for children’s mental health and emotional competency has grown over the past few years as violent incidents are placed in the spotlight. Adequate social and emotional skills enable students to succeed academically, develop positive relationships, and be prepared for the workplace following graduation. Schools can help students develop these skills through the use of social-emotional learning programs. Social-emotional learning programs explicitly teach students skills such as emotional awareness and conflict resolution. Though several studies have supported the efficacy of social-emotional learning programs, few have examined school-based professionals’ use and perceptions of SEL programs. The present study examined school psychologists’ perceptions of SEL programs in schools and the role practicing
school psychologists play in SEL programs. Participants were also asked about what barriers they experienced or would anticipate in implementing social-emotional learning programs. Thirteen school psychologists were interviewed in a focus group format to gain insight into their perspectives and use of social-emotional learning programs. The results provide a better understanding of school psychologists’ stance on using social-emotional learning programs and what barriers they have experienced in the implementation of these programs. The school psychologists discussed how social-emotional learning is an important component of students’ education, that there should be a push to integrate social-emotional learning in schools, and that several barriers exist to implementing a social-emotional learning program. The most frequently mentioned and discussed barriers were time, teacher comfort, and buy-in. Suggestions are made for future research and how school psychologists can advocate for social-emotional learning programs.
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Issues concerning mental health are on the rise, most notably with the school shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary. Research suggests that children and adolescents suffering from mental illness are not receiving adequate mental health treatment. According to Kataoka, Zhang, and Wells (2002) about 7.5 million U.S. children have an unmet mental health need and only about 6-8% of children with mental health issues receive adequate services. According to the White House (2013), 16 to 25 year-olds are at high risk for mental illness, substance abuse, and suicide, but are the least likely to seek help. Recent efforts have been made by the government to create a safer school environment and promote mental health treatment. By encouraging and improving the training of teachers and school-based mental health professionals to address the mental health issues of youth, the government is hoping to ultimately create a more positive school climate to help decrease violence in schools (White House, 2013).

Schools are an excellent environment to address students’ mental health and social-emotional needs. Most students spend 35-40 hours a week in the school setting (Resnikow, Cross, & Wynder, 1993). It is well-documented that nearly 75% of children
who receive mental health services are treated in schools, and for many children this is their only source of treatment (Egger & Burns, 2004). Schools can be used as learning centers and resources for healthy social and emotional development. Additionally, schools can be a key place to not only provide mental health services, but to also help prevent mental health problems by supporting students' development and emotional well-being (O’Connell, Boat, & Warner, 2009). Social-emotional learning (SEL) programs are one way to foster positive emotional development and prevent mental health issues through teaching students about emotions, social awareness, and relationship skills.

Few studies have examined school-based professionals’ use and perspectives of SEL programs despite the important role they serve. A study about school psychologists' use of social emotional learning programs is important, because social and emotional development is crucial for success both within and outside of school. The present study examined in-depth how social-emotional learning is currently addressed in schools through the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review summarizes social-emotional learning and how this topic relates to school psychologists. The literature review discusses emotional intelligence broadly then describes the key elements and benefits of social-emotional learning. The final two sections of this literature review examine the role of school psychologists in social-emotional learning and what the current research shows about their knowledge and use of these programs.

The media frequently highlights issues of mental health, and parents, communities, and educators seek to address this issue at school. However, pressure on schools to have students meet the math and science standards set by the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) has forced educators to focus more on helping students meet academic goals rather than having students engage in programs that develop pro-social behaviors. Currently, only eight states have social and emotional standards embedded in their content standards and Illinois is the only state with free-standing social and emotional standards at the K-12 level (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL); 2011).
To prevent and address behavioral issues, schools frequently use social-emotional learning programs. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a growing trend in schools. SEL acknowledges the importance of social growth in students and aids in developing students’ social competence (CASEL, 2003). Implementation of SEL programs typically occurs through the combined efforts of various school personnel, including school psychologists.

**Emotional Intelligence**

An important goal of SEL is for children to develop functional social skills and increase their emotional intelligence. Emotional Intelligence (EI), a term coined by Salovey and Mayer in 1990 and made popular by Daniel Goleman in 1995, is a form of intelligence that encompasses several aspects of emotional understanding and functioning. Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined emotional intelligence as “a subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (pg. 189). EI includes seven areas: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-motivation, (3) persistence, (4) control of impulses, (5) regulation of moods, (6) empathy, and (7) hope or optimism (Birknerova, 2011).

Gardner (1983) discusses five wider abilities for emotional intelligence: (1) Knowing one’s own emotions (self-awareness); (2) handling of emotions; (3) ability to self-motivate; (4) empathy; and (5) the art of interpersonal relationships (Birknerova, 2011). Knowing one's own feelings as they happen is "the keystone of emotional intelligence" (Goleman, 1995, pg. 42). Knowing one's emotions helps to develop self-
understanding and to be better able to make life decisions. Handling of emotions, an
ability stemming from self-awareness, includes calming oneself down and addressing and
resolving emotions such as irritability and sadness. Development of this skill allows one
to recover quickly from setbacks. The ability to self-motivate involves using and
regulating emotions to accomplish a certain goal. Self-motivation includes emotional
self-control such as delaying gratification and managing impulsiveness. Empathy is being
able to recognize and understand emotions of others. Empathy is important in
understanding social signals and in establishing relationships with others. Handling
relationships, the final ability according to Gardner (1983), is the ability to manage the
emotions in others. Having relationship skills aids in general interpersonal interaction and
making and maintaining friendships. Development of these abilities prepares a child to be emotionally stable and develop lasting relationships with others and interpersonal skills.

Core Components of SEL

SEL is a framework that helps students develop appropriate social and emotional
skills and behaviors. Zins and Elias (2007) defined SEL as “the capacity to recognize and
manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with
others” (pg. 234). Additionally, SEL is a method by which children learn to recognize the
emotions of others and develop empathy (CASEL, 2003). SEL teaches children healthy
and positive social behaviors and has them practice these behaviors in a safe environment
and then apply them to real-life situations. Interpersonal skills and emotional regulation,
both components of SEL, are linked to children’s school readiness, social confidence, and
family involvement (Arslen, Durmusoglu-Saltali, & Yilmaz, 2011). The focus of SEL is
to prevent behavior problems through encouraging and supporting social and emotional competence.

SEL can be incorporated into the mission of a school. A component of SEL is creating a positive, safe and caring school climate. Students should be able to trust and form positive relationships with adults. A positive school climate is associated with greater academic performance. Additionally, it can increase motivation to learn, commitment to school attendance, and graduation rates (CASEL, 2003).

The movement for SEL in schools is strongly driven by an organization called the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL was founded in 1994 by Daniel Goleman, Eileen Rockefeller Growald, and other researchers. CASEL encourages effective SEL programming in schools as a way to promote academic and life success (CASEL, 2011). CASEL’s mission is to promote social and emotional learning as an essential part of education. The organization also looks to advance the research on SEL programming and provides resources for educators to use in selection and implementation of evidence-based SEL programs. CASEL seeks to advance government policies for high-quality social-emotional learning in schools and to encourage states to adopt developmental standards for social and emotional learning.

Adequate SEL programs include many factors. First, SEL programs should be used at an early age and continue through high school (CASEL, 2003). SEL programs also should be used to develop five social and emotional competencies: (1) self-awareness, (2) social awareness, (3) self-management, (4) relationship skills, and (5) responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2003). Self-awareness involves being cognizant of
how one feels as well as having a grounded sense of self-confidence. Social awareness involves being able to recognize and understand what others are feeling and being able to take their perspective. Self-management is the ability to regulate emotions, delay gratification, and be resilient and persevere through obstacles. Relationship skills involve handling emotions in social interactions effectively. Relationship skills also include forming and sustaining relationships through cooperation, resisting social pressure, and finding solutions to problems. Responsible decision-making encompasses the consideration of factors and consequences of actions, respecting others, and being accountable for one’s own decisions.

**Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports vs. SEL**

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is a framework that closely aligns with SEL. PBIS and SEL are similar in their goals of academic, social, and emotional success for students. Both frameworks endorse a safe learning environment and positive school climate. PBIS and SEL also aim to prevent future behavioral problems.

Despite these similarities, PBIS and SEL are different concepts. PBIS creates a common purpose and method of discipline throughout the school by having positive expectations for all students that are reinforced by a reward system. SEL on the other hand teaches students specific social and emotional competencies through explicit instruction and students are given opportunities for practice, feedback, and application (CASEL, 2010). Both can be used collaboratively but are distinct in their methods of positive student outcomes.
Benefits and Effectiveness of SEL

Research supports SEL as a positive and beneficial factor in children’s education (Conduct Problem Prevention Research Group, 2010; Durlak et al., 2011; McKown et al., 2009; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014; Ulutas & Omeroglu, 2007). SEL has shown to be effective in helping both typical and at-risk youth develop prosocial behaviors and prevent delinquency (Stepp et al., 2011). Multiple studies show that it can produce positive benefits for students across many age groups (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011; Gunter, Caldarella, Korth, & Young, 2012). SEL has improved students’ attitudes including self-efficacy and respect for teachers. SEL has also decreased students’ problem behaviors (poor attendance, class disruptions, substance use) and improved students’ school performance (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins & Elias, 2007).

SEL programs have demonstrated positive outcomes for children in preschool as they are just beginning to develop language skills and abilities to regulate their emotions and behaviors (Egger & Angold, 2006). Early childhood is a time when children are trying to understand themselves and others (Santrock, 2011). Preschool children are beginning to differentiate between positive and negative feelings and are learning how to control these feelings (Izard et al., 2004). Additionally, it is a time when children are developing skills that prepare them for the expectations of kindergarten and the elementary school years. Gunter et. al (2012) found that the SEL program, Strong Start Pre-K, was associated with a decrease in internalizing behaviors (i.e. withdrawal, depression, anxiety) in preschool students as well as an increase in emotional regulation. SEL programs in preschools have also been shown to increase academic competence,
social competence, peer acceptance and relationships, and school performance as well as a decrease in aggressive-hostile behavior (Conner & Fraser, 2011).

Middle and late childhood also proves to be a time that requires SEL programming. During this time, children have a stronger sense of self-understanding and are capable of seeing and describing themselves in a social context (Santrock, 2011). A key social development in this time period is the ability to take another’s perspective (Santrock, 2011). Perspective taking is thought to be important in determining whether children develop pro-social or antisocial behaviors (Davis-Kean, Jager, & Collins, 2009) and is linked to maintaining a moderate level of emotional reactivity and is associated with an ability to recover from emotional arousal (Bengtsson & Arvidsson, 2011).

Children in middle and late childhood undergo a number of emotional developmental changes. These changes include: improved emotional understanding, increased understanding that more than one emotion can be felt in a situation, increased awareness of events leading to emotional reactions, the ability to suppress or hide negative emotional reactions, redirecting feelings through self-initiated actions, and genuine empathy (Santrock, 2011). SEL addresses all of these necessary developments and can aid students in acquiring these positive social behaviors.

Studies show that SEL can be beneficial for children in middle and late childhood. For example, Caldarella, Christensen, Kramer, and Kronmiller (2009) found that students who used the Strong Start curriculum had significant increases in peer-related pro-social behavior including helping, sharing, cooperating, and caring to build and sustain peer relationships especially in children who were considered at risk. In addition, there was a
decrease in internalizing behaviors in the experimental group participants. These findings are particularly important because SEL programs can act as a preventive action for all children and as an intervention for children with social deficits.

Adolescents are subject to a number of psychological problems including but not limited to substance abuse, eating disorders, delinquency, and depression (Santrock, 2011). Certain factors can help protect students from these problems. Friendship, for example, can act as a protective factor from depression for adolescents (Brendgen et al., 2010). With social skill acquisition from SEL, adolescents can be more capable of forming positive friendships that can help protect them from depression. SEL can also address the issue of substance use and be used as a preventative measure or as means to decrease use. Kimber and Sandell (2009) found that social and emotional training in adolescents helped to decrease tobacco and alcohol use over time.

Adolescence is a time when SEL would be effective to help students make good life choices. Peer acceptance and conformity are highly important to adolescents (Santrock, 2011). Adolescents may participate in risky behaviors to gain peer acceptance; they may join gangs or another antisocial group, engage in substance use and abuse, and take part in risky or premature sexual behaviors (Wenar & Kerig, 2006). Particularly, juvenile delinquency has been associated with adolescents having delinquent peers. SEL can be used to help adolescents make decisions about the peers they interact with and the behaviors they engage in. A study conducted by Stepp, Pardini, Loeber, and Morris (2011) showed that adolescent boys with higher social competence decreased their involvement with delinquent peers. This same study also showed that adolescents with
higher social competence went further in their educational career than those with lower social competence.

SEL in adolescence can also prepare students for the workplace after graduation. Casner-Lotto and Barrington (2006) conducted a study to discover what qualities employers sought in job candidates. The top four qualities (professionalism/ work ethic, teamwork/ collaboration, oral communication, and ethics/ social responsibility) all related to social competencies.

Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007) write “The case for SEL in schools becomes even clearer when one considers that the very nature of school-based learning is relational. Social and emotional skills create responsive, caring, and inclusive classrooms and provide the foundation for building and sustaining learning relationships that lead to academic success and responsible citizenship” (pg. 21). Because, the research shows that SEL is effective in aiding children’s social development, it is within school psychologists’ interest to encourage SEL program use in schools. By endorsing SEL program use, school psychologists can play a role in creating a positive learning environment, enhancing academic success, and teaching children life skills to help them become emotionally sound adults.

**School Psychologists’ Role in SEL Programming**

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has published mission statements on various topics that pertain to the field of SEL. Specifically, NASP touches on the topics of: early intervention services; effective character education; mental health services in the schools; prevention and intervention research in schools; pupil services;
school violence; sexuality education; and students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Osher et al., 2008). NASP states that school psychologists can “make important contributions to the development and implementation of scientifically based intervention and prevention programs to address learning and behavioral needs of students” (NASP, 2008, p.cxviii). NASP also notes that school psychologists should serve as resources and supports for students as a means to promote a safe learning environment and to prevent school violence. Embedded in NASP's Domains of School Psychology Graduate Education and Practice is a section for Interventions and Mental Health Services to Develop Social and Life Skills (NASP, 2010). Specifically, NASP (2010) states that school psychologists should "demonstrate skills to use assessment and data-collection methods and to implement and evaluate services that support socialization, learning, and mental health" (pg. 6).

School psychologists receive training that can make them leaders in SEL initiatives. They are required to obtain competency in many areas, including socialization and development of life skills, school climate, prevention of academic and behavioral problems, crisis intervention, and mental health (Osher et al., 2008). School psychologists have an awareness of the social, emotional, and developmental needs of children and how to address them. Competent school psychologists are also trained in effective academic, behavioral, and cognitive assessment and evaluation. Additionally school psychologists should have a strong understanding of the school setting (Ross, Powell, & Elias, 2002). This body of knowledge can be used to help a grade, school, or district move forward with SEL programming.
There are many roles a school psychologist can take in promoting SEL in schools. First, school psychologists can take the initiative in learning about the available SEL programs and to determine how a school or district would be able to fund each program. Second, school psychologists can act as educators of social skills for students. School psychologists can also facilitate professional development in-service training for other educators. Finally, school psychologists can monitor implementation and develop methods of evaluating and sustaining SEL programming based on student outcomes and changes in school environment.

**School Psychologists’ Use and Knowledge of SEL Programs**

Because school psychologists receive training and have potential to play a key role in using a SEL program in schools, it is important to examine what school psychologists are currently doing with regard to SEL. McKevitt (2012) notes that "practicing school psychologists often are the decision-makers in schools regarding the purchase and use of published intervention programs" (pg. 33). McKevitt (2012) conducted a national survey of 331 practicing school psychologists in which he examined school psychologists’ knowledge and use of evidenced-based SEL programs. His general findings indicated that school psychologists surveyed were not well-informed about evidence-based, published SEL interventions, though most learned about interventions through professional development. McKevitt (2012) also found that when considering particular programs, practitioners rated effectiveness research as the most important factor in decision-making.
In terms of specific evidence-based SEL programs available, McKeveit (2012) found that school psychologists were most familiar with Olweus Bully Prevention Program, Good Behavior Game, I Can Problem Solve, Project ACHIEVE, and Second Step. School Psychologists were least familiar with Responding in Peaceful Positive Ways, Al's Pals, Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers, Lion's Quest, and Child Development Project. McKeveit (2012) found that the SEL programs used most by school psychologists were Second Step (24.2%), I Can Problem Solve (20.5%), Good Behavior Game (17.5%), Olweus Bully Prevention Program (12.4%), and Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program (6.9%). The least used were Linking the Interests of Families and Teachers (0%), Al's Pals (0.9%), SOAR: The Seattle Social Development Project (1.2%), Responding in Peaceful Positive Ways (1.5%), and Lion's Quest (2.7%).

In addition to determining what SEL programs were used, McKeveit (2012) examined how school psychologists learn about SEL programs and interventions. Seventy-one percent of the participants relied on professional development activities to learn about effective SEL programs. A little over half (57.4%) of the sample said they relied on past experiences for learning. Just under one third (27.8%) of participants said that they rely on journal articles, even though this is the most direct way to gain information about the evidence base of many programs. Nearly a third (30.8%) of the participants said that they rely on graduate training for learning about SEL.

McKeveit’s study is important because it highlights trends in the use of evidence-based SEL programs and how school psychologists are gaining information about SEL. Because professional development was noted by the majority of participants in his study,
these activities can be used to educate school psychologists about evidence-based programs and how to select SEL programs. This study also highlighted the fact that many school psychologists do not access information about SEL from their graduate training, indicating that graduate programs need to educate students about SEL in order to promote its use in practice.

The Present Research Study

Multiple studies have shown the importance of teaching social competence to children (Arslen, Durmusoglu-Saltali, & Yilmaz, 2011; Casner-Lotto & Barrington, 2006; Gunter et al. 2012; Stepp, Pardini, Loeber, & Morris, 2011) and the effectiveness of SEL programs in schools is well established (Gunter et al., 2012; Kimber & Sandell, 2009). McKevitt’s study (2012) is an important step in determining school psychologists’ knowledge and use of evidence-based SEL programs; however, the survey design utilized has limitations, as it did not allow for an in-depth qualitative examination of the factors involved in the school-based implementation of SEL. McKevitt (2012), in reporting anecdotal information from open-ended comments on the survey (43 of the 331 provided them), noted that school psychologists typically reported that they are not responsible for implementing SEL interventions, their assessment responsibilities prevent them from devoting time to SEL program implementation, their district makes their own social-emotional learning program, the interventions used are theory-based rather than research-based, and that preparation for state mandated tests has priority over SEL. These findings are important and suggest a more in-depth investigation of the practices of school psychologists with regard to SEL is warranted.
It is important to understand the complex contextual variables involved in the selection, adoption, and subsequent implementation of evidence-based SEL programs in schools. School psychologists, as previously noted, are in an important position to spearhead these initiatives, and can provide unique insight into this process. An in-depth qualitative analysis of the implementation of SEL by school psychologists is an important next step in this growing area of research. The present study examined school psychologists’ use and awareness of SEL programs in schools and the role practicing school psychologists play in SEL programs. This study aimed to gather in-depth information and obtain first-hand accounts from school psychologists who are implementing SEL programs in their schools, as well as discuss barriers to implementing an SEL program from school psychologists who do not have SEL programs in their schools.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined in the present study:

**Research Question #1** What perspectives do school psychologists have in the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs?

**Research Question #2** What barriers exist for implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools?

Research Design

The current research study utilized a qualitative design, specifically an inductive thematic analysis with focus groups as the data collection method. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Focus groups allow a researcher to obtain in-depth information from several different perspectives on a single topic (Litoselliti, 2003). They also allow for engaging interactions between participants as opposed to a one-sided sharing of information with a researcher as is done in an interview.

Participants and Setting

**School psychologists.** Participants included 13 currently practicing school psychologists in southwestern Ohio. Two sessions were held: one in October and one in
early November. The first group had seven participants and the second focus group had six. The focus group sessions were conducted in a private conference room following county educational service center meetings because it was a location and time that was most convenient to the participants. All of the following names are pseudonyms in order to protect participant confidentiality.

Nancy is a part-time school psychologist at a private, religious K-8 school located in a large rural city. Nancy serves grades 5-8. Nancy has worked as a school psychologist for 14 years and has a doctorate degree.

Kara has worked for 20 years as a school psychologist. She currently works full-time in a private, religious K-8 school. Kara has a Ph.D. in school psychology.

Diana is a full-time school psychologist at private, religious K-8 school. She has worked as a school psychologist for eight years and currently has an Education Specialist degree.

Sally is a full-time school psychologist at a private charter school located in a large suburban school district. Sally works with students in grades K-4 and 9-12. Sally has been a school psychologist for seven years and has an Education Specialist degree.

Christine works full-time at a public separate learning center for students with intensive behavioral and/or mental health needs. Christine has been a school psychologist for 17 years and has a Ph.D. in School Psychology.

May works full-time at a private, religious school. She serves grade kindergarten through eighth. May is in her 33rd year of practice and has earned a doctorate degree.
Chandley is a full-time school psychologist at a small, private, religious school serving grades 9-12. She has a Ph.D in school psychology and has worked as a psychologist for 29 years.

Elana is in her first year of practice. She works across three public schools across two small, suburban school district. She serves students in kindergarten through high school.

Angela works across two public, small, and rural districts. She serves grades preschool through high school. Angela is in her seventh year of practice and has an Education Specialist degree.

Carolyn works across the elementary, middle, and high in one small, rural district. She is in her eighth year of practice and has an Education Specialist degree.

Marilyn works in a large rural district. She serves third through twelfth grade students. Marilyn has been a practicing school psychologist for 27 years and has a Master’s degree.

Ryan is in his first year of practice. He works at two public elementary schools. One school is in a large rural district and the other is in a smaller rural district.

Catherine is a full-time school psychologist at an elementary and middle school in a rural district. She has been in practice for 33 years and has a doctorate degree.

Materials and Procedures

Measures. Participants engaged in focus group discussions in small groups facilitated by the primary researcher using a semi-structured discussion protocol (see Appendix B). The questioning route was designed using the steps outlined by Krueger
and Casey (2000). This design included developing an introduction, an opening introductory question, key interview questions, and a conclusion. Key interview questions were designed to be open-ended to encourage discussion and ongoing dialogue among participants.

A short demographics questionnaire was given to participants (See Appendix C). The demographics questionnaire asked participants to identify: (a) gender, (b) years in practice, (c) degree(s) attained, (d) area of degree, (e) employment status (full or part-time), (f) grades served, (g) type of school (public, private, charter), (h) number of students served, (i) region served, and (j) NASP membership status.

**Procedures.** Approval from the University of Dayton’s IRB was obtained before carrying out this study.

**Recruitment.** The primary researcher initially contacted school psychologists via e-mail from randomly selected schools in the surrounding area using a contact list developed by the University of Dayton school psychology program coordinator. This method resulted in a very low response rate. Only one psychologist responded and then she did not respond to a follow-up e-mail to determine a time and location. The primary researcher then contacted school psychologist supervisors at local county educational service centers (ESCs) to inquire about upcoming county meetings that school psychologists would attend. With approval from the school psychologist supervisor, focus group sessions were held following these meetings. A recruitment e-mail was sent to the ESC supervisor which was then forwarded to the school psychologists affiliated with the ESC. Each ESC supervisor sent the recruitment letter twice. This resulted in a
greater and more immediate responses. All thirteen participants were recruited using this method. Participants were grouped based on the ESC meeting they attended. The researcher sent a reminder e-mail both one week and one day ahead of time with details about meeting time and location.

**Sessions.** Two focus group sessions were conducted for this study. One focus group session was held in October and one session in November. Focus group sessions were held at local ESCs. Prior to each focus group session, the moderator arrived 20-30 minutes early to set up food and drinks, test the audio recording equipment, and review the questioning route and procedures. Formal signed consent for participation was obtained from participants at the beginning of each focus group session. In exchange for participation, the researcher provided food and a guide on SEL programs from CASEL to every participant. Additionally, school psychologists were notified that participation in this study could be used for continued professional development. The primary researcher provided letters of completion to those who wished to document the session time towards their individual professional development plan.

**Confidentiality.** The audio recordings collected during each session were only accessible by the primary researcher. After completion of this study, any recordings or transcriptions of the recordings will be destroyed. Participants’ identities were protected on the transcription by replacing the participants’ names with pseudonyms.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected in October and November of 2013 and analyzed in December of 2013. Data were collected via recorded focus group sessions lasting 40-60 minutes in
length each. Each focus group session was recorded with three auditory recording devices, one as the primary recorder and the others as backup if the primary device failed. In addition to audio recording, the primary researcher took notes on what participants said. Furthermore, the primary researcher acted as a facilitator and guided each group through discussion by asking key questions, asking probing questions, ensuring everyone had a chance to speak, and refocusing if the group got off topic.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The present study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What perspectives do school psychologists have regarding the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs?

2. What barriers exist for implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools?

The content of each focus group was transcribed into a Microsoft Word document by the primary researcher. Glesne’s and Peshkin’s (1992) method for coding and subcoding were employed. In this method, each piece of data was given a major code category (i.e. “role of school psychologist”) associated with a code letter and name. Text was color-coded for each major category (i.e. all text “barrier to implementation” was highlighted in yellow). The highlighted data from each major category were subcoded into more specific categories (i.e. “time” and “teacher comfort” to fit under the major category of “barriers to implementation”).
Research Question 1: School Psychologists’ Perspectives

The interview transcripts were transcribed and coded. Following coding, three primary themes regarding school psychologists’ perspectives of the implementation of social-emotional learning programs emerged from the data: 1) SEL is a necessary but missing piece in students’ education, 2) There should be a requirement for these competencies to be addressed in schools, and 3) There are several barriers that exist in the implementation of SEL programs.

**SEL is a Necessary but Missing Piece.** The school psychologists were asked several questions about SEL programs in schools in order to understand their perspectives on implementation. A common idea presented by the school psychologists is that social-emotional skills are essential for student success. Sally described how these skills are needed in the school setting:

I just think that in general most educators know that you need to have a student who has their basic needs met when they come to school to learn but sometimes I think that educators forget that some of your basic needs are having, like (Christine) said, you have to have the skills, like non-cognitive skills to be able to learn, to be able to manage your time... the kids bring baggage to school. Who knows what is happening at home? And be able to manage that or being able to cooperate or communicate with others. All of [those] really are indicators of success in school...

Despite the perceived need to teach social competencies, the school psychologists feel that this piece is often overlooked because of the pressure for schools to succeed academically. Carolyn shared:
I think initially that people to see it as something that should be taught in schools because we’re seeing mean from the kids coming in but then it just gets lost among the academic pressure and expectations.

Chandley, however, commented on how incorporating SEL could boost the academic results that schools strive for.

...the schools we see in Ohio... schools are on report cards. They have to bring their achievement up and I think there is a lot of research that shows that schools that are doing SEL, achievement is better, attendance is better, dropout rates decrease. All that is stuff that schools are trying to achieve. So it would be hopeful that that somebody would pay attention to this that we could get a more statewide push to getting this kind of stuff adopted. So more districts would pay attention to it, you know, that they would adopt some of the stuff because it's well-documented that in the research achievement levels go up.

**SEL as a Required Component.** The school psychologists would like SEL to be something better addressed in the schools, either through legislation or the development of standards. Diana thought there may be a shift to address the competencies in schools as mental health issues appear more and more in the media.

Well I think with all the school shootings- there have been two in the last two days- two or three days... I think that mental health is becoming more in the limelight. I think we’re hearing about it a lot more and people are realizing that that is piece we are missing.

Chandley expanded, citing another issue that has appeared in the media:

Now there's that big thing about toxic stress...They were talking about all these kids who were coming from homes where you know parents are depressed or very dysfunctional homes and it actually makes chemical changes in the brain and now these kids are suffering from something they call toxic stress. Now schools are going to have to be dealing with all this. Like you said we are going to have to be looking at this more and more in the future.

**Barriers Exist in Implementation.** Despite the perceived need to address these skills within the school setting and the hope that legislation or social-emotional standards
will develop, the school psychologists believe that there are a number of barriers that prevent SEL programming from being implemented in a school. Sally mentioned a few:

I think a lot want to teach [social competencies] to the students but they don’t know how. Some don’t think it is important. “That’s not my job as a teacher.” And then some are overwhelmed and they’re like “it’s just one more thing I have to do. It’s one more thing to put on my plate.” So I think it’s really important because we all know that children have to have those skills to be able to learn but it’s one just more thing to do.

Research Question 2: Barriers to Implementation

The school psychologists were asked to describe the specific examples of barriers that they have experienced or perceive to be a barrier to implementing a social-emotional learning program. The interview transcripts were transcribed and coded. Following coding, three primary themes regarding barriers to the implementation of social-emotional learning programs emerged from the data: 1) time/pressure on teachers, 2) teacher comfort/perceived role, and 3) buy-in from staff and administration.

Time/Pressure. A barrier commonly mentioned by school psychologists was the lack of available time for teachers to implement a social-emotional learning program on a daily basis. Specifically, with growing pressure because of teacher evaluations, the school psychologists shared that teachers had too much academic content on which to focus.

Kara shared an example of a teacher at her school struggling with making time to incorporate a behavior intervention.

All I’m hearing my teachers say “I don't have time for one more thing”. For one of my teachers we're trying to get the kids to take their planners out. That was part of our study skills was to have their planners out every time they walk in the classroom. The teacher goes, “well to be honest I don't remind them. I don't have time. I'm too busy thinking about this and this and this”. And I’m like all you do
is “get your planners out.” And I don't think... I mean they realize that’s just a simple statement, it’s easy to do but it isn't easy when they think about all the things they are expected to do. They've got this lesson and that worksheet. They've got to try to get through this, this and this. And then they assign homework to the kids and parents are upset they have homework because they should have done it in school. I can understand; to be a teacher, I don't think I could handle it because there's so much they are expected to pack in and how do you do one more lesson.

Chandley shared how time has also been an issue in her high school:

I work in a high school right now and [time’s] an even bigger barrier in high school because those teachers are so pressed to cover so much content and I know any time their schedule changes, they go “Oh how am I going to get through all this material?” Their hope is to get through all the material that they... They forget sometimes that the process may be more important than the material. Bringing in all that other stuff is important but they don’t have the time.

Marilyn talked about how her teacher’s had a difficult time integrating a social skills lesson:

Last year we approached teachers to deliver a lesson for social skills and it was very difficult for them to fit into their time frame, especially when teachers were very resistant. They were like “No way. I cannot take on one more thing.”

Marilyn further explains how circumstances might change if teachers did not have the pressure to focus on academics for their evaluations:

Now I think if the teachers didn’t have the pressure that they have that they would be more open to doing these lessons class-wide which would reach more kids. That is my naive viewpoint. We could get it out there and teachers would be willing to implement it. You know, just a half hour a week but even that is too much commitment. Which is sad.

**Teacher Comfort/ Perceived Role.** The second theme that emerged regarding barriers to implementation of SEL was the idea of a teacher’s comfort level and knowledge interfering with the successful implementation of social-emotional learning
programs. Despite teachers’ ability to reach the most students at once, the school psychologists commented that their teachers commonly do not feel comfortable being the primary implementers of a program. Nancy shared how her teachers’ comfort level has impacted her ability to implement a social-emotional learning program:

I have worked a lot with my teachers on teaching these [skills]. They have a 30-45 minute class 3 times a week to teach them these skills but a lot of it is their comfort level. And they don’t know how and they don’t see it as their role. You know, “Aren’t you going to come in and teach it?” or “Shouldn’t somebody else come in?”

May expanded on the barrier of teacher comfort and how teachers perceive the idea of working on social-emotional competencies:

Sometimes they don’t understand because they think it’s difficult but it’s not difficult to teach this content. It’s just common sense but they think it is [difficult]. They think you need to have a psych degree to teach it and “what if the kid comes in and I don’t know how to handle it.”

Christine explained how she has observed teachers struggle with specific methods of teaching social-emotional skills to students:

A lot of teachers have a varied time with role-playing. There’s not a lot of comfort level with that. And that’s the basis of our whole social skill. They’ll talk to the kids about social skills until they are blue in the face and even though I keep saying to them that’s the least effective thing you can do is talk to them. Showing and doing is more effective but that’s not their comfort level.

Buy-in. A final theme that emerged regarding barriers to implementation of SEL was the idea of buy-in from both teachers and administrators. Buy-in was connected to other barriers such as pressure on schools for academic performance and teachers’ comfort with teaching these competencies. Chandley explained how there needs to be
administrative support in order to ensure that social-emotional issues are being addressed across a school or district:

If you're going to do a real social-emotional program you gotta have buy-in from the very top. You know you gotta have it from your superintendent… you’ve gotta have it from your principal. If it's not coming from there it's not happening because you really do have to change everything you're doing. So if you say you're going to implement responsive classroom your teachers have to have total training in that you know they have to have buy-in all the way around, with any program you implement. So I think that's a lot where it's really hard to get a district or you know a whole building to buy-in from the top.

Catherine shared how the administration’s desire for academic performance impacts the delivery of needed social-emotional skill lessons.

I think [another barrier is] also a lack of recognition of how important emotional stability is. How it impacts learning and overall intelligence. We talk about that emotional intelligence component. I just that that’s overlooked… You know if they’re not emotionally stable or their home environment is not emotionally stable, unpredictable they’re not going to do that well despite excellent teachers and excellent materials. They just don’t make the progress we want them to make and I think sometimes administration frankly doesn’t recognize that. They’re all about the SLOs and you know teacher compliance and standards, core curriculum. You know I think it’s rare for the administrators to recognize and value that so you’re always kind of fighting an uphill battle about “This is an important part” but it’s overlooked or minimized. Not prioritized.

Sally discussed an example of how the administration at a teacher’s former school discouraged deviating from the academic curriculum for a higher level discussion in the classroom:

… at [this teacher’s] public school she was a math teacher and it was in high school. And you have your standard, your calendar of what need to get done. So she was going through her lesson of the day and one of the kids asked this question a fabulous, higher-order thinking question and the kids started this great discussion about whatever was and she was like this is so awesome they're really taking it to the next level but she was being observed that day. She actually got
some marks off for deviating from the curriculum because they're like “you're not supposed to be covering that. You're supposed to be covering this and you didn't go by what you were supposed to cover this day”… And if I were a teacher I would be like, “I'm not going to teach social skills I'm getting dinged for having a great conversation about math in my math class.” You know, it’s silly.

Marilyn shared her experience with trying to implement Positive Behavior Supports (PBS), a stepping stone to a social-emotional learning program, in her high school:

I felt even though [implementing PBS] was very time-consuming, I felt it was very important and it forced some of our administrators and some of our teachers and we even had parents in the district building or district team kind of look at things differently. I mean it was painful, a very painful process. I had the high school and that was an ordeal in itself because they pretty much wanted to do it this way and PBS didn’t really fit into that and it was a constant negotiation trying to get them on board especially with office referrals. There was just a difference of opinion in the administration in the building at that time and that person is not there anymore but it could be difficult to implement if you don’t have buy-in.

Getting buy-in from teachers has also proven difficult for the school psychologists in this study in addition to getting approval from administration. One reason mentioned during these focus groups was the idea that social competencies are a responsibility that should be placed on parents and not on teachers. Christine shared her perspective on how some staff think about social and emotional competencies:

I think people's belief system is another barrier. It's not their job at school; they should be taught these things at home.

Another component of teacher buy-in is that their comfort or knowledge impacts their willingness to adopt a new program for teaching social competencies. Diana disclosed how her teachers misinterpret the true idea of social-emotional learning:

See the problem we have at our school though is that because we have all that in our mission the teachers [say] “well we already knew that” … so then they're like
“we already do it”. Well no because they're reactive to things and that’s hard to get the administrative support and buy-in from staff members but that's it and it hits the wall and a lot of staff say “we already do it. Why would I do anything different?”

May also communicated her experience with teachers who believe SEL skills have been addressed elsewhere within the school, though they actually have not:

I think one of the other obstacles we already said it but just to reiterate is if another program is already in place like character education the thought is that we are already doing. It is more like a check off, it's done versus we're really teaching life skills.

Some teachers may not feel confident in their ability to implement a social-emotional program in their classroom. Chandley mentioned how teacher training programs can help to increase the comfort in implementing and support for using SEL:

Right now, this is really not done in teacher training so if you want teachers to buy in they should really be part of a teacher training program. They would then get the skills, the comfort level, and have buy-in before they went into the classroom.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose and Major Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate school psychologists’ perspectives on social-emotional programs and their perceptions of barriers for successful implementation of SEL programs. The results from this study can be used to direct future research and SEL initiatives.

Findings indicated that school psychologists value SEL programs and their potential benefits. The school psychologist participants recognized that SEL could boost the academic achievement of students, which is a common goal in schools. Although the participants recognized the importance, some shared that they did not view others within the schools, such as teachers and administrators, as having the same opinion. Because others did not see the importance of addressing SEL within the school setting, the school psychologists generally cited themselves as being the primary implementers of SEL programs.

The school psychologists also pointed out a number of barriers. The greatest of all barriers was time. The school psychologists stated that teachers report not having time to
fit in a discussion of SEL when they are pressured to cover considerable amounts of academic content. From the school psychologists’ perspective, teachers feel like they have to focus primarily on students’ academic progress because that is what the teacher’s job performance evaluations are based on. Another study indicated that teachers also agree that time is the biggest challenge, specifically, having time to take on something new, such as a SEL program (Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013).

In addition to the pressure to focus on academics, the school psychologists shared that teachers are not comfortable being the primary implementers of SEL. Teachers may not receive any training in social and emotional development that would make them qualified for effectively implementing SEL in the classroom. A study by Civic et al (2013) indicated that only about half of the teachers surveyed had ever received training on SEL. Teachers may not be comfortable teaching social and emotional skills because they do not see it as their role or they think that others are more qualified in this area.

Both the pressure to focus on academic progress and teachers’ lack of comfort with implementing SEL affect buy-in. Because schools and teachers are evaluated on the academic gains of their students, it is difficult for them to believe that the social-emotional component is as important as the academic. As mentioned by the participating school psychologists, some school staff also believe that it is not the school’s job to help students develop emotional competencies but rather that responsibility falls on the parents.
The school psychologists mentioned other barriers that were not as significant as time, teacher comfort, or buy-in. These barriers included money, implementation integrity, logistics, and a lack of direction within the schools.

**Limitations**

This study is not without limitations. First, this study utilized a small sample size of participants who were all located within a small geographical area. The sample may not be truly representative of all school psychologists, thus it may not generalize to the greater population of school psychologists. The barriers identified in this study were only voiced by school psychologists. Perceived barriers may differ from the perspective of other school staff, such as teachers, counselors, principals, or superintendents.

Given the focus group design, some participants contributed more than others. Each participant might have had a greater opportunity for input if there were only three to four participants in each group. Additionally, self-selection bias may be present as all participants elected to participate in a discussion on a narrow topic.

A final limitation may have been the time of day. Both focus groups happened after a meeting at each ESC. The participants may have been fatigued and may have been more engaged at a different time of day.

**Implications for Future Research and Action**

The findings from this study can be used as a stepping-stone to direct future research efforts. This study revealed several barriers to SEL program implementation. To begin, research efforts should explore the perceptions of administrators to better understand their views and identify any limitations, hesitations, or misconceptions these
participants have about SEL. One study exists in which teachers were surveyed about SEL and identified three major findings: (1) Teachers understand and value SEL, (2) Teachers believe SEL helps students achieve in schools and life, and (3) Teachers could identify ways to accelerate the use of SEL (Civic Enterprises et al., 2013). Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan’s (2013) research and similar future research can help develop strategies to educate teachers and other staff members to increase knowledge and buy-in for SEL.

Future research might also investigate strategies to overcome the other barriers identified in this study within a school system. Specifically, how have other schools managed time while adding SEL to the curriculum and how have schools gained support from their administrators? With this research, educators can hopefully integrate a SEL curriculum into schools to help students develop social and emotional competencies.

As a next step, scholars also might develop a needs, resource, and school readiness assessment for integrating SEL. This tool would be integral to successfully implementing a SEL program. Although SEL is an important component to a child’s education, it would not be a worthwhile effort if a school is not ready to adopt a SEL program. The instrument could be used to identify school-specific barriers to implementation that could be addressed prior to implementation.

In addition to supplemental research, school psychologists and other educators are encouraged to promote the adoption and implementation of SEL programs. School psychologists can do this through having their own district or school adopt a program, or
by advocating for legislation that requires schools to address social-emotional
development.

Social and emotional development can also be incorporated into teacher training
to prepare educators to implement SEL. Because teachers have a great potential to impact
many students, it is essential that they become a part of the process for integrating SEL
into the classroom. Training teachers would help to eliminate teacher comfort as a barrier
to implementation. It would also enhance buy-in from teachers in general.

Conclusion

Research has shown that SEL programs are very beneficial to students. This study
indicated that school psychologists recognize the important role these programs can play
in the positive development of children; however, the participants identified several
barriers that prevent the implementation of SEL in schools. The most frequently
mentioned and discussed barriers were time, teacher comfort, and buy-in. These barriers
should be addressed through additional research and advocating for the adoption of SEL
programs.
REFERENCES


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UNIVERSITY OF DAYTON - CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE of STUDY: School Psychologists’ Use and Awareness of Social-Emotional Learning Programs

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Lauren Flynn from the University of Dayton. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to examine what social emotional learning (SEL) programs current practicing school psychologists are using, what their role and experience with social-emotional learning programs is, what barriers exist in implementing and using SEL programs, and what training they have received regarding social-emotional learning programs.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be part of a focus group with 2-5 other practicing school psychologists. The discussion should last 30-45 minutes. You will be asked questions by the researcher and engage in conversation with the other members of the group for each question. The session will be audio-recorded to assist with data analyses.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

You may feel uncomfortable answering questions in a small group. You are not required
to answer any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

**ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS**

There are no direct benefits to you. The information gathered in this study may advance the field of school psychology in the area of social-emotional learning programs.

**PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will be provided with lunch during the focus group as an incentive for participation in this study. In addition, you will be provided with a set of resources on social-emotional learning (SEL) at the conclusion of the session.

**IN CASE OF RESEARCH RELATED ADVERSE EFFECTS**

If you are experiencing any discomfort as a result of your participation in this study, you may contact Lauren Flynn, 937-229-1393, or her faculty advisor Dr. Elana Bernstein, 937-229-3624.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

When the results of the research are published or discussed at conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. Participants will only be identified by a pseudonym. Informed consent forms will be locked in a secured place and will be accessible only to the principal researcher.

Audio-taped recordings of you will be used; however, your identity will be protected or disguised by omitting names and identifying information when recording. The recording will only be accessible to the principal researcher and will be destroyed following transcription of the audio recording. The transcription will be destroyed following coding and analyses of the data.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your relationship with The University of Dayton. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice or penalty. The investigator may withdraw you from participating in this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions about this research, please contact one of the investigators listed below.
RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Dayton: Dr. Mary Connolly, (937) 229-3493, Mary.Connolly@notes.udayton.edu.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT (or legal guardian)

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

Name of Participant (Please print) ________________________________

Address

______________________________________________________________________

Signature of Participant ____________________________________________ Date ___________

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

My signature as witness certifies that the Participant signed this consent form in my presence.

Name of Witness (please print)

______________________________________________________________________

Signature of Witness ________________________________________________

Date ____________

(Must be same as participant signature date)
CONSENT TO USE IMAGES OR RECORDINGS FROM RESEARCH

(Participant or legal guardian)

I consent and give permission for the researcher to use any photographs, video-recordings, or audio-recordings made during the course of this research. My identity will be protected or disguised by the researcher prior to publication or use in presentations of their results. By signing below, I acknowledge that these images or recordings may compromise the confidentiality of my participation in this research.

Name of Participant _____________________________________________

Address

________________________________________Date

Signature of Participant

________________________________________Date
APPENDIX B

QUESTIONING ROUTE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory</td>
<td>“I want to thank you for attending today’s focus group session on social-emotional learning. My name is Lauren Flynn and I am a school psychologist graduate student at the University of Dayton and currently a practicing intern in Madeira City Schools. The purpose of tonight’s focus group is to discuss school psychologists’ use and awareness of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs. I want to let you know that there are no right or wrong answers and you may have different points of views on the topics discussed but I encourage you to share your viewpoint even if it differs from others. I am here to ask questions, listen, and ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. I will also be taking notes during the session. I am interested in hearing what all of you have to say although you should not feel obligated to respond to every questions. Feel free to eat and drink during this session.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening Introductory</td>
<td>“What is the first thing you think of when you hear ‘social-emotional learning?’”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key</td>
<td>• What programs do you currently use or you have used while in practice?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What has your role been in using these social-emotional learning programs if you have one in your school or what would you anticipate your role being if you do not have one in your school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What barriers exist to successfully having a social-emotional learning program in your school or what barriers exist that prevent you from implementing a social-emotional learning program in your school?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What differences do you see between Positive Behavior Intervention Supports and social-emotional learning?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>• In 2-3 minutes, briefly summarize main points of the discussion and ask if the summary is accurate</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Ask if there are any additional questions or comments the participants would like to share</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Say “Thank you for participating in tonight’s focus group and sharing your thoughts.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Gender: Male  Female

Years in Practice: ____________

Degree(s) obtained (circle all that apply): Master’s  Education Specialist

Doctorate

Area of Highest Degree Obtained: _______________________________

Employment Status: Full-time  Part-time  Other (please specify): ___________

Grades served: ________________________________

Type of School: Public  Private  Charter

NASP Membership status: ________________________________