The Importance of Practitioner-Driven, Non-Standardized Social Emotional Learning Initiatives:

A Case Study at One Suburban High School

by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

November 2018
Abstract

The main focus in the field of education has been on academics and standardized testing; however, there has been a recent philosophical shift towards educating the whole child, which includes meeting the social emotional needs of students as well as academic. As a result, a variety of social emotional learning (SEL) programs have been developed, implemented, and evaluated. The research shows that implementing SEL improves student outcomes: social, emotional, and academic. However, the impacts of such programs have not been sustainable long-term, and program success in one school does not necessarily guarantee success in another school due to contextual differences. The purpose of this case study was to understand how teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff in a suburban high school implemented a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative. Findings from 12 staff interviews included four themes: (a) Practitioners should first identify the value of an SEL initiative specific to the context of the school; (b) Administrators must buy into the initiative and then take their time to develop teacher and student buy-in; (c) School leadership has to provide varied, individualized and on-going/consistent professional development to build staff SEL capacity; and (d) All stakeholders must intentionally work towards building a climate and culture of community, communication and connection.

Keywords: social emotional learning, practitioner-driven, educational change, non-standardized
Acknowledgements

Thank you, Dr. Sara Ewell, Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters, and Dr. Patricia Law, for being my dissertation chairs and for being so supportive and encouraging. Thank you, my dear friend and coach, Leslie Wirpsa. You truly inspire me, and I will be forever grateful for your support in this process. Not only did you help me immensely with the content of my dissertation, you also helped me believe in myself.

I would also like to thank the staff members who volunteered to participate in this study. I appreciate your time and perspectives. I am lucky to work with such a caring and supportive staff.

Thank you, mom, dad, Pat, Laurette, and Bill, for being in my corner every step of the way. Your kind words of encouragement always spurred me to continue writing. You all believed in me even when I did not believe in myself.

Most of all, I want to thank my husband, Todd Bryzgel, for being the most amazing person in my life. You are a kind, giving, selfless, intelligent, and beautiful person. I can’t imagine my life without you. You deserve to share this accomplishment with me, for we are a team, and I could not have done it without you by my side.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The educational climate is tense because American schools are not meeting the needs of all students despite the work of various stakeholders. Policymakers support raising standards and relying on standardized test scores as the ultimate form of accountability (Callet, 2008). In response, teachers fear focusing on anything other than core academics (Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schuyler, 2000); therefore, the non-academic, relationship-focused side of teaching and learning is often ignored (Whitted, 2011), and the outcomes associated with the interplay between social emotional learning (SEL) and academics are lost (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003). Educators, parents, and the general public have articulated that a shift in focus from academics only, to a whole-child approach, is needed, one that builds the social and emotional competence of students (Metlife, 2002; Public Agenda, 2002; Rose & Gallup, 2000). Research has supported that students with strong social emotional skills are more likely to fulfill their academic potential (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; S. M. Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011) and become positive contributors to society (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Students with social emotional deficits are more likely to have conduct problems (Durlak, et al., 2011), to be suspended and/or expelled (Whetstone, Gillmor, & Schuster, 2015; Whitted, 2011), and to bully or be bullied (Domino, 2013; Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2015; B. H. Smith & Low, 2013). An approach to learning that balances academic proficiency, the development of social emotional skills, and the interdependency between these two arenas is crucial if we aspire to comprehensively meet the needs of all students (Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lampkin, & Roberts, 2015).
Statement of the Problem

The concept of SEL gained prominence in educational research in the 1990s in response to an increase of student social and psychological problems that schools were suddenly becoming responsible for ameliorating, including dramatic events such as school shootings and suicides (Hoffman, 2009). Since 1994 to the present, SEL has been used as the primary terminology describing “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2015, p. 5). There are five agreed upon “social emotional skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 535).

Research now abounds in regards to the positive impacts of SEL in the classroom. Students who have strong social emotional competencies have a greater sense of well-being (Durlak et al., 2011) and are more academically motivated (Whetstone et al., 2015). As a result, teachers report improved student academic outcomes even for their most at-risk students, supported by increased standardized test scores in reading and math (S. M. Jones et al., 2011).

Additionally, school climate is improved in districts that implement SEL. Students with strong social emotional skills are less likely to be a discipline issue; therefore, they are less likely to be suspended and/or expelled (Durlak et al., 2011; Whetstone et al., 2015; Whitted, 2011). There is also a decrease in bullying behaviors (Domino, 2013; B. H. Smith & Low, 2013), especially towards students with disabilities (Espelage et al., 2015). The continuous building of
students’ social emotional competencies ultimately helps them to become ethical, contributing members of society (Ayers, 2010; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Despite this abundant research, national and state SEL policy has been slow to catch up. It was not until 2001 that legislation passed a resolution supporting SEL in schools, and in 2004, Illinois became the first state to develop SEL standards K-12. Then in 2008, New York’s Mental Health Office adopted the Children’s Mental Health Plan, which included SEL. Pennsylvania adopted SEL standards in 2010, and Kansas adopted them in 2012 (National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBOE], 2013). Currently, only 49 states have preschool SEL standards, and three states (Illinois, Kansas, and Pennsylvania) have K-12 SEL standards (Gueldner & Feuerborn, 2016). The impact of such standards and legislation has not been thoroughly or empirically researched, which may be the reason for the lack of further policy implementation, development and success (Hoffman, 2009). Also, though there is sound evidence to support the inclusion of SEL in schools, there is still much debate about effective implementation (Hoffman, 2009).

Another possible contributing factor to the lack of SEL implementation is the “science-to-practice gap in the translation of evidenced-based interventions into mainstream educational practice” (Barry, Clarke, & Dowling, 2017, p. 437). This may be due to the isolated and fragmented aspect of evidenced-based SEL programs that have short-lived impacts on student outcomes (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004). Even programs deemed successful in the research have limited effect sizes (one-fifth to one-half of a standard deviation), and implementation is not always continued after a pilot or demonstration period (Durlak et al., 2011; S. M. Jones et al., 2011). The result is that “SEL programs are rarely integrated into classrooms and schools in ways that are meaningful, sustained, and embedded in the day-to-day interactions of students,
educators, and school staff” (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 3). It is like Dewey (1909) said in regards to schools teaching morals: It is not impactful on student behavior if teachers rely on specific class periods dedicated to direct moral instruction, rather it is effective when “they teach them every moment of the day, five days in the week” (p. 3). SEL must be taught day-to-day by teachers who have the social emotional competence (SEC) to recognize and respond to such an in the moment phenomenon.

Also, research on previous school reform efforts, including SEL programming, suggests that more long-term success is found when school practitioners drive the change process. Rather than bringing in outside experts to lead internal change, it is more effective to empower teachers to identify needs, create/research interventions, build their own capacity to implement them, and monitor and evaluate progress. This is because schools are diverse and what may work in one environment is not necessarily successful in a different context (Barry et al., 2017; Henson, 2001; Stanulis, Cooper, Dear, Johnston, & Richard-Todd, 2016). Thus, SEL “approaches must be designed to match the needs and contexts of individual schools and communities” (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 5).

In this context, the purpose of this study was to understand how teachers, administrators, and various support staff in a suburban high school implemented a practitioner-driven SEL initiative focused on identifying and implementing specific strategies and daily practices, and utilizing teachable moments rather than a standardized program. The intent was to discover how stakeholders can support the development of more accessible, feasible, and sustainable system-level social emotional practices (Barry et al., 2017). This included identifying how teachers can integrate SEL practices into the day-to-day life of their classrooms based on the personalized needs of their students, and “making them more attractive and feasible to implement for teachers
in busy school settings” (Barry et al., 2017, p. 440). Currently, this is lacking in SEL research and may be the missing link between research and practice.

**Significance Statement**

If teachers focus on social emotional skills along with academics, students may feel safer at school, more connected to teachers and peers, and more accepted as and able to be contributing members of the school community (Cervone & Cushman, 2015; S. M. Jones, Bailey & Jacob, 2014; Morcom, 2014; B. H. Smith & Low, 2012). In addition to possibly performing at higher levels academically in the classroom (Joffe & Black, 2012), students may also perform better on standardized tests (S. M. Jones et al., 2011). They may also become more civically engaged in the greater community (Ayers, 2010; Cohen, 2006) and ultimately more successful not only in school, but also in work and life (Durlak et al., 2011).

By identifying how to implement SEL practices into the day-to day-life of the classroom in a more accessible, feasible, sustainable and practitioner-driven way, teachers may become inspired and empowered to ensure that they take the time to meet the social emotional needs of their students. This may not only increase students’ academic, behavioral, and life outcomes, as previously stated, but this may also reduce teacher stress, increase teacher efficacy and effectiveness, and promote more career satisfaction amongst teachers (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011; Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovitch, Small, & Jacobson, 2009). Teachers who are happy in their jobs stay in the profession longer, perform better, and have more positive impacts on their students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Also, administrators may see a reduction in student discipline referrals (Whitted, 2011; Zahn, 2015) and an increase in student academic outcomes, which may encourage them to support and empower teachers to implement SEL into their classrooms in ways that teachers
identify as sustainable and impactful. Parents may see a positive change in their children’s personal and school outcomes. Schools may become safer places for our children, and, employers may see a difference in their employees’ skills and abilities to be successful in the work force. The more educators, parents, and employers support the implementation of SEL, the more apt policy makers may be to create and implement national K-12 SEL policy/standards, especially those that support a practitioner-driven approach.

**Positionality Statement**

As I conducted research on how teachers can implement SEL into the day-to-day life of the classroom, I had to be aware of how my “multiple and varied positions, roles, and identities are intricately and inextricably embedded in the process and outcomes” (Milner, 2007, p. 389). If not, my biases could have skewed my research, caused me to misinterpret data, lead teachers in the wrong direction, and negatively impact students.

**Personal experience.** I was born and raised with my brother in inner city New Britain, CT by divorced parents. My mother struggled to earn enough income to pay rent for our two-bedroom apartment. I shared a bedroom with her for many years until she realized a teenager needs her space. My Nana was always there to emotionally support me by whispering into my ear, “Work hard and you will have a better life one day.” Everything I did was in preparation for a better life. I started working at an early age delivering newspapers, babysitting, and working “under the table” wherever I could to make money. Once I was of working age, I held two jobs throughout high school and did much of the same working my way through college. Now I am a college-educated professional with an amazingly positive home life that I share with my husband. Thankfully, my positionality has changed as Takacs (2002) suggested it could.
My journey convinced me that if you work hard, you could rise above challenges. As an assistant principal, I find myself trying to impart this “wisdom” on struggling students that are regularly sent to the office. I have a tendency to turn “students into receiving objects” (Freire, 2014, p. 77) thinking that, if I could just teach them how to deal with and rise above life’s challenges, then they would be able to make better choices. Certainly it is not as simple as that, but I still find myself trying to convince students that how they are looking at or responding to a challenge is maladaptive in the hopes that it will change their behavior. I see many of the same students over and over again for breaking the rules, challenging teachers, or fighting with their peers, and I think, “Why don’t they learn? Why don’t they listen to what I am saying? Why didn’t that 45 minute discussion impact them?” Then I realize these students need more consistent social emotional support, which is why it is so important for teachers to incorporate SEL into their day-to-day practices. Yet, even with this approach, I must resist the temptation to think that students will take it in and suddenly be free of social and emotional issues. The process will take time, and students must buy into the process rather than just becoming the receivers of the knowledge.

Also, as a result of my childhood experience, I find myself blaming student misbehavior on parents and their parenting techniques, or lack thereof. I am not a mother, but I do believe that I could have had a better childhood if my parents were more socially and emotionally competent and less distracted by their own life challenges. And, I often hear those around me stating how parents are failing their children these days and that they are to blame for the problems in public schools. A principal, quoted in Jupp and Slattery, (2010) said, “We need to accept that our parents aren’t doing enough, will never do enough, have lost control” (p. 209). It is easier to blame an external force, rather than looking within. Parents have a major impact on their
children, but I need to be careful not to blame them for all of their child’s difficulties and not to see them as bad parents just because they are not providing for all of their child’s needs. Parents are not always emotionally equipped to meet the social emotional needs of their child(ren) (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Also, their style of parenting, culture, and beliefs influence their parenting techniques, so I cannot always assume it is just a deficit in parenting.

**Educational background/work experience.** One of my perspectives is that teachers are not taught enough (if any) classroom management strategies in their certification programs and therefore not prepared to teach social emotional skills, especially at the secondary level. Having been through a secondary English education program, I know first-hand that high school teachers are trained to teach their content area, not how to teach students the skills to manage the various social emotional challenges of school, work, and life. As a high school assistant principal, I see the same students being sent to the office partly because of the lack of social emotional teacher training. Identifying this issue could have possibly come across to teachers as offensive, for it could seem as though I was blaming them. I was a teacher for many years, so I know that it can be frustrating when the administration thinks teachers could be doing more. They could have easily seen me as an administrative dictator who was oppressing them into doing more work when their jobs were already too challenging. Freire (2014) stated that domination and repression are sometimes carried out by the elites (which in my case can be seen as administration) “in the name of . . . order, and social peace” (p. 78). I had to be sure that it did not appear as though I was asking them to take care of behavioral issues (in search of order in the school) that are supposed to be an administrator’s job to handle. My goal was the opposite: I wanted to find ways to support teachers in their approaches and strategies for preventing and responding to student
issues so that they could focus more time on academics and feel more satisfied with the progress of their students and their success as teachers.

**Positionality as an administrator.** I am an assistant principal in the building that I conducted my research, so I had to be aware of how my position of power could have influenced the teachers involved. How the teachers view me could have impacted their actions and responses especially because I am in a privileged (administrative) position (Briscoe, 2005). Though I believe I have established myself as a trustworthy individual in my school community, there is common concern amongst teachers that anything an administrator observes will be used in the teacher evaluation process. As a result, I had to remain cognizant of my positionality throughout the research process. Not only could my position have influenced who participated and how they participated, but it also had the potential to affect how I interpreted their data.

**Context bias.** My time as an educator/administrator has been spent in mainly suburban, high-performing, resource-rich schools besides my short student teaching experience in an inner city school. Though I have chosen this path, I am aware of the limitations this has created for me as a researcher. I am not able to look at a problem of practice through a struggling school lens, and that limits my ability to speak to the specific and unique needs and challenges that are presented in a school that has been identified as “failing.” With this knowledge, I was careful not to think that the findings in this study would be applicable to all contexts.

**Positionality conclusion.** Thinking about how my experiences and biases influence my perspective on my problem of practice has opened my eyes to the fact that there is no way to avoid being human in the process of research. The best we can do is to utilize our humanness to our advantage. Takacs (2002) stated, “Bias is a resource to help us see our positions” (p. 175). This statement was confirmed for me when I was in a calibration meeting for teacher evaluation.
We, a group of administrators, discovered that no matter how objective and scientific we try to make the process of teacher evaluation, we are all humans and the process is always going to be imperfect and subject to personal biases. The best we can do is to be aware of our own personal biases and actively work against them. Just like teacher evaluation, educational research is conducted by humans and is subject to the same flaws and imperfections. As they say, admittance of the problem is the first step towards the solution.

**Research Questions**

This qualitative case study sought to answer the following question: How can a suburban high school implement a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative in an effort to meet the needs of all students, as perceived by teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff? The following sub-questions were also investigated:

- What are the challenges and opportunities staff face in the early stages of a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative?
- How do staff members perceive the value of implementing social emotional learning during early implementation?

**Key Terms**

**Social emotional learning (SEL).** “The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5). Since the inception of the concept of SEL in 1994, five agreed upon social emotional skills have emerged: “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5).
**Self-awareness.** “The ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations and possessing a well-grounded sense of confidence and optimism” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5).

**Self-management.** “The ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. This includes managing stress, controlling impulses, motivating oneself and setting and working toward achieving personal and academic goals” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5).

**Social awareness.** “The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5).

**Relationship skills.** “The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed” (CASEL, 2015, p. 6).

**Responsible decision-making.** “The ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others” (CASEL, 2015, p. 6).

**Practitioner-driven.** This concept within the change process highlights the importance of empowering teachers/counselors/administrators to be the leaders who identify needs, explore, create, and implement solutions, and then reflect upon the impact to identify next steps.

**Non-standardized.** An approach to educational change that does not solely utilize one standardized, evidence-based program.
**Theoretical Framework**

This study was driven by Fullan’s (2016) theory of educational/organizational change. Fullan has written a variety of books and articles that focus on his evolving ideas around educational/organizational change; however, the following quote encompasses the specific element of his theory that guided this research:

First, change will always fail until we find some way of developing infrastructures and processes that engage teachers in developing and applying new knowledge, skills, and understandings. Second, I am talking not about surface meaning but rather deep meaning about the new approaches to teaching and learning. (Fullan, 2016, p. 27)

As Fullan (2016) continued to clarify his points, he explained that there are three changes that need to occur in practice to achieve deep, meaningful change in teaching: (a) Revising resources, materials, and curriculum; (b) Revising instructional practices; and (c) Altering existing belief systems. The right stakeholders must drive these changes in teacher practices and beliefs: the educators in the local context rather than government officials and policymakers who are primarily focused on standards and accountability. As Fullan (2016) stated, policymakers should not be the drivers of educational change, for “higher, clearer standards combined with correlated assessments are essential along the way, but they will not drive the system forward” (p. 43). As mentioned previously, raising standards and increasing fear around meeting goals on standardized tests has not solved the American educational problem of not meeting the needs of all students. Therefore, not only does this suggest a shift in teaching, but also a shift in how we go about changing teaching.

Fullan (2016) utilized the term “re-culturing,” which highlights the essence of his educational change approach. Re-culturing is “how teachers come to question and change their
beliefs and habits” (p. 23). The key word in this definition, in relation to this study, is “how.” In education, we often focus on the “what.” What do we need to do to meet the needs of all students? What can we do differently to raise standardized test scores? What do we do to get more parents involved in our school community? In this study, though the “what” is important and a necessary part of the puzzle, the ultimate focus is on the “how.” How can a suburban high school implement a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative in an effort to meet the needs of all students, as perceived by teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff? As seen through the literature, the “what” is clear: implement SEL into the day-to-day lives of the classroom; however, the “how” is not clear. Some schools have implemented whole-school programs or targeted interventions, but the positive outcomes are short-lived and/or even have negative consequences, so a more practitioner-driven approach is suggested, which is in sync with Fullan’s approach to educational change in that school leaders will not see successful change if they just implement a program that does not allow teachers to be a driving force in the change effort.

Also, the “prescription trap” (Fullan, 2016, p. 71) can and should be avoided when schools are looking to make change, like implementing SEL. What this means is that adopting a programmatic approach—the 4Rs Program, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), or Skills, Opportunities, and Recognition (SOAR)—has “little to do with subsequent implementation” (Fullan, 2016, p. 65). These programs are too rigid and do not promote the empowerment of the professionals within the given context. Also, just because the program may work in one school does not mean it will be successful in another school. Context matters, and there is no “silver bullet” (Fullan, 2016, p. 92) solution to any given educational issue.
Teachers and other staff within a given school building or district who are actually doing the work have a wealth of information that these program creators and/or policymakers do not. Context and teacher autonomy cannot be left out of the solution. There is power in Fullan’s (2016) statement that, “Significant educational change consists of changes in beliefs, teaching style, and materials, which can come about only through a process of personal development in a social context” (p. 107). A program is not going to provide teachers the opportunity to develop personally, rather, it is going to do the exact opposite: demean teachers’ abilities and skills and send them the message that they need someone else to tell them how to be effective teachers.

To further understand Fullan’s (2016) educational change theory, there needs to be an understanding of professional capital. Fullan (2016) stated that professional capital is made up of “human capital (the quality of the individual), social capital (the quality of the group), and decisional capital (the quality of evidence-based decisions and expert judgment)” (p. 121). Policymakers have a tendency to focus on the human capital alone; however, Fullan (2016) asserted that social capital is the most important element, for strengthening the group benefits the group and the individuals within the group. So, for example, if teachers and other stakeholders work together to identify a problem of practice within their context and help each other work towards improvement collectively and individually, then there is true opportunity for deep, meaningful change. Add decisional capital to this and you have a winning combination, for the group is not only working together but also working together to build its “collective expertise” (Fullan, 2016, p. 122). This further explains why it is important to focus on the teachers who are the ones on the “front-line” doing the day-to-day work and why it is imperative to empower them to be the change agents.
Competing educational change theories. There are other educational change theories to choose from, for the question of how to improve schools is not a new one. There have been a variety of theories and approaches utilized within the last several decades, which were mostly top-down management theories. For example, Odden and Marsh (1988) suggested that implementing comprehensive reform legislation would and did improve secondary schools. This movement of increasing standards, accountability, and rigid policy continued with the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) and the current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015). However, due to the continual downfall of such change efforts, a new approach to school reform has been explored within the last 15 years or so that promotes a more teacher-centered focus.

Goodson (2001) presented an educational change theory that tried to bridge the gap between external mandated change and internal teacher commitment and ownership of change. There are four elements to the theory: mission, micro-politics, memory work, and movement. Essentially, the mission of a change effort within a school must recognize the external forces whilst accepting that teachers are at the forefront of the change process. As a result, Goodson (2001) suggested that internal re-negotiation to ensure practices change according to the mission is essential. Then, existing memories of how the school has functioned up to a specific point must be “confronted” (p. 58). Though this theory includes the perspectives of the teachers, it misses the mark for this current study because it paints the process in a bit of an adversarial light by using such terms as “confronted,” and “re-negotiated,” and the process begins with an external mandate, which is not pertinent to this study.

Later, L. Smith (2008) studied eight schools that implemented changes and improved their student outcomes. L. Smith presented a 3x3 model of change, which included three
essential elements (context, capacity, and conversations) and three catalytic variables (internal dissonance, external forces, and leadership). Though the theory includes looking at change within a given context, building teacher capacity and collaborating towards improvement, all eight of the schools were described by Fullan in the Foreword of L. Smith’s (2008) book as being under “diverse, difficult and challenging circumstances” (p. xi). Since this study focuses on a suburban, high-performing school, the theory is not applicable.

Wedell (2009) presented ideas around how to enact educational change, which focused on people and their contexts, too. Theory and practice are presented throughout his book via a variety of case studies with the intent to “help make implementation planning more contextually appropriate” (Wedell, 2009, p. 5). Though the theory espouses the need to have policymakers communicate with various stakeholders within a context (i.e. teachers) before enacting policy, this process is not relevant in this current study, for it is a case study of one school in which teachers were seeking change due to a self-recognized need, not in response to state or federal educational policy.

There are other voices in the field of educational change, specifically in the implementation of SEL, that do not support Fullan’s (2016) theory. There are researchers, policymakers, and educational organizations that support utilizing evidence-based programs and/or intensive and targeted interventions; creating systematic and consistent change through top-down, mandated federal and state policy; and simply raising standards and increasing accountability to promote improvement. Each of these approaches has been historically utilized and supported by many; however, they have not proven to help all schools meet the needs of all students. They are not appropriate for this case study, for a unique practitioner-driven, non-
standardized approach is the focus rather than a mandated, top-down, evidence-based approach to educational change.

**Conclusion**

This study intended to explore Fullan’s (2016) theory within one high school that has identified its own need to implement social emotional learning and that has a history of success with empowering teachers to lead change in an already high-performing school. Identifying why teachers have recognized this as a need, what they perceived was needed to change their practices in order to address the need, and how they intended on moving forward was the goal. The hope is that other schools may see the power in practitioner-driven reform if they see a successful model. The following chapter will explore the history of social emotional learning initiatives, including whole-school approaches and targeted interventions. An analysis of the literature leads us away from these approaches and towards a more practitioner-focused approach, which supports the need for this case study.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Modern educational policies in the United States have fallen short of the national goal of providing an equitable education for every student, regardless of race, socio-economic status, or disability (Ornstein, 2010). The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), Race to the Top Program (2009), Common Core State Standards (CCSS, 2009), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) were enacted at the national level in an attempt to provide all students with equitable access to a rigorous education. These policies increase educational standards, teacher and school accountability, and school choice (United States Department of Education [USDOE], 2009, 2015), but they neglect to address the connection between emotional well-being and educational achievement (Sznitman, Reisel, & Romer, 2010). NCLB (2001) did include a focus on character and safety, and ESSA (2015) was the first to require non-academic accountability measures; however, student outcomes have not improved (USDOE, 2015). The achievement gap still exists, and students continue to drop out of high school at alarming rates (USDOE, 2016). In addition, students are facing new challenges, including an increase in mental health diagnoses, suicide rates, bullying incidents, and social media conflicts (Zins & Elias, 2006). One element that, if prioritized and enhanced, could significantly aid in achieving national education goals is social emotional learning (SEL) because developing students’ self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship and responsible decision-making skills along with their academic skills has been documented to provide them with the ability to persevere and rise above adversity in the classroom, at work, and throughout life in an ever-changing and challenging world (Elias, 1997).

Research has revealed that building social emotional skills has a positive impact on a variety of student outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; S. M. Jones et al., 2011; Whetstone et al., 2015;
Whitted, 2011), and various programs have been created that enhance their development; however, implementation across the nation has been inconsistent and short-lived (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004). A new approach to SEL implementation is warranted. This literature review will explore the growing need for SEL and a new approach for implementation by reviewing the history and context of SEL, which will provide the foundation, understandings, and evolution of this educational concept, and other similar approaches, to outline a new clear and logical direction. Then the connection between SEL and teachers will be explored to gain an appreciation of the approach’s impact on instructors, their role in effective implementation, and the need for teachers to drive it. Finally, the chapter concludes with models of and techniques for successful implementation, which will provide ideas for teachers to explore in the implementation of a practitioner-driven SEL approach, which is the focus of this study.

**History and Context of SEL**

The idea of and need for identifying and responding to the non-academic barriers that stand in the way of student success in school, work, and life is not novel. The concept of SEL has existed for approximately 30 years and is a result of an evolution of various long-standing social and emotional approaches to learning applied to education, sociology, and psychology, including character education, emotional intelligence, and mindfulness. There is no one ideal way to effectively implement SEL within the school environment; various approaches have been created and researched to achieve this goal (i.e. 4Rs, CSC, Paths, SOAR, MindUP, Responsive Classroom). Regardless of the approach applied, research has proven that SEL is important and has a positive impact on students (Domino, 2013; Durlak, et al., 2011; S. M. Jones et al., 2011; Whetstone et al., 2015). To review this history, this first strand of the literature review will outline the origins of SEL, types of SEL approaches, and the importance of SEL.
Origins of social emotional learning.

Character education. Scholars have touted the importance of character education since Ancient Greek times with Aristotle’s teachings on virtues (Nucci, 1989); however, the definition, intent, and approach has evolved throughout the centuries and across cultures. According to Mulkey (1997), in America, character education has been a focus since Colonial times when school textbooks mainly covered Christian principles, reinforcing sets of values first taught at home by parents. As the government began to question the connection between church and school around the late 18th Century, educators began to look for a more open-minded, secular approach to including character education within pedagogical frameworks. And, with the influx of American immigrants, who brought diverse social and cultural values with them amidst the dawning of industrialization, the purpose of character education shifted from a more Christian, value-based approach towards instilling practical attributes such as timeliness, orderliness, and respectfulness. In 1916, Berea College president and Presbyterian Minister William Hutchins popularized secular character education with the creation of The Children’s Morality Code. This code emphasized “self-control, good health, kindness, truth, sportsmanship, and good workmanship” (Mulkey, 1997, p. 35).

Also, during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, the progressive education movement significantly influenced American education in a variety of ways. John Dewey, a prominent educator and philosopher who was influential to this movement, supported a shift in education that was more student-centered, experiential, and more effective in preparing youth for democratic citizenship. This shift in intent and approach within education that encouraged more than just passing along information from one generation to the next incited much controversy about whether character education should be a part of the public school experience, and if so,
how? Dewey did not assert that students were empty vessels to be filled with academic content, morals, and values (White, 2015); rather, he claimed that experiencing life, incorporating social factors into the learning experience, and having freedom and autonomy in the learning process would allow students to become moral, democratic, and educated beings (Dewey, 1938). Because he did not advocate forcing moral values and character traits, some viewed his approach as the antithesis to character education, but for Dewey, the real cause of decline of character [was] an approach that [sought] to pound and pour particular attitudes and traits into the minds of students who, if they [were] engaged at all, [were] merely superficially engaged; the culprit [was] a system that enforce[d] conformity and uniformity and deny[ed] the existence and the potential of students’ motivating interests and impulses. (White, 2015, pp. 136-137)

The controversy between Dewey and his past and present-day critics not only acts as a microcosm of society’s competing educational philosophies, but also of the on-going quest to identify what it means to be American and what role schools should play in preparing students to be active, contributing, successful members and citizens of American society. The “larger question within which the fate of school-based character education is contained . . . [is] what can and should schools be doing to make positive contributions toward the future direction of our youth and society” (Elias, 2014, p. 37)?

As an answer to this question remains elusive and heavily debated amongst educators, philosophers, politicians, psychologists, and American leaders; indeed, the concept of character education in schools still exists and continues to evolve. Whether it involves a desire to create responsible citizens through major initiatives such as the Character Education Institute (1968), the idea of utilizing Kohlberg’s (1976) six stages of Moral Reasoning in schools to individualize
development of character, the creation of the national Character Education Partnership (1993) to foster a common approach (Mulkey, 1997), or the inception of Elias’ (2014) convergent concept of SEL and character development which combines the values and the skills in which to attain and apply them, a unified path has yet to be solidified.

As demands for school accountability continue to increase, there is more reason to believe that American education should focus not only on academics alone but also on another “set of qualities, a list that includes persistence, self-control, curiosity, conscientiousness, grit, and self-confidence. Economists refer to these as noncognitive skills, psychologists call them personality traits, and the rest of us sometimes think of them as character” (Tough, 2012, p. xv). No matter what they are called, these traits and how one attains them continue to be areas of interest and exploration in education. The identification and use of the concept of emotional intelligence constitutes one contemporary approach that has contributed to the evolution of SEL, and it is discussed in the next section.

**Emotional intelligence.** The theory of emotional intelligence (EI) emerged in the academic literature in the mid-1960s “without much attention paid to defining it or to creating an area around it” (Mayer & Cobb, 2000, p. 165). It was not until 1990 that psychologists Salovey and Mayer defined EI “as the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (p. 189). The theory was being widely studied and utilized within psychological research; however, its more common and worldwide popularity did not grow until five years later when Goleman (1995) published his book *Emotional Intelligence*, which was inspired by Salovey and Mayer’s (1990) work and which reached broader and more diverse audiences.
Goleman, a psychologist and scientific journalist, read Mayer and Salovey’s (1990) article and was intrigued by the new perspective EI theory brought to the field of developmental psychology and its possible influence on an individual’s level of success in life. Not only did he then pursue the topic enough to publish his own New York Times best seller in 1995 entitled Emotional Intelligence, he also co-founded the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a national organization that focuses on research, practice, and policy with a mission to bring evidenced-based SEL programs to schools around the world. It was not a coincidence that both CASEL and the term “social emotional learning” emerged from a meeting in 1994 hosted by the Fetzer Institute. Meeting attendees included researchers, educators, and child advocates involved in various education-based efforts to promote positive development in children. These SEL pioneers came together to address a concern about ineffective school programming and a lack of coordination among programs at the school level. Schools were being inundated with a slew of positive youth development programs such as drug prevention, violence prevention, sex education, civic education, and moral education, to name a few. SEL was introduced as a framework that addresses the needs of young people and helps to align and coordinate school programs and programming.

(CASEL, 2017b, n.p.)

Both Goleman’s (1995) book and the creation of CASEL brought attention to the existence of emotional intelligence and how social emotional skills can be developed in a person so that he/she can be successful in school, work, and life.

In his 2005 edition of the book, Goleman suggested that EI (also now known as EQ, representing emotional quotient) includes four skill areas: self-awareness, self-management,
social awareness, and social skills/relationship management (See Appendix A). These four EI skills are similar to the five core SEL competencies identified by CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2017a, n.p.) (See Appendix B). These remain the five competencies taught and studied by CASEL and other educational researchers whose studies reveal that the impact of implementing SEL programming into schools includes decreases in conduct problems, increases in positive social behaviors and attitudes, and increases in academic outcomes (CASEL, 2017c, n.p.). As a result, the field of education has been significantly impacted by the inception and study of emotional intelligence. Though character education has existed for centuries—and still does—along with the idea that schools should teach more than just academics, the knowledge of and the understanding of a person’s emotional intelligence and its impact on life-long development and success in life has brought with it a more holistic approach to education, which leads into the study and history of mindfulness.

**Mindfulness.** Like the concept of character education, the practice of mindfulness has been around for centuries, with its origins firmly rooted in Buddhism, Hinduism, and other Eastern religions and philosophies. Despite its religious connection, the practice of mindfulness has gained secular popularity in the Western hemisphere within the last 30 to 40 years.

“Mindfulness instruction is intended to enhance an individual’s innate ability to be aware of what is happening internally and externally with open curiosity and without judgment” (Perry-Parrish, Copeland-Linder, Webb, & Siblinga, 2016, p. 172); it incorporates meditation, body scans, yoga and other practices (Nagy & Baer, 2017) in an attempt to help individuals cope with and confront life’s stressors that lead to emotional, psychological, and physical suffering (Germer, 2004; Nagy & Baer, 2017).
Behavioral psychologists and psychotherapists in the United States popularized mindfulness practices and therapies (i.e. mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapies) in an attempt to help adults decrease their stress levels; however, due to their beneficial impact, the use of mindfulness practices has extended to other areas, like neuroscience, business, and education. This is in part because stress has increasingly affected people of all ages in today’s modern, complex world as evidenced by rising diagnoses of anxiety, depression, and attention disorders (Karunananda, Goldin, & Talagala, 2016), which have physiological effects. Moreover, being mindful is “a skill that can be cultivated by anyone” (Germer, 2004).

Research on mindfulness practices and their impact on youth have become more popular within recent years due to an alarming percentage of adolescents being diagnosed with mental health disorders, most of which are anxiety disorders. In a national comorbidity survey of 10,123 adolescents, 31.9% were diagnosed with anxiety disorders, 19.1% with behavior disorders, 14.3% with mood disorders and 11.4% with substance abuse disorders, with an onset sometimes as early as the age of six (Merikangas et al., 2010). The common emergence of these disorders “in childhood and adolescence highlights the need for a transition from the common focus on treatment of U. S. youth to that of prevention and early intervention” (Merikangas et al., 2010, p. 980). As a result, literature is emerging on the topic of mindfulness instruction for youth and adolescents in schools and universities.

A common theme found in the literature postulates that certain social emotional skills are improved as a result of mindfulness meditation instruction, such as self-awareness, self-management, and improved relationship skills (Karunananda et al., 2016; Perry-Parrish et al., 2016). This is why the literature on SEL and mindfulness often overlap and/or connect, and this
is why mindfulness is a concept worth exploring and understanding when conducting SEL research.

Another new area of study includes examining the impact of mindfulness interventions on the stress levels of public school teachers. One of the first studies of its kind has “supported the hypothesis that mindfulness training cultivates . . . social-emotional skills in teachers . . . [and has] found evidence that various aspects of (1) emotion regulation and (2) prosocial tendencies like compassion and forgiveness changed as a function of the mindfulness training and helped to reduce stress” (Taylor et al., 2016, p. 125). Additional research is needed in this area to further validate these results; however, the application of mindfulness as a component of pedagogical practice is growing in popularity.

Mindfulness practices in education help to achieve goals similar to SEL programs in that both seek to reduce the non-academic barriers that prevent students from being successful in school, future work, and other aspects of their lives. Outcomes are even similar, such as increasing one’s self-awareness, the ability to self-manage or self-regulate, and the capacity to build relationship skills. Their approaches are different, though, and mindfulness practices do not strengthen all five of the identified social emotional skills. As such, mindfulness can be used as one of the tools in a teacher’s toolbox to meet the various social emotional needs of their students and to build their own social emotional competencies.

Social emotional learning (SEL). The concept of SEL, like emotional intelligence, was first identified in 1994 in response to a group of educators, researchers, and child advocates who were concerned with the ineffectiveness of school programming and the various topics that they were becoming required to cover in public school, such as character development, sex education, civic and moral values, and substance abuse. The need for a broader approach was evident, and it
was in part discovered through SEL (CASEL, 2017b; Hoffman, 2009). Mindfulness focuses on self-awareness and self-regulation, and character education covers morals, values, and personality traits; however, SEL attempts to encompass all of these. SEL is also a more skills-based approach that can be taught similarly to and alongside academic skills.

As stated previously, social emotional learning has been used as the primary terminology describing the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (CASEL, 2015, p. 5)

There are five agreed upon “social emotional skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (CASEL, 2015, p. 5; Hoffman, 2009, p. 535). Though other definitions and skill sets exist in the SEL literature, this is the definition and skill set that was utilized in this research, for it is the most current and widely used.

Increased support for the implementation of SEL within the context of public school education was gained early in the 21st Century. “In 2001, the National Conference of State Legislators passed a resolution supporting the teaching of social emotional skills in schools, and in 2004, Illinois became the first state to develop specific SEL standards for K-12 students” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 533). It is not a coincidence that Illinois was the leading state in implementing SEL given that it is the state in which the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is located. As previously noted, CASEL is a leading national non-
profit organization funded by various interest groups and led by psychologists, researchers, and
educators, to promote SEL implementation into K-12 schools nationwide (CASEL, 2017b).

The popularity and strength of the SEL movement continues to grow in practice and research. In 2008, New York State’s Mental Health Office adopted the Children’s Mental Health Plan, which included SEL. Pennsylvania adopted SEL standards in 2010, and Kansas adopted them in 2012 (NASBOE, 2013). Currently, 49 states have preschool SEL standards and three states (Illinois, Kansas, and Pennsylvania) have K-12 SEL standards (Gueldner & Feuerborn, 2016). Research on the impacts of SEL is growing, as well; however, how to effectively implement SEL and sustain its impacts are areas requiring additional and extensive research (Hoffman, 2009), a need this study aims in part to address.

Scholars and researchers are beginning to see the value of SEL not only for students but for teachers as well, both in terms of building their own social emotional competencies (SEC) to be effective SEL instructors and also in terms of decreasing the stress level that comes with being a teacher (Collie et al., 2011; Lizuka et al., 2014; Waajid, Garner, & Owen, 2013). The goal in this context was for teachers to learn how to decrease their stress-response to the difficulties involved with teaching, increase their self-efficacy as teachers, and augment their willingness to stay in the field of education (Collie et al., 2011; Hoffman, 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As a result, “there is growing interest in addressing SEL as part of teacher preparation and in-service training” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 534).

The role of teacher happiness in the classroom is also being explored in the area of retention or “in terms both of keeping new teachers in the classroom and of well-being in teaching and in society, in general” (De Sterck, Goyette, & Robertson, 2015, p. 425). This is an area requiring future research and development if SEL training is to be incorporated in teacher
preparation programs and in teacher professional development with the intent of decreasing both teacher turnover rates, which rose as high as 15% for all public schools across the nation in the year 2000 (Lindemulder, 2017), and the rate of teachers leaving the field, which stands at a rate of 8% every year (Strauss, 2017). These trends are particularly concerning because there is also an increase in the number of challenging student issues and behaviors that have a negative impact on teachers’ perceptions of students and on their willingness to stay in their current position and/or profession. For, Djonko-Moore (2016), “using 2007-9 survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics” (p. 1063), discovered that when teachers in high poverty racially segregated schools perceived student behaviors as negative they were 193.1% more likely to make the decision to leave.

Scholars have documented an increase in and addition of societal stressors and fears that are progressively affecting the social emotional development of children (Burnham, 2009; Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004); the accumulation of such stressors has a negative impact on children’s long-term psychological and physical health (Garner & Shonkoff, 2012). Divorce rates are high; trusted and respected leaders are being arrested for child abuse; families are struggling with poverty, terrorists are killing innocent civilians, and the Internet has opened up a “Pandora’s box” of online dangers, including social media conflicts and cyber-bullying (Burnham, 2009; D’Ambrosio, 2002; Stauffer, Heath, Coyne, & Ferrin, 2012; Zins & Elias, 2006). There are also “increased economic and social pressures on families . . . and [a] weakening of social institutions that were once expected to fulfill emotional and social needs of growing children, such as the family, church, and community” (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004, p. 87). SEL has become an area of need that cannot be ignored if schools set the goal of attending to the social emotional health of children and youth.
**SEL programs and approaches.** Since attention has been increasingly drawn to SEL and its role in education, a variety of programs and approaches have been created, implemented, and analyzed for efficacy. Classroom-based SEL programs have been created, for example, for specific grade levels or ages and include stand-alone SEL lessons or SEL approaches/teaching practices that can be integrated within existing academic curricula. There are also programs that focus on targeted SEL interventions for identified groups of at-risk students that are commonly implemented mostly outside of the classroom, led by a school psychologist or other support staff. Recently, a shift towards school-wide or district-wide SEL programs focused on a variety of elements has emerged, and approaches have evolved to address school climate, teaching practices, SEL skill development, and mental health support for students, among others. This section will present an overview of the various types of SEL programs and approaches to provide an example of the breath of choices, though it should not be considered an exhaustive list of options due to the number of programs that have been created both nationally and internationally.

**Classroom-based SEL programs.** When SEL first became a focus in schools, programs tended to include stand-alone SEL skill lessons. In other words, teachers would follow specific programmatic lessons (most often in a particular order) to explicitly teach SEL skills, in addition to and separately from grade-level academic content and skills. For example, the *I Can Problem Solve* program for grades PreK-5 offers 83 freestanding lessons for teachers to utilize, the *MindUp* program includes 15 lessons for PreK-8, and the preK-9 *Second Step* program has up to 28 lessons (CASEL, 2013).

In all of these programs and others like them, each lesson has a specific focus and goal as seen in *MindUp* Lesson 1—How Our Brains Work: “The main goals of this lesson are really to
talk about what the pre-fontal cortex, the hippocampus, and the amygdala do and how that influences their actions” (Uhlig, 2017, n.p.). In the *I Can Problem Solve* program, each lesson targets “interpersonal problem-solving skills with the goal of preventing antisocial behavior” (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010, p. 34). Second Step, meanwhile, is a prevention program with “22-28 weekly topics across 5 days/week” (CASEL, 2013, p. 27) geared towards increasing “key areas of social competency to reduce problem-externalizing behaviors such as physical and verbal aggression” (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010, p. 37). Though these programs are still utilized, an evolution of approaches have been created and implemented.

Indeed, SEL programs have evolved and become more integrated with existing content curricula so as not to be so detached from the existing goals of the classroom or seen as an extra separate goal adding to teachers’ workloads. Examples include the following: The *4Rs* program for grades PreK-8, which offers 35 sessions that are meant to be integrated into the language arts curriculum; The *RULER* approach for grades K-8, a program that offers academic integration strategies; and, The *Facing History and Ourselves* program for grades 6-12 social studies classrooms (CASEL, 2013).

Content area skills and knowledge are taught alongside social emotional skills in these three programs, as well as in those of similar design. The *4Rs* program integrates and focuses on reading, writing, respect, and resolution skills. The curriculum includes seven units, and 35 literacy lessons, which have shown to decrease hostile and aggressive interpersonal skills, and increase math and reading skills (S. M. Jones et al., 2011). The *RULER* program integrates a feeling words curriculum into language arts and history lessons, for these are “the most practical subject areas in which to incorporate an SEL curriculum that centers on literature, writing, and understanding human experience” (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012, p. 219). Schools
utilizing this method have seen significant academic and social improvements, such as “higher degrees of warmth, and connectedness between teachers and students, more autonomy and leadership among students, and teachers who focused more on students’ interests and motivations” (Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2013, p. 77). The Facing History and Ourselves theoretical approach, “an international moral, character and civic education program . . . [that] supports secondary schoolteachers in crafting and implementing units or courses that foster the cognitive, academic, and social-moral development of their students” (Barr, 2005, pp. 145-146) has guided students to make connections between their own personal decisions and those of historical figures. The goal of these programs is to improve both the academic and social emotional skills of students.

As more SEL programs are developed and reviewed for effectiveness, the awareness of the need for training teachers to transform their instructional practices to improve students’ social emotional skills has increased. Programs that incorporate teacher instructional training include the K-6 Caring School Community (CSC) program, the K-8 Responsive Classroom (RC) approach, and the K-6 Skills, Opportunities, and Recognition (SOAR) program (CASEL, 2013; Weissberg, Resnik, Payton, & O’Brien, 2003). These programs focus on “how to teach rather than what to teach” (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014, p. 571). The CSC program, for example, involves

a one- or two-day on-site workshop for teachers, and a three-day training-of-trainers institute for school teams that include at least one teacher, one administrator, and one parent. On-site follow-up support services include classroom demonstrations and advanced workshops. (Weissberg et al., 2003, p. 49)
The RC approach is a teacher “professional development intervention comprised of a set of practical teaching strategies designed to enhance a teacher’s capacity to create a caring, well-managed classroom environment” (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014, p. 569). SOAR, meanwhile, requires teachers to undergo a three-day training focused on classroom management strategies, lesson planning, and assessment of student mastery. Parents are even offered training on how to create a positive learning environment at home (Weissberg et al., 2003). The CSC and SOAR programs have shown to improve pro-social behavior and problem-solving skills in students, as well as increase their reading, language, and math skills (Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004).

All of the aforementioned SEL programs have similar intentions, and though they are representative of different styles and approaches, many of them have overlapping elements and may also be somewhat representative of a particular type of approach, like an explicit-skills program, a program that integrates SEL instruction with existing curricula, or one that includes a training model for teacher instructional practices. This must be stated to avoid giving the impression that any one of these programs fits neatly into only one of these categories.

Practitioners interested in learning about additional expert-recommended programs should consult the CASEL list of effective SEL programs because they have been deemed well-designed, evidenced-based, classroom level programs that include training and implementation supports (CASEL, 2013, 2015).

School-wide and district-wide SEL approaches. As educators continue to implement SEL, it has become evident to some that classroom-based programs can have only so much of an impact because “SEL skills are also needed on playgrounds, in lunchrooms, in hallways and bathrooms—in short, everywhere . . . [and] students need support to navigate such spaces and make the entire school an environment that is safe, positive, and conducive to learning” (S. M.
Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 7). This section, therefore, provides an overview of school-wide programs that have been developed to incorporate a wide variety of contextual approaches to impact the social emotional culture of the entire school community: bullying prevention strategies, behavioral interventions and supports, peer mediation, SEL standards development, and parent education, to list a few (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The key to a school-wide approach is to have SEL “exist everywhere at school, across the building—with every adult in the building on board” (Shafer, 2016, n.p.) including teachers, administrators, lunchroom staff, bus drivers and every other adult students see and interact with throughout the school day. A meta-analysis of school-based preventions conducted by Wilson, Gottfredson, and Najaka (2001) showed:

Any one school-based strategy, implemented in isolation, will not have a large effect.

This suggests that at least as important as the question “Which program works?” are questions such as “Which combinations or sequences of strategies work best?” and “How can schools effectively design comprehensive packages of prevention strategies and implement them in a high-quality fashion?” (p. 269)

In an attempt to answer these questions, school-wide and district-wide SEL programs have been developed, implemented, and reviewed by researchers. Examples of these programs follow.

Classroom-based SEL models have commonly served as starting points for school-wide programs. The Plainfield, New Jersey school district started SEL implementation with a classroom, video-based program entitled Talking with TJ. These videos consisted of a fictional character who modeled solving various age-relevant social issues. Though the videos seemed to have an impact on students’ social emotional skills, the district identified the need for something more significant, which led administration to “bring the principles of the curricular intervention
from selected classrooms to an entire school building” (Romasz, Kantor, & Elias, 2004, p. 89) with the help of the Social-Emotional Learning Lab at Rutgers University. Their approach included developing district-wide SEL policies; implementing and monitoring student achievement of new SEL standards; creating SEL positions (i.e. SEL Administrative Liaison, SEL Resource Teacher); organizing a district-wide Social Development Coordinating Committee; hanging conflict resolution skill posters in schools; utilizing SEL resources such as Rutgers undergraduate assistants to aid in intervention support, along with a variety of other changes and supports. The evaluation of the implementation process showed promising results, including the value of non-classroom based SEL to help create a school-wide culture of SEL; . . . the importance of collaborative consultation, supervision, and feedback to improve program practices; and the benefit of broad involvement of stakeholders in providing data about school-based problems and school-focused solutions to them. (Romasz et al., 2004, p. 101)

These comprehensive approaches have continued to evolve nationwide. For example, a more current school-wide SEL program is SECURe (Social, Emotional, and Cognitive Understanding and Regulation in education). This program, developed by a team at Harvard University, was preliminarily piloted at various PreK-5 schools, including six public elementary schools in Phoenix, Arizona; schools in the Getting Ready for School program in New York City; those in partnership with the Children’s Aid Society of New York; and schools in Bridgeport, CT (Harvard Graduate School of Education EASEL Lab, 2018; S. M. Jones & Bailey, 2014). The SECURe approach incorporates a variety of strategies for “students, teachers, specialists, lunchroom monitors, and other school staff” (S. M. Jones et al., 2014, p. 21) to
promote a positive and productive classroom and school environment. For example, there are conflict resolution, communication, and cool down strategies (S. M. Jones, Bailey, Brion-Meisels, & Partee, 2016). Preliminary research results showed that the program has a positive impact on students’ reading and math outcomes and students’ abilities to be attentive, to behave, and to be emotionally regulated (S. M. Jones & Bailey, 2014).

Another example of a school-wide program is SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), which was developed in the United Kingdom in 2005. This program was first developed for primary grade students as a “whole-school approach designed to positively influence a range of pupil outcomes, including increased social and emotional skills, better behavior and reduced mental health difficulties” (Wigelsworth, Humphrey, & Lendrum, 2012, p. 213). Based on perceived success of the program, a secondary level version was developed in 2007, which had a similar design with an additional emphasis on student “attendance, staff effectiveness and the emotional health and well-being of all who learn and work in schools” (Wigelsworth et al., 2012, p. 214). In opposition to other SEL programs, schools utilizing the SEAL approach “are actively encouraged to explore different approaches to implementation that support identified school improvement priorities rather than following a single model, meaning that they can tailor it to their own circumstances and needs” (Wigelsworth et al., 2012, p. 216).

The development, implementation and evaluation of whole-school programs that give schools implementation choice represents a new area of focus in the SEL movement, and much remains to be refined for schools to reap the full benefit of school-wide and district-wide SEL initiatives. In fact, Durlak et al. (2011) observed that the implementation process of whole-school SEL is much more complex than classroom-based SEL; therefore, the potential for poorer outcomes exists as a result of implementation issues. This has proven to be true in the evaluation
of the SEAL program thus far, and there is potential—and a scholarly and practitioner-based need—for understanding what best implementation practices will improve the outcomes of a less-structured, school-wide, context-based SEL program (Durlak et al., 2011). For example, research is lacking models capable of engaging all students, as well as all staff, with SEL opportunities on a regular basis, and integrating SEL “into the fabric of the school in terms of basic school policies as well as links with other initiatives” (Banerjee, Weare, & Farr, 2014, p. 732).

**Targeted interventions.** Budget concerns have pushed schools to implement individual-focused, targeted intervention programs instead of potentially more expensive, resource-rich whole-school approaches. With these approaches, a small group of at-risk students are identified as deficient (by the school and/or district) in social emotional skills. The intent of the intervention is to assess what their needs are and determine how to best meet them. A variety of targeted interventions aimed at improving students’ social emotional skills have been created, implemented, analyzed, and evaluated. The following are a few examples of such approaches and the research that has been conducted to evaluate them.

An intervention entitled *New Beginnings* was implemented at the elementary school level in the UK beginning in 2007. Small groups of students at-risk socially and emotionally were grouped with children identified as role models with the purpose of increasing personal development, practicing skills, and learning about themselves and how they relate to others. Emotional competence, via child self-reporting as well as teacher and parent evaluations, was assessed. The results showed significant improvements in the children’s self-reports of social emotional competence. This did not match up with teacher and parent reports, however, which suggested that the improvements were more internal than external. Also, these gains were not
seen in a third set of measures taken some time after the program had completed, which suggested that the effects were only temporary (Humphrey, Kalambouka, Wigelsworth, Lendrum, Lennie & Farrell, 2010).

Kamosa-Hawkins (2012) studied the effectiveness of an SEL mentoring program for 25 at-risk 9th and 10th grade students at a low-performing high school in the United States. The student participants were assigned to either the intervention group (those who got mentors) or the comparison group (those who did not get mentors). Students from graduate programs volunteered to be mentors and met with the identified students on a weekly basis after being trained. The program effectiveness was evaluated with a survey pre- and post-intervention. Social emotional health was evaluated through the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale - 2nd edition Youth Rating Scale. Though it was hypothesized that participation in the mentoring program would lead to greater social-emotional health for the intervention group compared to their like, non-participating peers, [the researcher] found that social-emotional strengths grew as a result of receiving one-to-one mentoring; however, those changes were not statistically significant. (Kamosa-Hawkins, 2012, p. 405)

The small sample size was mentioned as a possible reason for the findings; therefore, it is not conclusive as to whether or not this targeted intervention may be effective.

In another study conducted in a large, metropolitan city high school, the principal identified 10 students who had several referrals to the office for discipline problems. “A highly qualified, experienced, and certified special education teacher facilitated instruction . . . every day for 40 min throughout one academic year. . . . The participants completed all 70 lessons from the MASST-R” (Whetstone et al., 2015, p. 27). Pre- and post-teacher ratings of each
participant’s behaviors were analyzed, and “as hypothesized, the post-intervention scores indicated a drop in negative behaviors and a rise in more socially appropriate behaviors in the participants following the completion of the MASST-R program” (Whetstone et al., 2015, p. 30). For example, students engaged in less bullying behaviors and were more likely to follow the rules. Of course, since it was a small sample size, the findings are not easily generalized. Future studies would need to include more participants.

Attention has been brought to the idea that there may be unintended negative consequences for students who are identified for these targeted intervention programs. Evans, Scourfield, and Murphy (2015) conducted a study in order to further investigate the possibility of unintended negative consequences of targeted SEL programing. The researchers observed and participated in the SEL program group sessions, and they subsequently conducted focus groups so the students could “reflect on their experience and to ensure participant validation of observation data” (Evans et al., 2015, p. 385). The researchers identified “four key processes through which targeting may influence young people’s lived experiences of SEL interventions” (Evans, Scourfield, & Murphy, 2015, p. 385). The first two processes relate to how the students were identified, either through a “caring” approach or a “failing” approach. In the schools that used a “failing” approach, students were identified as uncontrollable and undesirable. “There were detrimental consequences of this unarticulated but evident process of negative labeling” (Evans et al., 2015, p. 387). These students either were discouraged by the label or saw it as social “clout” in which “bad boy” status gave them power. Either way, identifying them in this way perpetuated their negative behaviors (Evans et al., 2015, p. 388). In the schools that identified the students through a “caring” approach, students were “offered a choice to attend,
and the school [downplayed] the targeting process in order to avoid potential stigma” (Evans et al., 2015, p. 386). These students felt visible and fortunate to be a part of this diverse group.

The other two processes were related to the composition of the SEL intervention peer group. The “failing” groups were made up in two different configurations: weakly bonded and unfamiliar peers, or bonded “naughty” students. Students either resented having to connect with “uncool” peers, bonded with their “bad boy” peers, and encouraged further poor behaviors, or groups of peers defended each other and balked against the intervention. In the caring approach groups, none of the individuals were close before the intervention; therefore, “none of these individuals were bound by closely bonded friendships or entrenched behavioural norms [and] deviancy amplification was not a feature of this group” (Evans, Scourfield, & Murphy, 2015, p. 391). So, the “caring” approach led to a diverse group that was able to engage in the intervention successfully. Overall this study identified a notable concern: the approach and level of care that professionals exude towards these targeted SEL interventions influences the level of impact on students and ultimately whether it is positive or negative, which is a variable that is somewhat abstract and difficult to control within a given context.

Due to the inconsistent outcomes in targeted intervention programs for improving at-risk students’ social emotional skills, it has become necessary to provide school psychologists and other support staff in charge of program selection with appropriate knowledge to increase their abilities to find the right approach for their particular group of identified students. McKevitt (2012), for example, conducted research to identify the “current state of practitioners’ knowledge and use of EBIs [Evidenced-Based Interventions] for social, emotional, and behavioral concerns” (p. 35). The outcomes of the study indicated that, “effectiveness research is the most important factor behind the decision to use a particular program. However, . . . less than one-third of
respondents relied on reading empirical journal articles to learn about the research supporting various programs” (p. 41). Instead, the study revealed, those choosing an approach tended to use website recommendations that might have been unreliable sources. The next factor they considered was the amount of time required to implement the program and the amount of training required. The cost of the program and whether the program worked for colleagues were both the last two factors considered in the decision-making process. The implications of this study suggested that school psychologists must be better informed and prepared for choosing effective SEL intervention programs.

**Importance of SEL.** Before schools can answer the question of which SEL approach will be appropriate and effective, they should answer the following question: Why should K-12 schools implement SEL into their curriculum and instruction? Some people, even educators, may argue that social emotional skills should be developed in the home and have no place in schools where academic learning is the focus. Whitted (2011) asserted, however, that “a growing number of children are entering kindergarten without the skills that enable them to be successful in an academic setting . . . [and] it is their social and emotional skill deficits that are most troublesome” (p. 11). Even if the expectation is that students should be learning social emotional skills at home, many are not. Some parents are unable to provide SEL for their children due to their own poor emotional health (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Reid, 2015). For students to be ready to access academic instruction, they first must learn how to behave and maneuver effectively in the social educational setting.

**Decreased discipline.** Students who have social emotional deficiencies are more likely to be a discipline issue in the classroom. Whitted (2011) discussed how children as early as kindergarten age are more likely to be expelled if they have social emotional deficiencies.
Whetstone et al. (2015), meanwhile, conducted a study that revealed “positive changes” (p. 25) in students’ behaviors after the implementation of an SEL program. New Haven, CT schools implemented the RULER approach in 2011, and they reported a 90% decrease in office referrals as a result (Zahn, 2015). Shechtman and Leichtentritt (2004) studied the impact of SEL on classroom misbehaviors in special education classrooms and found that an SEL focus reduced off-task behaviors and aggression in children with special education needs. Overall, students will less likely be referred to the office, suspended and/or expelled if they have strong social emotional skills (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2004; Whetstone et al., 2015; Whitted, 2011; Zahn, 2015).

**Improved academics.** Studies have shown that academic outcomes are improved by the integration of SEL. In this context, Joffe and Black (2012) studied a population of students who had not been identified with a disability and found that “students with low educational attainment and poor language showed significantly greater SEBD [social emotional behavioral difficulties] than a normative sample as reported by themselves, their parents, and their teachers” (p. 466). This suggests that a student’s social emotional competence may be positively correlated with a student’s academic competence. S. M. Jones et al. (2011) conducted a 2-year experimental research study on the 4Rs Program and found “2-year [positive] effects for a targeted group of children at highest behavioral risk on their academic functioning; specifically children’s scores on [New York State] standardized tests of math and reading skills and teacher reports of children’s academic skills” (p. 549), meaning that the children’s reading and math skills in the intervention group improved more significantly compared to the children’s skills in the control group. The findings of this study “suggests that integrating pedagogical attention to building social-emotional skills through simultaneously enriching literacy practices, as instantiated by the
4Rs Program, can promote positive development in both social-emotional and academic domains” (S. M. Jones et al., 2011, p. 550). Incorporating SEL into the curriculum has been shown to generally correlate with a sense of greater well-being and improved academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011).

**Increased teacher job satisfaction.** Teaching is not just about conveying academic content; it is also about creating a positive learning environment, as Hargreaves (1998) asserted: “Good teaching is charged with positive emotion” (p. 835). Research has suggested that, when teachers focus on their own social emotional skills and those of their students, they are more satisfied with their careers (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011). Teachers who are exhausted emotionally either quit teaching or remain disgruntled and unhappy, coping by “maintaining a rigid classroom enforced by hostile and sometimes harsh measures bitterly working at a suboptimal level of performance until retirement” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 492). If the teacher is unhappy, then it is logical to conclude that the students will find little pleasure in the learning experience. Also, their social emotional needs will not be addressed, which is a catalyst to a variety of negative outcomes (Domino, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Whetstone et al., 2015).

**Improved school climate.** Another reason to implement an SEL initiative is that educators, parents, and community members want schools to be safe learning environments (Learning First Alliance, 2001; Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004), especially now, due to the increase in school shootings. Parents want to believe that their children are safe at school, not being bullied, having positive interactions with peers and teachers, and not engaging in destructive behaviors like smoking, drinking, skipping school, etc. Incorporating a focus on social emotional skills can help provide students with the tools to avoid these social pitfalls. In this vein, Domino (2013) studied the impact of SEL in schools on bullying by sampling 7th grade students who
participated in the program *Take the Lead* and found that it reduced victim and bully behaviors. Also, B. H. Smith and Low (2013) concluded through their research utilizing a social-ecological framework that improving students’ SEL skills reduces bullying.

**Students become contributing democratic citizens.** Finally, research has also suggested that teaching students social emotional skills helps them to become contributing members of society. Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (2015) studied many high schools and found that students possessing a high level of social emotional skills developed a growth mindset that helped them to “persevere when challenged, . . . learn to be mindful, conscientious, and empowered, and . . . develop a sense of social responsibility about making positive contributions to their school community and the wider community beyond” (p. 1). Ayers (2010) agreed that incorporating SEL into schools helps students to become ethical contributors to a democratic society:

> Respect for persons, for teachers and for students, for parents and community members, is at the core of good democratic schools . . . [where teachers] focus their efforts not on the production of things so much as on the production of fully developed human beings who are capable of controlling and transforming their own lives, citizens who can participate actively in civic and public life, people who can think and act ethically in a complex and ever-changing world. (p. 5)

Incorporating SEL into the classroom puts more of a focus on the whole person and his or her ability to function and contribute to the greater democratic society and the goal of such.

**Conclusion.** A focus and importance have been put upon character education in school throughout history; however, it was originally behavior and rule-based. Since the inception of emotional intelligence in the 1960s and the refining of the definition throughout the 1990s
(Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Cobb, 2000; Salovey & Mayer, 1990), both the understanding of the role of emotions and the need to build students’ emotional skills have encouraged a more holistic, person-centered, growth mindset approach towards creating good democratic citizens in the 21st century (Ayers, 2010; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015). Goleman (1995, 2005) was at the forefront of identifying what skills build emotional intelligence; these have now become the five core SEL competencies identified by CASEL (2017a): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

A variety of age-oriented and school-level centered SEL programs have been created, implemented, and investigated (i.e. 4Rs Program, the RULER approach, MindUp), and the outcomes of research conducted around these programs suggest that they have positive impacts on student outcomes: social, emotional, behavioral, and academic (Durlak et al., 2011; S. M. Jones et al., 2011; B. H. Smith & Low, 2013; Whitted, 2011). Furthermore, research has shown that incorporating SEL into education has positive impacts on teachers, as well. In this context, teachers and SEL will be further explored in the next section.

**Teachers and SEL**

Teachers have the most direct contact with students on a regular basis and are primarily responsible for the implementation of educational reform initiatives; therefore, it is relevant to explore the relationships between teachers, students, and the particular topic under study, which in this case is SEL. Researchers have found that teachers’ social emotional competence (SEC) impacts their relationships with students, their level of classroom management, and their effectiveness in SEL implementation (Brackett et al., 2012; Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).
Socially and emotionally competent teachers have specific skills and qualities, much like those taught in an SEL learning program or initiative, that give them the ability to build a healthy classroom climate. They are self-aware, socially aware, able to problem-solve and build strong relationships, and are “comfortable with a level of ambiguity and uncertainty that comes from letting students figure things out for themselves” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 495). These teachers “are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge, and joy” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 835). Their purpose for teaching and their vision of learning reach far beyond content standards. Not surprisingly, these teachers are more effective, which leads to improved outcomes for students (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Poulou, 2017).

This section explores these outcomes along with the connections between teachers’ SEC, job stress, self-efficacy, and commitment to the profession (Collie et al., 2011; Emerson et al., 2017; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Jennings et al., 2017; Ransford et al., 2009). It then outlines research that provides evidence that teachers’ own SEC can be improved and that, to meet this end, it is essential to provide them with appropriate and comprehensive training in teacher preparation programs and through teacher professional development (Doikou & Diamandidou, 2011; Jennings, 2015; Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015).

**Teachers’ SEC impacts teacher effectiveness.** Jennings and Greenberg’s (2009) prosocial classroom theory connects teachers’ SEC and well-being with the three elements of teacher effectiveness noted previously: healthy student relationships, effective classroom management, and effective SEL implementation. “This model proposes that these factors contribute to creating a classroom climate that is more conducive to learning and that promotes
positive” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 491) social, emotional, and academic outcomes. These relationships are visually presented in a graphic model (see Appendix C).

**Teachers’ SEC and teacher-student relationships and classroom management.** Socially and emotionally competent teachers are more able to build strong relationships with their students. This is partly due to the teacher’s ability to better understand students: “[A] teacher who recognizes an individual student’s emotions, understands the cognitive appraisals that may be associated with these emotions, and how these cognitions and emotions motivate the student’s behavior can effectively respond to the student’s individual needs” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 493). Dolev and Leshem (2016) also found that teachers who received training in emotional intelligence (EI) were able to “better understand students and form closer relationships with them” (p. 87). Poulou’s (2017) research further discovered that “teachers’ EI correlated significantly with teacher reports of closeness to students, suggesting that a positive climate of relations in the classrooms is more likely to occur when the teacher has greater EI” (p. 84).

The building of student relationships also contributes to the overall climate of the classroom. The stronger the well-being of the teacher, the more ability he/she possesses to “sustain a classroom climate conducive to learning” (Jennings, 2015, p. 739). He/she is more proactive and able to emotionally “guide and manage student behaviors” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 493). Classroom conflict is better understood and more effectively addressed. Jennings & Greenberg (2009) presented the following situation as an example:

Students with self-regulation problems often become classroom scapegoats and may be intentionally provoked by their peers in ways that can be very subtle. Because of their more obvious aggressive response to this subtle yet effective provocation, teachers often reinforce these students’ scapegoat status by punishing them without noticing and
addressing the behavior of the provocateur. A more socially and emotionally aware teacher may notice this dynamic and handle this situation in a way that responds to both behaviors more effectively. (p. 493)

The teacher’s ability to respond in this way builds trust between the teacher and his or her students. And, trust is “the most influential variable in any collective human endeavor…[and] when we talk about relationship management and creating a supportive learning environment, we are really talking about the development and maintenance of communal trust” (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2010, p. 144).

The importance of this reciprocity between teacher and student SEC is drastically underappreciated and understudied. This is problematic because making SEC a priority has become even more essential, particularly given the developments over the past several years, like “bully-related suicide” (Bullying Statistics, n.d., n.p.), and school massacres that have become much too common: for example, seven school shootings occurred from January 1, 2018 to February 15, 2018 (Erickson, 2018). Educators respond to a myriad of social emotional issues on a day-to-day basis, but now that teachers may be asked to carry guns to school and act as “human shields” (Turkewitz, 2018, n.p.) for students, for example, this brings even more acutely into focus the need for the building of teachers’ and students’ SEC.

The teacher with SEC who is more capable of building relationships and community is more mindful and aware of student needs; she is able to respond to student conflict more effectively, which builds trust and safety in the classroom. This is conducive to a productive learning environment “that engages students more deeply in their learning” (Aspen Institute, 2017, p. 15), which is why student outcomes (social, emotional, and academic) are positively
impacted (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Poulou, 2017; Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2010).

**Teachers’ SEC and effective SEL implementation.** Teachers’ SEC also impacts their effectiveness by influencing the level of fidelity in which they implement SEL into the classroom (Ransford et al., 2009; Brackett et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). This is because “teachers are the engine that drives social and emotional learning (SEL) programs and practices in schools and classrooms . . . [and] teachers’ beliefs . . . influence the fidelity with which they implement SEL programs in the classroom” (Schonert-Reichl, 2017, p. 137).

School and district leaders play a key role in supporting both the development of teachers’ SEC and how they implement SEL with students. When it comes to implementation quality of any school program or initiative, it matters how supported the teachers feel by the leaders of the school (Ransford et al., 2009). For example, self-reports of how teachers felt and how they implemented a social emotional curriculum called *PATHS* (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) were utilized to identify correlations between teachers’ psychological experiences (stress, burnout) and their perceptions of curriculum supports and their quality of SEL implementation.

Results of Ransford et al.’s (2009) study identified several relevant findings. First, “teachers who experienced higher levels of burnout were less likely to deliver . . . additional curriculum components whereas those who reported higher levels of efficacy were more likely to deliver them” (Ransford et al., 2009, p. 525). The PATHS program includes required lessons and supplemental lessons that the teacher may choose to implement to further build students’ social emotional skills. The teachers’ SEC level impacted the number of lessons they chose to implement. Second, “teachers’ perceptions of the quality of curriculum training significantly
predicted how many lessons they implemented such that teachers who felt better prepared reported completing more lessons” (Ransford et al., 2009, p. 520). Though quantity does not equal quality, teaching more lessons could suggest higher fidelity of implementation. Third, “when teachers perceived administrators supported curriculum implementation they reported implementing curriculum lessons with greater quality” (Ransford et al., 2009, p. 525). Fourth, if the teachers perceived the training that was provided for the SEL implementation positively then these teachers implemented more lessons with higher levels of quality (Ransford et al., 2009). Overall, it was suggested that teachers’ SEC and their perceptions about training and leader support impact the quantity and quality of SEL lessons.

To further understand the impact teachers’ beliefs about SEL have on program delivery, Brackett et al. (2012) developed a tool to assess teachers’ SEL beliefs. “Because teachers’ beliefs about SEL can impact implementation quality, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers who are invested in educating the whole child should be especially interested in assessing these beliefs” (p. 231). They validated the tool by giving it to 88 fifth- and sixth-grade teachers from 62 different schools. Half of these teachers were given training in the RULER program (an SEL program) and were expected to implement five lessons every two to three weeks. All of the teachers were given the beliefs survey at the beginning and end of the school year. Teachers who implemented the RULER program were evaluated by coaches both in quality of implementation and attitudes towards the RULER program.

A few key findings came from this study in regards to teachers’ SEC and fidelity of SEL program implementation. First, “teachers who reported greater comfort teaching SEL were less likely to depersonalize their students—they saw students as individuals and, as such, modified their teaching to better serve their needs” (Brackett et al., 2012, p. 230). The second discovery
was that “teachers who have low expectations for these efforts or who feel uncomfortable teaching the content at the outset will be less likely to implement the programs with quality and fidelity” (Brackett et al., 2012, p. 231). Therefore, this suggests that, if school leaders want to ensure that their SEL programmatic approaches will be implemented appropriately and effectively, the school leaders should not only focus on the programming, but also on the teachers’ beliefs about the programming by helping them to learn and believe in why they are doing what they are, and how it will benefit not only their effectiveness as teachers, but most importantly, how it will benefit students.

**SEL and teachers’ stress level, self-efficacy, and commitment to the profession.** Like students, teachers are experiencing more stress than they used to, for they are not only expected to teach academic content, but they are also now expected to meet the social emotional needs of students (Napoli, 2004). A change in the average family structure and experience, like “mobility of families, the dwindling extended family, two-working-parent families, and single-parent families have created new and added demands for the school and teacher” (Napoli, 2004). In this context, parents and family members may not be responding to the full social and emotional health of the child. With these additional and heightened demands, teachers are experiencing more job burnout and decreases in self-efficacy (the belief in themselves that they can meet the needs of their students and be effective teachers), which then may lead to a lack of commitment to teaching, resulting in ineffectiveness or abandonment of the career altogether. However, research has revealed that increasing a teacher’s social emotional skills influences the variables of stress, teaching efficacy, and job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2011; Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Ransford et al., 2009). It has also been discovered that when teachers become more
mindful in their work, their levels of stress and burnout decrease, and self-efficacy and commitment to the profession increase (Burrows, 2011; Napoli, 2004; Roeser et al., 2013).

**Teachers’ levels of stress and self-efficacy impact SEL implementation.** As seen in the previous section in relation to the Ransford et al. (2009) study, teachers’ level of stress and burnout and their self-efficacy as teachers impact SEL implementation quality; this is because a teacher with less burnout and more self-efficacy was likely to teach more SEL lessons than required in the program. Through teacher self-reports, Ransford et al. (2009) also found that, when teachers perceived the SEL training as useful, which in turn helped them feel more prepared to implement the curriculum, the more lessons they implemented, with an increased level of quality. This was because teachers had higher levels of self-efficacy from the effective training provided. Future research in the area of SEL implementation may benefit from increased focus and attention on teacher training and preparation. These results confirm previous findings: “Teachers with a stronger sense of efficacy set more challenging goals for themselves and their students, take responsibility for student outcomes (Ross, 1995), and are more likely to adopt innovations” (Fuchs, Fuchs, Bishop, & Hamlett, 1992).

**SEL and teacher commitment.** Collie et al. (2011), meanwhile, investigated “the impact that SEL may have on teacher commitment” (p.1036) and found that “teachers may be more willing to commit to teaching in general and to a particular school that values the social-emotional well-being of all its members” (p. 1044). Therefore, Collie et al. (2011) suggested that, “promotion of positive school climates and SEL are key actions that schools can take to foster greater teacher commitment” (p. 1045). Using the same data set, Collie et al. (2012) further discovered that teachers who “are comfortable with their own social-emotional abilities and understandings” (p. 1197) are more comfortable teaching SEL. Also, teachers “who are more
comfortable teaching SEL experience lower stress” (Collie et al., 2011, p. 1044), which further supports Ransford et al.’s (2009) suggestion that SEL programmatic training for teachers is an important element that impacts the outcomes of SEL implementation. Thus, “the impact of an SEL program should be considered in relation to teachers, not only students” (Collie et al., 2011, p. 1047).

*Mindfulness and teacher stress, burnout and self-efficacy.* Similar research has been conducted specifically aimed at identifying the correlations between teacher mindfulness training and teacher stress, burnout, and self-efficacy (Burrows, 2011; Emerson et al., 2017; Napoli, 2004; Roeser et al., 2013). Napoli (2004) interviewed three elementary school teachers after they engaged in a mindfulness training program, and the “results . . . revealed that teachers used the mindfulness skills to (a) aid in curriculum development and implementation, (b) deal with conflict and anxiety, (c) improve the quality of their personal lives, and (d) facilitate positive changes in the classroom” (p. 31). Burrows (2011) conducted a mindfulness inquiry project with eight educators by providing them with private and group mindfulness sessions, which “contributed to the participants’ gradual but developing sense that they could at times maintain open, calm receptivity in the midst of emotionally charged classroom and school environments” (p. 3). The group sessions specifically provided “a vehicle for both the practice of mindfulness and the receipt of professional support and guidance on issues that arose as a result of participants’ inquiries into themselves and their professional way of being” (Burrows, 2011, p. 5).

Roeser et al. (2013) conducted a study with 113 elementary and secondary teachers in Canada and the United States who were randomized to either the group who received mindfulness training (MT) or the one who did not. Roeser et al. (2013) found that “teachers
randomized to MT showed greater mindfulness, focused attention and working memory capacity, and occupational self-compassion as well as lower levels of occupational stress and burnout at post-program and follow-up, than did those in the control condition” (p. 787). There were also “group differences in mindfulness and self-compassion of post-program mediated reductions in stress and burnout as well as symptoms of anxiety and depression at follow up” (p. 787). Most recently, Emerson et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of 13 mindfulness-based interventions for stressed teachers. They found that “through participation in mindfulness training, an individual may see gains in mindfulness (e.g. decentering, regulation of attention) and self-compassion . . . that lead[s] to more effective emotion regulation strategies . . . and increased professional self-efficacy . . . and ultimately reduced stress” (p. 1145).

These studies collectively support the benefits of mindfulness training for teachers as part of an effective approach to reducing teacher stress and burnout, and to increasing self-efficacy. This suggests that teacher mindfulness training may be an important variable when considering a comprehensive SEL school/district approach.

**Teachers’ SEC can and should be improved.** Researchers have found that teachers’ SEC can be improved through various training programs targeted towards improving their social emotional skills, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and other approaches (Harvey, Evans, Hill, Hendricksen, & Bimler, 2016; Jennings et al., 2017). As will be presented throughout this section, if teachers’ SEC can be improved and the outcomes are positive for teachers and students because teachers with higher SEC engage in more supportive classroom practices (Jennings, 2015), then schools and districts would benefit immensely from and have a certain obligation to provide the relevant training necessary to do so (Zinsser et al., 2015; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). And, teacher preparation programs can and should further invest in creating
Improving teachers’ SEC. Researchers have studied the effectiveness of programs and trainings geared towards improving teachers’ SEC, and the results have been positive. A study looking at whether teachers’ social emotional skills could be changed was conducted in New Zealand with 23 teachers across 20 schools (Harvey et al., 2016). Over the span of three months, the teachers were trained in various topics: “the classroom emotional environment, emotional awareness, emotional relationships, emotional interpersonal guidelines (standards and boundaries), emotional intra personal beliefs (philosophy, attitude, and acceptance), and emotion coaching (emotional expression as a teachable moment)” (p. 76). Results of the study showed that “teachers who participated in the intervention decreased negative relating and use of setting limits, and improved in their awareness of emotional content and process in the classroom” (p. 79). Students perceived these teachers, who showed improvement in their social emotional skills, as more helpful, friendly, and overall more effective in their classroom leadership.

Another study conducted at the elementary level in the United States, specifically New York City, also showed that teachers’ social emotional skills can be developed (Jennings et al. 2017). The sample of 224 teachers from 36 urban elementary schools participated in a program called CARE. This is a “professional development program that introduces specific skills to help teachers manage stress and improve their teaching effectiveness” (Jennings et al., 2017, p. 1014). The approach combines “emotion skills training with mindfulness-based stress reduction activities and provides teachers with opportunities to practice applying these skills in the classroom” (Jennings et al., 2017, p. 1014). After one year of participating in this program,
“teachers showed higher levels of adaptive emotion regulation and mindfulness and lower levels
of psychological distress and time urgency” (Jennings et al., 2017, p. 1021). A time urgency
decrease is when teachers slow down “their behavioral and thought patterns to gain a more
realistic view of the time they have for certain lessons and academic goals” (Jennings et al.,
2017, p. 1022). Teachers also reported less sleep disturbance and emotional exhaustion after
participating in this SEC program. As a result of teachers’ improved SEC, teachers were “able to
promote high quality classroom interactions that promote student learning” (Jennings et al.,
2017, p. 1021).

**Teachers’ SEC Impacts students’ SEC.** These two studies, among the very few of their
kind that have been conducted, suggested explicitly that teachers’ social emotional skills can be
strengthened when they are provided appropriate professional development. In turn, students are
thus impacted by the more positive classroom environment that is more conducive to learning
(Harvey et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2017). The impact on students seen in these two studies was
consistent with the results of a previous study conducted by Jennings (2015) claiming that
teachers’ social and emotional characteristics may play a critical role in teacher and
classroom quality . . . [and that] mindfulness and self-compassion are important
contributors to social and emotional competence . . . [and that] by supporting teachers’
well-being and social and emotional competence, we may improve their performance and
improve classroom quality. (p. 741)

The next logical conclusion that has been supported by current SEL research is that
schools and districts should provide the relevant training necessary to strengthen teachers’ SEC
if the goal is to most effectively impact students’ social emotional skills (Zinsser et al., 2015;
Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The level of support given by 32 teachers to their students was observed
and rated as moderately or highly supportive, and then the same teachers were interviewed by the researchers in focus groups. Comparisons made between the observational ratings and the interviews showed that “when highly supportive teachers discussed experiencing frustration or disappointment in their classrooms, they described purposely regulating negative emotions by using the strategies they wanted children to use” (Zinsser et al., 2015, p. 914). And, “in contrast, less emotionally supportive teachers described . . . adopting the façade of a happy, positive teacher” (Zinsser et al., 2015, p. 914). This supports the suggestion that teachers with higher SEC are more able to model appropriate social emotional skills for students than teachers with lower levels of SEC. They not only model social emotional skills, they also implement SEL programs with more fidelity and thus provide more effective SEL instruction (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Therefore, all of these constitute reasons to strengthen teachers’ SEC.

**Pre-service SEL training.** With this knowledge, how can teachers be supported in acquiring the requisite skills and competencies to both exhibit SEC and implement SEL with students before they become teachers, rather than waiting to be trained in the school or district in which they become employed? It would be appropriate to begin this training in teacher certification programs and continue through professional development, but SEL has not been commonly a focus in teacher preparation. SEC training is largely left up to the districts to both identify the need and to provide professional development opportunities to facilitate implementation; however, these professional development opportunities at the district level are commonly scarce and short term. The efficacy of building these skills during the certification process has been explored. For example, a study conducted in Greece by Doikou and Diamandidou (2011) looked at the impact of a teacher education program focused on enhancing student-teachers’ “qualities and skills that facilitate communication and to enhance teachers’
competence to apply social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes’ intervention activities in the classroom” (p. 61). The student-teachers reported that after the program, in general, they felt “able to approach their pupils in a more direct way and communicate better with them . . . [and] the majority of teachers reported feeling more competent to address their pupils’ needs” (p. 74).

Meanwhile, Waajid et al. (2013) similarly examined whether SEL content could be successfully infused into an undergraduate curriculum and instruction course, despite its “low priority in teacher preparation programs” (p. 31). The data collected and analyzed for this study was taken from reflection papers completed by each participant at the end of the semester. The questions they responded to included: “How has the course impacted your views on teaching? What do you know now that you did not before? What is the influence of social emotional skills on children’s learning? and What is the role of classroom teachers in facilitating social and emotional competence?” (Waajid et al., 2013, p. 40). Results revealed that the participants after the course better understood the importance between SEL and academic learning, the need to shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction, and, as a result, desired to learn more about SEL (Waajid et al., 2013, pp. 41-43). Though the sample was small and the methods could be stronger, the results show that “SEL concepts can be successfully infused in an undergraduate course on curriculum and instruction” (Waajid et al., 2013, p. 43); therefore, this suggests that teacher preparation programs can and should include SEL skill building.

**Conclusion.** Teachers are the primary driving force in the success of any school initiative; therefore, it is necessary to examine and understand how to prepare teachers for social emotional work in the classroom. This preparation should start in teacher preparation programs (Doikou & Diamandidou, 2011; Waajid et al., 2013) and continue to be built upon in district/school level professional development throughout one’s career (Harvey et al., 2016;
Jennings, et al., 2017). Through such a comprehensive approach, teachers will be enabled to build their own SEC so that they can be more effective in building student relationships (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009), establishing trust (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2010), implementing SEL programs and practices (Ransford et al., 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017), and monitoring/regulating the social emotional climate of their classrooms (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Poulou, 2017). Also, teachers will be less stressed, experience increased levels of self-efficacy, and be more committed to the profession (Collie et al., 2011, 2012; Ransford et al., 2009). In turn, this will have a positive impact on students’ social, emotional and academic outcomes (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Poulou, 2017), which is the paramount goal of any SEL initiative.

**Instructional Practices for Practitioner-driven, Non-standardized Implementation**

A primary focus of this study is to identify methods of implementing SEL in a practitioner-driven, non-standardized way, which is a direction in which current SEL research is heading. Therefore, this last section of the literature review offers a compilation of how teachers can implement SEL into the day-to-day life of the classroom. These “everyday approaches could add value to or even be more efficient than full-scale, comprehensive programs that teach SEL skills during structured lesson blocks” (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 4). Included are classroom management practices (i.e. how to build a positive, supportive classroom environment; discipline methods; relationship building) and instructional methods that integrate SEL with academic content, both in specific content areas and across all disciplines.

**Classroom management practices.**

*Be vulnerable with students.* Slaten, Irby, Tate, and Rivera (2015) examined an alternative school’s approach to meeting the social emotional needs of their students to figure out
what made their unique program successful. They interviewed 15 staff members at an alternative school with a predominantly urban, African-American population in the Midwest, utilizing a Consensual Qualitative Research approach, which employed exploratory research questions and then quantified themes.

One major theme, among others, revealed through the authors’ analysis of the verbatim interview scripts was relationships. “Specifically, participants mentioned several ways in which this occurs: being vulnerable with students, encouraging students, knowing students personally, and believing that relationships are a pre-requisite to learning” (Slaten et al., 2015, p. 50). These teachers, though a small group in a unique setting, understood that they needed to know their students–their families, their struggles, their strengths, and their weaknesses–to help the students become more available for learning. Most interesting was their willingness to be vulnerable with students, under the stated belief that self-disclosure fosters stronger relationships and provides students with the social emotional support needed to be successful in school. Typically, teachers are taught to keep their personal lives out of their conversations with students; however, these authors provided a reason for teachers to rethink the belief that keeping their struggles to themselves is in the best interest of the students.

**Support students’ goals and celebrate successes.** Another way to get to know students is by finding out what their goals are in order to support them and, when possible, celebrate their successes. Cervone and Cushman (2015) studied five high schools (East Side Community School in New York, New York; Quest Early College High School in Humble, Texas; Springfield Renaissance School in Springfield, Massachusetts; Fenger High School in Chicago, Illinois; and Oakland International High School in Oakland, California) across the United States known for their “excellence in nourishing both the hearts and minds of diverse learners, especially those
marginalized by color, class, language, or gender identity” (p. 5). They began their research in 2013 utilizing a constructivist approach. They asked staff and students what SEL aspects stood out to them with a goal of learning “how schools weave social and emotional learning into their daily fabric” (Cervone & Cushman, 2015, p. 4). They identified six key elements of SEL success: a web of structural supports; an intentional community; a culture of respect, participation and reflection; a commitment to restorative practices; a curriculum of connection and engagement; and a focus on developing student agency (Cervone & Cushman, 2015).

Cervone and Cushman (2015) discovered that all five schools had practices in place that emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships; they also found that this focus conveyed to students that teachers cared about them. The authors observed: “Again and again, students spoke movingly about how much their teachers cared” (Cervone & Cushman, 2015, p. 7). Not only did teachers show this in the academic classrooms, but they also spent time with students outside of the classroom, got to know their families, and took the time to know their students’ goals and what supports they needed to accomplish them. When they achieved goals, teachers found ways to applaud their accomplishments both personally and as faculty members in assemblies. Teachers then inspired students “to turn their own narratives of struggle into stories of agency and resilience” (Cervone & Cushman, 2015, p. 12). This made it possible for students to say, “The adults here . . . they’re not going to let you fail” (Cervone & Cushman, 2015, p. 7). The students from these schools revealed that they felt socially and emotionally supported to overcome their life/academic struggles.

J. L. Jones, Jones, and Vermette (2009), meanwhile, studied past SEL research, specifically in secondary mathematics classrooms, and discovered similar outcomes related to student goal-setting. Through the process of goal-setting, students usually self-reflect and come
up with an action plan, which then in turn increases their motivation and likely improves their personal and academic achievement. As the authors explained, “Decatur, Fitzsimmons, McGee, and Miller (2008) found that students who kept reflective journals and participated in regular self-assessment were more successful in developing self-regulative behavior, than their peers who were not taught how to reflect” (J. L. Jones et al., 2009, p. 7). Once again, the connection between SEL and academic success coincided.

Create a safe space to share thoughts and feelings. S. M. Jones et al. (2014) conducted a small study that used a nonrandomized sample of elementary classrooms in an urban public school district serving primarily low-income, non-English speaking students. An SEL program entitled SECURe was implemented that included a variety of daily strategies and approaches, including using a feelings thermometer poster with numbers 1-5 to illustrate different levels of feelings, I-messages, communication strategies to share feelings, and stop-and-think signals students used to nonverbally communicate when they needed to pause and wait before acting. The impact of such strategies created a more positive climate and increased the number of students meeting academic benchmarks.

A central theme found in S. M. Jones et al.’s (2014) research was that “classroom management is not about reaction but about prevention and building skills” (p. 20). If teacher and students consistently and effectively communicate about their feelings, support each other in proactively managing these feelings, and build trusting relationships then the classroom environment will be more conducive to learning. One teacher in the study stated, “By incorporating . . . strategies into daily routines, my students now have a means to express their feelings and act appropriately when faced with a situation that involves others” (S. M. Jones et al., 2014, p. 19). If this is not happening, then more disruptive behaviors will occur and less
learning will take place, which suggests that it is worth the time and energy to create a safe space before focusing on academics.

Norris (2003), a principal of a diverse elementary school, was in search of a way to build community amongst the students. She did not conduct an empirical study; however, she saw results in implementing SEL into the day-to-day life of the classroom. One approach she used was to have daily gatherings where students shared their thoughts and feelings on current issues, personal problems, or academic difficulties. They brainstormed solutions together to provide options, or they role played to try out different approaches, all the while building community. During this process they also built vocabulary to effectively express and talk about emotions. Identifying emotions and realizing that a person can feel more than one emotion about the same event can be eye-opening for students. Norris (2003) stated, that “activities that can help to provide them with a repertoire of responses to real-life situations must be a regular part of the classroom experience” (p. 316). She asserted that, not only does regularly sharing thoughts and feelings build community, it also helps students build important life skills such as the ability to empathize, problem-solve, and respond appropriately to emotions.

*Build classroom community.* Morcom (2014) conducted two qualitative studies on the effect of scaffolding social emotional learning at two different elementary schools using Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory as the conceptual model. Morcom (2014) asserted: “In sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) the supposition is that learning, motivation and emotions are interconnected processes” (p. 19). Both studies were conducted in Australia over the span of two school years. The teachers in these studies created collaborative communities in their classrooms by creating Five Class Agreements with students, conducting daily social circles,
weekly class meetings, and utilizing sociograms, and lift ups (Morcom, 2014). The following describes Morcom’s (2014) five strategies:

Five Class Agreements - Five agreements are created by the students that cover: mutual respect, appreciating others, attentive listening, participation/right to pass, and personal best. The purpose is to “develop and make explicit shared understandings about the core values of the community” (Morcom, 2014, p. 21).

Daily Social Circle - For about five minutes a day each child states their name and shares how he/she feels. The purpose is to “practice communication and social skills (Class Agreements) to build a caring and inclusive classroom” (Morcom, 2014, p. 21).

Weekly Class Meetings - Teacher and students share classroom/playground concerns. The purpose is to “develop a democratic process of participative decision making, underpinned by collaborative values” (Morcom, 2014, p. 21).

Sociograms - Every 8 weeks students pick new peers to group with. The purpose is to “promote new friendships and team building opportunities to develop social and emotional skills” (Morcom, 2014, p. 21).

Lift ups - Giving and receiving positive comments. The purpose is to “show appreciation to others, to build positive relationships, promoting the values of caring and inclusion” (Morcom, 2014, p. 21).

By coding student reflections logs and student/parent interviews for patterns and themes, “this research demonstrated how explicit values education scaffolded social and emotional learning, developed peer group friendships and promoted a sense of . . . classroom community” (Morcom, 2014, p. 28). The results suggest that these approaches impact student affective learning outcomes and build their social emotional skills.
**Use socially just practices instead of punitive discipline.** Building relationships with students includes knowing how to work with them when they do not make responsible decisions. Taking the opportunity to connect with a student during the disciplinary process can help him/her figure out what the motivation/catalyst is and how to make a better decision the next time, thus building self-awareness and the capacity to make responsible decisions. Research has shown that doing so can lead to less disciplinary offenses and therefore less disruption to the classroom learning environment (Cervone & Cushman, 2015; Rutledge et al., 2015).

Rutledge et al. (2015) conducted a year-long case study on effective urban schools to see what made them successful compared to struggling schools. They “developed a comprehensive framework from the school effectiveness research” (Rutledge et al., 2015, p. 1060) to guide their data collection at four different high schools in Florida (two high performing and two low performing). Their findings showcased the differences between the high and low performing schools. The high performing schools differed in that the teachers made efforts to connect with students and create a sense of family. They also utilized discipline issues as opportunities to connect with the students in a personalized way by discussing their challenges and attending to their social emotional needs (Rutledge et al., 2015).

Revisiting the study conducted by Cervone and Cushman (2015) of five effective high schools, the common use of social justice practices to help students manage conflict and/or challenges in a constructive way with the help of their teachers also proved to be a strong way of avoiding punitive discipline. Though this approach can also include stakeholders outside of the classroom, like an administrator, a parent, peers, or various community members, Cervone and Cushman (2015) documented how restorative justice work usually starts with teachers and their willingness to participate in the discipline process in a way they have not in the past. Common
practices include a teacher sending a student out of the classroom when disruptive or disrespectful so that administration can intervene. A consequence is doled out by an administrator, and the student is sent back to class with no further resolution.

Cervone and Cushman (2015) included a personal story of a student at Fenger High School in Chicago Illinois in their study to explain how a more student-centered, socially just practice can be much more effective and help build relationships. In this case, Brianna, a student, was calling out to her teacher but did not get a response. Brianna got upset, stormed out of the classroom, and swore at the teacher. The dean asked her what was going on. She finally broke down and shared that she was pregnant. In a zero tolerance school, she “would probably have been suspended, regardless of what had shortened her fuse. At Fenger, the dean decided this matter was best resolved through peer jury, a process that had become part of the school’s fierce determination to resolve conflicts peacefully” (Cervone & Cushman, 2015, p. 121). Brianna, two of her peers, and her teacher sat down within the hour and sorted through the matter. Brianna apologized and learned how to react differently in the future. Though this may be seen as letting her get away with poor behavior, staff and students at Fenger High School considered it learning “a few lessons in what Fenger’s peers jurors call ‘positivity:’ a mix that includes self-control, positive emotions, and having goals” (p. 122), all of which are social emotional skills and attributes.

**Integrating SEL within academic content.** Another way SEL takes place in the day-to-day life of the classroom is by infusing it into the existing academic content. This may sound as if teachers would be asked to add more learning objectives to their already “overstuffed” lesson plans; however, this is not the case. When creating curriculum, educators often begin with a question like, “What educational purposes should the school seek to attain?” (Tyler, 2013, p. 1).
Having been a part of many of these conversations at a variety of public schools, Tyler (2013) noted that the answer to this question always included statements that speak to students’ character rather than their knowledge of academic content. That is not to say that content knowledge does not matter, for it absolutely does; however, it takes more than knowledge of formulas, definitions, or historical dates to lead a happy, healthy, and successful life. Research has established that students must also build their social emotional skills in order to become productive members of a democratic society (Cohen, 2006). Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2004), in an attempt to build the scientific argument that implementing SEL into the classroom is the key to school success, stated that “addressing students’ social and emotional development is not an additional duty charged to schools along with academic instruction, but rather is an integral and necessary aspect to helping all students succeed” (p. 5). Rutledge et al. (2015) conducted a year-long study of higher and lower performing high schools in Florida and concluded that effective schools have components of both academic and social emotional learning that are interdependent of one another rather than treated as two separate outcomes. Thus, the literature suggests that academic instruction and social emotional instruction can coexist with and inform one another.

The following subsections will begin to uncover the various ways SEL can and is easily integrated into the day-to-day life of the classroom. Though there are not examples from every content area, many of the approaches can easily be applied to other subjects or grades depending on the objective. The core areas of history, math, and reading will be represented. All of the strategies identified are examples of how SEL and content learning can naturally occur together to reach all students and provide holistic development of the whole-child.
**SEL and social studies.** With a focus on civics and the values of a democratic society, social studies lessons provide teachers with natural opportunities to infuse social emotional learning. Kress, Norris, Schoenholz, Elias, and Seigle (2004) conducted a study in which teachers were asked to identify the social emotional skills present in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Content Standards for Social Studies. The following standards were identified:

6.1. All students will learn democratic citizenship and how to participate in the constitutional system of government of the United States.

6.2. All students will learn democratic citizenship through the humanities by studying literature, art, history, and philosophy, and related fields.

6.5. All students will acquire historical understanding of varying cultures throughout the history of New Jersey, the United States, and the world. (p. 77)

In the required work to meet these standards, social studies teachers commonly found that they were also helping students build social emotional skills, such as communication skills, perspective taking, and respecting differences and diversity (Kress et al., 2004).

Cervone and Cushman (2015) also found that the subject of social studies lends itself to teaching social emotional skills. They explored this at East Side Community School in New York, NY, which utilized a *Facing History* framework that “focuses on the very questions of belonging, identity, and agency that research suggests most affect the academic engagement and the social and emotional resiliency of adolescent learners” (Cervone & Cushman, 2015, p. 25). History units included a focus on identity, culture, world religions, and building community. Students learned about themselves through individualized exploration of historical themes and aspects of life that most impacted them as people. Most importantly, the social studies curriculum, the authors found, helped build students’ capacities to become active, engaged, and
responsible members of their communities. The study showed that social studies topics provided students with multiple opportunities to strengthen a variety of social emotional skills in the day-to-day life of the classroom.

**SEL & literacy.** Literacy skills strongly and frequently converge with social emotional skills. The research in this area is robust, but a few examples will be provided to give the reader a sense of this natural connection that can be utilized by teachers within their day-to-day academic practices of literacy in the classroom. Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon (2004) conducted a study of the Child Development Project (CDP), an initiative that aimed to improve academic, social, ethical, and emotional learning. Along with implementing cooperative learning practices, building community in and out of school, and building relationships, the program included “a reading and language arts curriculum based on high-quality children’s literature drawn from many cultures . . . to explore the values and behaviors of characters” (Schaps et al., 2004, pp. 192-193) in order to build perspective taking, or the ability to understand other’s viewpoints. The 7-year study, which began in 1982-83 showed that a comprehensive approach that focuses on the classroom, the school, and the community (and choosing diverse pieces of literature to help do so) was effective. This suggests that teachers (English, reading, literacy) can incorporate diverse readings into the day-to-day lessons to naturally strengthen perspective taking skills and to “sensitize them to the needs and perspectives of diverse others” (Schaps et al., 2004, p. 193).

Daunic et al. (2013) also looked at using children’s books to strengthen social emotional growth through the SELF program (literacy curriculum for at-risk students that incorporates SEL) in two elementary schools in Florida with diverse student bodies, to compare outcomes. One school implemented the program and the other did not. Utilizing teacher rating scales and
The Woodcock Reading Mastery Test, results of the test group showed that “integrating SEL and literacy can lead to improvements in self-regulation that should enhance positive social and academic development” (Daunic et al., 2013, p. 49). This study suggested that by choosing books that are developmentally appropriate, culturally and ethnically diverse, and focused on social emotional topics, a teacher could easily integrate academic learning with social emotional learning.

Polleck (2010) studied the use of book clubs to enhance social emotional and academic learning. She conducted this study with the idea that students can address their emotions through literature, also known as bibliotherapy: “the use of texts to enhance social-emotional development” (Cornett & Cornett, 1980; as cited in Polleck, 2010, p. 104). The study was conducted in a small, diverse urban high school. Qualitative data was collected from various sources, including participants, discussions, surveys, etc. Results revealed that discussing relevant literature does improve social emotional and academic skills (Polleck, 2010).

Returning to the study cited previously by Kress et al. (2004), teachers in New Jersey identified the language arts literacy standards that converge with social emotional skill building. The standards found included:

3.1. All students will speak for a variety of real purposes and audiences.

3.2. All students will listen actively in a variety of situations to gain information from a variety of sources. (p. 77)

The social emotional skills that these standards support include listening skills, communication skills, perspective taking, and evaluating options. All educators, not just language arts teachers, incorporate some form of communication and listening skills in their day-to-day practices, especially those schools implementing the Common Core Standards of Learning, so there are
opportunities to infuse SEL into the academic content (Common Core State Standards Initiative [CCSSI], n.d.).

**SEL & math.** Though not as obvious at first, teachers can incorporate SEL into the day-to-day life of mathematics classrooms. Problem solving and reasoning are important components of any successful math curriculum. Referring back to Kress et al. (2004) once again, teachers identified the following math standards that overlap with important social emotional skills:

4.1. All students will develop the ability to pose and solve mathematical problems in mathematics, other disciplines, and everyday experiences.

4.2. All students will develop reasoning ability and will become self-reliant, independent mathematical thinkers. (p. 77)

The social emotional skills present in these standards include identifying problems, setting goals, generating alternative solutions, anticipating consequences, evaluating options, planning, and evaluating outcomes (Kress et al., 2004). In this context, teachers can easily implement lessons that focus both on mathematical and social emotional skills.

J. L. Jones et al. (2009) provided teachers with ways in which to incorporate social emotional skills in secondary mathematics classrooms. They advocated for the use of cooperative learning in the math classroom to accomplish this integration. Cooperative learning provides students with the opportunity to work with diverse groups of people, become accountable as a group, and appropriately depend on others. Vermette and Kline (2007) coined the term “dual objective” (as cited in J. L. Jones et al., 2009, p. 6) to describe the concept of teaching content and skills at the same time. J. L. Jones et al. (2009) also suggested that math teachers can provide opportunities for students to become self-aware, set goals, and reflect on
their learning experiences. These approaches are not only useful to math teachers, but they can easily be implemented into the day-to-day practices of any content area classroom.

**SEL and the arts.** SEL can also take place in non-core subject areas, like art and music. Cervone and Cushman (2015) discovered that students felt the most comfortable being themselves in art classes. “In many ways, making art also supports social development” (Cervone & Cushman, 2015, p. 32). For example, the authors noted, students creating music together have access to an opportunity to collaborate and communicate; students are also able to communicate emotions through their artwork, dance, and music.

Edgar (2013) introduced the notion that SEL should be incorporated into music education professional development when he found himself lacking the ability to meet the social emotional needs of his students in his music classes. On his own, he discovered that music making is a collaborative and social experience that provides students with the opportunity to discuss the emotional qualities of music, bond together, and unite. He realized that “recognizing emotional qualities in music could be a vehicle to increase emotional vocabulary and articulate music qualities . . . recognizing, identifying, and empathizing with the emotions of characters in songs and stories” (Edgar, 2013, p. 31). As a result, he advocated for the implementation of social emotional preparation in music teacher programs.

**SEL-focused instructional strategies.** Many of these content-specific approaches come from or have intent similar to the various existing teaching methods that are being implemented currently, like collaborative learning, project-based learning, and affective teaching. When teachers implement these types of instructional approaches in their classrooms, they are teaching content and social emotional skills in tandem (Behizadeh, 2014; Laal, 2013; Shechtman & Yaman, 2012). For example, when students are learning about math content collaboratively, they
are strengthening their abilities to solve math problems and their abilities to work productively with others (Lazakidou & Retalis, 2010). In this context, this final section of this literature review will explore how teachers can integrate SEL into their content lessons simply by choosing an instructional strategy such as collaborative learning, project-based learning, or affective teaching, which are just some of the commonly utilized approaches.

**Collaborative learning.** Collaborative learning (CL) is not simply putting students into working groups. Laal (2013) described the elements that lead to true collaborative learning: listening to different perspectives, presenting and defending ideas, exchanging beliefs, relying on each other, teaching, supporting one another, maintaining working relationships, making decisions, building trust, and managing conflict. According to this definition of CL, students engaged in such an educational approach have an opportunity to strengthen all five of their social emotional skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships skills, and responsible decision-making. Further advantages include psychological benefits (i.e. increased self-esteem; decreased anxiety) and academic benefits (i.e. improved critical thinking skills and active learning skills) (Laal, Laal, & Kermanshahi, 2012).

A 21st Century educational collaborative experience was researched to see if primary level students’ self-regulated problem-solving skills in mathematics could be improved using a computer supported collaborative learning strategy (Lazakidou & Retalis, 2010). In rural Greece, 24 fourth graders participated in this study that lasted over two months. The setup of the study included various stages of problem-solving, including students observing the teacher solving a problem, groups of students solving problems together, students listening to one student solve a problem, and one student solving a problem on his/her own (Lazakidou & Retalis, 2010). The results measuring pre- and post-means showed that students’ problem-solving time decreased
and their capacity to solve problems increased. Though these could be seen as strictly academic gains, problem solving is not just a mathematical process, and the researchers also report that this process improved students’ metacognitive skills, self-regulation strategies, self-reflection and goal focus, all of which are social emotional skills. Collectively, academic, social and emotional gains were made as a result of using a collaborative learning process.

*Project-based learning.* Project-based learning (PBL) is another instructional strategy that is commonly used in 21st century classrooms. Bell (2010) defined PBL as:

a student-driven, teacher-facilitated approach to learning. Learners pursue knowledge by asking questions that have piqued their natural curiosity . . . student choice is a key element of this approach . . . children with similar inquiries may elect to work cooperatively thereby nurturing twenty-first-century collaboration and communication skills . . . children solve real-world problems by designing their own inquiries, planning their learning, organizing their research, and implementing a multitude of learning strategies. (Bell, 2010, p. 39)

Self-evaluation and reflection are key elements to PBL. For example, a student might reflect on how well he/she “contributed, negotiated, listened, and welcomed other group members’ ideas” (Bell, 2010, p. 43). And, self-evaluation includes evaluating one’s effort and productivity level, which all relate to social emotional skills (i.e. self-awareness, self-management). In the PBL process, “students become critical friends by giving constructive feedback to each other, which helps them become aware of their own strengths and improve on their interactions with each other” (Bell, 2010, p. 43). This, in turn, builds a student’s relationship skills and social awareness, two social emotional skills. Bell (2010) revealed
academic gains that go along with these social emotional skills, which further emphasizes that PBL is a strategy that can improve academic, social, and emotional skills.

An example of a collaborative project-based learning experience was presented in Behizadeh’s (2014) study in which the researcher intended to “promote project-based learning in English education as a way to combat the loss of cultural relevancy under the pressures of standardization” (p. 99). In the project documented in this study, “students were asked to identify an issue in the community and then develop a solution that drew on current research and historical ways of responding to it” (Behizadeh, 2014, p. 99). The students identified gang violence as a concern in their community. Their study of samurai warriors in ancient Japan helped them to identify that their community needed an honor code to potentially decrease gang violence. One of the students touted, “if people could pause and think through their actions, then maybe, you know, they wouldn’t just shoot someone for messing with them” (Behizadeh, 2014, p. 100). This passion-filled, relevant project became the classroom’s collaborative project that helped these students “think deeply and critically about their world” (Behizadeh, 2014, p. 100), which is part of what SEL espouses to offer to students—becoming more productive contributors to a democratic society (Ayers, 2010).

A mixed-methods, longitudinal study on the benefits of PBL at the secondary level in a mathematics course was conducted by Holmes and Hwang (2016). There were two groups of 8th and 9th graders: PBL group and control group. Results showed that the racial/ethnic/economic achievement gap was decreased and that “PBL students were more intrinsically motivated, showed significantly higher critical thinking skills, and appreciated peer learning” (Holmes & Hwang, 2016, p. 449). Specific to motivation, contributing factors included: “self-efficacy,
interpersonal attribution, and anxiety” (Holmes & Hwang, 2016, p. 451). This showed that social emotional skills are strengthened as a result of a PBL approach to learning.

**Affective teaching.** Teachers, on the average, “teach on two levels, namely information and conceptualization” (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2004, p. 325). Researchers in one study asked teachers to go to a third level–valuing: “A teaching device to increase students’ personal and emotional involvement in the learning process, hence making it more interesting, relevant and challenging to pupils” (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2004, p. 325). Affective teaching includes a focus on information, conceptualization, and valuing. Shechtman & Leichtentritt (2004) intended to study whether or not affective teaching would decrease problem behavior in the classroom. The results of this study conducted in 52 Israel classrooms, grades 1-9 indicated a lower frequency of misbehavior, including off-task behavior, talking without permission, moving without permission and aggression, in the affective lessons compared with the cognitive lessons. In addition, positive behavior, including expression of thoughts, expression of feelings, self-awareness and peer support, was more frequent in the affective lessons compared with the cognitive lessons. (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2004, p. 323)

The study results suggested that “one way to prevent problem behaviors [and increase social emotional skills of students] in the classroom is through the teacher’s instructional style” (Schectman & Leichtentritt, 2004, p. 329), namely an affective teaching style.

Schectman and Yaman (2012) later conducted an experimental study in Israel with 36 pre-service teachers: “The study assesses the effect of social and emotional learning (SEL) integrated in a literature class, named here ‘affective teaching,’ as compared to conventional teaching” (Shechtman & Yaman, 2012, p. 546). Each of the pre-service teachers were randomly
assigned to either the control or intervention group. The results of the study showed that “students in the affective teaching condition showed more favorable outcomes in content knowledge, motivation to learn, perceived classroom climate, and group cohesion, and their observed behavior improved more than that of those taught by the conventional teaching method” (Shechtman & Yaman, 2012, p. 561). These two studies, though conducted outside of the United States and representing only a small sample of their kind, show promise that an affective teaching style that includes a focus on students’ personal and emotional involvement in the learning process may have a profoundly positive impact on students’ academic, social and emotional outcomes.

**Conclusion.** With a practitioner-driven, non-standardized approach towards SEL implementation, teachers have the flexibility to identify and choose which approaches may be most effective and impactful given their specific classroom, school, and district context. The practices and strategies one can choose from include classroom management practices: being vulnerable with students (Slaten et al., 2015); supporting students’ goals and celebrating successes; (Cervone & Cushman, 2015; J. L. Jones et al., 2009); creating a safe space (S. M. Jones et al., 2014; Norris, 2003); building classroom community (Morcom, 2014); and, using socially just practices (Cervone & Cushman, 2015; Rutledge et al., 2015). All of these strategies and approaches help build a safe and productive learning environment where students can feel safe and supported to learn.

Teachers can also integrate SEL within the academic content that they are covering in their particular coursework so that it does not feel like they are trying to do one more thing above and beyond what they already feel overwhelmed with doing. For instance, in a reading and language arts curriculum, teachers can ask students to take on the perspectives of various
characters to build their abilities to understand points of view other than their own (Schaps et al., 2004). A math lesson can be focused on problem-solving, generating alternative solutions and providing students with the opportunity to cooperate with others and hear each other’s different approaches (J. L. Jones et al., 2009; Kress et al., 2004). And, students can collaborate, communicate and share their emotions through their artwork, dance, and music (Cervone & Cushman, 2015).

There are also interdisciplinary instructional strategies that lend themselves towards building SEL skills while learning content. A teacher may choose to incorporate collaborative learning, which provides students with opportunities to work together in groups, share in decision-making, build trust, learn how to effectively communicate, and self-evaluate one’s own contributions to the group’s effort (Laal, 2013; Laal et al., 2012). There is the possibility of project-based learning, which is when teachers ask students to identify their own questions and real-world problems and then facilitate students in finding ways to solve them through research (Behizadeh, 2014; Bell, 2010). Or, teachers may move beyond teaching information and conceptualization and include valuing, personalizing learning and including emotions (Shechtman & Leichtentritt, 2004; Schectman & Yaman, 2012). All of these approaches incorporate social emotional skills into the content-driven learning process.

**Summary**

The focus of this study was to understand how teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff in a suburban high school can implement a practitioner-driven SEL initiative focused on identifying and implementing specific strategies and daily practices, and utilizing teachable moments rather than one standardized, evidenced-based program. The intent was to discover how stakeholders could support the development of more accessible, feasible,
and sustainable system-level social emotional practices (Barry et al., 2017). SEL has developed out of a combined history of character education, emotional intelligence, mindfulness, and other non-academic focus areas in education. There is a growing need for SEL to be integrated into school classrooms due to persistent and increasing societal stressors such as bullying, suicide, and school shootings (Karunananda et al., 2016). Simultaneously, an increase in identification of mental health disorders in children and adolescents, such as anxiety, depression and attention disorders, bolsters the argument for the effective incorporation of SEL into all classroom, school, and district settings (Merikangas et al., 2010).

Several SEL programs have been created, implemented, and researched since the inception of SEL in 1994: classroom-based programs like MindUp, the Ruler Approach and SOAR; school-wide approaches such as SEAL and SECURE; and targeted intervention programs for at-risk students, like New Beginnings. As evidenced in this literature review, research conducted on program impacts indicate that SEL: decreases student discipline rates (Whetstone et al., 2015; Whitted, 2011; Zahn, 2015); improves students’ academic outcomes (Joffe & Black, 2012; S. M. Jones et al., 2011); increases teacher job satisfaction (Collie et al., 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009); improves school climate (B. H. Smith & Low, 2013; Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004); and helps students become better democratic citizens (Ayers, 2010; Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Despite SEL program success, some researchers and educators have expressed the need to move away from choosing a standardized program towards implementing a more comprehensive, context-driven SEL initiative that empowers practitioners to “explore different approaches to implementation that support identified school improvement priorities rather than following a single model, meaning that they can tailor it to their own circumstances and needs”
(Wigelsworth et al., 2012, p. 216). To this end, research has been conducted around teacher SEL training and development. Results suggest that training should start in teacher preparation programs (Doikou & Diamandidou, 2011; Waajid et al., 2013) and continue in district/school-wide professional development (Harvey et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2015). This is because teachers with higher levels of SEC are more effective in implementing SEL (Ransford et al., 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). As a result, they have a more positive impact on students’ social, emotional and academic outcomes (Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Poulou, 2017).

With a practitioner-driven SEL approach, it becomes necessary to become well-versed in the practices and strategies available to build a comprehensive, context-specific SEL program. This literature review has presented a broad yet comprehensive list of best practices. They include classroom management strategies such as teachers being vulnerable with students (Slaten et al., 2015), supporting students’ goals and celebrating successes (Cervone & Cushman, 2015; J. L. Jones et al., 2009), creating a safe space (S. M. Jones et al., 2014), building classroom community (Morcom, 2014), and using socially just practices instead of punitive discipline (Cervone & Cushman, 2015; Rutledge et al., 2015). SEL can also be integrated into academic content areas. For example, in a social studies class, students study historical figures and cultures while working on social emotional skills such as communication skills, perspective taking, and respecting differences and diversity (Kress et al., 2004). In reading and language arts, students can take on the perspective of a given character in a book from a culture different from their own to gain valuable perspective-taking skills (Schaps et al., 2004). And, across the disciplines, teachers may utilize various SEL-focused instructional strategies like collaborative learning
(Laal, 2013), project-based learning (Bell, 2010), and affective teaching (Shechtman & Yaman, 2012).
Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to understand how various school staff members began to identify and understand the role of social emotional learning (SEL) in the success of students within one suburban high school. Through a case study approach under the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, it simultaneously explored how to implement SEL practices into the day-to-day practices within a classroom and throughout the entire school. Though various programs have been implemented and researched, the goal of this particular study was to provide schools with an understanding of and a model for implementing a comprehensive, school-wide SEL initiative that is driven by the staff and makes sense for their context and students, rather than choosing a pre-made, standardized SEL program. This chapter will provide an overview of the research methods design that was utilized for this study, including: a description of the case study approach; an overview of the participants and how they were recruited; the interview protocol; and the processes of data collection, analysis and storage.

Research Questions

This qualitative case study sought to answer the following question: How can a suburban high school implement a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative in an effort to meet the needs of all students, as perceived by teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff? The following sub-questions were also investigated:

• What are the challenges and opportunities staff face in the early stages of a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative?

• How do staff members perceive the value of implementing social emotional learning during early implementation?
Paradigm of the Researcher

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm assumes that there are multiple valid realities that exist in the minds of individuals (Ponterotto, 2005); it is thus appropriate for this study, which intended to explore the various possible realities of those involved in an SEL initiative within one suburban high school. Semi-structured interviews provided individual research participants the opportunity for narration of and reflection on their personal experience in the SEL initiative in their school, their role in it, and their views about the entire process. The constructivist paradigm focuses on the “interaction between the investigator and the object of investigation. Only through this interaction can deeper meaning be uncovered. The researcher and her or his participants jointly create (co-construct) findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). In this process, the researcher must be aware of his or her bias and positionality, for “an interpretivist researcher is, for better or worse, already part of the story about the truth because she is the one examining and describing it” (Butin, 2010, p. 60). The key goal is to discover the story of the practitioners by “search[ing] for patterns of meanings” (Butin, 2010, p. 59) in their responses (both within them and between them).

Research Design: Qualitative Research

This was a qualitative case study, which was appropriate because the researcher’s goal was to examine a “complex social phenomena” (Yin, 2014, p. 4), specifically, how school practitioners go about implementing a non-standardized SEL initiative in one suburban high school, what they perceive as challenges in the process, and what value they place on it. A single case study provides a way to explore how a contemporary event occurs naturally, without the researcher having specific control over a particular variable (Yin, 2014). This method allows for researchers to “study current, real-life cases that are in progress so that they can gather accurate
information not lost by time” (Creswell, 2013, p. 98). Another reason for having used this approach was that the phenomenon under study, a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative, was happening within a “real-world context . . . [and] the boundaries between phenomenon and context” (Yin, 2014, p. 16) were not clear. The case study research method was utilized in an attempt to “cope with the technically distinctive situation in which there . . . [were] many more variables of interest than data points” (Yin, 2014, p. 17), which required the researcher to look at “multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (Yin, 2014, p. 17). In this study, a variety of participants within three separate groups of professionals—teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff—were interviewed to “search for patterns of meanings” (Butin, 2010, p. 59).

**Research Tradition**

The qualitative case study research method has been employed by sociologists since the beginning of the 20th Century; however, it “may be said to begin with J.S. Mill’s magisterial study [of inductive reasoning], *A System of Logic*, first published in 1843” (Elman, Gerring, & Mahoney, 2016, p. 376). Even much earlier than that, “elements of the case study format may be traced to antiquity and to the works of Aristotle, Herodotus, Thucydides, and others” (Elman et al., 2016, p. 375). Strictly looking at the modern rise of case study research, the method “arose from ethnographic studies of urban sociology (the ‘Chicago School’) in the early twentieth century” (Elman et al., 2016, p. 376).

More recently, within the last 30 years or so, the use of case study research has become widespread. It is commonly used in “psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, social work, business, education, nursing and community planning” (Yin, 2014, p. 4), though its origins are in anthropology, ethnography, and sociology specifically (Creswell, 2013). In fact,
“some researchers viewed case study as essentially ethnography” (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2014, p. 4), but contemporary researchers have argued against this and proven otherwise. For example, upon the emergence of case studies in education, which gained prominence in the 1970s,

Stenhouse (1979) challenged such a view stating that originally ethnographic research had relied on certain assumptions that were not applicable in education. These assumptions were that the researcher would lack familiarity with the contexts and situations to be studied, that researchers would tend to draw on theory from ethnography rather than education, and that they would not normally make copies of field notes available. In education case studies, on the other hand, he argued that educationalists tend to be familiar with settings where research occurs and that there should be limits to theory specific to other disciplines being imposed on education. (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2014, p.4)

Stenhouse advocated for the use of case study as a means to examine and understand school communities, but he was clear in his delineation between ethnographic study and case study in educational research.

Stenhouse (1978) went on to further advocate for the use of case study research in education and outlined the merits of such an approach. Though, at the time, and some may even say now still, much debate existed around whether the outcomes of qualitative case study research offered as much as what was to be gained by quantitative research (particularly in being able to generalize findings). Stenhouse (1978), for example, argued:
The basis of verification and cumulation in the study of cases is the recognition that a case is an instance, though not, like a sample, a representative, of a class and that case study is a basis for generalization and hence cumulation of data embedded in time. (p. 21)

Quantitative research may provide the statistical probability of a particular outcome when controlling a specific variable, and the method had been heavily, and in some cases exclusively, supported by some researchers up to the 1980s (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2014). However, Stenhouse (1978) argued that these statistics did not provide an understanding of “why one course of action is better than another” (p. 28). He cautioned that this approach leads us to make “judgements about what to do without understanding what we are doing” (Stenhouse, 1978, p. 28).

Though the research community continued to be positively biased towards quantitative, random assignment, controlled studies, the use of case study research continued to gain momentum. Some social scientists only see value in case study as an exploratory tool; however, others have argued that, “case study research is far from being only an exploratory strategy. Some of the best and most famous case studies have been explanatory case studies (i.e. Graham Allison’s (1971) original study of a single case, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis)” (Yin, 2014, p. 7). Other case studies have provided an in-depth understanding of various university innovations, drug prevention programs, educational leadership styles, and crime prevention programs (Yin, 2014).

This research method continues to be utilized in contemporary educational research and is emerging “as a possible champion that might be able to deepen understanding in real contexts rather than providing decontextualized evidence” (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2014, p. 4). Indeed, research that has not been conducted in real contexts
ignores the complexity of education settings and the significance of the diverse individuals and organizations that enhance that complexity . . . disempowering those at the heart of the education process while failing to recognize the value of different forms of engagement with issues in education. (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2014, p. 4)

This made case study appropriate for the current study, given that the goal was to study a particular educational context where practitioners were driving the implementation of an SEL initiative rather than a “gold standard” program that had been successful in other contexts, but not necessarily in all possible contexts.

The definition and approach of the case study method has been debated and developed over the years beyond Stenhouse’s (1978) work: Merriam (1988) looked at a case study as a single entity with boundaries so that rich data could be collected; Stake (1995) considered a case study a work of art where the researcher would interpret what he was seeing; and Pollan (80s & 90s) pursued a longitudinal case study strategy (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2014). For this study, Yin’s (2014) definition and approach to case study research was utilized. Yin (2014) first published his definition of case study and has developed it over the years to encompass the following two parts:

(a) A case study is an empirical inquiry that

- Investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when

- The boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident. (p. 16)
(b) A case study inquiry

- Copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result
- Relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulation fashion, and as another result
- Benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (p. 17)

This “twofold definition—covering the scope and features of a case study—shows how case study research comprises an all-encompassing method—covering the logic of design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis” (Yin, 2014, p. 17).

Context

The high school on which this study focuses is a regional school located in central Connecticut. There were approximately 1,000 students, of which 95% were white (Connecticut State Department of Education [CSDOE], 2017). There were approximately 76 regular education teachers, 13 special education teachers, 27 paraprofessionals, three administrators, one nurse, eight counselors/social workers/school psychologists, and 31 non-instructional services and support staff, 96% of which were white (CSDOE, 2017). It is considered a suburban school most often; however, within certain criteria, it can be referred to as a rural school district. In August of 2017, staff in the school learned about SEL and identified the need for a focus on it in order to meet the needs of all students. The identification of the need for an SEL initiative and the conscious and strategic action towards implementation made this regional high school an appropriate place to conduct this research.
Participants

Creswell (2013) stated that, “case study research begins with the identification of a specific case . . . that can be bounded or described within certain parameters, such as a specific place and time” (p. 98). The place and time chosen for this study involved a regional high school in Connecticut that has been implementing a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative over the last school year. The researcher utilized purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013) by seeking participants from each of the previously noted staff groups in this high school: teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff. With 12 as an ideal number of participants for a case study, according to Yin (2014), the researcher’s goal was to include at least 12 staff members representing different roles and departments to participate in the study. Participants were identified by their history of involvement with the SEL initiative over the school year prior to the interview process, within the school that was studied. More than 12 candidates agreed to participate; therefore, the researcher did her best to choose the 12 that represented a wide variety of roles and perspectives based on the following criteria: number of years teaching, department affiliation, level of involvement in the SEL initiative, and position (teacher, administrator, and counselor/support staff). Utilizing such predetermined criteria is supported by Yin (2014).

Recruitment and Access

The researcher followed the strictest of ethical research standards, beginning with submitting all appropriate documentation to secure permission from Northeastern University’s Internal Review Board (IRB). Before submitting the IRB paperwork, the researcher formally requested access and permission to conduct the current study at the identified regional high school in Connecticut by writing a request letter to the superintendent of schools. After positive confirmation from both the superintendent and Northeastern University’s IRB, the researcher
formally invited chosen participants via email, which included a short questionnaire (see Appendix D) to collect criteria data that the researcher used to select final participants (as explained in the participant section).

The ethical guidelines of research were followed to ensure that the human participants’ confidentiality and private information remained secure at all times during and after the research was conducted (National Institute of Health [NIH], n.d.; Yin, 2014). Pseudonyms were used during the data collection and analysis process, and no real names were used in the final write up of the research findings or will be used in any subsequent publications, workshops, trainings, or conference presentations. All participants signed a consent form (see Appendix E), given that “when people are invited to participate in research, there is a strong belief that it should be their choice based on their understanding of what the study is about, and what the risks and benefits of the study are” (NIH, n.d., n.p.). No participants were deceived in any way, and participants were selected equitably (Yin, 2014).

Northeastern University’s IRB process further ensured and monitored adherence to all ethical standards of research, specifically with a case study. The researcher submitted an application to the IRB, and no participants were pursued until after approval was secured, and only based on the approved research design to ensure adherence to all federal regulations in regards to the protection of human participants.

Data Collection

The researcher interviewed three different populations—teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff—to create a triangulated data set she could use to “search for patterns of meanings” (Butin, 2010, p. 59). Research participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview process, which means that “they resemble[d] guided conversations rather than
structured queries” (Yin, 2014, p. 110). Open-ended questions (see Appendix F) that were “carefully worded, so that [the researcher] appear[ed] genuinely naïve about the topic and allow[ed] the interviewee to provide a fresh commentary about it” (Yin, 2014, p. 111) were utilized to informally guide the interview process that took approximately one hour. The researcher was cognizant that she should attempt to “minimize a methodological threat created by the conversational nature of the interview” (Yin, 2014, p. 112), also known as reflexivity, which is when the researcher’s “perspective unknowingly influences the interviewee’s responses, [and] those responses also unknowingly influence [the researcher’s] line of inquiry” (Yin, 2014, p. 112). She accomplished this to the best of her ability by asking open-ended questions, keeping a reflexive journal, and utilizing peer review (Yin, 2014).

Interviews were conducted in a neutral place where the participant felt most safe and comfortable, to assure confidentiality. The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device and were uploaded to Rev.com on a password-protected laptop. Rev.com transcribed the interviews, and pseudonyms for the participants were used on all related documents. All physical files and documents were stored in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home. All documents were destroyed upon completion of research publication.

**Storage and Management**

All electronic files relevant to the study were stored in a password-protected Dropbox.com account to which only the researcher had access. The laptop on which the files were accessed was password-protected as well. All physical files were stored in a locked cabinet located in the researcher’s home. All electronic and physical files were destroyed upon completion and publication of the study in dissertation form. The informed consent form provided participants with all the information regarding steps taken throughout the research
process to assure their confidentiality of personal information and utmost trust in the integrity of the process.

**Data Analysis**

Rev.com, a commercial service that is confidential, was used to transcribe the interviews, and the transcripts were printed for coding purposes. The researcher simultaneously read each transcript while listening to the recording of the interview to gain a whole sense of the experience, and to be fully aware and make note of nuance. The transcript was read a second time, and notes were kept in the margins to begin the coding process. In the first round of coding, In Vivo coding was utilized because “In Vivo Codes use the direct language of participants as codes rather than researcher-generated words and phrases” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 71). This approach was used to allow the participants own words to be prioritized in the data analysis process, and to decrease the researcher’s positionality and bias. Then the transcripts were coded a second time using In Vivo Coding again, to assure that additional words or phrases were not missed that could prove useful to the rigor of the analysis. Each of these words/phrases from the first two rounds of coding were written on a separate piece of paper to identify repetition, similarities, and patterns. Initially coded transcripts were given to the relevant participants so that they could check for accuracy, which is referred to as member checking (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The researcher subsequently identified emerging themes from the coding process. Then, the transcript was coded a third time using Focused Coding, which “categorizes coded data based on the thematic or conceptual similarity [and] searches for the most frequent or significant Initial Codes to develop the most salient categories in the data corpus” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 294). Final themes were condensed down from the original list. Under each theme, the researcher recorded every word/phrase verbatim from the transcript that supported it. After this was completed for
each interview, data was compared within the three different populations—teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff—and across all participants.

**Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research presents a unique set of challenges to ensure trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Being an ethical researcher requires that each of these elements are addressed throughout the research process, and the first way to do this is to provide and follow “formal and explicit procedures” (Yin, 2014, p. 3). This was accomplished through the description of processes provided throughout this chapter. Great care was taken by the researcher to strictly adhere to these stated procedures. Also, the researcher was explicit about her role and relationship to those studied, and she directly stated her recognized biases in chapter one (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The use of triangulation in data collection was employed to build credibility in how the research findings match reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews of three different populations—teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff—were conducted and analyzed. During the interview process, the researcher was cognizant of the threat of reflexivity: the influence the researcher and the participant have on each other and their perceptions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). To ensure dependability, participants were asked to voluntarily review their transcripts and preliminary analysis, referred to as member checks or respondent validation, to ensure that the analysis rang true with the participants’ understandings and interpretations upon reflection of their experiences as stated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher kept a reflexive journal and engaged in occasional peer-review, which was essential to the maintenance of reflexivity. In the coding process, the researcher rigorously and “purposefully
[looked] for variation in the understanding of the phenomenon” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 246).

Throughout the research process, the researcher ensured confirmability by keeping a journal of thoughts, observations, questions, decision-making, and sense-making, which is referred to as keeping an audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This log of information aided in the researcher’s ability to provide descriptive, truthful, and understandable information about the research process. This also ensured attention to transferability, which refers to the generalizability of the research findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Rich and detailed descriptions based on keen veracity of the participants’ statements and observations are readily provided to the reader who may be looking to replicate the study in another context. The researcher also provided extrapolations, which “are modest speculations on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 254). Lastly, enough detail has been presented to show that the conclusions make sense (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).
Chapter 4: Research Findings

The purpose of this case study was to understand how teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff in a suburban high school implemented a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning (SEL) initiative. SEL has been a focus in educational research since its inception in 1994, and as a result, a variety of programs and approaches have been created, implemented, and analyzed; however, increasingly, researchers have shifted their focus towards whole-school programs that give schools implementation choice. As a result, there is much to be understood about this approach, how to go about implementation, and whether it is valid. Therefore, this study focused on the early implementation phase of a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative. This study sought to answer the following research question: How can a suburban high school implement a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative in an effort to meet the needs of all students, as perceived by teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff? The following sub-questions were also investigated:

- What are the challenges and opportunities staff face in the early stages of a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative?
- How do staff members perceive the value of implementing social emotional learning during early implementation?

This chapter presents the data findings of 12 interviews. The chapter begins with a description of participant characteristics and a general overview of participant perceptions of SEL, which were obtained from the interviews. Finally, the findings of the study by theme will be presented.
Participants

A total of 12 staff members were interviewed: four administrators, four teachers, and four counselors/support staff. The group of administrators included a director of curriculum, a director of special education, a principal, and an assistant principal. The years worked in these positions at this school ranged from 1-17 years. The group of teachers included two science teachers, one history teacher, and one math teacher. The years worked in these positions at this school ranged from 5-14 years. The group of counselors/support staff included two counselors, one social worker, and one receptionist. The years worked in these positions at this school ranged from 1-19 years. All participants had been involved with the SEL initiative at this school at varying levels within the past school year.

Before the participants were interviewed specifically about SEL and the school’s SEL initiative, the researcher asked each participant what he/she found most rewarding and challenging about their job. All 12 participants stated that the most rewarding aspect of their job had something to do with working with and helping students. For example, one of the support staff stated, “the relationship that I build with students,” and another stated, “making a difference with the kids.” The challenges varied, including students not being invested or resistant to learning, difficult parents, helping people in emotional situations, lack of resources, and not being able to reach all students.

One part of the first question related to SEL was specific to when the participant became knowledgeable of the approach. Four out of the 12 participants stated that the school year underway at the time of the study was the first time they had heard of the term. Others alluded to research articles, experiences, and professional development prior to the school’s initiative at the
Only one of the participants remembered learning about SEL before her first position in education during a college course.

All participants presented a positive perception of SEL and of the school’s specific initiative. This was evident in various comments such as, this is a “very good idea,” it makes “perfect sense to me,” it is a “natural fit,” it is “something that we should be doing,” it “could fix the behaviors I see in my class,” and that it “is the foundation of what we do.” One teacher even stated, “This is the first thing [initiative] that . . . I could get onboard with.”

Findings

This case study was analyzed through the lens of Fullan’s (2016) theory of educational/organizational change. Fullan (2016) espoused that, for change to be meaningful and successful, teachers and other stakeholders must be engaged in the process of identifying and developing new approaches to teaching and learning. This case study looked at how a school can implement a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative, which aligns with Fullan’s (2016) idea of re-culturing, the heart of his theoretical approach. Reculturing is “how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits” (p. 23). The “how” is precisely what is presented in these findings.

In addition to the essential research question, two sub-questions supported the understanding of the challenges and opportunities that come along with such an SEL initiative and the perceptions of value that the stakeholders had early in the process. Findings that answer these questions are also presented. All findings were guided by the analytical frame of Fullan’s (2016) theory.
Themes

Four themes emerged within the triangulated data set to answer the research questions:

(a) *Practitioners should first identify the value of an SEL initiative specific to the context of the school*; (b) *Administrators must buy into the initiative and then take their time to develop teacher and student buy-in*; (c) *School leadership has to provide varied, individualized, and on-going/consistent professional development to build staff SEL capacity*; and (d) *All stakeholders must intentionally work towards building a climate and culture of community, communication, and connection*. Each of these themes are subsequently explored and supported throughout the following section.

**Practitioners should first identify the value of an SEL initiative specific to the context of the school.** At the very beginning of the initiative, all administrators, teachers, and counselors/support staff were required to attend a session on SEL during the first professional development day of the school year. It was an hour-long workshop that provided them with what SEL is and how it could help teachers and students be successful. Much time was given for participants to have conversations with people in their department, in other departments, and in different roles in the district around the non-academic barriers that they noticed were getting in the way of student learning. Then after reviewing a variety of SEL strategies and approaches, they shared ideas in their groups of how to lessen the impact of these non-academic barriers, such as depression, anxiety, fear of failure, or an inability to be attentive. This prepared staff members to create individualized goals for the year to meet the non-academic needs of their students. The intent of this activity at the very beginning of the initiative was to provide staff members the opportunity to identify the value of an SEL initiative in their school. It is not
surprising then that all 12 of the participants in this study commented on the value that they saw in the SEL initiative specific to their school context.

There were three main non-academic barriers that were consistently referred to throughout the interviews across all participant groups. They were: feeling safe, managing anxiety, and regulating emotions. In this school context, these were the main reasons why participants saw value in the SEL initiative in their high school, for they hoped that these non-academic barriers would be decreased as a result. Each one of these areas will be explored and supported throughout this section

**Feeling safe.** The concept of the need for students to feel safe in the classroom before they can be available for learning is prominent in the transcripts. One administrator commented that students should “feel comfortable . . . [and] feel confident that they’re going to be able to participate and engage without harm.” And, he shared that he “would really like to see that this type of behavior gets codified into what we do” through the SEL initiative. Another administrator stated similarly that students “can’t learn from all of the people here, if [they] are too afraid.” A third administrator stated, “I think it [SEL] might also affect people’s tolerances of each other” and their differences (i.e. sexual identity, race, socio-economic status). He said he hoped that this “will allow people to be whom they want.”

Teachers identified similar concerns in regards to students feeling safe. One teacher shared that:

There is a lot of tension, sometimes drama and sometimes conflicts between them and their peers. And as hard as I work with some of these students, they will never open up in a room . . . when they have other people in that room that they had issues with. . . . Kids recess into the background because they’re afraid of their peers in the room.
She was hopeful that the SEL initiative might begin to address these concerns. Similarly, another teacher identified bullying and girl drama as a barrier to learning in her classroom. She stated that she tried “to defuse some of that in the classroom . . . [to create] a safe environment to take risks in.” However, she said she has not been as successful as she would hope to be. A third teacher also stated that they need “safe spaces” where kids can “engage respectfully.” Part of that would include teachers modeling tolerance and respect with their students and colleagues.

In addition to student safety, three participants shared concerns about creating a safe school environment for teachers. An administrator opined that teachers must believe that it is safe to take risks and make mistakes, just like students. A teacher referred to the fact that she sometimes does not feel safe to speak openly in the classroom because this is a “litigious and judgmental society.” She gave an example of a time when she addressed a student’s disrespectful behavior; she barely slept that night because she was expecting an angry email from the parent. She was working under the “fear of retaliation,” which could potentially limit a teacher’s willingness to address student issues. Lastly, a support staff member shared: “For over two years, I worked with a very difficult coworker who had a tendency to make everything something to be angry about.” It is these types of scenarios that make it difficult for the adults in the building to feel safe. These participants conveyed the hope that the SEL initiative would help them address these concerns.

**Managing anxiety.** Student and staff anxiety was a prevalent concern mentioned throughout many of the interviews. Participants opined that anxiety is the most prevalent mental health concern in their school. In fact, so many students were suffering from anxiety and avoiding school that the school had created a *School Resilience Program* to provide individual programming for each of these students in hopes that they would return to a regular student
schedule in the future. Three out of the four administrators referred to anxiety as a reason to
implement the SEL initiative. One stated, “I hope we reduce the anxiety and depression . . . [and
that] people can get the help and support that they need to feel more comfortable and realize it’s
not unique to them.” A second administrator said, “I’m really working with kids that are school
avoidant [and] have school anxiety” this year. A third administrator stated, “We’re seeing more
issues associated with student anxiety [and] school avoidance.”

Teachers and counselors/support staff shared the very same concern. One teacher stated
that “a number of kids . . . are dealing with pretty severe anxiety. . . . I would hope that maybe
the levels of anxiety that kids are feeling goes down.” One of the support staff noted that she
thinks the SEL initiative “can help with anxiety, . . . depression, [and] so many of the mental
health needs that we’re finding out more and more that students are having.” She shared that she
gets “calls from the nurse’s office” about students having active panic attacks and needing
assistance to calm them down. A counselor stated, “I do think there is an increase in anxiety. I
think there’s a lot of pressure and a lot of stress whether the students put that on themselves or it
is coming from an outside source.”

Concerns about teacher and staff stress were mentioned by administrators and
counselors/support staff. An administrator stated, “We’re seeing adults that are more likely to be
dealing with personal issues or just concerned about the direction that the world seems to be
turning at this point.” A counselor shared that she gets “more questions [from staff] about
personal anxiety” now than she has ever seen in the past. A support staff member referred to his
own anxiety, as well. So, students are not the only ones trying to cope with anxiety. Conveyed in
these interviews was hope that the SEL initiative would decrease the amount of anxiety people
were suffering from and provide them with appropriate coping strategies.
Regulating emotions. An ability to regulate one’s own emotions was recognized as important, yet lacking in this school setting. An administrator stated, “There has been a change in what people think they need to do in order to be successful. . . . You do also have to think about your emotional piece and not just about your particular knowledge.” She also recognized that a student who is “too angry or too sad” is not available for learning. A lack of emotional regulation not only gets in the way of learning, but she notes that it can also impede one’s ability to be successful in life. Another administrator shared his hope that the SEL initiative “will educate them [students] and equip them to better deal with their emotional challenges that they have to survive in life.” When working with a student, he often tries to address a student’s emotions. While working with two students engaged in a conflict, he tried to help each of them understand “what their anger was, and where it was coming from and why they were feeling that way.” This assisted in de-escalating the situation and setting them up for quick resolution. Similarly, a counselor shared that she often finds herself focusing on students’ emotions, too, when they are struggling with a problem. She helps them work through their initial emotional response by asking, “How else could that be perceived?” She stated that it helps them step outside of themselves to see another viewpoint. It pulls them out of their emotional tunnel vision.

Once again, there were statements made in regards to the adults in the building being able to regulate emotions, too. A support staff member stated: “We should be paying very close attention to . . . the emotional well-being and emotional intelligence of the staff here.” He further explained that this is because the adults need to be an “emotional resource” for students, and this cannot happen if the adults are unable to manage their own emotions. And, according to the support staff member, “You cannot be in control of the situation . . . if you are emotional.” As a result of the SEL initiative he noticed, “people are thinking about it more. . . . We have people
who are spending more time actually thinking about the level of their own emotional well-being.” He stated that he hopes that they continue to see growth in this area as the SEL initiative is further implemented.

Though the participants all began by identifying the non-academic barriers to student success, it became clear that they, too, wanted to feel safe, decrease and manage their own anxiety and stress, and regulate their own emotions. Both teachers and students benefit from a focus on the social emotional aspects of teaching and learning. And, a teacher’s well-being impacts the well-being of students. As one teacher succinctly stated: “If the adults are feeling better, then the students will feel better.” And, once staff begin to see the value in an initiative, they are more likely to buy into it, thus, the next theme centers on the concept of buy-in.

**Administrators must buy into the initiative and then take their time to develop teacher and student buy-in.** As with any new initiative, teacher buy-in is a major factor in successful implementation. It is no different with this school’s SEL initiative. Several participants in all three groups consistently commented on the importance of school-wide buy-in, the challenges of building buy-in and decreasing resistance, and the most effective ways to build buy-in. An analysis of this theme suggests that buy-in starts with administrators, then teachers, and then students. The significance of this particular order will be presented, explained and supported throughout this section, as well as how this was accomplished and will continue to be implemented in this school setting.

**Administrator buy-in.** Participants in the administrative group all recognized the importance of building buy-in and the notion that the SEL initiative had to start with administrative buy-in first before teachers and students could be expected to buy in. One
administrator stated that the “hardest part of putting this initiative out there is in getting a level of buy-in, a level of acceptance from our administration.”

However, this same administrator stated that the SEL initiative had been successful thus far in this school (the setting of this study) because members of the administration “embraced” the initiative, and as a result “the rest of the staff embraced it.” According to him, because the administrators were passionate about the SEL initiative, he did not hear from any staff or student that “this isn’t anything but a really, really great program and something that we should be doing.” A second administrator similarly stated, “I’ve been very impressed how everyone has accepted it and embraced it. Even those that I thought would be reticent and resistant to it . . . [are] recognizing the importance of it.” He suggested that this was due to administrator buy-in when he stated, “The buy-in comes from a message from leadership that they trust and respect. That it’s been decided this is important.” He also stated that his role in this initiative was to “be able to talk about it intelligently” while he was working with teachers. So, he made a point to learn as much as he could about it. And, he also tried to ensure that he was “consistently supporting, endorsing, and talking about” SEL. A third administrator stated that successful buy-in of staff came from the administration “advocating for it” and helping teachers to “see how it benefits them.”

A counselor also identified the importance of administration bringing SEL forward. She stated: “I like that this initiative did not come from the counseling department. I think that is an important piece of this and why it’s likely to be better received.” She went on to clarify that if it came from a counselor, who is already typically expected to be focusing on students’ social emotional issues, it would not have been “taken quite as seriously by some people.” She appreciated that an administrator brought the initiative forward because she viewed it as “a
school-wide, . . . community-wide, . . . societal issue that we should be addressing.” Another counselor recognized that the support of administration in this initiative was part of its success. She stated, “people feel comfortable going and asking questions because they know that they will receive support. . . . [They] are not afraid to make a mistake . . . [and] aren’t afraid to go to admin to talk about something.” She continued to state: “That is not true everywhere else. So, I think that’s something specific to [our school] that allows us to want to implement a lot of new programs” like this SEL initiative.

Teacher buy-in. Once administrators buy into the initiative, the focus should shift to promoting teacher buy-in. This step has to be given a lot of time and careful attention if a school’s goal is to implement a long-term, sustainable, and successful SEL initiative. This was the main focus throughout the first year of this school’s SEL initiative. This section explores why it is essential to spend time on teacher buy-in and how to do so successfully, as perceived by the participants involved in this study.

Both teachers and administrators touted the importance of building buy-in of staff members, particularly teachers, given that they work most closely with students and may be hesitant to take on a new initiative; they are also already overwhelmed, managing a multitude of professional responsibilities, rising to on-going pressure of effectively implementing the curriculum, differentiating instruction and assessment, and ultimately positively impacting student academic outcomes. As Fullan (2016) suggested, teachers must be engaged in the implementation of any school change process for it to be successful. This was confirmed in the analysis of the interview scripts. Support staff responses did not focus on buy-in as consistently as teachers and administrators. However, a support staff member did consistently mention that
SEL should not nor could not be seen as “something extra” for teachers to focus on; rather, SEL must be viewed as a “natural” part of the teaching process to build teacher buy-in.

This support staff member saw SEL as a “natural fit for what [she] was doing here” at this school, and she believed this was true for many other staff members. She did, however, recognize that not all teachers shared this mentality, or they did not have a natural propensity for focusing on the social emotional aspect of teaching. She stated:

I think for teachers that may not be as comfortable with the relationship building, it may be harder because they feel like it’s an extra step . . . to check in [with students]. But for so many of our teachers, it’s just a natural thing.

She repeated this sentiment later in the interview when she said, “The majority of staff is on board because they’re on board naturally. It’s who they are. It’s already in them. So, they don’t see it as something extra.” She suggested that more teachers would buy into the initiative if the approach focused on “working within that framework of ‘this isn’t extra.’”

Another consistent suggestion for successfully building teacher buy-in, specifically within the early stages of the initiative, was to give teachers the choice of whether or not to participate in the initiative and how to participate. One teacher stated that there has to be “buy-in from the school as a whole,” and there “needs to [be] school-wide support.” She noticed this happening, especially in her department, in which everyone agreed that, “this is a good thing.” This surprised her, for that kind of whole-department buy-in had not existed before on any particular initiative since she had worked at this school, from her perspective. The reason she gave for this was that “so far it’s been great that it’s a voluntary thing that teachers can choose to listen to, choose to participate in, or not.” She went on to say: “As soon as you tell teachers they have to do this, I think you build up a lot more resentment.” Another teacher touted the benefits
of the variety of workshops offered during professional development that teachers could choose to attend. She stated: “There was always something being shared, or some professional opportunity that we could engage in with the workshops.”

Administrators agreed with these teachers that a slow and subtle approach was instrumental in gaining teacher buy-in. One administrator agreed with the idea of giving teachers’ choice when she stated, “I don’t think it’s something that can be handed to people to say, ‘Implement this.’” She expressed her worry about the possible negative impact on teachers of such a tactic: “Some people like to read about it [and] some people like to talk about it. . . . If we just vary our approach, maybe that would help.” This same administrator shared how an SEL initiative was not successful in her previous district, which was because she could not get teacher buy-in, which further reinforced this point. A second administrator stated that what “was most important in the beginning was to take it slow . . . rather than hammer people over the head and say ‘Get in line.’” He continued to state, “I thought it was important that it was done with subtlety and with the purpose of educating people and getting them to buy into and understand it before they felt they were being forced to do something.”

Lastly, a teacher mentioned that her own buy-in was slow and came from the opportunity to learn about different SEL strategies and techniques and then to implement a few, and observe the impact on her classroom and students. After trying a few strategies, she realized that “it did make a difference” and that there “were connections between” students’ social emotional health and their academic performance. And, she discovered that spending time on SEL in the classroom could “strengthen the connections that kids have to each other and to this place.” In addition, she stated: “What’s happening to kids outside the classroom is my responsibility to try and mitigate so that they can access what is happening in the classroom.” Though she did not
clearly see the value of SEL at the beginning of this school’s initiative, she did buy into this initiative after being given resources, choices, and time to explore SEL strategies in the classroom.

**Student buy-in.** As teachers buy into the SEL initiative, students can then slowly begin to buy into it, as well. One teacher in this study stated that, for the initiative to continue in the right direction, there needed to be more attention paid to “student buy-in.” However, the way teachers approach SEL with students can make all the difference in the buy-in of students, particularly at the high school level. In this study, it took a whole school year to establish school-wide teacher buy-in, so the efforts to build student buy-in have been minimal. As a result, this section will identify only a few ideas that may lead to successful student buy-in.

One idea that a teacher had is creating a “robust advisory program.” She stated that in her previous school, this program had existed and that she noticed that giving students the chance to spend time with the same small group of students and one staff member gave students a chance to form “a really tight knit group.” Each student “felt safe sharing with each other in our own little space,” she said. And, even though the school in this study does have an advisory program, she noted that advisory groups do not meet enough. They only meet once or twice a month, and her previous school’s advisory groups met every day. The “faculty’s mindset” about advisory in her previous school was much more positive than it is in her current school. So, her advice was, if the advisory program were to be used to build relationships, then there would need to be a major shift in the vision and implementation of the program.

This teacher also recommended that the school should find ways to recognize more students in a variety of ways to build student buy-in. She stated, “We do a lot to acknowledge the traditional excellence in our school, and I feel like there’s not as much celebration of the kids
who are really great at “other things, like ‘technical work,’ [or]‘being a good person.’” There are students in the school who are not in the higher-level academic classes, and this teacher expressed concern that they might “feel like we don’t value them.” She said: “That’s a group that I think I would like to see somehow included more.”

Lastly, this same teacher touted the importance of not making SEL “seem too hokey” for this may turn kids away from buying into the initiative. The teacher’s approach must be “honest,” according to her. She recognized that “it’s such a tightrope to walk because they’re [going to] sniff it” if the teacher is not being genuine and is not truly buying into the initiative, as well. However, she also stated, that “it just takes a little while to get buy-in from everybody, I think. But I think once you do, then even those hokey moments can have learning opportunities because you all kind of know what the value is long-term.” So, there must also be time and attention given to helping students understand the value of SEL at the beginning in order to promote SEL through a real and sustainable approach. A second teacher shared that buy-in from students will only happen if there is “school-wide support.” Even parents need to buy into it, she asserted, stating:

I feel like as soon as you get teachers or students or parents who start saying things like, ‘Well, that’s not academic,’ or ‘that doesn’t belong here,’ or ‘that’s stupid,’ . . . I feel like the kids won’t buy in because a lot of students are very resistant to start talking about emotional and social things. So, as soon as they start hearing that negativity, I think a lot of them will back out.

Considerable effort must be given to getting school-wide and community-wide buy-in before students can be expected to buy into an SEL initiative. A high school student who is already weary of and most likely not going to talk about emotions in the classroom will be more likely to
continue to resist to do so, if there is any sense that the adults around them do not buy into the value of SEL in the classroom.

An administrator shared that he tries to build student buy-in by using SEL strategies when he works with students who come to the office with a peer conflict, a bullying report, or other social emotional issue. Taking these natural opportunities to utilize SEL strategies can help build student buy-in. He shared a specific example of an incident between two boys and one girl:

One was threatening to fight the other. At least the other was being told he was going to. They all have hard family relationships at home with broken families . . . and they seem to be lonely . . . [and] they don’t seem to have a lot of self-confidence. So, while talking naturally to each individually I was trying to . . . I was letting each of them remember, cause they had been friends, the other person’s position and their vulnerabilities, and their challenges that they wrestle with . . . [to] help them realize that they have more in common and they can support and help each other more than being somewhat manipulated into a fighting situation and to build on a past friendship and relation they had. It’s a delicate conversation because you really can’t share information, but to just open their sight to see and help each other to see why each of them are responding that way, and then also helping them think about why they’re feeling the way they are.

The next day after the conversations this administrator had with each of the male students, one of them came up to him and showed the text he sent the other student, “which was apologetic and . . . nice,” this administrator stated. It was from these types of outcomes that he further saw the value of finding natural ways to infuse SEL into the day-to-day struggles that students have. This promotes student buy-in and helps students to recognize the value in building their own social emotional skills so that they can successfully respond to life’s challenges and stressors.
The administrator also discovered that taking the time to encourage students to recognize and deal with their emotions in healthy ways “helps [the students] know that you listen and care about them,” which strengthens student-staff relationships.

One last way to build student buy-in is to infuse SEL into the academic learning process in ways that are relevant and relatable, according to one participant in the teacher group. She said she believed that these students “could be the smartest [people] in the world but without social emotional learning skills, I don’t think [they are going to] really ever be successful the way they want to be.” So, she was infusing the importance of SEL skills along with academic skills throughout her instruction. In her own words:

I want them to be ready to handle their world. I mean that’s one of the goals of history, is to give them the background and the empathy to interact with people from different cultures and understand that that’s okay and it’s okay to be different from them. And part of that, I think, is being able to walk out of here knowing how to handle those social responsibilities, knowing how to control themselves, knowing how to build resilience, how to take those setbacks.

Connecting the academic content with SEL skills helps build student buy-in by providing them with the relevance of and importance of SEL in students’ school experiences, to prepare them for real life.

School leadership has to provide varied, individualized and on-going/consistent professional development to build staff SEL capacity. All three participant groups had a common theme focused on the importance of professional development. All four teachers mentioned professional development in their interviews, and professional development was identified as a theme in three out of the teachers’ four coded transcripts. All four administrators
talked about professional development being necessary, and two out of the administrators’ four coded transcripts revealed professional development as a theme. All four participants in the support staff group mentioned professional development as a necessary resource, and three out of their four coded transcripts identified professional development as a theme.

Within the professional development theme, participants consistently supported the need for specific SEL strategies for teachers to choose from, emphasized the importance of time to review a variety of resources and discuss with colleagues, and stressed that it was essential to ensure that SEL remain a consistent focus in professional development for a long period of time and available to all different stakeholders (i.e. teachers, paraprofessionals, office staff). Each of these areas are subsequently explored and supported.

**SEL strategies.** Participants within all three groups shared that, for the SEL initiative at their school to be successful, they needed to either provide (if they were an administrator or trainer) or be provided with (if they were teachers and support staff) a variety of SEL specific strategies to try in their classroom or within their particular setting within the school. An administrator stated that he thought what was most important was to:

Help them [teachers] understand how they can best inform their practice in a way that’s going to engage kids. In a way that’s going to support kids, in a way that’s going to help kids come to the table ready and willing and enthusiastic about learning.

A teacher similarly stated, “I think the biggest thing that would help teachers now . . . are those concrete strategies . . . things to try. I think that’s something that’d be the most influential.” A member of the support staff group remarked: “People assume we have done it already but we have not.” He was referring to implementing SEL strategies while working with students.
This was a common sentiment among participants: they lacked specific training in SEL and lacked strategies. For example, a support staff member suggested that the school should offer training in how to deal with difficult staff, students and parents so that they could “respond to people in ways that they could hear,” for he often noticed that when dealing with someone in an emotional state, he/she would often not be able to respond to the assistance offered. A counselor saw the benefit of providing professional development for counselors, social workers, school psychologists, and other support staff to provide them with solution-focused techniques that could quickly get the student to return to the classroom within an appropriate time frame. Several participants stated that they needed strategies for themselves but also other strategies they could offer to their students who needed them as well to effectively cope with the stressors of their school day. For example, a teacher wanted to share with her students “ways to cope . . . [with the] social anxiety of being a teenager,” or, ways to become aware of their emotions and build their capacity to regulate them. Overall, there was a common belief amongst the participants that future professional development must include a variety of concrete strategies for staff and approaches to equip students with stronger SEL skills.

**Time to review and discuss resources.** Throughout many of the interviews, the idea of providing concrete time for all staff members to review resources and discuss not only within their departments, but especially in mixed groups across departments and with other support staff (i.e. counselors, paraprofessionals, administrative assistants) was mentioned as vital in the success of this SEL initiative. One teacher stated, “We’re at a discussion phase. . . . Conversations are happening, but it’s not structured.” She identified the need to build professional learning communities (PLCs) where they “read articles and discuss areas of education” in interdisciplinary groups. She went on to say that “we need to have pointed
questions where we discuss and . . . debate.” In addition, she expressed that she believed that these conversations should also take place in the wider community outside of the school.

Another teacher expressed that she thought that it was effective when previous professional development focused on SEL included a presentation and then a discussion amongst teachers in interdisciplinary groups so that they could “bounce ideas off [of] each other . . . and talk about what this would actually look like” in the classroom. She recognized that this was useful and that future professional development should utilize a similar structure.

One of the counselors recognized the power in the level of conversation teachers were suddenly engaged in since SEL had become a focus in the district and since several professional development workshops had been provided. In her role as a support staff member, she noted that this initiative had “made it easier . . . to talk to teachers about it.” Previously, teachers were not necessarily seen as available to hear, discuss, or explore the topic of SEL when counselors suggested the benefits of doing so. She also alluded to the power of these conversations and the need to continue them to see progress. Another support staff member shared:

Working in small groups and getting to talk to each other about this stuff in the classroom and ways that this can be worked out is so valuable . . . [and] time to cross-collaborate, not just with your own department, but [with other] staff [so we] can get to know each other . . . [and] learn from each other.

A counselor also asserted the importance of reading timely scholarly journal articles and resources to spark conversation. She stated:

I think . . . everybody [should] read the same journal article and then discuss it. . . . If you’re sitting with people that you would never in a million years have this kind of discussion with and you learn important things not only about them but about what they
see in the classroom, or what their family is like, and how they’ve experienced different things . . . that deepens the relationships between or amongst those people.

She further explained that it also provides each other with a different perspective of what is going on in the classroom.

Overall, the previous professional development that incorporated small, interdisciplinary group discussions was well-received and seen as valuable and integral in the success of the current SEL initiative. Many participants recommended more of the same on a consistent level in the future so that teachers could not only learn from each other this way, but they could get to know one another.

*Consistent and long-term whole-school professional development.* Participants from all three groups were very clear that, for this initiative to be successful, school leaders must be invested in and committed to the SEL initiative as a long-term focus; as a result, they needed to provide consistent, on-going professional development. An administrator pointed out that “it’s more than just the type of training.” He stated: “I think the type of training is important and then I think the overall school culture of . . . emphasizing, and putting a great deal of importance to this, and also giving permission to make this a priority for each individual teacher” in a consistent and sustainable way was paramount. Also, this leader asserted that training and professional development must be provided “for not just our certified teachers, but for our non-certified staff,” as well. He confirmed that such training must remain “a constant topic in our leadership meetings as opposed to the many other possible focus areas that may be looking for attention.” Similarly, a teacher opined that staff should be trained in different SEL strategies or approaches before attempting to implement them in the classroom. Essential, too, the teacher explained, are opportunities to debrief with colleagues about what went well, what they struggled
with and how they might adjust their approach in the future, if needed. In connection with this, an administrator stated that administrators should frequently visit teachers’ classrooms to observe these strategies being utilized and then have a conversation with the teacher about their process to help build their practice. In this case, professional development would go far beyond a workshop or training, given that administrators would observe classroom-level SEL implementation and then engage in a reflective exchange with the teacher to ensure growth.

One of the teachers stated that it would be helpful to learn “research about the benefits [and] impacts” of SEL implementation. This was the case throughout the previous school year as was a consistent offering of a variety of relevant workshops related to SEL. Another teacher reflected upon the previous school year and stated, “It was pretty consistent throughout the year that there was always something being shared, or some professional opportunity that we could engage in with the workshops.” For example, all teachers and paraprofessionals were required on the first professional development day of the school year to attend a workshop, at which an overview of SEL was presented. The second workshop, which was optional and provided a few months later, focused on how to work with students with anxiety. A few months after that, a workshop on mindfulness in the classroom was offered, and then a resilience documentary was viewed and discussed by all in small mixed department and position groups. On the last professional development day of the school year, a variety of teacher wellness workshops were offered, like yoga, weight lifting, financial wellness, and back health. A teacher positively noted the consistency in offerings during the year and made a point to say that these practices must continue. She also suggested that the school create and share a “consistent message,” for example, a vision for the SEL initiative, and develop and utilize a shared SEL language for consistency. A counselor also suggested that using common language with students would be
valuable because “semantics is super important with mental health,” an area that SEL often links with. A district-wide SEL and restorative justice committee has been formed to oversee the creation and oversight of the district’s SEL vision and the vocabulary and knowledge needed to do so effectively.

Participants continuously expressed that consistency was key to successful SEL implementation. For example, a counselor stated: “I don’t want this to be one of the things that we talk about for a year and then don’t talk about again because every year, every classroom, every period, kids are struggling with things.” She continued to state: “This is a part of all of our lives . . . so we might as well talk about.” We should ask each other the following: “What do you need as an individual? And we should ask, what do we need as a group to feel better about ourselves, about our work? And, how can we help others?” Asking these questions explicitly and consistently, she asserted, would help ensure that it is a long-term initiative.

Findings suggest that a variety of stakeholders saw the value in professional development that is consistent and long-term so that all stakeholders could be a part of the learning process. The data also revealed a strong sense of commitment to the initiative. It became clear that teachers and other staff needed to take their time to build their skills and knowledge of SEL so that they could implement these new instructional and classroom management strategies with confidence and fidelity. They also expressed that they needed to have time to reflect on and discuss the process and implementation with colleagues to build each other’s capacities, to learn from each other, and to ultimately build a climate of professional growth. As one counselor so aptly put it, “The more that we’re reminded that it is okay to take a breather and figure out ourselves, the better.”
All stakeholders must intentionally work towards building a climate and culture of community, communication, and connection. Much of the participant’s responses included a need to focus on building climate and culture. Specific to an SEL initiative, especially one that is practitioner-driven and non-standardized, a sense of community must be established amongst all stakeholders, consistent open communication across and within stakeholder groups must occur, and opportunities must be provided for students to feel connected to other students, teachers/staff, and community members. Community, communication, and connection will be explored and supported throughout this section.

Community. When the various participants spoke about the importance of building community when implementing an SEL initiative in their school, they referred to two different types of communities: classroom and school-wide. The building of the culture and climate of both of these communities has an impact on the success of the SEL initiative.

Building a community in the classroom means establishing and creating an environment in which students feel safe and able to take risks, make mistakes, and challenge each other’s ideas. Participants from all three groups (administrators, teachers, counselors/support staff) spoke specifically about the importance of building a positive classroom environment where all students feel comfortable and ready to learn. One administrator stated that many teachers are creating a community in their classrooms by providing students with the opportunity to feel comfortable coming to school, . . . comfortable within their classrooms, . . .[and] willing to challenge themselves, . . .[and] willing to challenge their peers and their teachers. They feel comfortable, they don’t show signs of closing up because they may feel like they’re going to be judged or seen as ridiculed, but instead feel confident that they’re going to be able to participate and engage without harm.
A teacher similarly stated that “building up a community in a classroom where we . . . embrace students on that personal level . . . having that relationship with students, helping them with their high and their lows” helps to make “a community where mistakes are okay.” She shared that, because she focused on building this type of classroom community throughout the past school year as a result of the SEL initiative, “this is one of the first years where . . . [she has not] had a single student fail.” Also, she did not have a student say that he/she wasn’t going to do the final project for the class. She believed that this was because of her focus on classroom community and “teaching [students] to handle . . . struggles and . . . frustrations.”

This teacher shared a specific example: She had one student who was very disengaged and would often state that she would not do the class work. In response to this, the teacher said to her, “Okay, well, that’s not a choice, you can’t just sit here and not do anything, so what are some ways you can handle that instead?” As a result, the teacher said that the student “developed a lot of very positive strategies,” like working in the hallway, or making up work in study hall later if she couldn’t focus, and then she would come back to the teacher with her work, or even “go to homework club after school and sort of make up some of that work.” This teacher found: “Taking time with her to talk . . . instead of just sort of yelling at her and sort of making her disengage more, sort of talking to her about what can you do better [and] how do you fix it when you do have bad days” produced a more positive outcome: The student passed the class, which was not the case in a similar course the year prior.

Within a successful SEL initiative a need also exists to focus on building a school community of respect, kindness, and engagement. One of the support staff consistently commented on the need for building school community and how this school has done so. She stated that it starts with freshman orientation where the students are given the message that “we
will give you respect and we expect it in return. And we expect that respect will be shown to each other.” Then in sophomore year, they have the *Power of Words* program that she was part of overseeing. All day sophomores are engaged in activities, presentations, and conversations around the power that words have. She described it by stating, “It’s a day where so much awareness of what others are going through” is being established, which provides “an opportunity to teach some empathy.” Upperclassmen who volunteer to be a part of this program “receive eight hours of training outside of school hours on diversity, leadership, self-awareness, stereotypes . . . [and] what’s happening here at [our school].” They are then given tools to respond to disrespect, stand up for others, and discern how to stop bullying or other unkind acts. Then these upperclassmen essentially share what they learn from this training and share their own stories of bullying, transformation, and growth. Volunteer teachers participate in conversations with these students also, so it genuinely builds a school-wide community of acceptance and kindness.

A teacher also stated that the school as a whole was committed to building a community with a collective vision towards implementing SEL. A Social Emotional Learning/Restorative Justice Committee was established and was comprised of a variety of administrators, teachers, counselors and support staff. The committee started with creating a vision and mission by collaboratively answering the following questions: “What is social emotional learning. What does this look like for [our school]? What can teachers do on a daily basis to support that?” This teacher stated that this committee helped in moving the SEL initiative into “an active goal that we are working on as a community.”

An administrator shared his vision of how a school can build community. He stated:
I think you’d envision it with . . . on the adult level, with adults that put the well-being of their students first and foremost in laying the groundwork for educating them. The adults are cognizant of their colleagues and the importance of working collaboratively through their colleagues, of treating their colleagues well, of being kind, of being able to engage in civilized discourse. For students, it’s students that are comfortable coming to school, students that are comfortable within their classrooms, that are willing to challenge themselves. They’re willing to challenge themselves, they’re willing to challenge their peers, and their teachers. They feel comfortable, they don’t show signs of closing up because they may feel like they’re going to be judged or ridiculed, but instead feel confident that they’re going to be able to participate and engage without harm.

He said he believed that this has been the case for most of the staff and students at the school for many years now; however, he had also seen an increased focus on these types of behaviors throughout the school since the implementation of the SEL initiative. And, he asserted that teachers recognize this also and “and are pleased that we’re purposely moving in this direction because it just reinforces something that they already appreciated with the community.” Essentially, he saw SEL as making an already strong school community even stronger.

**Communication.** According to the participants in this study, to move an SEL initiative forward, open lines of communication must exist amongst all stakeholders in the “whole community.” This section will focus on what participants shared about the communication that had already been established even before the initiative, the additional conversations that took place amongst staff members as a direct result of SEL professional development, and the anticipated impact on-going communication and conversations around SEL may have on this school in the future.
An administrator proudly stated that communication amongst administrators is and has been very strong, which has had an impact on the school climate and culture. He stated:

We have the benefit of having a very, I think, tight and cohesive administrative team that goes into classrooms all the time and communicates with each other so that within the building, the leadership is getting a first-hand view of what’s happening in the classroom. And most importantly, we’re talking about it with each other and if we saw a problem we would know to address it.

This, to him, was instrumental in helping to move this SEL initiative forward as quickly as it did. He also said:

I think another piece that plays to our advantage is that our students and our parents are not at all shy about informing us when they feel that a teacher is behaving in a way that’s contrary to these norms. So, that gives us an opportunity to intervene when there is a problem in the classroom.

The existing environment of open communication made this initiative easier to implement in the early stages. At the end of the interview, this administrator heeded a warning to other schools interested in implementing an SEL initiative if they do not already have this kind of culture. He remarked:

If you’re in a toxic environment or if you’re in an environment in which teachers feel like their purpose is to teach and this type of thing is not their responsibility, then you have an awful lot of work to do before you get to the point of even introducing it.

This is something for leaders to think about and address before beginning implementation.

Another administrator made a comment in regards to her experience in a previous school district that further supports this notion. She stated: “While my building was not in a place to move in
that direction, we started to lay the groundwork for it.” She went on to say that they began
providing readings and other resources for the district to begin implementation; however, a
culture of communication, collaboration, and connection was not established. She stated that
“my staff at that school was in a punitive mindset, and so after a lot of reflecting, I knew that it
was almost going to be impossible to move that building along.” She recognized that they needed
to work on the school culture before they could continue to move in this direction.

The culture of open communication in the school in this study provided an opportunity
for immediate growth in this area as a direct result of SEL professional development. A
counselor made consistent comments about how there was an increase in staff communication
after each professional development session. She stated, “I’ve been having different kinds of
conversations with many teachers with whom I haven’t had those conversations before. So, it’s
been helpful.” She also shared the following:

I had a lot of people at one of the presentations . . . [and] we were talking about different
apps and things. . . . [I told them to contact] me after that, and people I would not have
necessarily have expected to [did]. And they were doing it either for themselves or for
family members or friends who have expressed concern and distress with anxiety, and so
it kind of just opened up the opportunity to have that conversation.

The counselor noted that, although the initiative was geared towards helping students with social
emotional skills and issues, she saw a positive impact on teachers. She stated that again after a
professional development presentation on SEL, “I would have teachers come down and say I’m
worried about this, I’m worried about that and it’s like, alright, well, what are you going to do to
help yourself? What are some of the resources you can reach out to and take advantage of?” She
thought this was powerful and good for the teachers. She stated, “Yes, it’s about the student and
that’s been important for sure but it really did open the conversations a lot more” for staff and their own well-being.

Despite all of this positive reflection on the strength of the school’s communication amongst staff, a support staff member recognized the need for continual growth in this area and the impact it could have on the school. He stated, “What I hope for is an improvement in the ability of staff to communicate as a whole. With each other, with students, with everyone . . . the whole community.” Communication should be happening amongst all stakeholders, not just staff. The whole community inside and outside of the school must be talking. He also mentioned that we all need to further build our capacities “to communicate with someone who is difficult.” In his role, he said he often had to respond to those who were not in a positive frame of mind and were unable to communicate effectively, so he saw this as a specific need. Overall, the importance of existing communication, increased communication as a result of the SEL initiative, and the pursuit of further growth in this area to include the whole community is paramount to the successful implementation of a high school’s SEL initiative.

**Connection.** Building a climate where students and staff feel connected with each other is also an important element in an SEL initiative. Teachers identified connecting with students as important and necessary to meet the diverse needs of students. Also, teachers want to feel connected to students and their colleagues. Many participants noted that students were becoming more connected to the school as a result of the SEL initiative. All of these aspects will be explored in this section.

First, an analysis of the interview scripts made it very clear that teachers believed that making connections with students was of the upmost importance when trying to build a positive school culture and climate. One teacher emphatically stated, “You can’t write a kid off. You
have to connect with them. They all have potential, and they just might not have had an adult who connected with them,” so an adult in the school needs to make this effort. She went on to say that students need an adult connection to achieve: “A lot of these kids just didn’t have parents who followed up. When they had a surrogate parent [like herself] who followed up, they would start achieving.” Additionally, she stated that teachers must connect with students to see when they are struggling vs. just not caring. She said, “If you don’t have that emotional connection . . . you’re not going to understand what’s going on, you’re just going to see a kid start failing.”

A participant in the counselor/support staff group opined that students have to feel connected, too, but she also included the teachers in this, as well. She first said:

For each student to feel some form of connection is so important and I think to have that person that they can have a relationship with . . . a place that they can feel safe and connected socially, certainly emotionally, to know that they’re seen as a whole person. She suggested that staff members needed to “look at each student as an individual . . . because that’s where they’re going to feel connected.” She also recognized the importance of teachers feeling connected. She stated, “You have to understand that we have adults in the building that we also have to work with to figure out how we are going to build that relationship. How are we going to connect here?” Not all staff members felt connected, and this certainly did not set them up for building strong connections with students.

The school’s SEL initiative has made an impact on staff and student connections, according to several participants. One teacher stated that SEL “appeals to my desire to connect with the person as opposed to just delivering the material and moving on to the next class.” She reflected on the previous school year and stated, “I felt like I never connected with them.” After
the SEL initiative started, she stated that she made a significant effort to connect with students, especially those whom she did not necessarily respond positively to initially. She shared that there was one student in particular that she was specifically proud of for making a connection with him. She stated, “Making that connection with him, and seeing him grow in the classroom, it doesn’t get any better than that.” She also felt that the SEL strategies and approaches were addressing students’ “feelings of loneliness and isolation” given that there was more of a “sense of belonging” being developed.

A member of the support staff recognized changes in connections, too, as a result of the SEL initiative. She shared that there was an increase in the number of students who wanted to participate in various volunteer and mentoring activities throughout the school. She stated, “I think that’s a huge sign that students are feeling more connected here because they want to be involved in these programs and activities that are helping to make a difference.” Also, in response to current school tragedies, many students wanted to do something in the school to show their support for the victims of these tragedies. And, they began a community-wide conversation about how they could be making their own school safer. This support staff member, in response to this, stated, “I think the SEL curriculum and objectives have provided that.” She further explained that students were like, “Okay. Let’s look here. Let’s look at our home here and how we can be making it feel safe [and] a place of connection for students.” Students had not responded to school tragedies in this way before the SEL initiative, so this staff member believed that it could be at least part of the reason why students were suddenly feeling compelled to take action.

The importance of building a climate and culture of community, communication and connection came through very clearly in the analysis of these transcripts. The existing positive
climate and culture of the building helped to move the SEL initiative forward in a short period of time, but the SEL work that teachers and staff were engaged in throughout the school year also had a reciprocal impact on the school’s climate and culture for both staff and students. And, staff members anticipated that the SEL initiative would continue to have a positive impact on the climate and culture of the school.

Summary

In summary, the findings of the study in order to answer the research questions were broken into four themes: (a) Practitioners should first identify the value of an SEL initiative specific to the context of the school; (b) Administrators must buy into the initiative and then take their time to develop teacher and student buy-in; (c) School leadership has to provide varied, individualized and on-going/consistent professional development to build staff SEL capacity; and (d) All stakeholders must intentionally work towards building a climate and culture of community, communication and connection. A suburban high school spent a school year attempting to implement a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative with no framework or guidance in how to do so. Through this process, they learned there needs to be a discussion around why this initiative would be valuable to the specific school and its context, first and foremost. This was accomplished by first identifying the non-academic barriers that students were struggling with in the classroom at that point in time. Then, time, resources, and professional development were provided throughout the year for all staff members so that they could begin to choose specific SEL strategies that they thought could benefit their students’ particular needs. Giving staff choices, flexibility, and ownership over the process established buy-in. Buy-in occurred because it started with administrators, then worked its way to teachers and then, as a result, to students. The participants stressed the importance of this particular order
of buy-in. They also stressed the importance of providing consistent, long-term professional development so that the initiative would not become a one-time effort that eventually faded out. Lastly, the importance of having a culture of community, communication, and connection was identified as necessary before and during implementation for the initiative to be successful.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this case study was to explore how one suburban high school approached a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning (SEL) initiative during the first year of implementation. This chapter presents a discussion and interpretation of the major findings presented in Chapter 4. In addition, this chapter presents a discussion of the findings in relation to the theoretical framework—Fullan’s (2016) theory of educational/organizational change, and a discussion of the findings in relation to the literature review. Lastly, implications of the study, limitations of the study, future research, and a personal reflection follow.

Discussion of the Major Findings

The following four themes were found upon analysis of the 12 interview scripts: (a) Practitioners should first identify the value of an SEL initiative specific to the context of the school; (b) Administrators must buy into the initiative and then take their time to develop teacher and student buy-in; (c) School leadership has to provide varied, individualized and on-going/consistent professional development to build staff SEL capacity; and (d) All stakeholders must intentionally work towards building a climate and culture of community, communication and connection. These themes will be discussed in relation to the main research question and the two sub-questions.

**Practitioners should first identify the value of an SEL initiative specific to the context of the school.** At the very beginning of this school’s SEL initiative, practitioners were asked to identify the non-academic barriers that this approach could reduce. This occurred during a district-wide workshop intended to provide a basic understanding of SEL, the prevailing research that supports SEL, and how such an initiative could impact teaching practices and student outcomes. This opportunity provided practitioners with collaborative time to share the
struggles that their students were encountering, which helped them to see the value of an SEL initiative in their school. The 12 participants in this study were asked about the value they saw in the SEL initiative in their school, which was one of the sub-questions this study intended to answer, and three non-academic barriers emerged as most prevalent not only for students but for teachers as well. The three non-academic barriers were: (a) The basic need to feel safe in school; (b) The importance of managing anxiety; and (c) The ability to regulate emotions. In relation to the other sub-question this research study intended to answer, identifying and beginning to address these non-academic barriers was seen as one of the opportunities presented in the early stages of implementing SEL.

The first non-academic barrier identified was, students and staff need to feel safe in their learning environment before they engaged as learners and teachers. One administrator stated that students “can’t learn from all of the people here, if [they] are too afraid.” A teacher stated that “kids recess into the background because they’re afraid of their peers in the room.” Also, an administrator pointed out the importance of teachers feeling safe enough to take risks and make mistakes. But, a teacher stated that she often does not feel safe to speak openly in the classroom because of how a “litigious and judgmental society” characterized the present time. This fear of judgment stifles a teacher’s ability to speak freely and comfortably, and it prohibits many students from asking and answering questions in the classroom. A hesitant teacher and a classroom of nervous and uncomfortable students does not create a safe learning environment. The participants in this study repeatedly commented on the improvement seen as a result of the SEL initiative in their school in regards to feeling safe. One teacher said she was taking more risks to be honest with students, and she saw that some of her students were taking more
opportunities to speak out in class. Overall, the practitioners were seeing positive changes and hoped that this would continue as a direct result of the SEL initiative.

Participants also saw value in the SEL initiative in terms of managing and decreasing student and teacher anxiety. This was seen as the most prevalent mental health concern amongst students. Three out of the four administrators referred to anxiety as a reason to implement the SEL initiative. Teachers and counselors agreed. One teacher shared, “I would hope that maybe the level of anxiety that kids are feeling goes down.” A counselor also stated, “I do think there is an increase in anxiety” among students. Another counselor also stated that staff members were seeking assistance with anxiety, as well. Overall, the hope that was conveyed was that the amount of anxiety people experienced would decrease as a result of the SEL initiative.

Students and teachers learning to strengthen their skills in regulating emotions was another area of value discussed throughout the transcripts. An administrator stated, “We should be paying very close attention to . . . the emotional well-being and emotional intelligence of the staff here” because the adults need to be an “emotional resource” for students. And, students who lack emotional regulation struggle to learn and be successful. As one administrator recognized, a student who is “too angry or too sad” is not available for learning.

**Administrators must buy into the initiative and then take their time to develop teacher and student buy-in.** The participants in this study touted the importance of building buy-in to the SEL initiative for it to be successful. Identifying the value of the initiative by identifying the needs and issues that it can address, as discussed previously, is the first step in the process of implementing the initiative as a whole school; however, building buy-in amongst administrators must happen first before the staff, according to members of this study. The order of buy-in became apparent throughout the analysis of the transcripts: First administrators must
buy into the importance of the SEL initiative, then the teachers, and then the students. Building buy-in during the early stages of an SEL initiative was also seen as one of the challenges, which relates to one of the sub-questions of this study, as well. As one administrator stated, the “hardest part of putting this initiative out there is in getting a level of buy-in, a level of acceptance from our administration.”

First, administrators must have buy-in before teachers can. One administrator recognized this and stated that, because members of the administration “embraced” the initiative, “the rest of the staff embraced it.” A counselor also stated that the initiative was “better received” because it came from administrators. Another counselor recognized that the support of administration in this initiative was part of its success. She stated, “People feel comfortable going and asking questions because they know that they will receive support. . . . [They] are not afraid to make a mistake . . . [and] aren’t afraid to go to admin to talk about something” related to the initiative. This perception of administrator buy-in and support provided teachers with the opportunity to build their own buy-in.

Building teacher buy-in to the initiative comes next, and this step takes time and patience. Teachers are overwhelmed with responsibilities and the pressure of implementing several new initiatives, so giving them a choice of whether or not to participate in the initiative and how to participate was crucial in the success of the implementation. One teacher stated, “So far it’s been great that it’s a voluntary thing that teachers can choose to listen to, choose to participate in, or not.” She went on to say, “As soon as you tell teachers they have to do this, I think you build up a lot more resentment.” This resentment would lead to a resistance to the initiative. An administrator agreed with this sentiment by stating, “I don’t think it’s something that can be handed to people to say, ‘Implement this.’” A second administrator stated that what “was most
important in the beginning was to take it slow . . . rather than hammer people over the head and say ‘Get in line.’” Also, a teacher shared her experience in trying different SEL strategies and realizing “that it did make a difference.” Having the time and space to explore in her own way provided her with the opportunity to buy into the initiative.

In this school SEL initiative, student buy-in was just beginning to be thought about at the end of the first school year of implementation. A teacher espoused that student buy-in could only happen if there was “school-wide support” including administrators, teachers, and even parents, though parent buy-in was not widely mentioned. One teacher suggested that a “robust advisory program” be developed to build student connections and relationships. She also recommended finding ways to recognize more students in a variety of ways beyond “traditional excellence” to build student buy-in to an SEL initiative and to make them feel more valued and connected to the school community. Another teacher suggested infusing SEL into the academic learning process in ways that were relevant and relatable for students. More work is anticipated at this school in the next year to further build the buy-in of students.

**School leadership has to provide varied, individualized and on-going/consistent professional development to build staff SEL capacity.** As previously mentioned, a district-wide workshop was presented to all stakeholders to introduce the SEL initiative as a first step; however, the professional development identified as necessary to build the capacity of practitioners was consistently and strongly recommended by all of the study participants. During every professional development day during the first year of the initiative, a variety of SEL workshops were offered as choices. For example, workshops around the following topics were offered: anxiety, mindfulness, growth mindset, resilience, trauma, physical health, and yoga. The workshops addressed the social and emotional needs of both students and teachers, which is
important to point out. A district or school, according to participants in this study, should not only help teachers to address these needs for students but also for themselves, first and foremost. When teachers are aware of their own social emotional needs and begin to build their own competencies, then, and only then, can they begin to address the same needs in their students. An administrator pointed out that “giving permission to make this a priority for each individual teacher” is of the upmost importance in an SEL initiative. He then explained that professional development must not just be for “our certified teachers, but for our non-certified staff,” as well.

The participants in this study also suggested that more professional development must be provided consistently and long-term, which was seen as a challenge in this initiative and in all school initiatives. As one counselor stated, “I don’t want this to be one of the things that we talk about for a year and then don’t talk about again.” Not only does professional development need to happen, a school or district must be persistent in its offerings. In terms of professional development content, the participants in this study wanted to specifically learn about a variety of “concrete [SEL] strategies” that they could choose from and utilize in their classroom to see which ones proved the most impactful for them and their students. They also wanted time to review and discuss SEL resources, not just for ideas, but for time get to know their colleagues. A teacher stated, we need to “bounce ideas off of each other . . . and talk about what this would actually look like” in the classroom. A counselor shared that when you are sitting down and talking with one another about a research article, for example, you can “learn important things not only about them but about what they see in the classroom or what their family is like and how they’ve experienced different things.” That, she further stated, “deepens the relationships between or amongst those people.” So, the time to discuss amongst all staff, including teachers
and non-certified members, provides ideas and builds relationships that may not have been created otherwise.

**All stakeholders must intentionally work towards building a climate and culture of community, communication and connection.** In addition to answering the question of how to implement an SEL initiative, this theme provides a response to the question about the opportunities found during the early stages of implementation. Naturally, the opportunity presented when focusing on SEL is building the climate and culture of the school community. However, on the other hand, it was also pointed out by one administrator that having both a positive culture and climate before implementation makes it easier for the SEL initiative to be successful, which makes considerable sense; there is less work to be done. The participants in this study specifically described that this SEL initiative strengthened the culture of community, communication, and connection, especially because it was a practitioner-driven initiative.

The participants focused considerably on the building of classroom and school-wide community. Doing so, one administrator said, provided students with the opportunity to feel “comfortable coming to school . . . comfortable within their classrooms . . . [and] willing to challenge themselves, peers, and . . . teachers.” A support staff member shared that the building of this community started with freshman orientation where students were given the message from their teachers and peers that “we will give you respect and we expect it in return. And we expect that respect will be shown to each other.” Upperclassmen ran groups during this orientation, and they were prepared to establish this expectation. The sense of community was further strengthened throughout the implementation of this initiative, in part through the creation of an SEL/Restorative Justice Committee involving a group of volunteer practitioners to establish a collective vision for future SEL work in the school and district.
Communication amongst all the stakeholders in the “whole community” was identified as a necessary component of a successful SEL initiative. Though communication existed prior to the initiative, immediate growth was seen in this area as a direct result of SEL professional development. A counselor stated, “I’ve been having different kinds of conversations with many teachers with whom I haven’t had those conversations before. So, it’s been helpful.” She elaborated, saying, “Yes, it’s about the student and that’s been important for sure but it really did open the conversations a lot more” for staff and their own well-being. The hope for even more growth in this area was anticipated by a support staff member who stated, “What I hope for is an improvement in the ability of staff to communicate as a whole. With each other, with students, with everyone, . . . the whole community.”

Building a climate where students and staff feel connected with each other is also an important element in an SEL initiative. Teachers connecting with each other and with students is paramount in creating a positive culture, and it is necessary so teachers can get to know students and meet their diverse and individual needs. Every student is important: “You can’t write a kid off. You have to connect with them. They all have potential, and they just might not have had an adult who connected with them” and that is why they are not succeeding, asserted one teacher with deep empathy. A support staff member also suggested the importance of connection amongst the adults in the building. She said, “You have to understand that we have adults in the building that we also have to work with to figure out how we are going to build that relationship.”

Participants recognized the improvement in staff and student connections as a result of the SEL initiative. One teacher stated that she built a connection with a student and that she may never have done so before the initiative. She said that “making that connection with him, and
seeing him grow in the classroom, it doesn’t get any better than that.” She had a renewed sense of accomplishment and impact. A support staff member identified that more students wanted to be involved in “programs and activities that are helping to make a difference” as a result of the initiative, too.

Overall, though the climate in this school was viewed as positive before this SEL initiative was implemented, participants recognized an increase in the sense of community, an increase in communication, and an increase in connections between colleagues and between staff and students, which they attributed to SEL.

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature**

How to effectively implement and sustain the impacts of an SEL initiative are relatively newer ideas in SEL research that need further attention (Hoffman, 2009), which was a need this study aimed in part to address. Though various SEL programs (i.e. SOAR, MindUp, Responsive Classroom) have been found successful (CASEL, 2013), some researchers have suggested that school-wide, contextual approaches that incorporate a variety of SEL approaches may prove to be more impactful and sustainable (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Wilson et al., 2001). The results of this study offer some insight into the promise of such a contextual, practitioner-driven, non-standardized approach to an SEL initiative.

**SEL and school safety.** Practitioners in this study perceived that an SEL initiative could impact the sense of safety in the school. Previous research has shown that if teachers focus on SEL, students may feel safer at school (Cervone & Cushman, 2015; B. H. Smith & Low, 2013). Some of the research has suggested that feelings of safety are increased as a result of SEL because there are fewer discipline issues, suspensions, and expulsions (Sheetman & Leichtentritt, 2004; Whetstone et al., 2015; Whitted, 2011; Zahn, 2015). An environment with fewer
behavioral issues and a decrease in punitive measures may contribute to increased feelings of student safety. This study suggests that both teachers and students may feel safer and more comfortable in a climate that is focused on SEL.

**SEL and anxiety.** In sync with a study conducted by Wigelsworth et al. (2012), the SEL initiative in the school in which this current study was conducted was perceived to have value as a way to improve “the emotional health and well-being of all who learn and work in schools” (p. 214). The practitioners interviewed for this study shared that this initiative was having an impact on both teachers and students. One common area of improvement that the practitioners in this study and those in the context studied by Wigelsworth et al. (2012) hoped for was “reduced mental health difficulties” (Wigelsworth et al., 2012). The specific mental health issue that practitioners in this study hoped to see a reduction in was anxiety. Previous studies have looked at the impact SEL programs have on teachers, and some have found that they can decrease the stress level that comes with their profession (Collie et al., 2011, 2012; Lizuka et al., 2014; Waajid et al., 2013). The fact that anxiety was identified as a current issue that could potentially be addressed by the school’s SEL initiative reinforces the data that suggests the existence of an increase in societal stressors and fears that are affecting the social and emotional development of children (Burnham, 2009; Stauffer et al., 2012; Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004).

**SEL and emotion regulation.** An ability to regulate one’s emotions was recognized as important, yet lacking in this school setting. Both in this study and in former research, it has been shown that a lack of emotional regulation not only gets in the way of learning, but can also impede one’s ability to be successful in life (Durlak et al., 2011; S. M. Jones & Bailey, 2014). Research has also shown that a focus on SEL in schools helps students to become more emotionally regulated (S. M. Jones & Bailey, 2014). Emerson et al. (2017) studied the impact of
mindfulness interventions for stressed teachers, and they found that teachers had “more effective emotion regulation strategies” (p. 1145) as a result. This is not surprising, considering that the definition of SEL includes one’s ability to “manage emotions” (CASEL, 2015).

**SEL and teachers.** Previous research has suggested that when teachers drive SEL implementation, more long-term success is found because they are able to identify needs, create/research interventions, and build their own capacity to implement them within their unique contexts (Barry et al., 2017; Henson, 2001; Stanulis et al., 2016). Thus, SEL “approaches must be designed to match the needs and contexts of individual schools and communities” (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 5), which is what has taken place in the context of the current study.

The participants in this study identified the need to build both the buy-in of teachers and their own social emotional competence (SEC) before they could begin to address the SEL in the classroom. This resonates with past research that has found that teachers’ SEC impacts their relationships with students, their level of classroom management, and their effectiveness in SEL implementation (Brackett et al., 2012; Dolev & Leshem, 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As one teacher in this study stated, she noticed that once she began to address SEL in the classroom, she saw an increase in her students’ willingness to participate in class, and she saw an impact on student academic outcomes: no students had failed her courses, which was not so in past school years. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) asserted that an emotionally competent and aware teacher builds stronger relationships with their students due in part to the increased ability of the teacher to understand his or her students. “[A] teacher who recognizes an individual student’s emotions, understands the cognitive appraisals that may be associated with these emotions, and how these cognitions and emotions motivate the student’s behavior can effectively respond to the student’s individual needs” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 493).
Research has been conducted on whether or not teachers SEC can be improved, and the results have been affirmative (Harvey et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2017). It has also been proven that, when a teacher’s SEC is improved through appropriate professional development, the positive classroom environment thus impacts students (Harvey et al., 2016; Jennings et al., 2017). Therefore, it makes sense that the participants in this study shared that an effective SEL initiative must focus first on the teachers and then on the students.

**SEL and school community, communication, and connection.** As stated previously in the literature review, the key to a school-wide approach is to have SEL “exist everywhere at school, across the building—with every adult in the building on board” (Shafer, 2016, n.p.). That is why participants in this study included administrators, teachers, and counselors/support staff. The participants also recognized the importance of including all stakeholders in their SEL professional development conversations. Including everyone in the initiative is paramount to its success. Including all stakeholders assists in building a positive school culture that promotes community, communication, and connection.

As seen in this study, past research has shown that when educators implement an SEL initiative they see an improvement in school climate, as a result. All stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and community members, want schools to be safe communities where learning is possible (Learning First Alliance, 2001; Weissberg & O’Brien, 2004), especially now, due to the increase in school shootings. Research has shown that schools see a decrease in bullying behaviors when they implement SEL, which contributes to a more positive school environment (Domino, 2013; B. H. Smith & Low, 2013).

Teachers who build their own SEC build stronger teacher-student relationships (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This was further supported by the analysis of participant interviews in the
current study. Dolev and Leshem (2016) found that teachers with stronger emotional skills were able to “better understand students and form closer relationships with them” (p. 87). Also, in another study, “teachers’ EI correlated significantly with teacher reports of closeness to students, suggesting that a positive climate of relations in the classrooms is more likely to occur when the teacher has greater EI” (Poulou, 2017, p. 84). Jennings & Greenberg (2009) studied the relationship between teacher SEC and the impact on classroom community. They found that teachers with stronger SEC respond to classroom conflict more effectively. The teacher’s ability to respond to conflict effectively builds trust between the teacher and his or her students. And, trust is “the most influential variable in any collective human endeavor . . . [and] when we talk about relationship management and creating a supportive learning environment, we are really talking about the development and maintenance of communal trust” (Powell & Kusuma-Powell, 2010, p. 144).

Studies have shown that, when teachers utilize SEL teaching and classroom management strategies centered on collaboration, they see a positive impact on the classroom community, which was also noted by teachers and administrators in this study. Morcom (2014) studied teachers who created collaborative communities in different elementary schools that used Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory as the conceptual model. Based upon student reflection logs and student/parent interviews, the study found that peer friendships were developed and strengthened, which “promoted a sense of . . . classroom community” (Morcom, 2014, p. 28). Collaborative learning has been studied as an effective SEL teaching strategy that promotes interactions between students, building their capacity to appreciate and understand different perspectives, exchange beliefs, support one another, maintain working relationships, build trust, and manage conflicts (Laal, 2013; Laal et al., 2012).
Lastly, research has shown that in schools that focus on SEL, students are more likely to become contributing democratic citizens, as was specifically seen in this current study by one of the support staff participants when she stated that more students were becoming involved in programs and activities that helped support the school community and the greater community. Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (2015) studied many high schools and found that students possessing a high level of social and emotional skills developed a growth mindset that helped them to “persevere when challenged... [to] learn to be mindful, conscientious, and empowered... and develop a sense of social responsibility about making positive contributions to their school community and the wider community beyond” (p. 1). Ayers’ (2010) research on the topic also showed that incorporating SEL into schools helps students to become ethical contributors to a democratic society.

As seen in the high school that was the focus of this study, schools that implement an SEL initiative may see the following improvements: an increase in students’ sense of school safety; a decrease in student and staff anxiety; an increase in student and staff emotion regulation; an increase in teachers’ social and emotional competence with a positive impact on student outcomes; an improvement in the school climate, specifically an increase in the sense of community; an increase in teacher-teacher/support staff and student-teacher communication; and a greater sense of connection amongst teachers and students.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study was driven by Fullan’s (2016) theory of educational/organizational change. The theory is centered around the belief that “change will always fail until we find some way of developing infrastructures and processes that engage teachers in developing and applying new knowledge, skills, and understandings” (Fullan, 2016, p. 27). This study examined the attempt by
one suburban high school to implement a practitioner-driven SEL initiative with the intent to answer how to effectively do so.

Fullan (2016) suggested that there are three revisions/alterations that need to occur to foster meaningful change in teaching: (a) Revising resources, materials, and curriculum; (b) Revising instructional practices; and (c) Altering existing belief systems. The participants in this study shared that their school first provided them with an opportunity to identify the value in an SEL initiative, in which they pointed out the possibility of increasing school safety, decreasing anxiety, and promoting emotion regulation. This could be referred to as altering their belief system; indeed, they were examining the challenges they were seeing in their classroom and how SEL could help them to address those issues to increase their effectiveness as teachers. Then they received a wide variety of professional development opportunities that further strengthened this belief that SEL could decrease non-academic barriers for their students. Teachers then implemented, based on knowledge and choice, SEL instructional strategies and approaches in their classroom and reflected upon the impact on student outcomes. Many participants revealed in their interviews that they began to see a positive impact and that they thus desired more professional development, specifically SEL strategies that they could continue to utilize in their teaching practice.

In Fullan’s (2016) words, it takes re-culturing to effectively promote educational change. Re-culturing is “how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits” (Fullan, 2016, p. 23). This study aimed to answer “how” to implement a practitioner-driven SEL initiative. And Fullan (2016) warned against the “prescription trap” (p. 71), or following a strict program to enact an educational change initiative such as SEL. The school in this study did not implement a specific SEL program, such as SOAR or PATHS. Instead, administrators
empowered their staff to identify the issues in relation to SEL in their school context and helped them to build their skills and knowledge to identify and implement various strategies and approaches. Rigid programs that may have worked in one school context do not necessarily bring success in another context. The staff in any given context has a wealth of information that program creators often lack. This study further confirms the power in Fullan’s (2016) statement that, “Significant educational change consists of changes in beliefs, teaching style, and materials which can come about only through a process of personal development in a social context” (p. 107). It is important to remember that teachers are on the “front lines” doing the day-to-day work, so they should be empowered to be the change agents in educational initiatives.

**Implications of the Study**

The findings in this current study provide insight into how a suburban high school might proceed with a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative. First, a school should provide staff with opportunities to know and understand what the topic is and identify the purpose of or value of the specific initiative. Empowering staff to identify the value then leads to buy-in. Once staff is committed to the initiative, they will need consistent and on-going professional development to build their capacity. Teachers must build their own SEC before they can effectively implement an SEL initiative with students. The process will be more successful in a school that already has a positive school climate and culture, but no matter where the starting point is, the school culture of community, communication, and connection will increase as a result of the initiative. An explicit focus on such culture building is a valuable part of a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative.

Fullan (2016) and his theory of educational change supports the practitioner-driven approach that empowers teachers to drive the process in identifying needs, creating instructional
strategies, and implementing them effectively. More long-term success is found when school practitioners drive the change process, rather than bringing in outside experts to lead internal change. It is more effective to empower teachers, because schools are diverse and what may work in one environment is not necessarily successful in a different context (Barry et al., 2017; Henson, 2001; Stanulis et al., 2016). Thus, SEL “approaches must be designed to match the needs and contexts of individual schools and communities” (S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 5).

SEL initiatives should not only be practitioner-driven, they should also be non-standardized approaches that make sense within the given context (Fullan, 2016; S. M. Jones & Bouffard, 2012). This study reveals that an SEL initiative can and should be responsive to the specific needs of the students in the school/district. The “prescription trap” (Fullan, 2016, p. 71) can and should be avoided when schools are looking to make change, specifically in implementing SEL in which getting to know students, building relationships, and creating a positive school climate are essential to the intent of the initiative. Natural byproducts of a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative, in the context of this study, included increasing school safety, decreasing anxiety, and improving emotion regulation, and building a culture of community, communication and connection. Therefore, the act of empowering teachers in an SEL initiative helps to strengthen the SEC of teachers, which then provides a natural opportunity to impact the SEC of students.

Limitations

While this current study produced positive results, there were limitations to the research. The first limitation is that it was one case study of one suburban high school with a small sample size of 12 participants, with only four participants within each subgroup. The second limitation was that no parents or students were included in the study, so those perspectives were not
presented. The third limitation was that participants in this study voluntarily participated in the SEL initiative in the school, so they already had interest and knowledge that may have influenced their particular perspectives on the initiative. The fourth limitation was that the researcher was also an administrator in the school setting, so the research findings lack the perspective of an outsider, unbiased observer. As a result of these limitations, the findings of this study cannot be easily generalized to other settings.

**Future Research**

This case study was conducted at one suburban high school in Connecticut during the first year of implementation of a practitioner-driven, non-standardized SEL initiative. Future research should include conducting case studies in other contexts: inner-city schools, middle and elementary schools, and schools in different phases of the implementation process. To further expand the findings of this study, future studies may want to also include interviews with students and/or parents to gain these additional perspectives of the process and impact of the initiative. Perhaps future studies could also include focus groups and document analysis to further triangulate data analysis and findings.

The current study and past research findings have suggested that teachers’ SEC can be strengthened and learned; therefore, further studies could look at the importance, impact, and effectiveness of various SEL instruction in teacher preparation programs. Also, analyzing the effectiveness and impact of various professional development opportunities for staff could be helpful in identifying specific effective SEL strategies for teachers to utilize. The interconnectedness between teachers’ SEC and its impact on students’ SEC could be further explored. Lastly, this study did not provide deep understandings of how SEL can be integrated into the curriculum, so studies that look into these strategies would be important. Lastly, future
Conclusion

This case study examined how a suburban high school implemented a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative during the early stages of implementation. The results provide a few key points to consider during early implementation of an SEL initiative. First, giving staff the opportunity to identify the potential value the initiative has in their school context will help build buy-in. Second, administrators need to be committed to the initiative before they try to build teacher buy-in. Third, a school should focus on building the SEC of teachers and staff before attempting to do so with students. Teachers who have strong SEC will better implement SEL strategies in the classroom and will build better relationships with students. Fourth, staff must be provided consistent, long-term professional development. One workshop once or twice in the first year is not enough to propel the initiative forward and build teachers’ capacities to do the work. Fifth, the school must be aware of and utilize the initiative to enhance the culture of community, communication, and connection. A school that starts with weaknesses in this area may take longer to see results. However, a byproduct of such work will include the strengthening of the school culture, making it more positive and safe for staff and students.

The SEL initiative at this suburban high school has been successful thus far, but a continued focus on collaboration and professional development that provides teachers with a variety of specific SEL strategies to pick and choose from will make all the difference in the
sustainability and long-term success of the initiative. The fact that all stakeholders who participated in the study have perceived the initiative positively reveals that a practitioner-driven, non-standardized approach to school-wide SEL implementation does have promise. However, more broad range and long-term studies should be conducted to confirm these findings.

**Personal Reflection**

This process began for me when I was an assistant principal struggling to figure out why the same students were persistently sent to the office for disciplinary offenses. Despite the fact that I was building rapport with these students, I didn’t see a sustained behavioral change. My frustration led to conversations with various educators, and I began to realize that there was something missing in the school experience for these students. They did not have the social emotional skills to effectively work through various stressors throughout their day, like being asked to put away their cell phone every class period, and being told they had to be quiet and still, or work with the student they did not get along with. These seemingly minor stressors quickly triggered an emotional response that did not make sense to those around them who had stronger coping skills, and perhaps less trauma and stress in their lives. So, the question became: How do we build these skills in the students who do not come to school with them?

Thus, my journey as a doctoral student began. I applied to Northeastern University’s Ed.D. program with an essay that focused on this issue. Upon acceptance, I spent the next three years studying this topic. In each class, I was offered an opportunity to look at this topic from another perspective and to build the literature review that is part of this dissertation. I was astounded with how much research there was on this topic, and I became excited about the prospect of contributing to the literature. At the same time, almost magically, my school district began to self-identify a weakness in meeting the social emotional needs of our students. I
remember sitting in what we call a FACT meeting (a meeting that happens weekly with all of our
district leaders, including department coordinators, principals, etc.) and being instantly excited
when I heard a department coordinator verbalize his concern for the social, emotional,
psychological, and physical well-being of our students and the need for us to be doing more. I sat
quietly, resisting the urge to scream out “Yes!” Instead, I sat back and watched the process
unfold in that meeting and in many more to come. Before I knew it, we were ready to dive into a
district-wide SEL initiative.

I was humbled when I was asked by the curriculum director to present a district-wide
workshop for our staff. I thought, “Who am I to provide this kind of important information?”
Though, at that time, I had spent two years researching SEL, I still did not see myself as an
“expert” in this area, which a few staff members later referred to me as. Though hesitant, I
decided it was time to begin sharing the knowledge I had been acquiring, even if I did not feel
ready. I created a workshop that I would deliver four times throughout the morning of our second
day back to school in 2017. In the process of deciding what to include in this workshop, I kept
telling myself, “Be careful. Don’t make this too hokey. It has to make the right impression, or it
is doomed.” I tried to keep it simple and research-based so that the staff could see the proof for
themselves and could see the potential in focusing on students’ social emotional skills. I also
made it action-oriented by linking the topic to our stakeholder goal for the year, which was to
identify a non-academic barrier that each teacher could focus on decreasing for a cohort of
his/her students. With nervous anticipation, I presented the material. To my surprise, the staff
responded positively. This set us up for the year of work that was presented in this case study. I
am very thankful for the happy coincidence that led us to this experience and am grateful for
every participant.
Throughout this past school year, I have been impressed with how positively teachers have been responding to the various SEL workshops we have provided. It became apparent to me that staff members have been craving for the opportunity, even permission, to focus on the stressors and emotions involved in their difficult work with high school students who are anxious, stressed, and emotional. Teachers have shared that the focus on SEL has decreased their own stress, has increased their happiness, and has changed their work as a teacher. There is nothing better than hearing a teacher reinvigorated to go back to his/her work in the classroom with a renewed sense of purpose and pride. If nothing else occurred, this would have been enough of a positive outcome to this initiative. But, that has not been the only outcome. Teachers and non-certified staff are connecting more, sharing ideas, and seeing the value in each other’s roles. Students are sharing that they, too, appreciate that teachers have been given the opportunity and support to meet their non-academic needs, and to not only be concerned with delivering academic content.

I have seen teachers doing mindfulness activities and breathing exercises with their students, and I have heard them talking to them about stress, coping skills, and fears. I have had multiple conversations with teachers taking about how they give students the opportunity to retake quizzes/tests if they did not do well the first time. Students are rewriting papers, and taking the opportunity to test in smaller, quieter settings, even if they do not have a 504 or IEP mandating that they do so. They are also given extra time when needed, and are not being held to arbitrary standards. The culture of the school has been impacted in so many positive ways, it is impossible to articulate each and every detail, which is exciting and uplifting to experience.

Our society is challenged with too many stressors, and schools are not the safe havens they once were. As a result, I have noticed the difference in the number of students who say they
have anxiety issues and panic attacks. My colleagues state that they see the same increase.

Whether it is increasing or not, the perception is that it is, and, as a result, students are either not focused in class, avoiding class, or not coming to school at all. Something needs to be done to shift the focus of education so that all students can feel safe and connected to their schools, be available for learning, and reach their individual potential. I truly believe that implementing an SEL initiative that is practitioner-driven and non-standardized is the most effective way of doing so. Teachers become more socially and emotionally competent in the process, and students then benefit. I know our school community, and if we asked them to just implement a standardized SEL program, they would have resented and rebuked it. Many staff members have shared this with me personally, and the participants in this study confirmed this. Thus, I encourage other educational leaders to consider the approach before implementing an SEL initiative. Consider the culture of your school, the needs of your teachers, and the needs of your students to figure out how to empower your staff to implement SEL in the way that makes sense in your context. It may mean that you look at various programs and strategies, for there is a lot out there to choose from. However, staff should be able to pick and choose from those programs and approaches so that they can figure out what works for them and their students.

Throughout this process, I have confirmed my belief that, to enact successful change in a school or district, teachers must be at the forefront of and in control of that change. They are the ones doing the difficult work every day with students. They know what they need themselves and what their students need. There is such great power in that. It doesn’t matter what the initiative is, a practitioner-driven, non-standardized approach will reap more positive and long-term, sustainable outcomes. If teachers feel valued, trusted, and empowered, they do amazing
work. I truly believe this and will continue to utilize this approach throughout my time as an educational leader.
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doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2010.06.013


Appendix A

Goleman’s (2005) Emotional Intelligence Skill Areas

Sonoma State University (n.d.)
Appendix B

CASEL’s (2017) Core SEL Competencies
Appendix C

Jennings & Greenberg’s (2009) Prosocial Classroom Model

The Prosocial Classroom: A Model of Teacher Social and Emotional Competence and Classroom and Child Outcomes

Jennings & Greenberg, 2009

Google Images

The Prosocial Classroom Model Image (n.d.)
Appendix D

Recruitment Letter sent from bryzgel.p@husky.neu.edu only

Dear __________;

I am a researcher pursuing an Ed.D. through Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies Education Program. Dr. Sara Ewell, the principal investigator, and I are researching directly the implementation of a social emotional learning initiative that is being conducted at your institution. You are a possible candidate for participation based on your involvement with this initiative. It would be highly beneficial to me and to this study if you would consider pursuing participation by replying to this email. This study has the potential to encourage other schools to empower their staff to drive a social emotional learning initiative specific to the needs of their students and to provide them with a model of how to do so successfully. Participation is very straightforward, and it is confidential. I aim to understand how a school implements a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative. I am conducting a case study, so I would like to conduct an hour-long in-depth interview with you. You will have the opportunity to review the interview transcript. If you think participating in this initiative is of interest to you, please respond to the following questions:

1. What is your job title?

2. How many years have you been in this position?

3. How would you describe your level of involvement in the SEL initiative at your school of employment on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest level of involvement)?

IRB# CPS18-05-16
Approved: 5/23/18
Expiration Date: 5/22/19
If you are selected for participation, I will meet with you to overview the process of participation, which will include an interview that will last approximately an hour, ideally conducted in person, or perhaps via Skype or Facetime. Before the interview begins, I will ask you to review and sign a consent form that will provide you with information on the risks and benefits of participation, what the study is about and aims to do, how your privacy will be protected and how you may decline participation at any time of the process. In short, you will use a pseudonym, and I will take every precaution possible to assure that your participation in this study is not identified. Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you do not email me at bryzgel.p@husky.neu.edu to volunteer, you will not hear from me regarding this research again.

Thank you for considering accepting this invitation. I believe you have valuable information that can help me conduct a study that has the potential to help us, and other educational institutions, to further meet the needs of students so that they can be successful in school, work and life. Again, thank you for your time and consideration. Please feel free to email me at bryzgel.p@husky.neu.edu to volunteer for this study with any questions or concerns.

Please do not email me at any other email address. Per Northeastern University IRB, emails to any other email address must be deleted with no response.

Sincerely,

Penny Bryzgel

IRB# CPS18-05-16
Approved: 5/23/18
Expiration Date: 5/22/19
Appendix E

Participant Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Name of Investigator(s): Principal Investigator, Dr. Sara Ewell, and Student Researcher, Penny Bryzgel

Title of Project: The Importance of Practitioner-Driven, Non-Standardized Social Emotional Learning Initiatives: A Case Study at One Suburban High School

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
We are asking you to be in this study because you are involved with the social emotional learning initiative in your school.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand how a school can implement a social emotional learning initiative driven by those who work in that context.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an hour-long interview, ideally in person, or via Skype/Facetime.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The interview will take place where you are most comfortable, though none can take place in any workspace assigned to the student researcher. The interview will be approximately one hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort to you. Again, we will take all precautions to minimize risk: utilizing a pseudonym, storing data in password-protected and/or locked files, meeting with you in the location of your choice, and giving you permission to terminate participation at any point.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study; however, the information learned from this study may help you to strengthen your understandings of and approach to SEL.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify

IRB# CPS18-05-16
Approved: 5/23/18
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you in any way or any individual as being part of this project. Interviews will be recorded and the researcher will take notes; however, all documents will be stored in a password-protected laptop, and in a password-protected Dropbox file. A pseudonym will be used in place of your name. Rev.com. will transcribe the interviews. All physical transcriptions and other documents relevant to the research will be kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher’s home. All documents will be destroyed upon publication of the research.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
No harm is foreseeable in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Penny Bryzgel at bryzgel.p@husky.neu.edu only, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell at s.ewell@northeastern.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No payment will be given for participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
No costs should be incurred.

I agree to take part in this research.

______________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part

______________________________________________
Printed name of person above

______________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

______________________________________________
Printed name of person above

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Approved: 5/23/18
Expiration Date: 5/22/19
Appendix F

Interview Protocol Form

Institution: Northeastern University
Interviewee (Title and Name): ______________________________
Interviewer: Penny Bryzgel, Doctoral Candidate at Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

RESEARCH QUESTION: How can a suburban high school implement a practitioner-driven, non-standardized social emotional learning initiative in an effort to meet the needs of all students, as perceived by teachers, administrators, and counselors/support staff? The following sub-questions will also be investigated:

- What are the challenges and opportunities staff face in the early stages of a practitioner-driven social emotional learning initiative?
- How do staff members perceive the value of implementing social emotional learning during early implementation?

Part I: Introductory Session Objectives (5-7 minutes): Build rapport, describe the study, and answer any questions. Participant will review and sign consent form.

Introductory Protocol
You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about social emotional learning. My research project focuses on the experience of an educational practitioner who recognizes the importance of getting to know students and implementing practices that respond to their social emotional needs. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into how schools can implement social emotional learning into the day-to-day life of the classroom and whole-school experience. Hopefully this will allow us to identify ways in which we can strengthen the social emotional skills of our students so that they are successful in school, work and life.

Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview? [If yes, thank the participant, and let him/her know you may ask the question again as you start recording, and then turn on the recording equipment]. I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the recordings, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed by Rev.com. To meet our human subjects requirements at the university, you must sign the form I have with me [provide the form].

Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)
Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of the participant’s general experience in the field of education. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background
1) How long have you been in this position and what brought you to the field?
2) What do you like most about being a ________ (teacher, administrator, support staff)?
3) What do you find most rewarding/challenging about your work?

Administrators

One of the things we are interested in learning about is your perspective on SEL implementation in a school. I would like to hear about your perspective/experience in regards to the SEL initiative in your school in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please do not mention names. You say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

1. Tell me about how you first became knowledgeable of SEL and what your initial thoughts or questions about it were?
2. Explain your perceived value and potential in implementing an SEL initiative in your school. What needs did you foresee SEL addressing and how? Why now?
3. What was most challenging about starting this initiative? What role did you see yourself taking in overcoming these challenges?
4. What areas of professional development did you identify as necessary and how have you provided this for staff?
5. How do you perceive the process throughout the last school year and how have you monitored its progress?
6. Have you noticed impacts on teachers, students, practices, or any other area? And, what impacts do you anticipate as you move forward and why?

Teachers

One of the things we are interested in learning about is if and how teachers meet the social emotional needs of their students. I would like to hear about your perspective/experience about how you get to know your students, build rapport, and personalize the learning process and your involvement with the social emotional learning initiative in your school in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please do not mention names. You say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

1. Tell me about how you first became knowledgeable of SEL and what your initial thoughts or questions about it were?
2. Explain your perceived value and potential in implementing an SEL initiative in your classroom. What needs did you foresee SEL addressing and how? Why now?
3. What was most challenging about starting this initiative? What role did you see yourself taking in overcoming these challenges?
4. What areas of professional development did you identify as necessary in your ability to meet the social emotional needs of your students?
5. How do you perceive the process throughout the last school year and how have you monitored its progress?
6. Have you noticed impacts on yourself, your practices, other staff, students, or any other area? And, what impacts do you anticipate as you move forward and why?
Counselors and Support Staff

One of the things we are interested in learning about is a counselor’s or support staff’s involvement in meeting the social emotional needs of students. I would like to hear about your perspective/experience about your role in the social emotional learning initiative in your school in your own words. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please do not mention names. You say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

1. Tell me about how you first became knowledgeable of SEL and what your initial thoughts or questions about it were?
2. Explain your perceived value and potential in implementing an SEL initiative in the school. What needs did you foresee SEL addressing and how? Why now?
3. What was most challenging about starting this initiative? What role did you see yourself taking in overcoming these challenges?
4. What areas of professional development did you identify as necessary in your ability to meet the social emotional needs of students in your specific role?
5. How do you perceive the process throughout the last school year and the progress you have made?
6. Have you noticed impacts on yourself, your practices, other staff, students, or any other area? And, what impacts do you anticipate as you move forward and why?

End: Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation. Remind them that they may review their transcripts upon initial coding.