

**A Phenomenological Study Exploring Secondary School Counselors' Perceptions of
Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Within Their School Setting**

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Department of Community Care and Counseling, Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

School of Behavioral Sciences

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Abstract

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has become a standard practice in public education due to the many social and mental health challenges faced by young people. Teachers have been directed to incorporate SEL lessons daily, which sometimes can be a challenge to facilitate when having to teach core instruction. However, secondary school counselors are trained to facilitate SEL as part of their comprehensive school counseling programs and the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) national model. Unfortunately, they experience challenges with facilitation. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was to analyze the lived experiences of secondary school counselors' implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) within their school settings. The research sought to identify how secondary school counselors navigate barriers when implementing SEL and the practices/strategies utilized. The study was driven by one central and one guided research question. Data was collected using a semi-structured interview approach with eight secondary school counselors to provide a rich description of their perceptions of implementing SEL. Five themes emerged from the data review: (a) student/counselor interaction, (b) school-wide social and emotional learning practices, (c) school counseling SEL program initiatives, (d) SEL implementation barriers, and (e) navigating the barriers. Research implications, limitations, and recommended future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Social and emotional learning (SEL), school counselors, phenomenology, secondary school counselor, American School Counselor Association (ASCA), Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

Copyright Page

Dedication

First, I would like to thank God for leading my footsteps and covering me throughout this journey. Days when I wanted to give up or life challenges created barriers, He always reminded me of “my why” and to keep pushing. Second, I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my mother, father, son, brother, and one of my best friends and sister, Tiffany. To my mother, you made me who I am today and have been the blueprint for me to be strong, confident, God-fearing, independent, and a resilient woman. You taught me to put God first in everything I do, and I am so blessed to have you as a mother and present through this process to cheer me on. To my father, I know you are smiling from heaven at your little girl and all that I have accomplished, and I will continue to make you proud. To my son, you had a front seat to this journey and the number one reason I kept pushing. You make me a better human and mother every day. I am inspired by you, and every decision and step that I take is for you. To my brother, I miss you and wish you were here in the flesh to talk to; however, your untimely passing pushed me to carry on our family legacy of excellence. I know that you have been cheering your little sister on every step of the way. And to one of my best friends and sister, Tiffany, thank you for deciding to take this journey with me, being my emotional support, encourager, good distraction (LOL), and study/writing partner. Finally, I would like to dedicate this manuscript to those in my family that preceded me on this journey, the late Dr. Alayne Swimpson, Ed.D. and Dr. Patricia Williams, Ph.D. I was inspired by your hard work, dedication, tenacity, and fearless mindset to undertake such a humbling, rewarding, and monumental accomplishment.

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The core of my study recognizes the importance of social and emotional learning support. During this journey there were several in my life who did just that. Without each of you this process would have been harder to endure. To my mentor and friend, Dr. Norma Brumage, Ed.D., thank you for all your support and guidance over the last twenty years with developing me into a strong school counselor and encouraging me through the dissertation process. To the eight school counseling participants who dedicated their time to make this study possible, thank you. Your participation has provided a way forward in the school counseling profession. Finally, this journey would not have been possible without my amazing chair, Dr. Todd Schultz, EdD. God could not have assigned me a better “quarterback” to guide me through the dissertation process. You are truly God-sent, patient, knowledgeable, a man of God, and it is evident that serving as chair is one of your callings.

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List of Abbreviations

American School Counselor Association (ASCA)

Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Professional School Counselors (PSCs)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

School Counselor in Training (SCIT)

Thematic Analysis (TA)

Chapter One: Introduction

Overview

Social and emotional learning (SEL) support within schools has become a necessity. School counselors are trained in facilitating social and emotional learning for students at all levels. Unfortunately, school counselors are experiencing challenges with providing SEL support to students. Chapter one proposes the basis for the present research study. This chapter introduces the historical, social, and theoretical backgrounds of the challenges school counselors face when facilitating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in the secondary school setting. Moreover, the chapter identifies the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the study's significance, the central and guiding research questions, and relevant vocabulary with supporting definitions.

Background

Historical Background

The concept of social and emotional learning (SEL) historically dates back to the works of Plato's *The Republic*, 380 B.C. (Beaty, 2018; Edutopia, 2011). It was Plato's belief that one should approach education holistically, which is done by ensuring a system of education that is easily accessible and conducive to rearing children grounded in good character and sound judgement. As a result, children should develop into productive citizens (Beaty, 2018). Moreover, the goal of education should be to build children into sympathetic, constructive, reliable, and engaging citizens (Beaty, 2018; Edutopia, 2011).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) has not always been at the forefront of public education (Beaty, 2018). SEL practices were not commonly implemented in educational settings in the past due to a lack of resources, school officials unable to see the growing need, or a lack of

prioritization (Beaty, 2018; Blum et al., 2002; CASEL, 2018). Consequently, in 1994 public education was inundated with anti-drug campaigns, affirmative youth teachings, sex education, civil and moral lessons, and violence prevention educational programs (Allison et al., 2011; CASEL, 2018; Piotrowski & Hedeker, 2016; Proios & Gianitsopouou, 2009). Therefore, in 1997 the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) collaborated with Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to develop a *framework* [emphasis added] that would meet the social and emotional learning needs of all children (CASEL, 2018; Scheier & Grenard, 2010). It became apparent that the need for SEL was rapidly growing to mitigate the social issues faced by youth, with the goal of helping them develop into well-adjusted adults (Beaty, 2018). It quickly became a national and comprehensive push for all schools to incorporate SEL within the structure of their learning environments (Beaty, 2018; CASEL, 2018).

Social Background

The role of the School Counselor is to cultivate a school culture that nurtures a safe, inclusive, engaging, well-informed, comprehensive program and to foster success for all learners (Chandler et al., 2018; Cigrand et al., 2015). Nationally, school counselors have become overwhelmed by the growing trend of school shootings, community violence, dangers of social media, teen domestic violence, substance abuse, and an increase of direct and indirect trauma experienced by the students they serve (Wood, 2020). These issues are even more exacerbated when trying to support students within varying school settings. Consequently, the public school system is struggling to keep up with the demand of creating a school environment that can holistically address these issues as well as provide a world-class education (Beaty, 2018;

Berman, 2018; Chandler et al., 2018; Cigrand et al., 2015; Eklund et al., 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018).

The public school system is in a race to create a social and emotional learning (SEL) environment that lends itself to addressing these needs of students (Beaty, 2018; Berman, 2018). School counselors have been identified as one of several resources to facilitate SEL within schools. However, school counselors are faced with challenges/barriers to successfully facilitating an effective SEL framework in their schools, primarily in secondary level schools (Beaty, 2018; Berman, 2018; CASEL, 2015, 2018; Chandler et al., 2018; Cigrand et al., 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015).

Theoretical Background

Adolescents require more than knowing how to pass a test, knowing how to read, and being proficient in all core content learning areas. It is important that they learn social and emotional skills that will assist their navigation through life and the challenges they will face (Beaty, 2018; Kress et al., 2004; Slater-Warren et al., 2020). Although public education recognizes the need for SEL, educators are presented with systemic barriers to prioritizing and facilitating SEL initiatives while also attempting to tackle core instruction (Beaty, 2018; Chandler et al., 2018; Cigrand et al., 2015; Slater-Warren et al., 2020). Teachers are often charged with incorporating SEL within their classrooms but feel that the task is too daunting and lessens their time to devote to students' academic success. Educators, including school counselors, are trained in implementing SEL as prescribed by their comprehensive school counseling programs, but they do not often utilize it despite being the primary facilitators of SEL within their school settings (Beaty, 2018; Chandler et al., 2018; Slater-Warren et al., 2020).

Moreover, Fetzer Institute assembled researchers, educators, and child advocates to

construct concepts that could aid children in becoming positive citizens in 1994 (CASEL, 2018). It was during their meeting that *social and emotional learning* (SEL) [emphasis added] emerged and the conception of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was developed; it is now the leading organization in encouraging social and emotional learning within the United States (Beaty, 2018; CASEL, 2018). CASEL's bold objective is to offer SEL as a vital part of education, supported by evidence-based research to facilitate programs within all school settings (Beaty, 2018; CASEL, 2018).

The CASEL theory clearly defines the need for adolescents to learn SEL competencies to aid them in developing into socially adjusted adults. Schools recognize this need and how it can support the overall progress of the students. School counselors are an excellent resource within their schools to support this effort. Therefore, it is important for school districts and administrators to support school counselors by acknowledging the value of their work and eliminating any challenges/barriers preventing school counselors from successfully facilitating SEL with students.

In addition, CASEL was founded to expand research surrounding the social and emotional skills that promote student success in school and life with support from the Fetzer Institute and Surdna Foundation (Beaty, 2018; CASEL, 2018). CASEL's primary focus is to ensure evidence-based social and emotional learning is at the forefront of education from preschool through high school (Beaty, 2018; CASEL, 2003). CASEL's leadership team of professionals and researchers defined social and emotional learning along with establishing a set of social and emotional skills that clearly explicate social and emotional learning standards. The SEL standard represents a "blueprint" for facilitating SEL instructional practices; the standards describe certain goals and targets for students by grade level and convey what students must

demonstrate (CASEL, 2018).

Situation to Self

The ability for the researcher to relate to the study aids in identifying any philosophical assumptions the researcher may have while conducting the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Currently, I am a secondary school counselor at a high school. While working in this role for 18 years I can attest to the challenges my colleagues and I face trying to facilitate SEL daily to meet the needs of our students. I desired to pursue this study with the hope of identifying if secondary school counselors believe they can effectively facilitate and execute the framework of SEL learning within their schools.

Further, the philosophical belief coupled with this study recognizes how reality is known, in part explaining and understanding what is known (Kim, 2001). Social constructivism guided the study. Social constructivism highlights the significance of culture and context in knowing what arises in society and constructing understanding based on this knowledge (Bruner et al., 1956; Kim, 2001). As the researcher in this study, I explored the participants' lived experiences pertaining to the implementation of SEL within their school setting. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) the lived experiences of people shape reality; therefore, I desired to examine the reality for other secondary school counselors implementing social and emotional learning.

Social and emotional learning competencies are essential skills that children should be exposed to early in life. Schools have a great opportunity to teach these skills and school counselors are the trained professionals to carry out this task. My goal for this study was driven by my belief that school counselors recognize the importance of SEL, and despite the challenges/barriers they face with providing SEL support to students they work to find ways to

navigate around them. School counselors are the *heart* [emphasis made] of the school and desire to be recognized as an SEL essential resource within their schools and school divisions.

Problem Statement

Within the last few years, current research has shown that social and emotional learning has taken a front seat in public education. School districts recognize how important teaching students social and emotional learning is for the overall development of students, as this positively impacts academic outcomes and ensures students are socially adjusted into adulthood (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011). Now more than ever before, teachers and school counselors are being asked to implement social and emotional learning within their classroom lessons and comprehensive school counseling programs. Current research establishes the role of teachers implementing social and emotional learning in their classrooms and the challenges they face in doing so. However, there is limited research on the perceptions of school counselors when implementing social and emotional learning within secondary school settings (Slater-Warren et al., 2020).

Although most current research has focused on teachers and administrators for social and emotional learning, it is still greatly unknown how school counselors navigate indirect and direct non-counseling barriers when implementing social and emotional learning with students. Slater-Warren et al. (2020) noted that the collaboration between teachers and students was recognized to be critical to the SEL learning environment. Positive school culture is conducive to cultivating the development of SEL competencies and successful academic student outcomes. Additionally, Slater-Warren et al. (2020) recommended the need for additional research to identify the perceptions of the school counselors' roles when implementing social and emotional learning.

Therefore, based upon the current focus of research and the recommendations from the relevant literature, this study was designed to be a phenomenological transcendental qualitative study. It explored the perceptions of secondary school counselors when employing SEL and what strategies they use to navigate barriers when implementing SEL. This study provided in-depth insight through the lenses of secondary school counselors and their perceptions of implementing SEL. Further, the goal of this study was to apprise stakeholders, administrators, and senior leadership on how the school counselor is a vital resource to their SEL mission. This study addressed the lack of current research on how secondary school counselors view their roles with SEL implementation.

Purpose Statement

Based on the relevant literature recommendations and the focus of current research; therefore, the purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of secondary school counselors implementing SEL and the barriers they encounter to effective facilitation of SEL. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is generally defined as implementing effective SEL at the secondary level. The theory guiding this study was the theoretical framework by CASEL. This study assisted with delineating a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences school counselors encounter when implementing SEL within a secondary school setting.

Significance of the Study

There is not a rich abundance of phenomenological qualitative literature within the field of school counseling and social and emotional implementation. This study was an addition to the body of research and provided credibility of the emergence of such studies (Heppner et al., 2016). Additionally, this study provided a necessary evidence-based representation of

information supporting the need to eliminate identified barriers that hinder school counselors from effectively implementing SEL.

Further, this study provided valuable information to the field of school counseling, addressing the need to support navigation of barriers surrounding effective implementation of SEL within schools. This research can be utilized by higher education institutions with school counseling curriculum development, as well as be used to provide awareness to school districts and ensure their comprehensive school counseling programs are able to support the social and emotional needs of all students. Also, this research can help mitigate issues impacting school counselors' successful implementation of SEL within their schools and school districts.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do secondary school counselors describe their implementation of social and emotional learning support for students? This question aimed to identify the lived experiences and barriers that secondary school counselors encounter when facilitating SEL within their school settings.

Guiding Research Question

What are the current strategies that secondary school counselors use to navigate barriers when implementing social emotion learning support to students? This question was created to identify how school counselors overcome their identified barriers to provide social and emotional learning support for students and to identify strategies for navigating those barriers.

Definitions

1. *American School Counseling Association (ASCA)*- the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) was founded to support the growing needs of school counselors

through advocacy, professional development, research, and professional literature.

(<https://www.vsca.org/history>)

2. *CASEL*- Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed with the goal of “establishing high-quality, evidence-based SEL as an essential part of preschool through high school education” (CASEL, 2018).
3. *Secondary Schools*- Secondary education covers ages 11 or 12 through 18 or 19 and is divided into two levels: lower and upper secondary (levels 2 and 3). The United States has defined lower secondary education as grades 7 through 9 and upper secondary as grades 10 through 12 (McCallops et al., 2019).
4. *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)*- social competence is the condition of possessing the social, emotional, and intellectual skills and behaviors needed to succeed as a member of society. And the processes in which children as well as adults obtain and effectively implement the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to control their emotions, develop and execute positive goals, empathize with others, create and maintain healthy/positive relationships, and make good decisions (CASEL, 2018; Mahoney et al., 2018).

Summary

Social and emotional learning offers the needed skills to ensure students acquire the foundation for developing into healthy adults. The school setting plays a pivotal role in carrying out this mission. Additionally, public schools realize that SEL is critical for enhancing students' ability to succeed in school, careers, and life. Therefore, school divisions have made SEL part of their daily learning process. School counselors play a significant role in ensuring that effective SEL practices are implemented within the secondary school setting, as they possess the training necessary to effectively implement SEL initiatives as prescribed by their comprehensive school

counseling programs. Unfortunately, school counselors face daily challenges with ensuring SEL is implemented. This study explored the perceptions of secondary school counselors' lived experiences with implementing SEL to their students, the challenges they face and how they navigate around challenges.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Overview

Research suggests that social emotional learning (SEL) is essential to the development of children, ensuring they possess adequate life skills to grow into well-adjusted adults. Therefore, schools recognize the great need for implementing SEL to promote desired behavioral responses and academic success. School counselors play a vital role in facilitating SEL initiatives and it is a part of their comprehensive school counseling program as prescribed by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) national model. Unfortunately, school counselors tend to face greater barriers with implementing SEL. This study explored secondary school counselors' perceptions regarding barriers they face when facilitating SEL in the secondary school setting.

The purpose of this research was to examine school counselors' perceptions of SEL implementation in secondary schools and explore the strategies they use to navigate any barriers they encounter. The literature review in this chapter explores why social and emotional learning is necessary and the efficacy of implementing SEL in schools. Further, the role of the school counselor is clearly defined as it relates to facilitating SEL based on their comprehensive school counseling programs. This chapter also discusses the theoretical framework of the present study, associated literature, and a concluding summary.

The literature review was conducted with scholarly search methods. The Jerry Falwell Library was used, as it is established and recognized for containing access to pertinent findings of relatable topics conducive to education and school counseling. Current digital books, educational research, and peer-reviewed articles were accessed for this review. Online research databases utilized included Sage Online, Google Scholar, EbscoHost, ERIC, ProQuest Global, and ProQuest Liberty University. Additionally, peer-reviewed journal articles, texts, and

government research were also found from online research databases. From these databases, the following terms were used to complete this review: social emotional learning (SEL), CASEL, secondary school counseling, evolution of school counseling, school counseling roles, American School Counseling Association (ASCA), and culturally responsive counseling.

Related Literature

The related literature section explores the research foundations and theoretical framework supporting the current study. Past foundations of social-emotional learning and school counselors' role and perceptions in SEL program implementation in the secondary school setting are described with relevant research findings.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL Overview

The history of social and emotional learning dates to 380 B.C. with *Plato's The Republic* [emphasis made] (Beaty, 2018). He believed that approaching education holistically was important, with the goal of raising children to be good citizens with well-developed character, as mentioned in the previous chapter (Beaty, 2018). Preparing children to be caring, productive, reliable, and engaging citizens is a prevailing pursuit that remains to be the objective of education (Beaty, 2018).

Social and emotional learning is viewed as essential to the long-term success of students during their time in grade school and their post-secondary journey. Therefore, its implementation is needed throughout Pre-K-12 education (Mahoney et al., 2018). Thousands of schools in the U.S. have implemented SEL programs. In many cases, U.S. state departments of education have prescribed or are working on constructing core standards for developing the necessary skills at each grade level (Mahoney et al., 2018). Federal, state, local officials, and stakeholders have

bought into the idea of backing these programs with the necessary financial support (Mahoney et al., 2018).

Further, social and emotional learning can be conceptualized in a variety of ways; primarily it is perceived as the processes in which children as well as adults obtain and effectively implement the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required to control their emotions, develop and execute positive goals, empathize with others, create and maintain healthy/positive relationships, and make good decisions (Mahoney et al., 2018).

Social-emotional Learning Competencies and Dissemination

According to Mahoney et al. (2018) there are five core clusters of social and emotional competencies derived from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning CASEL: (a) self-awareness (b) self-management (c) social awareness (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making. These competencies are believed to facilitate students' academic performance, positive social behaviors, and social relationships during their school tenure; they are also thought to decrease behavior problems and psychological distress, and aid in preparing youth to thrive in college, work, family, and society (Jones & Kahn, 2017; Mahoney et al., 2018).

Moreover, to aid in the comprehensive dissemination of SEL core curriculum, CASEL (2015) designed a framework for structuring SEL skills and thoroughly identified well-designed, science based SEL programs. As a result of the wealth of SEL programs, the CASEL Guide sought to support educators in choosing carefully assessed programs with in-depth, evidence-based influence and efficacy for students (Lawson et al., 2019).

CASEL created an outlined list of SEL programs that met its criteria to be considered evidence based. The guide outlined information regarding program design, such as

target/grade/age range, number of sessions annually, and application assistance, as well as knowledge about the evidence of efficacy (Lawson et al., 2019). Furthermore, the Council of Distinguished Scientists of Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development submitted “The Evidence Base for How We Learn” explaining the associations between social, emotional, and academic development (Berman, 2018; Immordino-Yang et al., 2018; Jones & Kahn, 2017). The twenty-eight researchers utilized data from economics, brain science, medicine, psychology, and education, collectively concluding that learning is emotional and social. Fundamentally, cognitive skills, emotional abilities, and social and interpersonal skills interlink in the learning process (Berman, 2018).

SEL Educator Advocacy

Educators in recent years have vocalized and made a case that for students to be prepared for an ever-changing, diverse, and complex world they must be developed beyond academia. They argue that social and emotional learning (SEL) is essential to students’ long-term success in and out of school and must be implemented and sustained throughout PreK-12 education (Mahoney et al., 2018). Currently, social emotional learning programs are being implemented nationally, along with many U.S state departments of education issuing or in the process of developing SEL standards and curriculum to be facilitated at each grade level. Additionally, many federal, state, and local stakeholders and policy makers are on board to fund SEL programs (Mahoney et al., 2018). Children at the elementary and secondary levels benefit from not only learning life-skills, but also organized, precise, and developmentally sensitive instruction in the deterrence of specific problems, such as substance abuse, sex education, violence, and bullying (Elias, 2003). However, varying cultures will choose and aim to prevent different problem behaviors. For example, urban schools may focus on gun violence more so than a school setting

that is considered rural or suburban. Moreover, children benefit from specific guidance in recognizing healthy life choices such as good eating and sleeping habits; study and work settings are some of the areas that are essential for fostering academic and social-emotional learning (Elias, 2003).

The social-emotional learning structure also focuses on growth. SEL began as results from the emotional intelligence literature indicated that these “non-cognitive” skills are as necessary as “cognitive” skills for life success (Ross & Tolan, 2018; Zins et al., 2007). Consequently, the framework arose to connect results of several different studies substantiating social and emotional skills’ connection to development and the decision to encompass those necessary for school and life success (Ross & Tolan, 2018; Zins et al., 2007). Worry that schools were remiss in meeting the mental health and social development needs of students quickly gained attention and pushed the need for further research within the field. From the beginning of SEL development, several studies have backed the significance of social and emotional functioning for behavioral and academic achievement (Oberle et al., 2014; Ross & Tolan, 2018; Zins et al., 2007).

Federal and State Level Call for SEL in Schools

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning in recent years has recommended the adoption of SEL standards at the district and state levels. These SEL standards’ purpose is to delineate the skills students acquire and understand. Moreover, this provides a framework setting expectations, therefore driving decisions regarding what students should learn and how they should be assessed in schools. These expectations are longitudinal across grade levels regarding expectations (Blum et al., 2002). SEL standards are intended to guide SEL instruction within schools. Further federal- and state-level guidelines enumerate

important consequences for the delivery of SEL instruction in schools. These guidelines promote the facilitation of SEL service delivery, therefore holding educators and school districts accountable for SEL competencies to be taught (Blum et al., 2002; Eklund et al., 2018).

Impending educational policy shifts at the federal level offer administrators at the state, district, and school levels the chance to make SEL competencies a priority. In 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was established, offering states the plasticity to create accountability practices that provide evocative data to lead school improvement endeavors (Eklund et al., 2018). Specifically, states are required to adopt accountability practices assessing two indicators of student academic success and at least one in school climate/student success in SEL. Statewide application of SEL standards and appraisal of these competences will provide more thorough data to enable school counselors/educators to be more individualized with delivering SEL support, as well as school-wide improvement initiatives (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017b; Eklund et al., 2018).

The Need for SEL at the Secondary School Level

Numerous mental health difficulties can begin in adolescence or early adulthood (Caldarella et al., 2019; McGorry et al., 2011). Between 13% and 20% of youth suffer significant mental health issues (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2013) and these problems are on the rise in the United States (Caldarella et al., 2019; Olfson et al., 2015). It is estimated that 6% to 10% of adolescents ages 12 to 17 are prescribed medications to treat mental health challenges (Caldarella et al., 2019; Howie et al., 2014).

Unfortunately, it is estimated that less than half of adolescents with mental health complications obtain sufficient interventions, and most of these youth obtain mental health support in schools (Caldarella et al., 2019; Costello et al., 2014). Therefore, the need for social

and emotional learning in schools is great, especially at the secondary level due the increased challenges caused by environmental factors such as social media, gun violence, suicide, drugs, physical and emotional abuse, increased racial/homophobic violence, and poverty to which the secondary school setting is exposed (Costello et al., 2014; McCallops et al., 2019). Schools are a key factor in promoting social and emotional learning proficiencies for all learners.

Incorporating comprehensive social and emotional learning (SEL) in school settings encourages intellectual and behavioral competences among all learners (Lawson et al., 2019). The advantages of SEL are well-documented. Numerous current meta-analyses suggest that comprehensive SEL interventions are effective in improving a broad array of outcomes including social skills, mindsets, conduct, and academic performance (Jacob, 2007; Lawson et al., 2019).

Research outcomes constantly signify that social emotional learning promotes strong values, nurtures relationships, and offers thorough assistance for students by utilizing school-based social resources for the school, family, and community. Social and emotional learning is student-centered, fostering improved positive attitudes about self, and environmental needs are better supported. This is facilitated by a comprehensive and systemic school-wide approach to student emotional development (Costello et al., 2014; Haimovitz et al., 2018). Social emotional learning interventions aim to decrease bullying behaviors, improve personal development, lessen behavioral concerns in schools, and improve academic outcomes. In keeping with the student-centered approach, each child's personal and social growth is essential to their academic progress (Costello et al., 2014; Haimovitz et al., 2018; Jacob, 2007).

Adolescents are at a developmental stage of immense learning, discovery, and opportunity. Still, it is also a period when behavioral and health challenges can arise or exacerbate, with negative effects that spill over into adulthood. For example, those who are

victimized or taunted/bullied during their youth may later develop aggression and/or depression (Steinberg, 2015; Yeager, 2017). Excessive schoolwide discipline guidelines can force youth near delinquency as juveniles and toward criminal behavior as budding adults, regardless of whether they were prone to such behavior before such discipline, which is often referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline.” Research also indicates that youth who fail to graduate high school on time are more susceptible to poorer health and less prosperity and contentment throughout their lifespan. Unfortunately, this is still applicable to those who later earn a General Education Diploma (Steinberg, 2015; Yeager, 2017).

The benefits of SEL can greatly improve student learning by providing young people with a basic enthusiasm to achieve, be focused and engaged in their work, experience fulfillment and belonging, and develop a desire to work willingly with other learners. Also, social emotional learning can lessen student depression and stress, enhance student’s attitudes towards school, and improve pro-social behaviors such as understanding and empathy (Stillman et al., 2018).

Further, public education has made advancements in developing school-based interventions to implement social emotional learning within the secondary setting (McCallops et al., 2019). Empirical evidence exists regarding the effectiveness and application of a variety of social emotional programs to teach social skills to young children and counteract or address difficult behavior; however, it varies by program and depends on the overall success, strength, and effectiveness of the program’s approach (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Mahoney et al., 2018).

The approach to teaching SEL in the secondary schools must be inclusive (McIntush et al., 2019). Culturally responsive SEL has been identified as an effective method of implementation to meet the needs of students regardless of their gender, creed, or sexual orientation. Culturally responsive SEL integrates instruction that is relatable for students by

using their personal and lived experiences as a framework to drive the facilitation of SEL skills. The emphasis on students' cultural representation of effective social and emotional skills is crucial to culturally responsive SEL (McCallops et al., 2019; McGorry et al., 2011; McIntush et al., 2019). Therefore, providing students with a feeling of support and understanding while navigating culturally diverse conflicts is an important part of teaching SEL skills in home and school settings. Students are more willing to support the initiative when their interests, views, and needs are incorporated in the SEL program development, allowing for innovative SEL curricula. Also, students feel they are part of the process due to input from their peers and community stakeholders (McCallops et al., 2019).

Moreover, factors that have an impact on the growth of social emotional learning skills include differences in culture, gender, complex trauma, mental health, and socio-economic status (Barnes, 2019; McIntush et al., 2019). These factors have a negative influence on positive relationships with peers, teachers, and anyone invested in diverse students. Furthermore, research implies that when students enter schools with no support and limited to no SEL skills to control their cognitive and emotional behaviors effectively, their academics suffer. As a result, schools are challenged with a growing number of behavioral problems within the primary, elementary, and secondary schools due to students lacking SEL self-regulation techniques (Hayes & Finkley, 2020).

Literature has discovered more than two causes that hinder the process of implementing SEL in schools, which exist at numerous environmental stages (Durlak, 2016). Examples comprise of (a) extensive community-based factors such as satisfactory funding and educational procedures, (b) facets of the program as they relate to the school and its probable malleability, (c) identifiable character traits of staff who will be delivering the program, for example, their drive,

(d) self-efficacy and assurance to the program, (e) features of the school or group presenting the program such as a willingness to change, (f) the assurance and backing of its leadership, (g) its general ability to offer new programs and its organizational climate, and (h) if adequate professional development is provided (Banerjee et al., 2014; Durlak, 2016; Humphrey, 2013; Lendrum et al., 2013).

Further, to effectively support the mental health of students, steps must be made to engage students in strength-based interventions holistically, to not just support their needs but also recognize and shape the strengths unique to them, their family, and community (Barnes, 2019). Providing support to students' mental health by using strategies focused on their interests as well as using this knowledge to aid students in preserving and developing their social emotional skills is crucially important. One way to achieve this goal is the development of strength-based safeguards in the implementation of culturally responsive pedagogy to deliver social-emotional learning interventions (Barnes, 2019; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

According to Humphries et al. (2018) numerous schools are challenged with limited resources, consequently resulting in increased resistance to the implementation of resources geared towards social and emotional development programming. This is due to the perception of it being a distraction from academics, which is deemed a priority instead of supporting social-emotional development. Moreover, staff in low socio-economic schools are frequently confronted with a larger workload that can create less opportunities to implement social emotional learning programs. Increased non-related trainings and demands for more instructional planning to improve student achievement interfere with SEL implementation and are regarded as counterproductive. If students are unable to regulate their emotions, discipline is high, and

students are faced with indirect or direct home and community-based trauma, inevitably causing academic achievement to suffer (Martínez, 2016).

Also, since schools are recognized as the primary source of implementing social and emotional programs, all staff are expected to be key socializing managers leading this initiative (Humphries et al., 2018). Today's society expects educators and school counselors to uphold the task of managing the emotional lives of their students, even though the way schools are currently structured and the challenges most schools face greatly interfere with facilitating an effective SEL program (Humphries et al., 2018).

Modern dialogues among social emotional learning scholars that encourage program implementation in schools have emphasized that, besides classroom-based programming, a systemic school-wide approach to SEL strategies is necessary (Meyers et al., 2015; Weissberg et al., 2015). It charges the entire school community as the core of change and seeks to immerse SEL into daily activities and practices at several tiers in the school using shared efforts that consist of all staff, teachers, stakeholders, families, and students (Meyers et al., 2015). In turn, this universal method helps produce a supportive framework for introducing and sustaining effective SEL programming for all students. Also, this pushes schools away from disjointed and disintegrated methods of SEL to a more comprehensive and organized development and application (Meyers et al., 2015; Oberle et al., 2016).

The School Counselor's Role in Implementing SEL

School counselors are essential in implementing SEL competencies in schools. According to the ASCA National Model (2019) they are trained to assist staff with a culturally responsive approach. Therefore, it is imperative that school counselors are not inundated with indirect duties that prohibit their ability to provide SEL support (Morgan, 2019). Stakeholders

and school districts see the necessity for SEL programs; however, school counselors experience barriers to effectively providing SEL support to all students regardless of their socio-economic or cultural background (Durlak, 2016; Randick et al., 2018).

American School Counseling Association (ASCA): National Model Framework

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model was founded in 2003 (ASCA, 2019). The ASCA model is a framework for developing school counseling programs to ensure comprehensive facilitation; such programs are to be data-driven and developmental in nature (ASCA, 2019). Moreover, the model delivers a structure for practice that delineates the appropriate role of the school counselor, ensuring duties are program-centered and conducive to a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2019). It integrates the national standards for school counseling programs and aligns the professional practice of school counselors to certify their program facilitation is in sync with the mission of the respective educational institution (ASCA, 2019). Overall, a comprehensive school counseling program that follows the ASCA National model will ensure the effective utilization of school counselors to promote student success (ASCA, 2019). Additionally, the ASCA National Model Framework for School Counseling Programs is comprised of four components: (a) Foundation, (b) Management, (c) Delivery, and (d) Accountability. These components come together to develop a comprehensive school counseling program that aims to provide services to all students in the areas of academic, personal/social, and career development (American School Counselor Association, 2012a; Geesa et al., 2019).

ASCA (2012) ethical standards for school counselors necessitate school counselors to carry out duties identified by the ASCA National Model and to *monitor their emotional and physical health and practice wellness to ensure optimal professional effectiveness* [emphasis

added]. Therefore, school counselors are required to balance the two-fold task of supporting their students' academic, social/emotional, and career development in addition to overseeing their own wellness needs and mental health (Randick et al., 2018).

According to the American School Counselor Association (2019) school counselors implementing programs strive to have an impact on student growth in three areas: (a) academic, (b) career, and (c) social/emotional development. School counselors understand students should show measured proficiency in these areas equally to be successful. School counselors recognize these areas are not deemed separate but are interwoven, each affecting the other. Although this statement focuses on social/emotional growth it is understood academic and career development are to be given equal attentiveness (ASCA, 2019).

Moreover, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) was developed in 1981 in addition to the ASCA National Model to define national training standards and postgraduate requirements for school counselors (Lu & Pillay, 2020; Waggoner, 2021). In successive amendments, the CACREP standards continued to evolve by focusing on cohesiveness of the profession and encouraging a solid identity within the school setting and collegiate levels (Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs, 2016; Lu & Pillay, 2020; Waggoner, 2021). Subsequently, several states use the CACREP standards to drive the core function of their school counseling programs and educational criteria for licensure and certifications (Granello & Young, 2012; Lu & Pillay, 2020; Neukrug, 2012; Waggoner, 2021). Empirical research findings highlight the efficacy of the comprehensive school counseling program in the ASCA National Model (Waggoner, 2021)

Further, school counselors act as a first line of defense in detecting and addressing student social/emotional needs within the school environment. They have distinctive training in

helping students with social/emotional issues that hinder academic success (ASCA, 2019).

Within the conceptual framework of the school counseling program, school counselors create a multi-tiered approach, additionally developing curriculum, delivering small-group and classroom guidance, and providing evaluation and advisement geared towards improving students' social and emotional well-being (ASCA, 2019).

The area of social/emotional development is composed of standards to assist students with managing emotions and learning interpersonal skills as early as preschool and kindergarten. School counselors help encourage mindsets and behaviors in all grade levels that improve the process and cultivate a culture of college and career readiness for all students in the area of social/emotional development (ASCA, 2019). School counselors are expected to facilitate social emotional learning (SEL) preventative interventions that follow the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) mindsets and behaviors for student success (Peggy et al., 2021).

Additionally, the evolution of the school counseling profession has rapidly changed over the years and will continue to evolve as the needs of students grow. School counselors have become social advocates to ensure education equity is provided for all students. This is especially applicable for the urban school counselor due to serving students in underrepresented and impoverished communities (Hunter, 2021).

Over the past several decades, the role of the school counselor has advanced from one that mainly provided guidance services to facilitating more comprehensive school counseling programs that focus on academic, career, and social/emotional development through leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and accountability (Randick et al., 2018). Furthermore, sensible job duties encompass a combination of counseling, consultation, curriculum, and coordination responsibilities. The American School Counselor Association (2019) outlines the sensible duties

requisite of the school counselor. School counselors should not cover classes, serve as testing coordinators, or fill in as administrators (American School Counselor Association, 2019).

Additionally, the school counselors provide individual and small group counseling services to students, as well as consulting with stakeholders, facilitating classroom school counseling lessons, evaluating disaggregated data, designing interventions, and conducting school-wide responses for crisis management (American School Counselor Association, 2019).

The ASCA model is a comprehensive school counseling program. It focuses on meeting the academic objectives of schools via suitable roles in services delivery, program management, student advocacy, and stakeholder partnerships (American School Counseling Association, 2012a). Advantages to enhanced application of the ASCA National Model consist of a constructive influence on student success and school climate.

Regardless of the benefits of the ASCA National Model application, clear connections between the roles outlined by the national model and school counseling practices have not always existed (Fye et al., 2022). For instance, data has enumerated substantial and negative concerns with engagement in non-counseling responsibilities as prescribed by the ASCA National Model guidelines. Moreover, school counselors report they experience their roles differently than expected, which leads to poor job satisfaction. However, school counselors report that when they are afforded the opportunity to facilitate a comprehensive school counseling program that is aligned with the ASCA National Model, it restores their satisfaction (Fye et al., 2022).

The Evolution of School Counseling and SEL

School counseling roles have evolved during the 21st century. At the forefront, school counselors provided vocational guidance. Their primary role was to prepare pupils for the

workforce. School leadership had a tremendous influence during the mid-1900s with outlining the duties of the school counselor (Cinotti, 2014). To keep up with growing trends of psychology and personal adjustment counseling services, school leadership responded by developing vocational guidance to incorporate a more academic emphasis. Therefore, school counselors became a part of *pupil personnel services* [emphasis added], which encompassed school psychologists, social workers, attendance techs, and other school-based practitioners during the 1950s. Even though the key role of the school counselor during the 1950s and 1960s was to offer counseling services, school counseling professionals were still not being used within their prescribed role (Granello & Young, 2012; Gysbers, 2010). Therefore, concerns grew regarding the perception of the profession and school counselors not being viewed as a vital support to the academic, social, and emotional growth of students. Consequently, due to the roles and duties remaining undefined, school counselors continued to be viewed as a supplementary support service to teachers and leadership. As a result, leadership continued to assign school counselors tasks and responsibilities to meet their needs (Cinotti, 2014).

Today, school counselors are regarded as mental health professionals that support students in the areas of academic, career, and social/emotional development (Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016). Over the past 20 years, school counseling has taken a strong pivot towards concentrating on closing extreme gaps and providing support to address the social and emotional concerns that have inundated the public school settings. Currently, the belief is that a school counselor consistently evaluates students' social and emotional needs and is well-informed of issues that plague schools and the students they serve (Martinez et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2016).

Comprehensive school counseling programs consider the needs of the student population by executing effective planning and delivery of SEL programs. SEL programs are recognized as having a positive impact on students' growth; therefore, school counselors must approach with a holistic understanding of influences that will support positive program outcomes and student development as they embark on planning and implementing SEL programs (Stevens, 2021).

Moreover, research implies that SEL and restorative practices offer promise in evolving skills and values, encouraging healthy relationships, and maintaining and supporting positive attitudes and behaviors, cultivating improved academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Haimovitz et al., 2018; Payton et al., 2008). School counseling programs have become a part of school improvement plans and accreditation data is tracked to show how SEL interventions are improving school-wide discipline and mental health concerns impacted by public schools. SEL interventions aimed to affect all participants of the school community tend to reduce disciplinary referrals and poor classroom behavior as well as create a better school climate (Durlak et al., 2011; Haimovitz et al., 2018).

Further, school counselors are expected to sustain and participate in a joint network of stakeholders, and intervene at various levels to advocate justice, impartiality, and access to all students, especially those who are marginalized (Martinez et al., 2017; Sink, 2016). This focus requires school counselors to recognize the influences that cultivate student realities in addition to identifying the areas of students' lives that can be positively influenced (Williams et al., 2016). School counselors are required to support the needs of their students by assisting with exploring academic, career, and post-secondary options that will prepare them for life beyond school despite the social challenges that they experience. In doing so, school counselors must

possess cultural competence, the ability to empower their students, a systemic understanding, model leadership, and the ability to promote advocacy (Martinez et al., 2017).

Successful school counselors have the unique ability to see student progress from a holistic viewpoint, personally and professionally. They are trained not to limit their view to just test scores and discipline records, but to dig further and understand the student's social history in the context of family, culture, community, and identity (Martinez et al., 2017). Therefore, it is imperative that school counselors are culturally sound and nonbiased when working with all student populations. This is achieved by being respectful of the student's perspective and handling them with care, recognizing their strengths and identifying the presenting issues (Williams et al., 2016).

School Counseling Barriers when Implementing SEL in School Settings

Unfortunately, schools that employ school counselors do not always make them accessible to students. In fact, high student-to-counselor caseloads are a major barrier to access the school counselor (Corwin et al., 2004; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). Furthermore, developing high quality and effective interventions is simply the first step when thinking about affecting the SEL of adolescents within any school setting. Quality implementation affects successful outcomes. To ensure quality implementation, school counselors are tasked with creating comprehensive school counseling programs amongst a variety of personal and systemic conditions that often create barriers for effective execution (Stevens, 2021).

Additionally, school counseling advocacy groups are sounding the alarm regarding the suggested student to counselor ratio not exceeding 250:1. School counselor to student ratios are often much larger; some as high as 500:1 (Lombardo, 2018), creating the inability for school counselors to develop meaningful relationships with their students and be effective at

implementing successful social emotional learning (Lapan et al., 2012). With their roles constantly being challenged and the increase of trauma-informed and social emotional learning school settings, the need for school counseling ASCA-defined duties is of significant importance (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Havlik et al., 2019).

Secondary school counselor-to-student ratios adversely influence service delivery in a comprehensive school counseling program. Secondary school counselors suggest it is not a substantial inhibitor to job performance but identified non-school counseling responsibilities as a major barrier to job satisfaction and performance (Moyer, 2011). Studies have analyzed school counseling roles in higher performance schools in comparison to lower performance schools but recognize challenges with the roles of school counselors exist in both settings. Challenges within lower performance settings tend to be due to social and environmental factors that require an increase in SEL responses (Havlik et al., 2019). Irrespective of the success level of the school, research participants conceded that non-counseling duties command a lot of their attention and time with a minimal percentage of their day spent offering direct counseling services (Cervoni & DeLucia-Waack, 2011; Chandler et al., 2018; Fitch & Marshall, 2004).

With concerns related to role challenges and overwhelming caseloads, school counselors having a clear voice supporting their ASCA-defined roles is more important than ever. School counselors can positively impact the educational success of all students when given smaller, more manageable caseloads and clearly defined responsibilities. However, as mentioned previously, often school counselors are given caseloads above the 250 recommended caseload set by ASCA (American School Counseling Association, 2012a).

Leadership assigns non-counseling duties such as 504 plan case management, participation in Child Study Team (CST) meetings, classroom, and student access restrictions

due to leadership concerns over interference with students' instructional time and assigned testing coordinator duties. These duties keep school counselors from carrying out their comprehensive programs (Havlik et al., 2019). Regardless of school counselor transformation and data confirming the positive impact of counselors on students' growth, inadequate access to counseling assistance throughout public education in the United States continues to be a reality (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

School Counselor SEL Training

Often, the role of the school counselor is defined with vagueness and is not clear to school administrators and stakeholders. They are unclear how to adequately utilize their training, which minimizes the actual support they can offer the school personnel and students. Consequently, this causes low morale, low retention, and increased role conflict (Havlik et al., 2019). Also, there is an obvious disconnect regarding the overall public knowledge of how valuable a role school counselors play in students' academic, social, and emotional development. In a recent study, 6% of 1,221 respondents supported focusing on funding for school counseling positions (Havlik et al., 2019). Funding is critical for ensuring school counselors have access to the necessary training and student-centered SEL resources for an effective program (Phi Delta Kappan, 2016).

Additionally, most school counselors are forced to attend district and school-based professional development that offer no value to their role and/or duties. These professional developments gear towards instructional strategies that do not correlate to the ASCA National Model to support the SEL needs of students (Savitz-Romer, 2019; Young et al., 2013). Since the needs of students vary by school demographic and setting, often the professional development facilitated by their districts are not aligned with the unique comprehensive school counseling

program prescribed at their school. The needs of students are constantly changing in real time and the application of Positive Behavioral Intervention Strategies (PBIS) or post-secondary planning trends are not offered to ensure school counselors are utilizing innovative best practices (Savitz-Romer, 2019; Young et al., 2013).

Moreover, professional learning opportunities for school counselors are seen by administrators as costly and as unnecessary time away from work. This is particularly difficult for school counselors placed in urban and rural schools due to districts' lack of funding. Often, administrators are more concerned with school counseling duties not being fulfilled due to their absence (Havlik et al., 2019). Teachers utilize substitutes when absent, unlike school counselors who have no one to serve in their role, which impedes a school's capacity to respond to crises. Consequently, school counselors are met with an enormous workload upon their return. School counselors will often elect to not attend professional learning opportunities when available for this reason (Havlik et al., 2019; Savitz-Romer, 2019; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

Outdated professional development practices for school counselors further complicate improved job efficiency. Also, when school counselors are trained in new skill application, administrators lack support or willingness to understand these practices and will maintain expectations that are not aligned with their role. This can create tough barriers to accessing professional learning. Unfortunately, this is counterproductive to the profession as it causes professional learning deficits, leading to the students' needs suffering (Paisley & McMahon, 2001; Savitz-Romer, 2019).

Since professional development occurs during tenure as a school counselor, it is vital that it is viewed by school districts as a process that should be encouraged to effectively serve the needs of the student population; however, there is little focus offered by school administration

and school districts due to lack of funding and/or the concern that it will take school counselors away from the building to complete daily tasks. Consequently, they are forced to participate in professional development offered by the district that is not relevant to their role (Brott & Myers, 1999; Paisley & McMahon, 2001).

It is not apparent, however, how successful training programs for school counselors are achieving that mission (Shurts, 2015). Advocates for marginalized students and high achievement for all students, such as The Education Trust, emphasized that higher education school counseling programs should concentrate their program curricula on attending to personal and social experiences, encouraging health and growth, problem solving at both the individual and systems level, and appreciating culture and diversity to empower students, families, and communities (Morgan & Amerikaner, 2018). Therefore, the connection between counselor training programs, school counselors-in-training (SCIT), and professional school counselors (PSCs) is of crucial significance for strengthening students and developing student results in public schools (East et al., 2016).

Higher education faculty responsible for preparing school counselors are essential to ensuring their students are well-informed and given the skills and values requisite for becoming effective school counselors, particularly in urban school settings. Essential to this training is a familiarity with what develops human interaction in various social settings, including race/ethnicity, gender, creed, class, age, and sexual orientation. It is important for these educators to keep in mind the social constructs of interlocking systems and hierarchy of power as it relates to local/federal government, laws, policies and religious influence, media, and institutions (Martinez et al., 2017). Moreover, it is vital that school counselors are trained in analyzing social

issues of any domain with the desire to understand as well as encourage relationship-building within the diverse communities they serve (Martinez et al., 2017).

Non-School Counseling Duties

The definition of a school counselor in the mid-1900s was vocational according to administrators. They were tasked with a plethora of responsibilities unrelated to their actual role; therefore, little to no counseling was provided to students. Instead, administrators would assign tasks that thrust school counselors into an *assistant principal* [emphasis added] capacity (Cinotti, 2014; Waggoner, 2021).

School counselors are inundated with tasks and duties that are non-counseling related. Consequently, consistent barriers impede their ability to facilitate a thorough school counseling program (Chandler et al., 2018; Cinotti, 2014; Waggoner, 2021). The ASCA National Model outlines the proper counseling duties that should be given to school counselors. The model specifies that 80% of school counselors should be delivering direct and indirect time to students. Research has identified the frequency of non-counseling duties, explaining how non-counseling duties influence the perception and practice (Chandler et al., 2018; Waggoner, 2021).

Moreover, recent studies that monitored school counselors' daily activities were later compared with the ASCA Model's recommended duties and activities (Chandler et al., 2018; Chauncey, 2018). Findings suggested a lot of counselors did not utilize their time adequately, resulting in a misuse of individual counseling, small group counseling, guidance lessons, and consultations, in addition to being overworked and burdened with administrative and clerical tasks (Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Chandler et al., 2018).

The ASCA National Model standards outline school counseling duties as direct and indirect support, responsive services, individual and small group counseling, crisis counseling,

wrap around community-based service consultation, and program management (ASCA, 2019; Chauncey, 2018). Moreover, the ASCA National Model identifies some school counseling professionals are given clerical and administrative responsibilities that interfere with their role (Chauncey, 2018; Lieberman, 2004). In turn, these non-counseling responsibilities remove school counselors from the focus of their comprehensive school counseling programs that are geared to address the specific needs of their student population in the areas of SEL, academics, and post-secondary/career awareness (Chauncey, 2018).

Lack of School Counselor Diversity

School populations have seen a rise in diversity in recent years. Therefore, it is necessary for school districts to ensure their school counseling programs promote multicultural competence (American School Counselor Association, 2012; Moore, 2022). The need for school counseling programs to be multicultural and representative of social justice leadership is extremely crucial due to current trends in politics that are greatly impacting the academic, career, and personal social constructs of students in marginalized and urban preK-12 public schools (Moore, 2022; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). Not feeling like the school counselor is culturally sensitive or can relate to their own culture and/or background is a barrier to seeking help for some urban students (Moore, 2022; Sue et al., 1992). According to Moore (2022) school administration and stakeholders should be cognizant that marginalized students are more inclined to have positive academic and social outcomes when they feel safe and have the necessary resources (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018).

Moreover, it is imperative that school counselors must be culturally responsive and diverse when engaging students. There are factors that bring attention to this need. One example is the racist and classist viewpoints some counselors carry that guide the manner in which they

service student expectations (Cole & Grothaus, 2014; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

Additionally, inadequate training in supporting the various needs of students, particularly in urban areas, is also a problem (Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008; Savitz-Romer, 2019; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

Finally, the school counseling workforce continues to lack a diverse representation of the student population. Historically, the school counseling profession has been, and remains, primarily white and female (ASCA, 2021; Gysbers, 2010; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022) despite more than half of all K–12 learners being non-white (Hussar et al., 2020; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). Recent research concludes that non-white students benefit from interacting with school counselors that may share their ethnicity or racial identity, and therefore the hiring practices greatly need to be adjusted within school districts and the field (Mulhern, 2020; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). The field of school counseling cannot advocate for culturally responsive SEL, equity, and diversity if the profession is not a snapshot of the student body and communities it serves (Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

Students' Attitude Towards School Counselors

Scientists have discovered various barriers that conflict with students' desires to request counseling assistance for their social and emotional issues (Auger et al., 2018; Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Chan & Quinn, 2012; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Fox & Butler, 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2005). Moreover, studies have congruently emphasized that students will often elect to cope with their problems on their own instead of seeking counseling professionals within their school (Auger et al., 2018; Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Chan & Quinn, 2012; Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006). Research reveals that it is simply difficult for students to seek professional help to deal with their problems (Auger et al., 2018;

Chan & Quinn, 2012; Corry & Leavey, 2017; Del Mauro & Williams, 2013; Fox & Butler, 2007; Raviv et al., 2009).

Further, survey studies have reliably shown that less than half of students admit to being willing to ask for support from their school counselor or health-care provider for an array of emotional challenges (Auger et al., 2018). Another barrier to asking for counseling assistance is students' perception that the school counselor is a virtual stranger; they do not feel comfortable sharing their personal problems with them. Therefore, seeking help can be particularly challenging for minority students due to their cultural belief that family and personal problems should remain at home, maybe only believing in seeking pastoral counseling from church (Fox & Butler, 2007). Additionally, seeking help from the school counselor is often viewed as a stigmatizing act among students (Chandra & Minkovitz, 2006; Fox & Butler, 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010). However, students that do not view it as stigmatizing will still avoid asking for help from their school counselor (Auger et al., 2018).

Lack of Support from Non-Counseling Staff and Administration

The uncertainty and lack of clarity that often is developed with the role of the secondary school counselor is recognized by three basic themes. The first theme is that secondary school counselors do not possess the ability to triage their varying roles within their school environments (Brown, 2015; Freeman & Coll, 1997). For instance, secondary school counselors are required to support an extremely diverse population of students, parents, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders. Consequently, their roles are molded based on what group they prioritize. Secondly, secondary school counselors inform there is contradiction with the responsibilities they are required to execute and the role and responsibilities prescribed by ASCA (Brown, 2015; Freeman & Coll, 1997). Often administrators will expect them to serve in a

disciplinarian role, which can destroy their counselor/student relationships. In such cases the students no longer see the school counselor's role as a student advocate or safe place to seek assistance. The third theme is that school counselors find themselves called on by building administrators to complete tasks that are not related to school counseling and guidance such as scheduling, maintaining student records, truancy, classroom, and lunch duty coverage. School counselors prefer to carry out counseling-specific duties than administrative responsibilities (Brown, 2015; Freeman & Coll, 1997).

It is extremely critical that the school counseling profession be adequately defined for school administrators, teachers, parents, students, stakeholders, and district/state level policy makers. Unfortunately, studies indicate that some school districts continue to allow their schools to be led by administrators who are not knowledgeable of school counseling roles and responsibilities (Dodson, 2009). According to Singh et al. (2010) school counselors benefit from being planned and purposeful when collaborating with school stakeholders to evoke change. School counselors should advocate for their roles, armed with empirical evidence and professional education when promoting their comprehensive school counseling programs and explaining how their program can meet the social and academic needs of the students.

Further, studies highly recommend that school counselors schedule meetings with their principal often to clearly explicate and document their yearly responsibilities as prescribed by the ASCA National Model (2021). This includes developing an annual agreement in collaboration with key stakeholders and discussing goals, objectives, and strategies for the program (ASCA, 2012; Cigrand et al., 2015; Havlik et al., 2019). Also, school counselors should plan to be added to faculty meeting agendas to educate and apprise all staff on their comprehensive programs.

This will enable systemic awareness and encourage a buy-in to supporting the profession (Havlik et al., 2019).

Conceptual Framework

Emerging theories offer a logical, research-grounded basis for understanding, applying, analyzing, and creating new approaches to examine relationships and to resolve problems in educational and social science contexts (Kivunja, 2018). The emerging theory that supports and provides a conceptual framework for this study is CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007). CASEL elucidates the guiding principles of school counseling based on the National ASCA Model and the role of the school counselor effectively implementing social emotional learning within a school setting.

CASEL's Social Emotional Learning: A Framework

Social emotional learning theory surfaced from The CASEL Model which has become the gold standard in social and emotional competency studies (Ross & Tolan, 2018). There are five competencies of this model: (a) self-management, or the ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; (b) self-awareness, or the ability to recognize one's emotions and accurately assess one's strengths and weaknesses; (c) social awareness or awareness of the culture, beliefs, and feelings of the people and world around them; (d) relationship skills or the ability to effectively communicate, work well with peers, and build meaningful relationships; and (e) responsible decision-making or the ability to make plans for the future, follow moral/ethical standards, and contribute to the well-being. These components are meant to assist students' positive social, emotional, and academic development (Ross & Tolan, 2018).

Dewey (1910) first suggested that the skills of empathy and interpersonal functioning were skills to be learned in the school setting. The current era of social-emotional learning began

as a byproduct of Goleman's (1995) theorization of emotional intelligence (Elias et al., 2007). As a result, his work led to the expansion of a series of clusters for social-emotional learning, along with the formalization of CASEL, originally called the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (Elias et al., 2007; Weems, 2021).

Initially, CASEL aimed to develop a strong research base for support of social and emotional learning in schools by joining forces with the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) to publish the first research-based book on social and emotional learning (Weems, 2021). As this research continues to be pursued, CASEL has also pivoted to offering guidelines and support works for states, schools, and districts employing social emotional learning initiatives (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007; Weems, 2021).

CASEL's current focus is to support the implementation of social-emotional learning so by 2025 at least 50% of preschool through high school schools will have social emotional programs as a schoolwide approach to their daily learning (Weissberg, 2019). CASEL serves to summarize the collaborative's work:

CASEL is unique in education today. It is an organization devoted to improving education by bridging theory, research, and practice – and to pursuing the goals of school improvement and student success through continuing dialog and collaboration with educators (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007, p. 3). CASEL desires to develop students in the areas of career, academic, and social/emotionally, school counselors employ counseling programs (Caldarella et al., 2019). When a school counseling program is facilitated in its entirety, student outcomes are correlated with improved academic success and school behaviors (Caldarella et al., 2019). The American School

Counselor Association (ASCA) highlights the knowledge, skills, and competencies that a school counselor should have when implementing a school counseling program (ASCA, 2019).

Additionally, ASCA also identifies the kinds of programs school counselors should be executing and the need for utilizing partnerships with school-wide staff and principal leadership (ASCA, 2019). These programs should encompass positive behavior interventions, character education, drug/alcohol prevention/intervention, antibullying teachings, self-esteem support, and encouragement of academic success (Caldarella et al., 2019).

Ideally, school counselors facilitate social emotional learning (SEL) programs at individual, small group, and systemic levels within schools to assist students in flourishing socially, emotionally, and academically (ASCA, 2019). Depending on the need of the school, the programs can be delineated prescriptively, educationally, or reactively. The goal of SEL programs is to influence a student's personal and social growth and to enhance their proficiency in making positive life choices, reducing maladaptive behaviors (Moreno-Gómez & Cejudo, 2019). Specific SEL programs may include, but are not limited to, self-esteem, friendship, growth mindsets, mindfulness, anger management, stress reduction, character development, and coping skills (Caldarella et al., 2019).

Summary

This study is important due to the growing need to implement SEL within schools to address the increasing social and environmental factors that plague today's students. SEL has been recognized by federal and local policy makers, stakeholders, administrators, and senior division level leadership as an essential resource that aims to cultivate the enhanced behavioral changes and successful academic outcomes for students (Beaty, 2018; Blum et al., 2002; Brown, 2015; Slater-Warren et al., 2020). Although all schools greatly benefit from SEL program

implementation, it is particularly appropriate for students being served in urban school settings as these students are exposed to more egregious environmental factors that interfere with their academic success and carry over into their adult years (Barnes, 2019). School counselors play a vital role in developing and implementing comprehensive school counseling programs to ensure that students are equipped with social constructs, enabling them to be productive and well-adjusted individuals. This present study demonstrated that school counselors are trained and knowledgeable on the importance of SEL, and sought to disclose the barriers that school counselors face in employing SEL along with how they navigate these barriers to support students.

Chapter Three: Methods

Overview

The study investigated secondary school counselors' perception of implementing social emotional learning within their school setting. Further, the study analyzed secondary school counselors by identifying and describing their lived experiences implementing SEL with students. The chapter discusses the research methods utilized in this study. Research questions and the research design are clearly outlined. Additionally, the chapter discusses how the research participants were selected, data collection procedures, analysis of data, the role of investigator bias, and the interview schedule.

Design

The research design employed for this study was qualitative, as a qualitative design seeks to understand a person's lived experiences by analyzing their perceptions in context (Heppner et al., 2016). This qualitative phenomenological inquiry attempted to discover personal experience and focused on the individual's personal insight or description of an object or event, instead of producing an objective statement of the object or event itself. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) qualitative researchers are concerned with insight regarding how individuals understand their experiences, how they structure their worlds, and essentially what is the meaning behind their lived experiences (p. 5).

Qualitative research is used to express various mindsets regarding strategies for conducting inquiry that is targeted at revealing how human beings translate, experience, interpret, and produce the social world (Hammersley, 2013). A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to analyze secondary school counselors' perception of implementing social and emotional learning within their school setting and strategies they use to overcome

implementation barriers. Creswell (2007) implied that qualitative research starts with hypotheses, a worldview, the potential use of the theoretical lens, and the analysis of research problems inquiring into the meaning human beings or groups attribute to a social or human dilemma. Moreover, qualitative research should seek to understand the phenomenon being investigated and not the researcher, reader, or research participants (Creswell, 2007; Smith et al., 2022).

Further, the researcher is the primary data collector when conducting a qualitative study and is effective at immediately responding or adapting to the data collection process, which is ideal for analyzing data too (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Other benefits are that the researcher can develop his or her insight through nonverbal and verbal communication, process informative data instantly, refine and summarize material, check with sampling participants for correctness of interpretation, and investigate strange or unexpected responses (Creswell, 2013; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The researcher used a transcendental phenomenological method. Any phenomenon represents a proper beginning for an investigation. Appearance is what is perceived of a thing; however, it is not an empty illusion. Instead, it works as the essential beginning of a science that pursues valid determinations which anyone to validate (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994; Zahavi, 2018). The primary objective of phenomenology is to study individual experiences with a phenomenon to help explore a description of its universal essence, seeking a common understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, 2012; Giorgi, 2012). Moreover, the direction of transcendental phenomenology is identified as universal self-knowledge (Husserl, 1977). It is a lucid path of information that develops from a transcendental or pure ego, an individual who is willing to explore what is, just as it is, and to elucidate what it is in its own terms (Moustakas, 1994). The assignment of phenomenology is not to define empirical and

factual differences, but to examine the fundamental structures differentiating our experiences, their correlations, and the connection between the two (Giorgi, 2012; Zahavi, 2018).

According to Giorgi (2012) a significant part of phenomenology is descriptive, but this does not eliminate phases where interpretation also takes place (p. 6). Furthermore, description is the use of language to communicate the intentional objectives of experience (Giorgi, 2012; Zahavi, 2018). Husserl (1931) is recognized for making the argument that the epoché and the transcendental reduction are crucial to phenomenology. Additionally, Husserl has contended anyone who believes both to be irrelevant might use the term ‘phenomenology’ (Husserl, 1931; Zahavi, 2021).

Transcendental phenomenology focuses on subjective experiences of human beings and groups, and involves attempting to uncover the world as experienced by the individual through their lived encounters (Kafle, 2011).

Research Questions

Central Question

How do secondary school counselors describe their implementation of social emotional learning support for students?

Guiding Question

What are the current strategies that secondary school counselors use to navigate barriers when implementing social emotion learning support for students?

Setting

The setting for this qualitative phenomenological study was public secondary high schools in the Southside Hampton Roads region of Virginia, which is comprised of five cities—Norfolk, Portsmouth, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, and Suffolk. Participation was solicited

throughout all public secondary high schools within the Southside Hampton Roads region. The setting was selected because I am currently serving as a secondary school counselor in Norfolk City Public Schools. Performing this research adds to the literature for this setting and my current career. Moreover, the secondary level of these public Southside Hampton Roads Virginia schools organizational structure consists of principals, assistant principals, school counselors, paraprofessionals, and other certified and classified staff. Interviews for this study were conducted by phone, online platforms, in person, or via ZOOM. Scientists that utilize a qualitative approach go after a more thorough insight of the bias of the study and online access provides an opportunity to facilitate more extensive data collection (Salvador et al., 2020).

Participants

Participants for the study were secondary school counselors in a conventional school setting and were chosen using a purposive homogenous sampling method (Etikan et al., 2016; Zhi, 2014). This type of sampling method focuses on participants that have similar traits or identifiable characteristics. For instance, participants' ages, cultures, jobs, or life experiences can be similar (Etikan et al., 2016). According to Roberts and Hyatt (2018) qualitative research does not focus on a large sample size; however, more emphasis is put on specifics of the setting and situation, participants, and a rich description of participants experiences (p. 148). The comprehensive case-by-case assessment of individual transcripts is a timely process and the goal is to accurately understand the perceptions and insights of the participants, instead of prematurely arriving to broad claims (Larkin et al., 2021).

As asserted by Creswell and Poth (2018) purposive sampling was best suited for this study due to intentionally sampling specific participants that could greatly inform and guide the research (p. 148). However, convenience sampling was utilized as the sampling strategy. Ideally,

the ability to use an entire population to collect data is preferred; however, it is primarily unrealistic due to populations being finite. Therefore, convenience sampling is a strategy favored by most researchers (Zhi, 2014). Convenience sampling is a form of nonprobability or nonrandom sampling in which participants of the identified population meet specific practical criteria, such as easy access, geographical closeness, availability at a given time, or the readiness to participate (Etikan et al., 2016). Moreover, purposive sampling with a convenience sampling strategy allows the researcher to explore *their circle of friends and acquaintances, either in their existing community or other communities they have lived or worked, and professional organizations* [emphasis made] (Heppner et al., 2016).

Additionally, to further support convenience sampling, I utilized snowball sampling (Etikan et al., 2016; Naderifar et al., 2017; Zhi, 2014). Snowball sampling is a convenience sampling technique. Snowballing is utilized when it is challenging to access participants with the target characteristics. Within this technique, the current participants recruit other potential participants from among their contacts. The sampling process remains until data capacity is fulfilled (Naderifar et al., 2017; Stratton, 2021). Participants were contacted via their work email asking permission to participate in the study. If they agreed to participate, I contacted them to schedule a time for an interview. Additionally, they were advised that they may be contacted later to participate in a focus group for the study.

Moreover, the convenience population sample was selected among current secondary school counselors within the Southside Hampton Roads Virginia schools. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) purposive sampling aims to target a group of individuals that are best suited to inform the research problem being investigated. The setting allowed for a large enough sample size to adequately guide the research questions.

Convenience sampling methods are considered less unbiased than probability methods and are a form of sampling by which the researcher constructs his/her sample from a specific or target population rather than the participants being selected by the researcher, referred to the researcher, or self-selected to participate in a study (Stratton, 2021). Convenience sampling is regarded as useful when creating a prospective hypothesis or research objective. Regardless of the limits of convenience sampling, certain steps can be implemented to increase credibility (Stratton, 2021).

Procedures

The secondary school counseling participants were identified using their school counseling websites at each secondary high school in the Southside Hampton Roads Virginia region. Additionally, a recruitment letter (Appendix B) and approved letter of consent (Appendix C) were sent to all identified school counselors via email. Within the consent, compensation information and any other information pertinent to the study was included (Hunter, 2020). Upon obtaining a response from all interested participants, an interview was arranged for those chosen for participation in the research. Participants were expected to return a signed letter of informed consent to me preceding or on the day of the interview (Hunter, 2020).

Participants elected to conduct their interviews via ZOOM or in-person. I obtained demographic information for statistical purposes, identifying tenure, experience, advance degrees, and licensure/certifications (Hunter, 2020). I transcribed all interviews using Speed Scribe and forwarded them to participants to check for accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I made any necessary corrections provided by the participants. Follow-up interviews for clarity were conducted as needed. Further, to follow Internal Review Board (IRB) confidentiality guidelines, all data were stored on a secure password-protected database system (Hunter, 2020).

The Researcher's Role

I am currently employed at a secondary high school in Norfolk City Public Schools. Utilizing Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, my goal was to attain transcendental subjectivity, in which the impact of the researcher on the study is assessed often and any bias or preconceived notions are removed so as to not influence the object of the study (Neubauer et al., 2019; Staiti, 2012). Additionally, qualitative researchers typically develop study-specific questions for their interviews to ensure a natural and discovery-oriented research process. They avoid using pre-selected research questions or instruments (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

I examined the data from the interviews to assist with detecting pre-study thoughts and assumptions regarding what a participant may say in response to the questions that were asked. This guided my bracketing endeavor to control bias (Seale, 1999). Further, I refrained from inserting myself in the study to avoid any bias influencing the descriptions presented by the participants (Neubauer et al., 2019; Staiti, 2012).

Data Collection

As stated by Larkin et al. (2021) one effective way to approach data collection when conducting a transcendental study is to use a semi-structured interviewing process. This interviewing style permits the researchers and participants to take part in a dialogue whereby primary questions are altered based on the participants' responses, and the researcher can explore specific and important areas that develop during the interviewing process.

Semi-structured interviewing provides the interviewees a certain amount of freedom regarding explaining their thoughts and focusing on specific aspects of their interests and areas of expertise (Horton et al., 2004). Additionally, this enables their responses to be probed for more detail. This interviewing style allows them to explain their thoughts, emphasizing areas of

particular interest and expertise they feel they have (Horton et al., 2004). For this phenomenological study interviews and reflective journaling were used; employing several sources of data helped me to develop an informative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Horton et al., 2004).

Journaling is an effective strategy used by researchers that provides a *thick/rich* [emphasis added] and in-depth research experience. Qualitative research is grounded in exploring and interpreting the lived experiences of humans within their social setting. Journaling allows for discovery of the different pathways the qualitative research journey can take, which enables the researcher to stay true to the data collection process and the way it is collected (Birks et al., 2008; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978).

Finally, interviews were conducted to explore the participants' lived experiences through social engagement between the participants and the researcher (Heppner et al., 2016; Hunter, 2020). The semi-structured interviews were comprised of demographic/icebreaker and open-ended questions. As suggested by Moustakas (1994) broad general questions were asked first, followed up with several open-ended questions to inquire about the secondary school counselors' perceptions of implementing social emotional learning.

Icebreaker /Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity/race?
4. What is your idea of self-care?
5. What advice would you give your 20 year old self?
6. What is the first thing you would buy if you became a millionaire?

7. What is your highest degree earned?
8. What professional licenses and/or certifications do you hold related to school counseling?
9. How long have you been a school counselor?
10. How long have you worked for Norfolk City Public Schools?
11. How long have you worked in a secondary school counseling setting?

Central Research Question: How do secondary school counselors describe their implementation of social emotional learning?

12. Describe your experience with implementing social emotional learning at your school.
13. What types of social emotional learning initiatives are offered at your school?
11. Discuss any activities/interventions/practices used to support social emotional learning at your school.
12. Describe how you implement social emotional learning at your school.
13. How do non-school counseling colleagues (i.e., administrators, teachers) support your facilitation of social emotional learning at your school?

Guided Research Question: What are the current strategies that secondary school counselors use to navigate barriers when implementing social emotional learning?

14. Elaborate on the barriers you encounter when implementing social emotional learning.
15. Describe how the ASCA National Model describes your facilitation of social emotional learning.
16. How do you navigate around the barriers when implementing social emotional learning at your school?

17. How does Norfolk City Public Schools support school counselors with implementing social emotional learning?

18. Describe any personal strategies or self-practices you have adopted to assist you with effectively implementing social emotional learning.

19. Describe the need for social emotional learning at your school. What have you observed from student behavior that has increased or decreased the need for social emotional learning?

20. Describe how you measure the success of implementing social emotional learning at your school.

Interview questions one through eight were created to collect demographic information from each participant. The answers to these questions provided personal and professional background information. Questions nine through twenty were created to obtain an in-depth understanding of each participant's lived experiences by being comprehensive and general (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell (2012) elucidates that asking comprehensive, broad, and general interview questions assists with gathering textual and structural data descriptions of the participants' lived experiences, providing a richer understanding of shared ideas and experiences.

Data Analysis

This qualitative study was approached using thematic analysis (TA). Thematic Analysis is a process for systematically detecting and arranging patterns of meaning (themes) throughout a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2022). This enables a researcher to concentrate on meaning across a data set by identifying and understanding the collective or shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). TA supports qualitative research due to its accessibility and flexibility, providing a clear understanding of the mechanics of coding and how to process

qualitative data thoroughly, which helps to make the connection to wider theoretical or conceptual concerns (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

According to Creswell (2013) when conducting qualitative research, the researcher should aim to generate a *layer of analysis* [emphasis added] using a variety of data sources, such as documents, journaling, and interviews. Additionally, to effectively implement qualitative research the researcher should individually code and analyze interview notes and transcripts (Slater-Warren et al., 2020). Creswell (2012) emphasizes starting qualitative research analysis by investigating the conventional sense of data and code development. This requires meticulous focus on language and in-depth reflection of the emerging patterns and meanings of human experience. To code or classify is to organize things in a systematic order, making it a part of a classification or system in order or to categorize. The art of applying and reapplying codes to qualitative data is called “codifying,” allowing the data to be segregated, grouped, and regrouped to consolidate meaning and give an explanation (Grbich, 2007; Saldaña, 2021). I approached the TA in this study using the following six-phase approach recommended by Braun and Clarke (2012).

Phase 1: Familiarize Yourself with The Data

This phase entails engrossing oneself in the data by reading and rereading textual data, such as transcripts of interviews and the responses to qualitative surveys. I listened to audio recordings or watched visual recordings of data to become intimately acquainted with the data set’s content, enabling me to recognize relevancy to the research question(s). The researcher read the entire data set three times to ensure complete understanding of data content, as is recommended (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase 2: Generating Initial Code

Saldaña (2021) elucidates a code as a short phrase or word that emblematically assigns a comprehensive, significant, essence-capturing, and/or evocative characteristic for a fragment of language-based or visual data (p. 5). Therefore, I started the systematic analysis of the data through coding. Coding involves, again, a thorough read of all data items. A researcher must code each data item completely before moving on to code other data. It is important to code anything that is possibly pertinent to the research questions. I followed up by writing down the code and labeling the text connected with it and using more than one code if necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase 3: Search for Themes

The researcher began to assign codes to themes. Coded data should be reviewed to detect areas of resemblance and overlap between codes, and collapsing and clustering codes that appear to share some similarity or features as a group suggest a logical and meaningful pattern in the data. Moreover, I analyzed the relationship among themes and thought about how the themes work in unison to clearly communicate the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Saldaña (2021) suggests grouping themed data in two ways: (a) categorizing data according to topic and idea, and (b) theming data phenomenologically by concentrating on meaning isolated from the data through emblematic capture. Therefore, coding should be concentrated in the areas of categorical, thematic, or conceptual similarity (p. 301).

Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes

The researcher started the recursive process by developing themes that were in relation to the coded data and entire data set. First, I reviewed themes contrary to the collated extracts of data and investigated whether the theme worked in relation to the data. Second, during the

review process I reread all data to establish if themes meaningfully described the full data set or an aspect thereof (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

The researcher clearly stated what was distinctive and precise regarding each theme by summarizing the essence of each theme in a few sentences. Moreover, I provided the deep analytic work involved in thematic analysis, which was essential at shaping up the analysis into its fine-grained detail. I also identified what to call each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Phase 6: Producing the Report

Using a first-person active tense, I outlined the data analysis by telling a story regarding the data based on the analysis. The report aimed to persuade and clearly explicate in a complex way within the scholarly field. I made an argument that answers research question in detail (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldaña, 2009; Smith et al., 2022).

Moreover, NVivo software was explored due to how it decreases several manual responsibilities and affords the researcher additional time to find tendencies, identify themes, and obtain conclusions (Hilal & Alabri, 2013). Using software like NVivo or MaxQDA has become essential in qualitative research. It is a lot easier for the researcher to count codes if he/she desires and to construct complex stratified sets of codes arranged around nodes that are layered differently (Elliott, 2018).

Trustworthiness

Credibility

According to Van Manen (2014) and Polkinghorne (1989) credibility refers to the notion that an idea is well-grounded and supported (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Polkinghorne (1989) asked the overarching question, “Does the general structural description provide an accurate portrait

of the common features and structural connections that are manifested in the examples collected?” (p. 274) (Hunter, 2020). I was able to use such a question to think about the credibility of my study. Member checking was used to allow participants to examine the data, inferences, interpretations, and analysis for exactitude and credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking is viewed by some researchers as a vital strategy to ensure credibility (Gysbers, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability is a term within qualitative research used in lieu of reliability. It is a process by which the data from a study can change and/or render instability (Carcary, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This involves using a descriptive coding process to build broader themes and subthemes based on generated codes from the data collection. Moreover, this process delineates a specified set of categories to enable the researcher to know if secondary coding is requisite. Descriptive coding outlines for the reader what the researcher observed and processed from each interview (Saldaña, 2021). Each theme is produced from the description of the findings and presented. In this study I utilized a qualitative narrative to present detailed discussions of all themes and subthemes, and data were interpreted for meaning (Creswell, 2013).

Confirmability

I established confirmability of the research process using the audit method. This process enables a researcher to confirm the validity of data collected for a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confirmability suggests the extent to which others can confirm the research results. The precise explanation of details is utilized to make improvements (Ghafouri & Ofoghi, 2016). Further, during this process the researcher utilized peer examination, like member checks, to

enrich the credibility of the study (Anney, 2014; Bitsch, 2005; Krefting, 1991). The researcher shared research methods and results with another doctoral candidate pursuing qualitative research , which assisted with the identification of categories that are not aligned with the framework of both the central and guiding research questions to identify negative cases (Krefting, 1991). Peer examination assisted the researcher in providing a more in-depth reflexive analysis (Bitsch, 2005; Krefting, 1991; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Transferability

Creswell and Poth (2018) explain that within qualitative research, the findings of the study must be transferrable between the researcher and participants. This study offered thick and comprehensive descriptions by ensuring transferability and obtained direct quotes and substantial statements from participants (Bitsch, 2005).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are inevitable during the research process. I considered the following to address and mitigate ethical issues: (a) protect the identity of participants by maintaining confidentiality (b) safeguard the storage of collected data, and (c) properly destroy collected data. Participants were identified using pseudonyms to protect their identity and employment location (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Research participants were informed regarding all details pertaining to the study using voluntary informed consent. I stored all collected data in a locked and secure space. Moreover, I utilized a professional service to properly dispose of all data and research materials acquired once the dissertation was successfully defended.

Summary

This chapter defined the methods that were used to conduct this research study. I used a transcendental phenomenological method to describe the lived experiences of secondary school

counselors' perceptions of implementing social and emotional learning in their school settings.

The central and guided research questions and participants were identified in addition to the selection process. Moreover, Chapter 3 outlined the data collection, data analysis, interview schedule, procedures, and role of the researcher bias.

Chapter Four: Findings

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of secondary school counselors' implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) within their school settings. This chapter provides descriptive details of each participant within the study related to the secondary school counselors' facilitation of SEL. Moreover, the findings of the data analysis are stated in terms of specific results. All information is reported using thematic narratives and tables (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021). Additionally, direct quotes from interviews of each participant are utilized to provide rich and thick data reporting, answering each research question (Birks et al., 2008).

Overview of Data Analysis

I employed an inductive Thematic Analysis (TA) approach, utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-phase methodology. Data were gathered using a semi-structured interview process. I became familiar with the data by carefully reviewing interview transcripts several times, notetaking, and journaling. Further, codes were identified from each interview transcript in which themes emerged and were defined. I strategically detected, arranged, and identified patterns to generate themes throughout the data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This permitted me the ability to focus on meaning across the data sets and to gain in-depth insight from the lived experiences of each secondary school counseling participant (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

To ensure trustworthiness and validity of data collection and results during this process, descriptive coding was used for theme and subtheme development (Saldaña, 2021). Next, I used the member checking process for participants to survey the data, inferences, interpretations, and

analysis for accuracy and integrity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was a vital step in the analysis process to ensure study credibility (Gysbers, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lastly, peer examination was used to further enrich the credibility of the study, the thematic analysis process, and data outcomes. A peer that currently holds a Doctor of Education in qualitative research reviewed the analysis process by ensuring honesty and offered more in-depth, thorough reflexive analysis as it relates to the analysis process and results recommendations (Bitsch, 2005; Krefting, 1991; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During the peer examination, I was asked to explain in more detail the recruitment process to offer more clarity on participant sampling. The peer examiner asked me to clarify the coding process and theme development. Peer examination feedback identified my qualitative research method and Thematic Analysis as appropriate uses of data collection and analysis of data. The peer examination resulted in no changes or recommendations. After member checking and peer examination, I used the audit trail process to trace through my findings and verify whether the research findings were trusted as a platform for additional examination (Carcary, 2009).

Participants

The study was comprised of eight school counselor participants. Each participant was employed at a secondary public school in Virginia. All participants willingly contributed to the study. The identification of each participant is captured below using pseudonyms as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant*	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Years as a School Counselor	Years as a Secondary School Counselor

Charita	31	Female	Black	3	3
Mary	49	Female	Black	10	5
Rosalind	42	Female	Hispanic	12	10
Liz	51	Female	Black	2	2
Katie	44	Female	White	7	7
Tonya	50	Female	Black	24	23
Keith	46	Male	White	1 ½	1 ½
Tom	58	Male	White	25	25

Note. *Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant for privacy.

Charita

Charita is a 31-year-old Black female who has served as a high school counselor in Virginia for 3 years. This was her first school counseling position since graduating with a master's degree in urban education and school counseling 3 years ago. During her time, she has served at the same high school. Charita has a passion for school counseling and enjoys helping students plan for their future. However, Charita expressed concern that her "light has been dimmed" since entering the profession. She believes that she and her four school counseling colleagues have been bogged down with tasks that interfere with their ability to adequately support the students and families at the school, primarily because the population they serve is Title I at an inner-city school plagued with crime, direct/indirect trauma, and poverty. Most days she feels she is fighting an "uphill battle" and cannot see the impact she has on the students. Although she recognized the school having some SEL initiatives, she feels that they are facilitated more by non-school counselors and questions the training that has been provided to ensure her non-school counseling colleagues are effectively implementing SEL skills.

Mary

Mary is a 49-year-old Black female who has served as a school counselor for 10 years, with five years as a school counselor in New York where she obtained her master's in school counseling K-12. However, the last three years she has been a high school counselor in Virginia

where she serves an at-risk and Title I population. Mary has worked as an adjunct professor and graduation coach while in New York. She relocated to Virginia in hopes of more opportunities and a place to raise her school-aged daughter. Mary expressed feeling like she's giving back to underrepresented populations and believes that she has the skillset to support some of the most challenging populations. Mary feels that her time serving as an adjunct professor gives her a wealth of knowledge to better prepare her students for post-secondary opportunities. She feels that there has been a "shift in support from the outgoing administration vs the incoming administration. It is a drastic difference in support of me and my department." Mary believes that students are in varying levels of crisis and school counselors need to be more hands-on than ever to meet the challenges students face with social/behavioral concerns. At the time of her interview, she hesitated to elaborate on how difficult the current administration has been with supporting her department and welcoming feedback to support SEL within the school.

Rosalind

Rosalind is a 42-year-old Hispanic female who has served as a public-school counselor in Virginia for 12 years, and ten of those years have been as a middle school counselor. Rosalind has worked for the same school district her entire career. Prior to school counseling she was an elementary school teacher. Rosalind is extremely concerned with the state of children's mental health and believes that "trauma has taken a front seat in the lives of most children." However, she feels that some days her role as a school counselor is effective, but most days she is struggling to manage her day to support students and complete non-counseling duties. She believes that "each year she's straying further away from the true work of school counseling." Rosalind has always served in Title I and at-risk schools, with the population being predominately black. She believes her counseling style is more solution-focused to address social

and emotional learning (SEL) and “building relationships and rapport” with her students is vital in implementing SEL daily.

Liz

Liz is a 51-year-old Black female who has been a school counselor for 2 years but has worked in education for 19 years. Two years ago, when she graduated with her master’s degree in school counseling, she knew she desired to make a positive impact on youth by “developing them to be academically successful, reinforce the needed skill sets to be lifelong learners, and to ensure they had a solid post-secondary plan.” Liz has worked her two years as a school counselor at the same high school, which is Title I and serves an at-risk population including the English as a Second Language (ESL) learners for the district. Liz appeared to be happy with her school and feels that the school takes a “all hands-on deck” approach to supporting students and facilitating SEL. Although, she stressed that she must “meet students where they are” and believes that establishing rapport and connections with students is critical for her ability to develop students socially and emotionally. Liz believes in staff collaboration and during her tenure feels that establishing the same connection with staff and building administration is extremely important to gain support for student success.

Katie

Katie is a 44-year-old white female who graduated with a master’s degree in school counseling 7 years ago. She has been a high school counselor at the same Title I school during her tenure. Prior to working in public education, she worked in higher education administration. Katie expressed aspirations to become an administrator in the future and is currently enrolled in a graduate program pursuing her doctorate in administration and supervision. Katie is extremely personable with her students and believes “establish[ing] connections” is the only way school

counselors can make progress with supporting the social and emotional learning needs of the students. She expressed very little support for her department from the current administration. However, she has a model of what school counseling support looks like from the previous administration. Most days Katie is exhausted trying to advocate for support of the comprehensive school counseling program. She recognized one building-wide SEL initiative that is facilitated one day per week by teachers. The school counseling department was not included in the development or implementation of the initiative. Katie “does not see the effectiveness” of the initiative and believes this is partly due to the lack of school counseling support. At one point during the interview Katie became emotional while expressing the lack of support she gets from administration.

Tonya

Tonya is a 50-year-old Black female and is the veteran school counselor among the participants. She has a master’s in urban education and School Counseling and holds an Education Specialist degree. Tonya has been an educator for 27 years; 23 years have been as a secondary school counselor. Moreover, she has also served as school counseling director. Tonya has seen a huge uptick in the need for SEL in schools and feels “it is a dire need.” She is concerned with students “not having a strong emotional toolbox” to equip them in being effective communicators of their emotions. Students “use aggression, poor social skills, and violence to communicate.” Tonya expressed concern that society is in trouble if developing the SEL needs of students does not become a top priority nationally. Tonya has always worked in her current district and was excited to share a new SEL curriculum that is rolling out for the 2023-2024 school year. She was very hopeful and believes it is aligned with the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) national model, providing detailed guidance for school

counselors to facilitate SEL within their schools. Tonya continues to have a passion for school counseling despite the many challenges she and her colleagues have faced trying to “do the true work” of school counseling.

Keith

Keith is a 46-year-old white male who has the least amount of school counseling experience among the participants. This is his first year as a full-time high school counselor in a non-Title I, predominantly white school. Last year he was hired on as a part-time school counselor. Keith has a love for the profession and is excited that the school offered him a full-time contract. Keith has a master’s degree in urban education and School Counseling. Keith was not aware of current SEL programs in the school but feels the school counseling program does a great job connecting with students. He expressed SEL is important for his population “due to lack of social awareness, the inability to appropriately manage their emotions, poor social skills, and lots of peer drama.” Keith expressed that he would like to see more group-based counseling. At the time of his interview, which was at the start of the 2023-2024 school year, he was thinking of a group he could start. Keith identified his administrative team as supportive but “feels they are asked to do too many tasks that are non-direct student contact.” When asked about the ASCA national model, Keith was not familiar and was not aware of SEL initiatives that his school counseling department facilitates.

Tom

Tom is a 58-year-old white male that has been in education for 25 years. He started his first ten years as a school counselor in New York and moved to Virginia where he has worked as a high school counselor for the last fifteen years. Tom is incredibly involved with students in and outside of the school, where he serves as a coach. During his interview, Tom appeared extremely

comfortable and knowledgeable with his role as a school counselor. He shared that he has served as a school counseling department chair within his current district. Tom recognized school counselors as “the glue that keeps the school together” in many ways. Social and emotional learning is extremely important to Tom as “it develops student’s basic skills to be good citizens and emotionally adjusted adults.” Tom referred to a lot of societal issues which “stem from adults that were not taught social skills as a child.” Tom feels that his current school does an excellent job getting involved with the “whole student” but feels that he and the school counseling team must get creative with accessing students. One way Tom tries to facilitate SEL daily is by “keeping an open-door policy and establishing trust among [his] caseload.” He feels “if students do not feel they can talk to me, how do I get them to listen or learn SEL strategies?” He shared how he takes pride in implementing SEL on and off the field as a coach.

Theme Development

As shown in Table 2, five leading themes and twelve subthemes emerged from the analysis of data that correlated to each research question. The central research question yielded two themes: student/counselor interaction and school wide social and emotional learning practices, which led to seven subthemes. The guided research question yielded three themes, school counselor social and emotional learning program initiatives, social and emotional learning implementation barriers, and navigating the barriers, which led to five subthemes.

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subtheme
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Central Research Question: How do secondary school counselors describe their implementation of social and emotional learning support for students?

Student/Counselor Interaction	Individual Counseling
	Group/Classroom Guidance
	Counselor/Student Relationship
	Wrap-around Services Support
School-wide SEL Practices	Teacher Led SEL
	Staff/Student Mentorship
	Tiered Facilitated SEL Support

Guided Research Question: What are the current strategies that secondary school counselors use to navigate barriers when implementing social and emotional learning?

School Counselor SEL Program Initiatives	SEL collaboration
	Triage SEL Support
	Comprehensive School Counseling Program
SEL Implementation Barriers	External Barriers
	Internal Barriers
Navigating the Barriers	

Research Questions and Responses

Central Research Question

Secondary school counselors described their implementation of social and emotional learning support for students. I attempted to identify the lived experiences that secondary school counselors have when interacting with students while facilitating SEL within their school

settings. Each participant brought a wide range of rich knowledge and expertise on how they employ SEL within their secondary school settings.

Student/Counselor Interactions

When asked to illustrate their implementation of social and emotional learning at their school, each participant described the methods and practices they have used over the span of their careers. Participants' implementation of SEL varied based on their tenure within the field of school counseling and differed per school setting and student need. Moreover, participants elaborated in detail on their first-hand experience with implementing SEL.

During each interview, participants shared remarkably similar experiences with their implementation of SEL and its facilitation. Each of their experiences were very hands-on but varied in style, technique, and personal/professional preference. Further, post-COVID was a crucial factor in how some participants responded to the SEL needs of their students. During Katie's interview, she shared how students returned to school post-COVID and lacked the ability to effectively communicate their feelings. Staff as a whole were in shock by the behaviors and how she and her colleagues struggled with how to approach what Katie referred to as, "the elephant in the room" due to so many students appearing to be emotionally checked out. Katie took a few deep breaths as she began to elaborate, appearing to take her time with gathering her thoughts, seeming overwhelmed with emotion as she began to share. She described the experience as:

Since COVID, I have noticed SEL is greatly needed. Students returned to school and lacked the necessary skills appropriately communicate their frustrations, and we witnessed a lot of staff and teachers struggling daily with getting students to engage. I felt like I was in rapid response mode every day.

Like Katie, Tonya echoed similar concerns with post-COVID proving to be one of the most challenging times in her career, with students needing more social and emotional learning support:

Students appeared to be spiraling out of control, emotionally and socially disconnected. It was almost like the flood gates had opened and we were simply not prepared to address the rapid need for the emotional and behavioral support our students needed.

Tonya expressed a lot of frustration with being overcome by the level of need and often not feeling equipped with the tools to facilitate SEL, stating, “At times I felt like I was useless, and they certainly did not prepare us for this type of counseling in my graduate program.” She mentioned feeling like she was “flying by the seat of [her] pants” due to not feeling like she could address the concerns fast enough. Tonya expressed that before COVID SEL was “fit in” wherever she could, such as academic sessions during post-secondary planning and most often classroom school counseling lessons.

Liz expressed a lot of challenges with implementing SEL. However, she made it clear that SEL implementation for her has been a challenge due to so many unpredictable incidents during the day. And only serving in the role for two years, she is still learning the nuances of effective school counseling that make it hard to implement SEL strategies consistently on a daily basis with her caseload of 288 students. Liz laughed and stated, “Where there’s a will there is a way.” She paused before elaborating further on her experience with SEL facilitation at her school:

I find that being approachable is a wonderful way to establish rapport with my students.

Often it is as simple as speaking to them in the hallway, acknowledging a cute outfit they are wearing, or intervening when observing them having a disagreement with a staff member or peer. That is how you open the door to implementing SEL in a non-traditional

way like classroom guidance. Sometimes I look at my counseling colleagues that have been doing it much longer than me, and I wish I were more organized. Maybe that is standing in the way of me being more proactive with rolling out SEL to my caseload.

Tom, serving as the oldest and having the most tenure, twenty-five years, was very relaxed and reminded me that his time as a school counselor in the State of New York, “was the training ground for being quick and creative with how I incorporated SEL with my kids.” He recalled that most of his time with students over the years has been more impactful one on one. Tom further described his SEL facilitation:

As much as I enjoy going into the classrooms to do SEL lessons or creating SEL lesson plans, I am assisting students with SEL skills more during individual sessions and when I create behavior intervention plans. It is a more personalized and student-centered approach that is tailored to their specific needs.

During Rosalind’s interview she made it clear that in her twelve years as a school counselor she has had to be extremely creative with how she facilitates SEL with her students while working at an at-risk and inner-city school:

I find that you must do what works for the population you serve. Conflict mediation is a substantial portion of SEL at the secondary level. Unfortunately, not everyone in the building and outside of the building will see the necessity SEL is for students. I enjoy that one on one experience with my students. Classroom lessons are a joy for me because I get to really experience the students and it makes the SEL lessons more meaningful because the students learn from one another, and I learn from them.

Rosalind elaborated during the interview that SEL facilitation can look different per school counselors and “a good rapport with students is paramount in aiding the mission of SEL facilitation.”

Keith approached the question with some apprehension. Unlike most participants, he had the least amount of tenure, having only served one and a half years as school counselor. It was obvious from his body language that he was a bit uncomfortable with how to answer the question. His experience with SEL was limited and he shared:

I have not really done a lot with SEL at my school so far, but I would like to start a self-empowerment group. I feel students lack that skill and a lot of them have very poor self-esteem.

At the time of the interview, Mary had just concluded her workday and shared that she had been presenting in classrooms all day on the warning signs and symptoms of depression, stating, “Whew today was a day. I am exhausted from being in classrooms all day presenting the warning signs of depression.” When asked to describe her experience with SEL at her school she explained:

Going where the students are and being in their space is where I am most effective with SEL. However, I was not always comfortable with presenting SEL or having those conversations with students, believe or not. Classroom lessons and individual sessions are, in my opinion, the best way for school counselors to push SEL in schools. We [school counselors] are really the heart of SEL within a school even though teachers are asked to include SEL as part of their daily learning objectives.

When asked to elaborate on her experience with the facilitation of SEL at her school, Charita slightly laughed, stating, “It’s been a bit difficult for me to facilitate being a new school

counselor.” Charita only had one year of in-person experience as a school counselor and the first two years were virtual due to COVID. Charita further shared how she has navigated facilitating SEL:

It was a challenge for me when we were virtual. So, I feel like this year has been my training ground to go into classrooms and really create lessons based on SEL needs of my students. The population I work with needs a lot of love and support. A lot of my time with SEL is working with my students individually. They seem to really be comfortable with me and to me that is key to teaching the SEL skills.

Subtheme: Individual Counseling

The secondary school counseling participants emphasized how the majority of their SEL implementation is facilitated during individual or one-on-one counseling sessions. Mary stated, “I find that during my individual sessions with students, I am more effective with SEL support.” Most participants believed that the needs of their students are so great and “individualizing SEL support is more impactful.” Keith shared, “I can reach my kids better when it is one-on-one SEL support. They seem to listen, and the conversation is more meaningful.” Mary and Charita shared the same sentiments that “individualized SEL” has a longer lasting effect.

Subtheme: Group/Classroom Guidance

The participants shared their insight regarding how group and classroom guidance lessons are used to facilitate SEL, and it was familiar territory for several of them. They shared that group and classroom guidance is a fantastic way to implement SEL and wished they had more opportunities to do so. Charita stated, “I find that the conversations during SEL lessons can be powerful...students learn from one another.” Rosalind expressed, “It can be hard to get into

the classrooms or even run a group nowadays. Honestly, setting aside time is hard with so many daily fires, so I try to make it a point to get in the classrooms once a month.”

Subtheme: Counselor/Student Relationships

The school counseling participants stressed the importance of the counselor/student relationship when facilitating SEL support. It was at the core of what they conveyed throughout their interviews. Tonya stated, “If you can’t make a meaningful connection with a student, you can hang it up with reaching them socially and emotionally.” Liz and Mary shared the same sentiment as Tonya. Liz shared, “I’ve been able to reach some of the most problematic students based on the relationship I had with them.” Mary further explained, “It really all boils down to connections... I am always looking for a way to connect with my kids” and Keith stated, “I try to find a way to make them laugh and feel like they can be themselves around me.”

Subtheme: Wrap-around Services Support

It became noticeably clear as the interviews progressed that most participants utilized several wrap-around services to provide SEL support. During Rosalind’s interview she mentioned that often she must outsource SEL support for her students, stating:

I figured out early on in my career that I cannot be all things to my students, and I must know when to refer them to community-based services for outpatient mental health support, intensive in-home services, mentoring, or to consider psychological evaluations to provide more care that we just cannot offer in the school setting. Our school psychologist and social worker are great resources too. It truly takes a “all hands on deck” approach to provide SEL.

Tonya, Charita, and Mary highlighted during their interviews how they enlist the support of outside agencies to meet the social and emotional needs of students. However, some of the

participants mentioned challenges with the availability of wrap-around service support. Tom expressed that he refers out for student support but “a lot of these services are backlogged and overwhelmed by the growing need of emotional support students are requiring.”

School Wide SEL Practices

Theme two was discovered when participants were asked to expound on how their secondary school facilitates SEL school-wide. Each participant was asked to describe what building-wide SEL initiatives have been implemented at their schools. Experiences for participants varied per school-based student need, population, and demographic.

Charita began by stating, “Where do I begin?” Charita appeared somewhat frustrated as she began to explain how her administration approaches SEL school-wide implementation. She shared:

Our administration is vastly different from my last administration. One of our first-year social studies teachers has been given the responsibility to develop SEL lesson plans for teachers to implement during the week. Something like that should be given to the school counseling department to do. It just seems like a school counseling task since that is one of the daily supports offered by our department.

Charita stressed that the staff and administration as a whole work to develop good relationships with students and encouraged students to identify trusted adults within the building to assist when they are facing challenges. She went on to say, “That much of the SEL work we do is informal on a case-by-case basis.” Further, she elaborated that she feels the school could do a better job by utilizing the school counseling department more to assist with training teachers on SEL best practices.

Unlike Charita, Mary had a much different opinion of her school's approach to SEL. Mary said that she has seen better school-wide SEL support from other schools she has worked at. Mary stated:

Building-wide SEL is non-existent in my school. Everyone operates from a very reactionary mindset. Part of the problem is lack of collaboration. Teachers are stressed with testing and meeting student outcome goals, that no one is addressing the elephant in the room that our kids are in trouble mentally and socially. They see the academic distress, but until that social and emotional piece is addressed, the academics will continue to suffer.

Moreover, Mary stressed how there are compassionate staff that do a wonderful job of making individual connections with the students and that is how they address the SEL needs within their building. And if a more comprehensive SEL program was established school-wide her school could be more proactive with addressing SEL across the board.

During Rosalind's interview she echoed the similarities of Charita and Mary. However, she felt that her school was making some good strides overall to address SEL more holistically. Rosalind reported:

Although we have room for improvement, my school tries to cover a lot of areas with SEL daily. Our suspension reinstatement process involves admin, a school counselor, and any support staff needed if attendance, housing, or other issues need to be addressed. A lot of schools do not require students being reinstated from suspension to meet with the school counselor. At that time, I get to review grades, work on behavior modification, and assist the student with developing needed SEL skills to not repeat the same behavior.

Rosalind added that the staff at her school are “pretty good at referring students to the school counselor.”

Liz’s mood was happy when asked to ask what school-wide SEL looked like at her school, stating, “Wow, we do a lot! There is always someone working one on one with a kid in the hallway or attending a game or making time to show support at extracurricular activities.”

Liz further shared:

My school goes the extra mile with seeking and implementing community resources and making use of the practitioners and mental health staff within our building. There is a club to support almost every student interest you can think of. I am currently leading a girl’s group to build self-awareness and self-confidence.

Liz stressed that rapport building is a big deal at her school. Her administrative team is supportive of her department at assisting with SEL facilitation and trusts their expertise. Much of Tonya’s experience with SEL school-wide support was the same. During Tonya’s interview, she highlighted how SEL is a “all hands-on deck approach” and SEL is tiered throughout her building based on student need. Tonya shared:

A lot of our schoolwide SEL is initiated using assemblies, mentoring, and we have a PBIS behavior intervention program that covers a lot of our SEL support. This program is used along with our school counseling SEL guidance program duties.

Katie further expounded on SEL being at the forefront of her school, taking on a collaborative effort. Comprised of tiered interventions, rapport building, and exposure to developmental opportunities for students within and outside of the building. Katie stated, “I think we do a really great job of exposing our kids to mental health support by building partnerships with outside agencies.” Further, Tom reiterated many of the same school-wide SEL initiatives

that were identified by other participants, such as that SEL could be found within student support meetings for Section 504 and Individualized Education Plans. Tom further added:

We rely on a lot of community-based resources, student activities, and embedding social and emotional learning within our instructional daily. Also, we have several clubs to cover a lot of social and emotional issues many of our student body experience.

Keith had limited insight on how his school implements SEL primarily due to his short tenure, but shared:

School Spirit Week is a success at our school. It gets the kids involved. That is the only school-wide social and emotional learning support I have noticed in the year I have been here. Most of our social and emotional learning happens during academic sessions the counselors have with students.

Subtheme: Teacher-Led SEL

During the interviews, most school counseling participants shared their frustration with how SEL is facilitated among teaching staff. Although SEL is expected to be incorporated within daily classroom instruction as a school-wide initiative, it is not a consistent practice. Tonya's body language showed disappointment when asked about this, and she shared:

It really is frustrating how my administration has placed so much of the SEL-led lessons on teaching staff and not the school counselors...we are the social and emotional learning trained professionals in the building. For some reason we are not the first to be asked to develop the lessons. Now, I am not sure if that is the trend in other school buildings, but it is here.

Tonya went on to express concerns with so much stress being placed on teachers to ensure students are meeting learning objectives; therefore, "SEL lessons are not prioritized", it is a

disadvantage to the students, and “true SEL progress cannot be made” because of it. The consensus among the participants was although teachers should help incorporate SEL school-wide, it is not being consistently done, and if they are asked to prioritize SEL over ensuring students are meeting learning goals, SEL will always take a back seat.

Subtheme: Staff/Student Mentorship

Building strong relationships with students and guiding students to identify trusted adults within the building is “so important to close SEL gaps.” Participants echoed that school counselors, staff, and teachers are encouraged to make connections with students by serving as mentors. Mary shared:

I decided to develop an “I Can Count on You” mentor program at my school. School counselors can’t be everywhere all the time, so I enlisted the help of all staff to serve as a mentor for 1 to 3 students in the building. Students can identify an adult they can count on or a student that needs a little extra TLC can be assigned to a mentor. One of the things I try to do is provide some education to those staff about SEL to ensure that understand how incorporate it when interacting with their mentees.

Although, not all participants had mentorship programs within their school like Mary, it was apparent that by default, they view themselves as mentors to their students. Tom stated, “I try to model for my students how to navigate daily challenges. One example is I always remain calm during student’s and parent’s triggered emotions...this allows them to see how remaining calm during stress regulates their emotions.”

Subtheme: Tiered Facilitated SEL Support

Participants interviews revealed that most of their schools offer tiered SEL support which is facilitated by Student Support Teams (SST), Special Education Services, Positive Behavioral

Interventions and Support (PBIS), parent/teacher conferences, crisis counseling, and community-based wrap around services. Charita stated, “I think we have some great resources in the building to triage the SEL needs of our students.” Tom, Liz, Keith, and Rosalind further expounded on the same types of tiered SEL support within their buildings. During Rosalind’s interview she mentioned, “Some days I do not feel like there is enough support, but it is truly not because the resources are not available...it is more need than can be handled sometimes.” Keith stated, “I can count how many times I need to make a crisis referral and the behavioral health center does not have any inpatient beds available.”

Guiding Research Question

Participants shared the strategies they use to navigate barriers when providing social and emotional learning support to students. The themes that emerged from this research question were: school counselor SEL program initiatives, SEL implementation barriers, and navigating the barriers. Each participant’s experience provided rich context and varied based on their tenure, school division, and building level administration.

School Counselor SEL Program Initiatives

Theme three was discovered when participants were asked to share their experience with SEL program delivery within their school by providing context on how their division and respective schools supports their comprehensive school counseling program’s delivery of SEL. Participants provided insight on strategies used and how they facilitate SEL initiatives professionally, in addition to what is requisite of their comprehensive school counseling programs prescribed by their school district.

Charita revealed during her interview that program delivery can be challenging at times and often she finds herself getting creative with meeting the SEL needs of students. Charita shared:

Our school counseling program is American School Counseling Association driven. My school division's mission mentions a robust school counseling program and requires SEL goals. Our school counseling program is comprehensive to ensure we are social, emotional, and academic focused, but a lot of it is done with on-the-go counseling. One of my goals is to motivate students by teaching them goal setting and highlighting their strengths. I am constantly building a relationship with my kids to do that. I make it a point to build student connections by being relatable and being transparent. However, I do think my school could be more school counselor friendly to support this effort.

As Charita continued to share her thoughts, she expressed how she felt that the school division and her school at times provide "superficial support" of making it easier for her to implement SEL practices throughout the school, stating, "They want me to do my job but most of the time I do not feel supported to actually do my job."

Mary, who has served as a school counselor both in and out of state, described a sense of joy with her approach when implementing SEL strategies, stating, "You know, this is the part of my job that I enjoy the most." Mary further shared:

Despite not getting the best support from my building administration, I make it a point to utilize the wrap-around services within the building and my community-based partners. You really must meet the kids where they are. For me, that requires making personal connections and doing my best to support the student holistically. I find that

incorporating journaling and sketchbook techniques can be extremely useful with creating SEL strategies.

Like Mary, Rosalind expounded on her district's comprehensive school counseling program that encompasses a SEL curriculum and stakeholder support. However, making it clear that with good supports in place, her SEL delivery remains "one woman show" driven, she said:

I am more successful at providing SEL support by catering to the specific needs of my students. It is not a one size fits all process. Although we have a great comprehensive school counseling program and our division recognized SEL as an important part of the learning process, the SEL needs of students must be tailored. That is why it is so important for school counselors to be well-trained in that area.

Liz further explained:

ASCA lays it all out on the table how SEL should be facilitated by school counselors. We are a huge component of that initiative within a school. When I am looking for SEL strategies, I refer to the ASCA national standards to develop lesson plans as well as ensure that I am covering all talking points during academic and individual sessions with my students. I maintain a safe space that is inclusive for all students. This helps me a lot with SEL support.

School counseling participants' outlook on the feeling of support from administration and their school division varied; however, it was very apparent that all participants were in solidarity that SEL was necessary, and they were aligned with ASCA. Katie explained how SEL for her is at the core of student support:

This is when I get to put in my best work. It is a reminder of why I am here. I practice self-care a lot. If I am not ok, how can I be fully present for my students? I like to use

personal student folders and journaling. Journaling is great for those students that can verbalize their thoughts and feelings at that moment.

With twenty-four years of experience, Tonya was noticeably confident and prided herself on what she has found to be helpful with her delivery of SEL:

It helps that the division I work in has a social and emotional learning curriculum and recognizes school-based social and emotional learning programs as necessary. I am always looking for how I can build my student's social and emotional learning toolbox. Also, one of the things I learned in graduate school is to practice self-care to ensure I am a great support to the needs of my students.

Tom was direct in his approach and had a very student-centered SEL outlook, and he explained:

I believe in holding students accountable and showing up for my kids. Students have to be able to trust you. We have a great counseling program, but none of it will work if we are not teaching kids life skills of accountability or creating an environment where our students cannot trust us.

Although novice to program delivery with the least number of years of experience among participants, Keith highlighted that being relatable and personalized works for him when working with kids to teach an SEL skill, stating "It is important to me for my kids to see me as a real person." Keith further informed that he thinks his school could do a better job of supporting his department.

Subtheme: SEL Collaboration

The school counselors shared that experience with SEL collaboration mostly consisted of teacher communication to develop behavior intervention plans (BIP) and working with the

school psychologist and school social worker to facilitate threat and mental health assessments.

There was little administration collaboration unless it was a crisis or a referral to Child Protective Services (CPS). Katie shared:

Our school psych and social worker are phenomenal. I really do not know what we would do without them. I call on them more often than I would like, but I know that the social and emotional needs of our students will be met with open arms, knowledge, and with care.

Moreover, participants informed that collaboration with teachers sometimes can be a great asset. Tonya stated, “We want to collaborate with our teaching staff, and for the most part teachers are really good about informing us when students are in distress.” Participant interviews further revealed that they often enlist the help of teachers to support SEL needs of students. Keith stated, “The teachers are in the classrooms with them all day, so their feedback is valuable to better meet the needs of the student.”

Subtheme: Triage SEL Support

Participants detailed that being able to triage SEL support for students is a vital skillset they need to be efficient and effective since they are “stretched thin” most days to meet the needs of so many students. Liz shared:

One way that I triage student support is Solution Focused counseling. Unfortunately, I am unable to sit with students for hours or even 30 minutes sometimes. So, my goal is to get to the root of the problem and assist the student with developing a two to three step resolution.

Each school counselor expressed the importance of trying to stay organized and prioritizing students’ needs based on importance and severity. Mary shared, “If I could give each

student hours of my time that would be amazing...but it is not possible. I do try to make sure the rapid response is quality support.” Tom and Keith explained how it is a “fine line” with triaging care. Tom stated, “What do you do when you have more than one severe student need at one time...that is when I call for back up...a school social worker or another counseling colleague steps in for me.”

Subtheme: Comprehensive School Counseling Program

Comprehensive school counseling programs are designed to ensure a robust SEL program is in place for schools. Participants identified the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) National Model with strategizing how to be efficient in supporting the SEL needs of students. Rosalind informed, “ASCA teaches us professional standards and competencies to be effective.” Tonya shared:

Throughout my twenty-four years I always refer to the guiding principles of ASCA to aid the best practices of executing SEL to my students. ASCA is clear and concise about what that looks like for school counselors. It is what drives our school counseling programs to ensure all students’ needs are met with rigor and total support.

Liz and Charita also emphasized how their school counseling programs are developed using the ASCA framework. Charita stated, “ASCA is our governing body to be certain that SEL needs of students are approached holistically and with continuity.”

SEL Implementation Barriers

Theme four was discovered when participants were asked to share their experiences with barriers they encounter when implementing SEL and how they navigate around identified barriers. Additionally, the participants were asked to detail how they measured their success by overcoming those barriers.

When Charita was prompted to elaborate on the barriers she encounters with SEL implementation, she took a deep breath and stated, “Whew child, where do I begin?” Although only serving three years in the profession she quickly delineated what she encounters daily that creates roadblocks for her to successfully implement SEL:

I would have to say parent/student follow through is a huge challenge. A lot of times with the at-risk population I serve, parents and students are not receptive to getting the help that is recommended. Families do not have the financial means to get help. A lot of parents refuse the services or simply do not return the call of a community-based provider. I submitted a referral to for care.

Charita further explained that she feels overwhelmed most days due to the increased behavior and social needs of her students, stating, “There is never enough time in the day. Especially with all the non-counseling tasks that my principals expect from our department.” Charita identified having good time management skills and solution focused counseling as her go to strategies to overcome barriers.

Mary further described her barriers:

It feels like a student’s mental health takes a backseat to instruction. Teachers will refuse to send students to me when I send for them because they do not feel it is important enough for them to be away from their classwork. Like I said before, how can a student be academically present if they are not mentally present?

Mary stressed that triaging her time, accessing students during free blocks and/or lunch, and developing a good rapport with parents are especially important in eliminating some of the barriers.

Rosalind recalled attendance being a huge concern with access to students. Rosalind shook her head before she began to go in-depth with her answer:

If the kids would simply come to school. The kids that need the most SEL support are the ones that do not come. I am talking about missing 40 days in the first semester. I do a lot of referrals to our Parent Liaison, Truancy Officer, and Graduation Coach to do house visits. Since COVID our student attendance has been dismal. I prioritize the students that are here. I feel like a hamster on a wheel going in circles with no real resolutions.

Further, Rosalind expressed despair, stating, “We cannot continue to go like this. A change must take place or else we are going to find ourselves with a generation that are ill-prepared to function in society, emotionally and financially.”

When Liz was asked to reflect on the barriers she faced regarding SEL implementation, the look on her face expressed exhaustion. She described:

There are a lot of what we call in the profession “faux counselors.” These are non-school counselors that attempt to do school counseling tasks. This is extremely dangerous because they are not trained in areas to appropriately service the mental health needs of the students. A lot of inaccurate information is given. Unbelievably, our teaching colleagues and administrators are not always pro school counseling. They do not know what we do so tasks are given to us like duty stations, administrative tasks, or we are forced to attend professional development trainings that are not relevant to our skill set.

Liz continued to share that she believed it is necessary for school counselors to communicate a yearly plan with administration to inform them of the student goals outlined by the counseling department. And student advocacy, along with keeping communication lines open with her administration, is very helpful with decreasing these barriers.

Katie's experiences with barriers were similar, and she explained:

Administration is at the core of how successful a comprehensive school counseling program will be. If one of our student goals is SEL support and admin does not support your department with encouraging student access to their counselor and bombarding us with unrelated school counseling tasks, there is no way students will benefit. Eighty percent of our time should be direct student contact per the ASCA national model. That does not happen!"

Katie made it clear that she is driven to support students by any means necessary, stating, "I refuse to let others get in the way of what I am here to do. I get highly creative to support my students."

Tonya met the question with frustration, stating:

Students are just not receptive compared to ten to fifteen years ago. Even pre-Covid there has been a major shift in students' ability to care. Staff can be agitators for students.

There have been many times a colleague either triggered a student or undo the work that I put in to stabilize a student's progress in their class. That goes for parent support too, which is lacking a lot nowadays. I work around this by really trying to establish a rapport with my parents and colleagues. Also, I make connections with my students. This allows me to reach them when no one else can because they trust and respect me.

Further, Keith identified during his interview that one of his biggest hurdles is being a male counselor, stating, "Being a male counselor limits my reach with my female students, so it is nice to know my female counselors are willing to step in when I ask them." Keith mentioned how some student issues can be triggering for him and require him to do a warm handoff to another counselor to provide support.

Tom smirked when asked to outline the barriers he faces with SEL support, and he said: Students are quick to shut down when you require they are accountable for their actions. There is a lot of entitlement with this generation and lack of response to recommendations to improve behavior. I feel like I could be more hands on with following up my students to address this if I was not tasked with so many 504 meetings and committee participation. However, in my twenty-five years I have learned that effective time management is the secret, addressing several hot ticket items with students during individual sessions, and effectively communicating what is needed to my colleagues.

Subtheme: External Barriers

As the interviews progressed, it was unmistakable that each participant had concerns with external factors outside of the school setting that created barriers to supporting the SEL needs of their students. Katie shared:

Sometimes the families are just not receptive to my recommendations for outpatient therapy, in-home counseling, or to set an appointment for a psychological evaluation. I work in an at-risk school and the population I serve struggles with being open to counseling, experiencing financial hardships, and do not believe mental health should be prioritized.

Tom and Keith shared the same sentiment as Katie. Keith stated:

One time had a parent that hung up on me when I called to tell her that her child was in crisis. Initially I thought it was an accident, but when I called back, she informed me [We do not do counseling], I was floored...exactly how do you help a kid that parent flat out turns down the help?

Moreover, Tom shared, “A big problem we face is the resources are inundated and they cannot meet the demand. Parents are waiting six months for a psychological evaluation. What do you think is happening with the kid during that time... nothing!”

Subtheme: Internal Barriers

School counseling participants were very passionate about the internal or *in-house* [emphasis made] challenges within the school setting they experience with facilitating SEL support for students. All of them expressed great concern with what they face within their building daily. Rosalind stated:

Administration really does not know what we do. That is our biggest hurdle. They assign tasks to us that get in the way of direct student contact. We are overwhelmed by the daunting administrative tasks of paperwork from serving as 504 Plan case managers, pulled to cover classes and serve as duty stations. They truly do not see us as mental health support and often seek out others to carry out duties that we are trained in. It is an anomaly, and I just do not get why they do not want to use us effectively.

Charita further stated, “We are the dumping ground for everything. If they do not know who to make responsible for a new task...they give it to school counseling.” Mary explained, “We are not allowed to do classroom guidance in my building. My admin thinks it interferes with instructional time.” Liz further expressed how “being assigned duties that are not aligned with direct student contact is a huge concern. I do not feel valued. We are forced to sit in professional development meetings that have nothing to do with school counseling.”

Tonya stated:

We are expected to wear so many hats and overstretched. Unreasonable deadlines with scheduling. ASCA recommends one counselor to no more than two hundred and fifty

students. Some of us have well over three hundred students at the secondary level. The poor elementary school counselors really are stretched thin. Some of them are the only school counselor in their building of four to six hundred students. How is that even possible to meet the SEL needs of the students? I have had some very supportive admin over the years...and I have had some horrible ones that were not pro school counseling. Liz expressed:

A huge challenge sometimes can be teaching staff not prioritizing students' mental health and being more concerned with educational outcomes. If they cannot understand that mental health needs supersede academics...we will continue to not service SEL. Some truly do not link a healthy mindset to positive learning outcomes.

Navigating the Barriers

Despite the many barriers participants shared with implementing SEL, theme four highlighted several strategies participants utilize to navigate around it. Each of them spoke of practicing self-care. Charita stated, "If I don't take care of me...I can't take care of my students." Rapport building and developing strong student/counselor relationships were at the forefront of how they navigate the barriers. Tom shared, "When admin sees the influx of students coming in the school counseling office that means we are doing something right." Mary stated:

I hold my student accountable and set high expectations along with meeting them where they are. I tell them you may struggle with self-esteem today, but we are on the trajectory to self-love and resiliency. I focus on giving my students hope and empowering them. Building their emotional toolbox is one of my go-to strategies. I like to give them a takeaway that they can immediately put into action.

Summary

This chapter reported the results of the lived experiences of eight secondary school counselors' perceptions of implementing social and emotional learning with students. Participants demographics and interview responses were presented. Applying Braun and Clarke's (2012) Thematic Analysis (TA) process to analysis interview data, five themes emerged: (1) student/counselor interaction (2) school wide social and emotional learning practices (3) social and emotional learning program delivery and (4) social and emotional learning implementation barriers, and (5) navigating the barriers. The discoveries from this qualitative study revealed secondary school counselors acknowledged their vital role in implementing SEL to students, and they demonstrated in-depth understanding of how SEL is facilitated.

Participants' introductions were highlighted, followed by a report of each theme that emerged from the data which attended to each research question. Each participant outlined their understanding of social and emotional learning (SEL), clearly explicated their application of SEL in their school, conveyed their schools' overall approach to SEL, and explained their ability to navigate implementing SEL or lack thereof because of various barriers. Further, triaging SEL support, rapport building, collaboration, and individual sessions were the most prevalent methods of implementing SEL with students among participants. Next, the subsequent chapter offers a summary of the research and key findings, which is comprised of a discussion of the results, conclusion, implications, limitations and delimitations, suggestions for further research, and an inclusive summary.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Overview

This qualitative, transcendental phenomenological analysis aimed to focus on the perceptions of secondary school counselors' implementation of SEL within their schools. Most importantly, the goal of the study was to identify how secondary school counselors describe their implementation of SEL and the barriers they face while doing so. Additionally, the study aimed to identify the strategies they use to navigate the barriers. During the research analysis, I learned the participants shared the same or similar experiences with SEL implementation and strategies used to navigate barriers during implementation. This chapter is comprised of a summary of the findings, discussion of findings, implications of the study, delimitations and limitations, suggestions for future research, and a final summary.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived/firsthand experiences of secondary school counselors' perceptions of implementing SEL. I was particularly interested in recognizing the barriers these school counselors face while implementing SEL and how they navigate the identified barriers. I conducted semi-structured interviews with each secondary school counselor, asked open-ended questions about their experiences at their schools, their perceptions of their role with SEL, how SEL is supported within their school, and what challenges they face in providing SEL support to their students.

A total of eight secondary school counselors willingly shared their experiences with facilitating SEL within their school and the challenges they experience. The findings concerning the secondary school counselors' individualized experiences generated five central themes: student/counselor interaction, schoolwide SEL practices, school counselor SEL program

initiatives, SEL implementation barriers, and navigating the barriers. Participant interviews created the basis for conceptualizing how they perceive their role with implementing SEL and the challenges they experience as a result.

During each interview I could relate to most, if not all, of what they shared. Their interviews further confirmed that school counselors have an extremely important and much-needed role with social and emotional learning within schools. Students are faced with many challenges that require learned practices to socially and emotionally adjust to internal and external factors in their lives. School counselors are a great resource to build this skill set. Each school counselor was very enthusiastic about their role and expressed frustration with not being able to fully execute their role as delineated by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) or as prescribed by their comprehensive school counseling programs, which are aligned with their school/school district's SEL mission. Their knowledge and experience were a reminder why I entered the profession, and the difference school counselors make in the lives of students daily.

Each secondary school counselor had experience with implementing and facilitating SEL practices within their school. It was evident that they concentrated on very hands-on SEL practices in a variety of ways, such as classroom lessons, individualized sessions, group guidance lessons, and building rapport and strong relationships with their students/families. They provided insight on the critical need of SEL support for students due to a myriad of social, developmental, and environmental issues that plague their students daily, especially during and after COVID. Their stories highlighted that school counselors are at the heart of leading the charge for SEL support and a great resource to meet this need.

Moreover, the schools represented by the participants are committed to a school-wide SEL approach due to recognizing the need to improve students' quality of life and encourage academic success. However, the school counselors shared how it truly depends on if their building-level administration is receptive to making SEL a school-wide initiative. In some instances, the school counselors felt that they have an active role in assisting with this goal; however, some participants felt that they were not recognized as a valuable SEL resource within their building although they were trained in SEL. Consequently, teachers were tasked with driving the SEL initiative, which is often not given adequate attention due to them prioritizing instruction over SEL. During one interview it was shared that a social studies teacher was designated as the SEL expert by administration and chosen to write SEL lesson plans for the entire school. The teacher's background in SEL was questioned, thereby creating an overall feeling that administration lacked confidence in the school counselor's training and abilities.

Further, despite feeling as though school counselors are not charged with leading the way with SEL support, they expressed how suspension reinstatements, Section 504, Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) meetings, and behavioral intervention programs are part of their overall SEL school-wide initiative but preferred that they have more of an active role as a department with initiating SEL practices school-wide.

Additional findings suggest that the school counselors are well-trained in SEL practices. Their interviews shared how they follow the framework of the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) National Model to facilitate their school counseling program to meet the needs of all students. Social and emotional learning is at the forefront of their daily program delivery. The school counselor's programs supported this effort, and they elaborated on a variation of methods they employ, like rapport building, triage counseling, solution focused

counseling, holistic student support, community/school-based support staff collaboration, and rapid response counseling. It was clear that they were very comfortable with program delivery due to having such a solid foundation that was heavily rooted in ASCA. Also, during several interviews, they shared how they must find ways to be creative while executing SEL initiatives due to the daily environmental and systemic challenges they encounter.

The findings further reported a lot of emotion and stress among the school counselors. They expressed lots of frustration with building-level support from their colleagues and primarily their administrative team. Dealing with families that had limited access to mental health or did not make mental health a priority for their children was a common concern. The school counselors felt that students struggle with emotional regulation even more so post-Covid and staff have been challenged with how to address the heightened increase in unwanted behaviors from students.

The more tenured school counselors believed that administration limits the access they have with students due to being inundated with unrelated administrative tasks—such as constant scheduling, generating reports, data entry, and duty stations—which creates less direct student contact and more indirect student contact. Moreover, although they felt like staff could be supportive at times, but most believed that staff interfered with the SEL needs of students. Sometimes they did not give students passes to see the school counselor when in need, or they attempted to take on school counseling tasks that interfered with the overall need of the student, minimized student concerns, or sabotaged continuity of support by not adhering to implemented behavior modifications plans.

In general, the school counselors are diversely trained and knowledgeable in SEL. Schools systems recognize the importance of implementing SEL as a schoolwide initiative.

Social and emotional learning school-wide initiatives varied among school counseling participants from being minimal to robust. School counselors' comprehensive programs are developed to meet that need as outlined by the ASCA national model framework. Consequently, school counselors are often overshadowed by the school administration using teachers to take the lead with school-wide SEL initiatives. School counselors are therefore relegated to being creative in their approach to ensure their students are receiving adequate SEL support.

Discussion

Empirical Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore a gap in the literature to further understand the lived experiences of secondary school counselors' implementation of social and emotional learning and barriers faced. Most of the existing research consists of teachers' experience with implementing SEL within their classrooms and the challenges they encounter (Slater-Warren et al., 2020). The findings from this study elucidate that the need for SEL within schools is necessary and secondary school counselors are well-trained and knowledgeable to effectively implement SEL school-wide (ASCA, 2019). However, this study implies there are several barriers that interfere with facilitation such as poor administration support of the school counseling department, the lack of student/family follow-through for recommended services, limited direct student contact, and school counselors being tasked with non-counseling duties, all of which are also supported by other literature (Cinotti, 2014; Fye et al., 2022; Hunter, 2021; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016).

Further, the results of this study proposed secondary school counselors believe that when they are allowed to fully execute the SEL framework outlined by the American School Counseling Association (ASCA), they have more success with student outcomes (Fye et al.,

2022). This study further expands on the strategies that secondary school counselors employ to overcome barriers such as rapport building, peer collaboration, individual academic sessions, and establishing positive relationships with students and families. Also, this study further delineated the challenges that secondary school counselors face with facilitating SEL daily to meet the needs of students, such as unclear expectations among administrators regarding the roles of school counselors and lack of student accessibility (Corwin et al., 2004; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

Cigrand et al. (2015) asserted that school counselor advocacy is at the forefront of effective use of school counselors' time to ensure SEL is adequately enforced. This present study's findings corroborated that assertion by identifying ineffective use of school counselors' time was one of several barriers to implementing SEL (Brown, 2015; Burnham & Jackson, 2000; Caldarella et al., 2019; Chauncey, 2018; Corwin et al., 2004; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022).

The school counselor's role is critical in implementing SEL competencies to develop comprehensive school counseling programs that are driven by data and provide a structure for practice (ASCA, 2019). Moreover, school counseling comprehensive programs are important in effectively facilitating SEL initiatives and are designed to address the social and emotional learning needs of their students. Using teachers and not school counselors to be at the forefront of facilitating SEL initiatives and tasking them with writing SEL lesson plans is cause for concern due to their lack of training, and instruction often becomes a priority over the SEL needs of the students.

Consequently, prior research sheds light on the fact that clear relationships between the roles indicated by ASCA and school counseling practices do not always coexist (Fye et al., 2022). Research findings further supported this idea by highlighting several concerns with

school counselors not being utilized by their administration correctly, with their roles being minimized and/or delegated to non-school counseling personnel such as teachers, which prompted concern over their lack of training in SEL.

In a previous study by Waggoner (2021), the findings of how participants align their SEL implementation to their comprehensive school counseling program and its effectiveness as prescribed by the ASCA National Model further highlighted the importance and need of the school counselor's daily role with SEL. Research findings indicate lack of access to students, limited administrative support, the role of the school counselor not being clearly defined, and external factors such as poor parental support and lack of parental follow-through with SEL recommendations as some of the barriers school counselors face with SEL implementation. For example, Chandra and Minkovitz (2006) identified that there is a stigma for some students surrounding seeking assistance from the school counselor, and students who do not view school counseling as a stigma still refuse to look to their school counselor for support (Fox & Butler, 2007; Gulliver et al., 2010).

Moreover, cultural practices can prevent access to school counseling services due to parents not recognizing SEL recommendations as a priority, possibly due to the stigma around mental health and/or not wanting the school "in their business." Some students do not view seeing the school counselor as "cool" and are concerned with what their peers may think of them. Also, some students are hard to *reach* [emphasis added] and develop a strong rapport with.

An additional finding highlighted how schools often do not make school counselors accessible to students and identified the school counselor-to-student caseload ratio being a significant barrier, which has also been supported by other research (Corwin et al., 2004; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022). Findings indicate this concern by emphasizing school counselors are

overwhelmed with meeting the needs of all their students and do not feel there is enough time in the day to support students efficiently with such large caseloads. Furthermore, comprehensive school counseling programs are designed to support SEL efforts but are met with challenges from building administration and non-counseling colleagues. A previous study from Stevens (2021) confirmed this idea by informing about the variety of personal and systemic conditions that create barriers to effective execution of the comprehensive school counseling programs' mission.

Theoretical Findings

In this qualitative research, the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was identified as the theoretical framework. As a school-wide approach, CASEL outlines the five guiding principles of school counseling as prescribed by the National ASCA Model for school counselors' role in implementing SEL (CASEL, 2007). Further, CASEL's guiding principles are the gold standard in social and emotional competency studies (Ross & Tolan, 2018). The five competencies are: (a) self-management, or the ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behaviors; (b) self-awareness, or the ability to recognize one's emotions and accurately assess one's strengths and weaknesses; (c) social awareness or awareness of the culture, beliefs, and feelings of the people and world around them; (d) relationship skills or the ability to effectively communicate, work well with peers, and building meaningful relationships; and (e) responsible decision-making or the ability to make plans for the future (CASEL, 2007; Ross & Tolan, 2018). Applying the CASEL theory as the framework offered a guide to explore secondary school counselors' perceptions and lived experiences with implementing SEL and how they navigate around challenges.

Furthermore, outcomes of this study imply that secondary school counselors perceived implementation of SEL challenging within their role and they must be creative with how they facilitate SEL daily to meet the needs of their students, despite minimal support from administration and lack of student access. The secondary school counseling participants recognized the value in their ability to provide SEL to their students and were determined to overcome internal and external challenges. Moreover, Dodson (2009) explains how extremely important it is that the school counseling profession be appropriately defined for school administration, teachers, parents, students, district/state level policy makers, and stakeholders. As the CASEL theory suggests, when school counseling programs are facilitated in their entirety, student achievement is linked to better academic outcomes and school behavior (Caldarella et al., 2019; CASEL, 2007). This research reinforces prior research using the CASEL theory in understanding the need for SEL within schools and identifying school counselors as an excellent school-based resource to execute the five guiding principles (Caldarella et al., 2019; CASEL, 2007; Weems, 2021).

Implications

Empirical

Today's schools are battling many social issues that plague the students they serve. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is one way to combat such issues and guide students in developing the necessary skills to be academically sound and socially adjusted (Beaty, 2018; CASEL, 2018; Chandler et al., 2018). Therefore, the role of the school counselor is extremely vital to ensure SEL is adequately being facilitated within schools. During this study, the need for social and emotional learning was stressed for SEL to be successfully facilitated in schools and underlined how school counseling roles are not being utilized to support this need. The research findings of

this analysis further corroborated and extended the current empirical literature on how school counselors are essential to the facilitation of SEL, as they are heavily trained to provide SEL support (Caldarella et al., 2019; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Morgan, 2019).

Research examining how school counselors are not efficiently utilized within their school building to employ SEL initiatives exposed numerous significant findings (Brown, 2015; Chauncey, 2018; Cigrand et al., 2015; Corwin et al., 2004). Such literature highlights that non-counseling responsibilities remove school counselors from their comprehensive school counseling programs that are geared to address the precise needs of their student population in the areas of SEL, academic, and post-secondary/career awareness (Brown, 2015; Chauncey, 2018; Cigrand et al., 2015; Corwin et al., 2004). Furthermore, this present study supports previous research that revealed although teachers are being tasked with implementing SEL within the classroom, many do not have time to make it a part of their instruction; therefore, they prioritize focusing on teaching core content due to stress with closing achievement gaps (Blanco & Norville, 2019; Brackett et al., 2012; Slater-Warren et al., 2020). Consequently, students are not given needed SEL support, which continues to impact students' achievement outcomes (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Martínez, 2016).

Additionally, study participants accentuated that non-school counseling duties, lack of student access, poor parent/guardian mental health support follow-through, the role of the school counselor not being clearly defined, and administrators' improper use of school counselors were the main barriers they face when implementing SEL (Dodson, 2009; Lieberman, 2004). Participants within the study highlighted how they have to become creative with navigating these barriers. For example, they shared how they focus on rapport building, collaborating with other

practitioners in and outside of the school for support, and incorporating SEL whenever possible as strategies they use to overcome those barriers, which are all supported by other research as well (Jones & Kahn, 2017; Lombardo, 2018; Singh et al., 2010).

Moreover, school districts and school administration that are well-informed on the role of the school counselor will understand the correlation between the efficient use of school counselors in implementing SEL and improved student behavior/academic outcomes, which the research findings of this study further support (Stevens, 2021). Also, the empirical implications of this study's findings suggest that the participants' schools and school divisions are well-informed of the need for SEL and the great impact it has on students' long-term and academically; however, they need further professional development and would benefit from being educated on the barriers they cause for school counselors and their SEL initiatives (Corwin et al., 2004; Dodson, 2009; Havlik et al., 2019; Savitz-Romer & Nicola, 2022)

Theoretical

The theoretical framework selected for this qualitative phenomenological study was the (1994) Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007). This theory supports the guiding principles of the school counselor's role, which is based on the American School Counseling Association's (ASCA) national model for implementing social and emotional learning initiatives within school settings.

Applying CASEL as the theoretical framework offered insight on secondary school counselors' perceptions and lived experiences of implementing SEL. This study's findings revealed that secondary school counselors perceived the facilitation and application of SEL as vital and recognized their role as necessary in meeting the SEL needs of students. However, results suggested that school counselors are challenged by many barriers to execute their roles

with facilitating SEL as prescribed by CASEL and ASCA. Moreover, the CASEL (1994) theoretical framework explains how school counselors play a key role in the development of youth, and their training and education are designed to support all areas of SEL within schools (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2007).

Also, this study illuminated the participants' interpretations of their SEL counseling experience. Applying this theoretical framework offers in-depth understanding of their daily experience with SEL, as it highlights how the five competencies of CASEL are applied by the participants and imbedded within their school settings. The CASEL theoretical framework and this study's research findings suggest that participants' school districts and building level administrators must take ownership for the secondary school counselor's necessary role in implementing SEL. Further, the CASEL theoretical framework recognizes using school counselors as a primary leadership role for implementing SEL within schools. Previous studies recommended that removing non-counseling duties from school counselors' daily responsibilities would create more effective implementation of SEL school-wide initiatives (Brown, 2015; Chauncey, 2018; Dodson, 2009). Additionally, this research analysis stretched the use of the CASEL theoretical framework to determine the need for SEL and emphasized that school counselors are a critical SEL resource in schools (CASEL, 2015; Havlik et al., 2019; Stevens, 2021).

Practical

This study's research findings provide a way forward to improve the school counseling profession. The role of the school counselor is unique and designed to provide specialized SEL support to students; therefore, it is necessary that they be utilized efficiently and effectively. Drawing upon the findings, school counselors can take a more active role in collaborating with

senior and building leadership to self-advocate that they have a more active SEL role within their schools. When administration offers more support, this will highlight the true impact of the school counselors' work.

Moreover, the findings concluded that secondary school counselors recognize how important it is to lead the charge for SEL within their schools. This study offered the most common strategies school counselors use to ensure they are servicing students socially and emotionally. Recommendations can be given to senior leaders at the state and district level on how to ensure their SEL initiatives are successful by utilizing school counselors more effectively. This was ascertained by participants sharing about the lack of support they often receive from the top down. Also, the findings suggest that by assigning the SEL building initiative to school counselors, this can lessen the loads of classroom teachers, allowing them to focus more on teaching their content.

Furthermore, research findings affirm that secondary school counselors understand the great need for implementing SEL within schools. They struggle with the lack of support from administration and their ability to fully employ SEL initiatives prescribed by the mission of their comprehensive school counseling program. However, despite barriers/challenges they are committed to finding creative and practical strategies to support the SEL of all students.

Delimitations and Limitations

During this study, the goal was to become knowledgeable about the phenomenon of the secondary school counselor's experience with SEL. Delimitations of the study were school counseling participants only from the secondary level of public schools in Virginia, represented within the same area code. The study was comprised of only high school counselors from two neighboring school districts. The selection of participants excluded school counselors from

elementary, middle, and private schools. Thus, these delimitations were intentional to guarantee that all participants had experienced the phenomenon of implementing social and emotional learning and the barriers faced while doing so.

Limitations of the study included sample size, race, and gender, and the participant pool did not expand to all stakeholders. The eight participants included six females and two males. Moreover, although sufficient, the number of participants was constrained. An increased sample size of participants could have provided richer information. Further, participants could have been comprised of a variety of stakeholders, such as teachers, parents, students, school-based mental health practitioners, and administration. Consequently, six of the eight participants were located at Title I schools whereas the other two were based out of non-Title I schools, which historically have more access to resources and funding (Corwin et al., 2004).

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to become more knowledgeable about the lived experiences of secondary school counselors' experiences with implementing social and emotional learning and how they navigate the barriers they face. A richer pool of school counseling participants outside of public schools and within different school setting capacities, demographics, and regions would offer more insight and a richer phenomenon experience. There were eight participants; however, having a larger participant pool would have provided more comprehensive study integrity, providing more valuable insight to the field of school counseling. Providing more range and scope of school counseling participation would offer the profession a more detailed outlook on the role of the school counselor and their experiences with SEL facilitation. Further, additional recommendations would include expanding the criteria for research participants to incorporate school counselors at all levels and

settings: (a) middle school, (b) elementary school, and (c) private school, in addition to extending participation to charter, Department of Defense (DoD) schools, and those out-of-state. Another recommendation would be to recruit a broader sample size of diverse ages, gender, and years of experience.

Also, related phenomenological analysis could be implemented in different localities/regions. This study was limited to two schools within the same area. All participants had experience with SEL at the secondary level and each had been working at the high school level during that time. Extending the research to elementary, private, and middle schools in other states and districts would offer more insight in identifying if the school counselors' experiences in this study with implementing SEL were more of a site-based or larger phenomenon.

An extension of the body of research would be to conduct a quantitative design with a simple correlational method to examine school administration's perception of the school counselor's role in implementing SEL in the learning environment. Although phenomenological research looks to reveal collective experiences shared by research participants, a simple correlational design aims to unearth the relationship between two variables and uses a statistical examination to define their connection (Heppner et al., 2020).

Summary

This study focused on describing secondary school counselors' experiences with implementing SEL in their schools. This research analysis added to the body of literature and may contribute to improving the school counselor's role in implementing SEL within schools. The findings of this study suggested that although school counselors understand their role with SEL initiatives, they are not adequately utilized within their building by senior and building-level administrators to lead the charge with school-wide SEL initiatives, even though it is part of their

comprehensive school counseling programs. Commonly shared phenomena among the secondary school counseling participants were lack of student access, poor parent/guardian follow-through with recommended SEL support, administration assigning non-counseling tasks that interfere with daily SEL implementation, and teachers being given the responsibility to facilitate SEL during classroom instruction. Consequently, this causes less student exposure to SEL.

Findings from the study offered a plethora of implications for district leadership, administrators, higher education school counseling preparation programs, and educational leaders. First, it is important to clearly define the role of the school counselor for administrators and district level leadership. Secondly, schools should require administrators not to assign non-counseling duties to their school counselors, allowing them to take the lead with school-wide SEL initiatives. It is extremely important for administration and senior leadership to support the mission of their school counselors' comprehensive school counseling programs and work to dismantle any internal or external factors that create barriers for them to effectively execute SEL.

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Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 5, 2023

Rhonda Lindsey
Todd Schultz

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1544 SCHOOL COUNSELORS' PERCEPTIONS OF IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) WITHIN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL SETTING: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Rhonda Lindsey, Todd Schultz,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information

electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP

Administrative Chair

Research Ethics Office

Appendix B: Invitation to Participate in One-to-One Interview

TITLE OF RESEARCH: School Counselors' Perceptions of Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) within the Secondary School Setting: A Phenomenological Study

RESEARCHER: Rhonda Lindsey, Doctoral Student, Liberty University

This student has been approved by Liberty University's Institutional Review Board.

I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree in Community Care and Counseling- Traumatology at Liberty University, which is in Lynchburg, Virginia. One of the requirements of my degree is to complete a research study doctoral dissertation. The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of secondary school counselors' implementation of social and emotional learning within their school setting.

This is an invitation for you to participate in a one-on-one interview that will assist me in my efforts to collect data in the completion of research for my doctoral dissertation. Please make note that the participation is voluntary and that you may decline or withdraw from the process at any time without penalty. Participants must be current secondary level school counselors within the public school setting.

The interview will take place via ZOOM, Teams, or in person at a mutually agreed upon location and time. The interview will be conducted, and audio recorded by me, the researcher, and will last no more than 45 minutes. Only I, the researcher, will have access to this data. To ensure privacy, no names will be used, and participants will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Please email me if you are interested in being a participant in a one-on-one interview.

A consent document will be provided prior to the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign and return the consent form to me prior to the interview.

Thank you,

Rhonda Lindsey
Doctoral Student
Liberty University

Appendix C: Consent

Title of the Project: School Counselors' Perceptions of Implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) within the Secondary School Setting: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Rhonda Lindsey, Doctoral Student, School of Behavioral, Liberty University

Co-investigator: Dr. Todd Schultz, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a current secondary level school counselor within the public-school setting. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore how secondary school counselors describe their implementation of social and emotional learning support to students. And what are the current strategies they use to navigate barriers when implementing social and emotional learning support to students.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a virtual or in-person/audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 45 mins.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored in a locked drawer and in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hard copy records will be shredded.
- Audio recordings will be stored in a locked/secured file cabinet for three years until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted/erased. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

None.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Rhonda Lindsey. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you agree to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Printed Subject Name

Printed LAR Name and Relationship to Subject

LAR Signature

Date

Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Questions

Icebreaker /Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your ethnicity/race?
4. What is your idea of self-care?
5. What advice would you give your 20 year old self?
6. What is the first thing you would buy if you became a millionaire?
7. What is your highest degree earned?
8. What professional licenses and/or certifications do you hold related to school counseling?
9. How long have you been a school counselor?
10. How long have you worked for Norfolk City Public Schools?
11. How long have you worked in a secondary school counseling setting?

Central Research Question: How do secondary school counselors describe their implementation of social emotional learning?

12. Describe your experience with implementing social emotional learning at your school.
13. What types of social emotional learning initiatives are offered at your school?
11. Discuss any activities/interventions/practices used to support social emotional learning at your school.
12. Describe how you implement social emotional learning at your school.
13. How do non-school counseling colleagues (i.e., administrators, teachers) support your facilitation of social emotional learning at your school?

Guided Research Question: What are the current strategies that secondary school counselors use to navigate barriers when implementing social emotional learning?

14. Elaborate on the barriers you encounter when implementing social emotional learning.
15. Describe how the ASCA National Model describes your facilitation of social emotional learning.
16. How do you navigate around the barriers when implementing social emotional learning at your school?
17. How does Norfolk City Public Schools support school counselors with implementing social emotional learning?
18. Describe any personal strategies or self-practices you've adopted to assist you with effectively implementing social emotional learning.
19. Describe the need for social emotional learning at your school. What have you observed from student behavior that has increased or decreased the need for social emotional learning?
20. Describe how you measure the success of implementing social emotional learning at your school.

