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Teacher Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning Supports in Freshman Academy

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Nadia Saint-Louis

December 2020

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Keywords: social emotional learning, freshman academy

ABSTRACT

Teacher Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning Supports in Freshman Academy

by

Nadia Saint-Louis

Ninth grade year is the most important challenging year of high school. Many students struggle adjusting to the transition to high school. If supports are not in place, many ninth-grade students are at-risk of dropping out of school. The purpose of this study was to identify and examine the social emotional learning supports in Freshman Academy that assist in the transition to High School. A qualitative investigation was conducted to explore these social emotional supports. This study used a phenomenological methodology, enabling the researcher to gather information from a purposeful selection of educators directly identified by their Academy Principals.

This study employed processes of data collection that included the use of individual interviews found in qualitative design. Analysis of data happened in several steps: (a) transcribing all interviews that were recorded, (b) coding, (c) examining the themes of the codes, and (d) relating the themes to the research questions. The credibility of the analysis was supported by triangulation, member checks, and thick descriptions.

The results revealed that seven themes emerged as identified supports which included: (a) Freshman Seminar programming, (b) personnel supports to include Dean of Students and the School Counselor, (c) Restorative Practices programming, (d) building relationships with students, (e) advisory, (f) informal SEL practices, and (g) teaming.

Based on the research the following conclusions were presented: (a) schools use restorative practices as a means to provide SEL, (b) relationship building is a central focus, (c) and the Freshman Seminar course and content provide meaningful social emotional learning experiences.

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DEDICATION

This research study is dedicated to my parents Marie and Thomas Dean, for always supporting and encouraging me and my dreams. Thank you for inspiring me and for being wonderful role models. Thank you for instilling in me that the sky is the limit! Thank you for being examples of Christ. Thank you for being my cheerleaders. Without you all, I would not be here.

I am also dedicating this study to my sister Marguerite. You are my forever friend who has loved, supported, and cheered for me every step of the way. Thank you for being a bright light in my life. I have learned so much from you over the years and I am forever thankful.

Lastly, I want to dedicate this study to all of my sister-friends. Each of you have made a lasting impact in my life. Thank you for crying with me, standing with me, believing in me, and supporting me! Each of you make me want to be a better woman, sister, and friend each day because I am surrounded by greatness.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Imagine what may be going through the minds of rising ninth graders as they begin their journey to high school. Emotions that surface are anxiety and fear related to embracing the challenges ahead during the first year of high school. Freshman year of high school can present many challenges. Students entering in high school have to tackle a new physical space and differences in student population (Emmett & McGee, 2012). Furthermore, students have a heavier workload and more challenging classes, which can lead to failing grades (Vaugh, 2010). Failing grades can then lead to academic turmoil and even students falling off track towards promotion to the next grade and graduation (Ruth, 2009). As students face the many challenges related to academics in high school, they still have to cope with many social and emotional issues that come alongside being a teenager like fitting in, dating, peer pressure, social media, friendships, responsibilities, and coming to know who they are. According to Reents (2002), self-esteem, attendance, and grades sometimes decline dramatically as students transition to high school; therefore, students need academic supports during this crucial transitional time. Without proper supports during the transitional time, some ninth-grade students will lag behind academically, socially, and emotionally (Reents, 2002). It is during this critical time students need supports and interventions. Academic supports are vital, but emotional supports are just as important for students as they navigate their way through their first year. Social emotional learning, or SEL, can assist students with managing stress, handling mistakes, and establishing healthy relationships (Gulbrandson, 2019). Additionally, social-emotional learning can help reduce discipline issues and emotional stress, increase a positive attitude towards oneself, and improve test scores, along with grades and attendance which are all areas that students struggle to maintain their first year of high school (Weissberg, 2016). The focus on SEL will help

students be more successful in high school by giving them tools they need to be successful in adulthood.

Statement of the Problem

Ninth grade year presents new and exciting experiences and challenges related to what students are learning and who they are becoming. Transitioning to high school can be a difficult time both academically and socially for many students. Moreover, students who are not successful during this transition can end up falling through the cracks or dropping out of school. According to Sung (2018) ninth grade year is pivotal moment that often times determines success or failure in high school. Success or failure in the ninth grade is a predictor of whether a student will graduate on time (Jaschik, 2017). When starting high school, students are presented with the difficulties of an unfamiliar learning environment, new teachers, challenging academic expectations, and mounting social pressures (Legters & Andersen, 2018). Furthermore, when entering high school, students have to face many of the same issues that teens struggle with like poverty, abuse, neglect, bullying, drugs, and dropping out of school (Lynch, 2016). Research has shown that up to 40% of ninth grade students in urban schools fail to be promoted on time and less than 20% of those students go on to graduate from high school (Legters & Andersen, 2018). Additionally, each course failed in 8th grade increases the chances of non-promotion from 9th to 10th grade by 16% (Christie & Zinth, 2008). Ninth grade students are more at risk than any other age group (Willens, 2013). The ninth-grade year is significant to students' success in high school. According to Christie and Zinth (2008) during this time, students experience peer pressure and the development of bad habits such as skipping class. Entry into a larger less caring, environment can all influence how students will react. Implementing organizational changes and targeted academic and social-emotional supports in ninth grade can put more students on the path

to graduation (Legters & Andersen, 2018). Social-emotional learning, or SEL, can provide students the opportunity to overcome many of these challenges they face as they transition to high school. SEL contributes to improved academic performance, better attitudes and behavior, fewer discipline behaviors, and reduced emotional distress which in turn can help students have a successful year (Importance of Social Emotional Learning, n.d.). Because the ninth grade is such a vital year to set students up for success throughout high school, the whole child must be served. SEL helps students navigate through their emotions and relationships so they can be well-rounded citizens.

Significance of the Study

School districts continue to examine ways to increase graduation rates in high schools, limit the dropout rate, and focus on the importance of the ninth-grade year in high school. Educators focus on ninth grade because it is the year that determines whether a young person will move on or drop out of school (Willens, 2013). The research regarding social emotional learning will benefit school leaders, parents, teachers, and community leaders who work directly with ninth grade students. Social-emotional learning is a framework that helps combat issues that ninth grade students face including drug use, bullying, and dropout rates (Importance of Social Emotional Learning, n.d.). The research will be significant to district and school leaders as they make decisions about students' well-being and how to support them as they transition to high school, and how that connects to SEL. The research may be significant to the parents who have a child entering the ninth grade. Parents need to know what opportunities are available for their child both emotionally and academically to ensure their success. Furthermore, the research will be significant to teachers who may work primarily with eighth or ninth grade students. Teachers need to know what supports, directly or indirectly, can assist students as they transition to high

school. SEL skills are essential to be a good student and citizen and has many benefits (Importance of Social Emotional Learning, n.d.). Understanding these benefits and strategies will be significant in helping support the challenging transition to high school that many students encounter.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study is to identify and examine the teacher and staff perceptions of social emotional learning supports across Freshman Academies. The study also examines how those supports aid ninth-grade students in the transition to high school.

Theoretical Framework

Emotional intelligence and social emotional learning are often linked together due to the focus on an individual's emotional well-being. Social emotional learning can often be thought of as a branch of Emotional Intelligence. The theory of Emotional Intelligence (EI) is often used in the business world. It is the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions (Cherry, 2020). On the other hand, social-emotional learning (SEL) gained popularity in schools and academia. EI can be mastered and improved over time through the process of social and emotional learning (Gibson, n.d.).

Research Questions

This qualitative research study centers around one overarching question: What are the teacher perceptions of the supports related to students social-emotional well-being in Freshman Academy?

1. What are the organizational supports that have been implemented in Freshmen Academy?
2. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' self-awareness skills?
3. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' self-management skills?
4. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' social awareness skills?
5. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' responsible decision-making skills?
6. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' relationship skills?

Definition of Terms

Freshman/9th Grade Academy: Split up freshman into a different area to support their transition to high school and help with increasing more students being successful in the ninth grade (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Small Learning Community: transforming large high schools into multiple sections, which might be identified by a theme or similarities (David, 2008).

Transition program: Programs to support students in the shifting of school settings, typically from middle school to high school (Chen, 2019).

At-risk student: Students who are in danger of not graduating high school or dropping out of school due to academic struggles, social concerns and other factors (McMillan, J. & Reed, D., 2010).

Advisory Programs : A small group of students put together with one adult in a school that helps support academic, personal, and social/emotional growth while also building a strong relationship with that one adult (Manning & Saddlemire, 1998).

Social-Emotional Health: “The systematic development of a core set of social and emotional skills that help children more effectively handle life challenges and thrive in both their learning and their social environments” (Ragozzino & Utne O’Brien, 2009, p. 3).

Academic Press: Defined as the implementation of meaningful and rigorous work while expecting students to succeed (Yoder & Nolan, 2018).

Metacognition: The intentional act of thinking about your thinking (Price-Mitchell, 2015).

Restorative Practices: The practice of placing accountability on the wrongdoer to repair the harm for which they caused (Thonsborne & Blood, 2013).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS): PBIS focuses on identifying, recognizing, and encouraging desired student behaviors rather than strictly punishing misbehaviors (Carmichael, 2017).

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID): College-readiness program intended to help students in middle and high school develop the skills they need to be successful in college and life by emphasizing on writing, critical thinking, teamwork, organization and reading skills (Moody & Pannoni, 2019).

Delimitations and Limitations

Limitations are factors that are beyond the researchers control that could affect the results of the study (Simon, 2011). Limitations in this study are the external factors relating to the COVID-19 pandemic that was spreading as these interviews and research took place. Also, there was a small sample size that limits the participants and amount of first-person research. Due to

the district approval timeline and teacher summer plans, the response from teachers was a limitation.

On the other hand, delimitations are factoring that researcher does have control and could affect the study (Simon, 2011). The study was delimited to teachers in Middle Tennessee high schools who teach in ninth grade Academies; therefore, any teachers that do not teach in ninth grade academy will not be represented. Additionally, the self-reported data could be a likely delimitation.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to identify and examine the social-emotional learning (SEL) supports in a Freshman Academy that assist in the transition to high school. Included in this study are five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the statement of the problem, research questions, the significance of the study, definition of the terms related to the study, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 is a review of literature related to the transition to high school, Freshman Academies, and Social Emotional Learning themes. Chapter 3 goes into depth regarding the research methodology and design which include the research questions, data collection, selection process, data analysis and ethical considerations related to the study.

Chapter 2. Review of Literature

This qualitative study was constructed to understand how teachers perceive the support students receive through social emotional learning tools and how those tools can assist students in making a successful transition to high school. This chapter will provide a comprehensive assessment of Freshman Academies and supports for students as they enter high school, as well as social emotional learning and core competencies. Additionally, this chapter will examine the integration of SEL into academic instruction, whether directly and indirectly.

Freshman Year of High School

The high school dropout rate is a concerning issue to educators, parents, and business leaders. The impact of not graduating high school goes beyond teenage years and well into adulthood. If graduation from high school is one of the keys to success, then it is important to look at the many reasons why students do not make it to that stage of their development, in order to provide necessary intervention. According to Rinka et al. (2016), one way of improving high school graduation rates occurs when focusing on student transition from middle school to high school. Many ninth-grade students look forward to being able to have more voice and choice in high school, additional possibilities, and freedom (Mizelle & Irvin, 2005). Some students are excited to explore the next milestone on their own. Other students, though, can have anxiety about the change in relationships with peers and teachers, a difference in the amount of parental support, and the overall sense of being overwhelmed with feeling unprepared for high school (Nield, 2009). According to Lampert (2005), many students are developmentally unprepared to navigate the changes related to transitioning high school. Students are also dealing with changes in puberty, shifts in important relationships, differences in self-esteem, and adjusting to the physical changes in school – class and school size (Popaduk & Oliver, 2011). Additionally,

when students began their freshman year of high school, they can have anxiety about entering a new environment, increased social and academic pressure, and responsibility (Clark & Hunley, 2007). Furthermore, as students enter high school, many have reported fears about new social situations and learning how to budget their time due to new demands and responsibilities (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). The transition to high school can bring so much angst. It is a time where many students are coming to know themselves, which can impact their relationship with others and their own self-perception.

Entering high school brings students from neighboring middle schools together. The merging of student populations can allow students to form new relationships, but this dynamic can also create a sense of competition. It is important to note, that as students transition from middle school to high school, they also have to contend with the school environment potentially displaying more impersonality, competitiveness, and presenting many more choices than their middle school experience (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). Balance is essential when assisting students with finding freedom and opportunities in high school while also helping them cope with the numerous stressful encounters they will confront entering a new academic environment.

The first year of high school is paramount in terms of adjustment and accomplishment (Donegan, 2008). It is important to have strategies in place to help ninth grade students find and achieve success. Research indicates that more students fail the first year of high school more than any other year, which leads to additional disciplinary actions and concerns, increased truancy, and an increase in high school students not finishing high school. The high school dropout rate peaks between ninth and tenth grade (Donegan, 2008). Due to the number of issues that students face in high school, particularly when they start high school, students end up dropping out (Smith, et al., 2008). Course failures, discipline rates, and dropout rates are higher in ninth grade

than any other grade level (Smith, et al., 2008). Additionally, students struggle with high absentee rates, course failures, and difficulty earning credits, forcing many students to consider dropping out of high school (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). Many students who do not get back on track, see dropping out as their only solution (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). Not completing high school ends up costing the nation millions of dollars in lost wages, taxes, and productivity (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). Adults who drop out of high school are more likely to be unemployed, dependent on public assistance, in prison, or enrolled in adult education programs (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). One of the key predictors of students not finishing high school is falling off track during the ninth grade (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). It is important for educational leaders to continue having cognitive awareness of the impact and issues students face in ninth grade in order for more students to successfully graduate from high school.

Supporting Students as they Transition to High School

Focusing on the transitional challenges students will encounter when entering high school is key to providing the necessary support students needed increase their potential for success. Ninth grade is the make or break year that will determine if students' complete high school successfully (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). It is during this time that students have to conform to a new set of values and expectations from teachers and their peers (Chmelynski, 2004). Ninth grade students exhibit more issues and problems than students in all other grade levels (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). Also, there is a greater loss when students all behind their freshman year than other high school year (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). As students transition to high school, they struggle with meeting challenging graduation requirements, substantial differences with the academic and social pressures, and classes with more rigorous demands and expectations for completing homework assignments (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). With

the transition to high school, there is potential for an increase in absenteeism, a decline in academic performance, and increase in behavioral issues during the ninth-grade year (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Furthermore, when transitioning to high school, students can quickly become discontented due to the changes and these also impact many areas as well as cause an overall negative attitude toward school (Clark & Hunley, 2007). Students also seem to struggle to adapt to the various instructional strategies when transitioning to high school, as they have more teachers to interact with on a daily basis (Chmelynski, 2004). Lastly, these issues can lead to loneliness and isolation during the first year of high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). With any transition in life comes some obstacles, so it is vital to put meaningful supports in place to assist students in the course of their time in high school.

Transition Programs

Successfully completing high school does not begin the first day students start high school but begins in middle school. Supporting students' transition to high school begins in middle school through early interventions, rigorous coursework that supports high school content, and a continuously supportive environment which should continue throughout the students' ninth grade year (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). While supporting students in middle school to make the transition, it is equally important that high schools' partner with feeder middle schools to implement transition programs that meet the needs of their students (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). In order to support students with the transition from middle school to high school, it is important to consider options that would expose students to high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Exposing students to high school could include possibly hosting a ninth-grade orientation event, utilizing student mentors, hosting meet the teachers' night, and sending high school students to local middle schools to share their academic

experiences (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). The pre-exposure to high school life can possibly ease some of the anxiety and fear while also giving students a feel of what to expect. Student mentors for ninth grade students can provide mentors the opportunity to teach curriculum to their mentees, role playing and preparing daily lessons that would support student transition (Lampert, 2005). Other opportunities might include one-time informational assemblies or panel discussions for students and parents to attend and learn more information about transitioning to high school (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009).

Parental involvement is key to a successful middle school to high school transition (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009). Unfortunately, it is during the ninth-grade year that parents become less involved in their child's education (Chmelynski, 2004). Parents may feel that as their child grows older, they need less support. According to Gewertz (2018), partnerships between schools and parents can confront key dangers that students face during their ninth-grade years, which include poor attendance and unfinished homework. The previous stated key dangers account for a significant amount of course failures during the freshman year and increase the odds that a student will not graduate on time (Gewertz, 2018). In regard to curriculum and middle school students, one transition idea supports students bringing homework packets home to work through with parents in order to keep parents engaged in their child's academic transition (Gewertz, 2018). It is important for students to be exposed to a more rigorous curriculum in middle school in order to meet the demands of high school academics (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). It is important that middle schools and high schools communicate with one another as eighth grade students transition to ninth grade in order to collaborate and also build family support as student navigate to high school (Gewertz, 2018).

Social Emotional Learning or SEL can also address the supports students need as they transition to high school. Social Emotional skills are crucial in helping a student become more studious in the classroom (Weissberg & Cascannon, 2013). SEL involves a process in which students can acquire and apply skills that help manage emotions, set goals, maintain positive relationships, and help students make responsible decisions, which are all essential in helping a student successfully develop in high school (Weissberg & Cascannon, 2013). As students transition to high school, SEL programs and practices help students reduce emotional stress, decrease the need for disciplinary issues, and improved social and emotional skills (Weissberg & Cascanno, 2013). Others may want to consider more in-depth options that last for a longer period of time.

Some examples of transition programs are:

- Four to six-week summer programs for identified incoming high school students who need additional support (Christie & Zinth, 2008)
- Advisory programs, where the purpose is to reduce course failures and increase participation in school activities (Lampert, 2005)
- Transition classes for English and math (Christie & Zinth, 2008)
- High School 101 classes (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010)
- Student shadowing programs (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009)
- High school course advising sessions (Cohen & Smerdan, 2009)

Another transition example includes Freshman Academies also known as Ninth Grade Academies or Freshman Centers, which are considered a smaller learning community in the high school setting. Also, orientation meetings for parents and students in which courses are

specifically designed to assist ninth grade transition are helpful programs or practices (Reents, 2002 & Sims, 2010).

Successful transition programs do not end once a student's eighth grade year is completed but continue throughout the ninth-grade year (Hertzog, 2006). As previously mentioned, successful transitional programs must involve collaboration between eighth and ninth grade buildings and personnel (Smith et al., 2008). In schools in which transition programs are fully operational, researchers saw a dropout rate of 8%, while schools without transition programs averaged 24% (Reents, 2002). There is no one size fits all approach to supporting students when they transition to high school. The hope is that through a transition program, students gain self-confidence and important academic and social skills which are necessary to becoming successful throughout their remaining time in school (Chmelynski, 2004).

Mentorship

Mentoring is a support practice for many students to assist with the move to high school. Mentoring is not only a support program for many students, but it also eases the difficulty of transitioning from middle school to high school. An additional adult, the mentor, can help make a significant positive change students' life. Mentorship in schools is typically an adult-to-student relationship, provided by a school staff member or an outside agency, to support students and their needs. The needs include access to tangible resources and academic support (Sebenius, 2016). Mentoring can also meet non-academic needs like personal growth, expression, future planning, and goal setting (School Based Mentoring, n.d.). Mentoring can be one-one, in a group, or in a team format (School Based Mentoring, n.d.). Mentors show a correlation between positive relationship and improved engagement and attendance (Blad, 2017). Additionally, mentorships can allow student to connect to the school environment, improve relationships,

improve feelings, and have greater access to resources (School Based Mentoring, n.d.). The largest benefit of mentorship is how it significantly shapes student outcomes (Sebenius, 2016).

Small Learning Communities

Typical comprehensive high schools in America can be impersonal in nature. Along with a sense of isolation the immense population in comprehensive high schools, students often do not find the curriculum relevant to their lives (David, 2008). Due to the lack of relationships and connections that can sometimes exist in high schools, students begin to withdraw, leading to a high number of dropouts, failure rates, and low student achievement (David, 2008). Small learning communities were established in the early 2000's and the concept was built on mixture of high school reform measures to combat the issues that many large high schools have faced over the previous decades (Oxley, 2008). In the 1960s, high school reform included ideas such as houses and schools-within-schools. In the 1970s, the high schools in the United States saw reform in the place of magnet programs, career academies, and mini schools (Oxley, 2008). Additionally, in the 1980s and 90s, school options started including charter schools (Oxley, 2008). Small learning communities include many of the components of the previously mentioned reform strategies (Oxley, 2008). Small learning communities, or SLCs, are small structures in schools that have a focus on curriculum and are specialized by choice, with a focus on learners (Oxley, 2008).

Small learning communities typically function in large schools allowing autonomy and flexibility and include a team of teachers who instruct no more than a few hundred students (Oxley, 2008). Furthermore, SLCs provides time for interdisciplinary teams to collaborate and support students over multiple years (Oxley, 2008). Best practices for SLCs include building and district level support; interdisciplinary teaching and learning team; rigorous, relevant curriculum

and instruction; inclusive programs and practices, and continuous programming improvement (Oxley, 2008).

Small learning communities have other features that include shared leadership structure, teacher common planning time, career academies and ninth grade academies, specialized student scheduling, advisory programming, personalization and support, defined themes, and curricular integration in core academics (Dayton et al., 2007). Furthermore, SLCs have a focus on instruction and teams of teachers engaging students in units of study together (Suporitz & Christman, 2005). The benefit of small learning communities includes deeper sustained relationships with students, parents, and the community (Suporitz & Christman, 2005).

Advisories

Small learning communities were developed concurrently with the advisory programs. Advisories are typically in middle and high schools with a regular meeting time between a school advisor and a group of students (Ark et al., 2015). Advisories are designed to meet the needs of students outside of a traditional classroom (Blad, 2019). When students have meaningful relationships with an adult, they are more likely to succeed academically (Cook-Deegan, 2017). Advisories offer that opportunity to build relationships with adults as well as peers (Cook-Deegan, 2017). Another goal of advisory is to help students figure out who they are and where they are going (Ark et al., 2015).

According to Ark et al., (2015), there are five elements of advisories and they include: (1) weekly academic monitoring and support, (2) connection to services, (3) support for positive school culture, (4) support for career awareness, (5) and planning for post-secondary options.

Connection to peers, connection to adults, personal growth, and teacher advocacy are all benefits of having an advisory program (Ark et al., 2015).

Career Academies

Career Academies a type of small learning communities. They were established around fifty years ago as part of high school reform initiatives (Kemple, 2008). Philadelphia, PA began incorporating Career Academies in the late 1960s and then the same concept was replicated in California schools about ten year later (*WWC Intervention Report*, 2015). These specific SLCs combine academic and technical curriculum around a career theme and establish business partnerships in the community (Kemple, 2008). Additionally, career academies' goal is to keep students engaged in schools as well as prepare students to transition successfully into a range of post-secondary opportunities (Kemple, 2008).

There are three key features of career academies. First, career academies are small learning communities that are designed to create a supportive and personalized learning environment around a common interest. Secondly, they combine academic and technical career curriculum around a career theme that enriches both teaching and learning. Finally, they establish partnerships with local businesses and employees (Kemple, 2008).

Small learning communities that are designed to create a supportive and personalized learning environment around a common interest or career theme is one key feature of career academies (Kemple, 2008). Classes are focused on a career path and are designed to develop knowledge and provide skills related to that field (*The Role of Career Academies*, 2009). The career theme also enables students to participate in special projects connected to the theme while relating to academic classes (*The Role of Career Academies*, 2009). Additionally, the career

academy personalized learning environment involves work experiences connected to the career pathway, internship, and senior capstone projects (*The Role of Career Academies*, 2009).

The second key feature is the combination of academic and technical career curriculum around a career theme that enriches both teaching and learning (Kemple, 2008). In career academies, students are encouraged to stay engaged in both the academics and career opportunities as well as make meaningful connections between the two (*The Role of Career Academies*, 2009). An example of a connection would be students in an audio academy making podcasts around subjects learned in their United States History courses.

The final key feature in career academies involves partnerships with local businesses (Kemple, 2008). Career Academies in schools are centered around local, popular industries. It is important to mimic the industries in the city or town in order for students to engage in meaningful outside experiences like field trips, job shadows, and internships (*The Role of Career Academies*, 2009). Business partners come to schools to be guest speakers and project consultants. Employers from various companies that work in the schools serve on advisory boards with career academy staff to help discuss the needs of the teachers and students and how they can support the academy (*The Role of Career Academies*, 2009).

According to Anderson (2016), career academies alone will not guarantee educational equity, but when combined with other initiatives and programming, they can be very beneficial. One benefit of career academies is the improved attendance and graduation rates due to students being more engaged in school (Anderson, 2016). Likewise, career academies increase interpersonal support that students need and improve student engagement for both medium and high-risk subgroups (Kemple, 2000).

Freshman Academies

Another SEL and specific transition program that impacts all first time ninth-grade students is a Freshman or Ninth Grade Academy. Many high schools across the country have adopted Freshman Academies in order to provide multiple and meaningful interventions. Program goals and objectives are facilitated through Freshman Academies, making transition smoother from middle school to high school for students (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001). Freshman Academies have also been introduced in order to off-set many of the issues ninth grade students face (Clark & Hunley, 2007).

The concept of a Ninth Grade Academy is similar to that of a middle school. It requires a committed group of teachers who provide instruction in core subjects for ninth grade students in separate classrooms. In this way, students can easily make the transition from middle school since they are all housed together and away from the upper grade levels (Hertzog, 2006). Freshman Academies provide structure and a sense of belonging to students (Clark & Hunley, 2007). By implementing the academy concept, schools provide the transitioning students an opportunity to adjust to their new academic environment, thus acquiring the skills to succeed in a more rigorous educational setting and enjoy a feeling of security similar to what they experienced in middle school (Hertzog, 2006). Students attend class more often when they have strong relationships with their teachers and when they see their coursework as relevant and important to their future (Christie & Zinth, 2008). One of the keys goals of Freshman Academies is to place an emphasis on adults building relationships with students (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001). Additionally, while easing the transition to high school, Freshman Academies support integrating rigorous content and increasing communication between teachers and parents (Clark

& Hunley, 2007). Freshman Academies target academic and emotional support and keep disengaged students from failing to complete high school (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001).

A similar structure to Freshman Academies is Freshman Learning Centers, which are organized structures in a school designed to aid students experiencing poor performance in the ninth grade (Smith et al., 2008). Freshman Learning Centers create a sense of community, operate more like middle schools, and include teams or houses (Smith et al., 2008). The teams or houses in Freshman Learning Centers have a shared set of teachers whose purpose is to focus solely on the academic and social development of one grade level, so that individual students do not fall through the cracks (Smith et al., 2008). House arrangements also protect students from getting lost in the crowd in a high school setting (Lampert, 2005). School districts that operate 9th grade centers report that they too are seeing academic success along with overall declines in their dropout and disciplinary referral rates (Reents, 2002).

Research identified 9th grade as the most essential time to intervene and prevent students from losing motivation, failing, and dropping out of school (Reents, 2002). In order for Freshman Academies or Freshman Learning Centers to be successful there must be a continuous improvement plan where curriculum is based off the needs (Holland & Mazzoli, 2001). Freshman Academies and Freshman Learning Centers can provide the middle schools supports while also challenging students academically while they finish their first year of high school.

Disadvantages of Freshman Academies

There are many advantages to Freshman Academies. They are a way to support ninth grade students in the vital transition year to high school; however, Freshman Academies do have some disadvantages program. Freshman Academies can sometimes make students feel as though

they have two freshman years of high school (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Students first transition to high school and are sheltered through a Freshman Academy and then they must to adjust to a different system when they enter their second year of high school with less supports (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Additionally, sometimes Freshman Academies are being formed for the wrong reasons, such as overcrowding. By setting up Freshman Academies based on the needs of the school and not the needs of the students, problems can abound (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Lastly, teachers are very passionate about what they do, and Freshman Academies may create rivalries between teachers who work in a Freshman Academy and those who work in different academies (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Freshman Academy Supports

There are hundreds of Freshman Academy programs across the United States at high schools and each program has its own unique supports for student success. Some of the common supports in Freshman Academies include having all first time ninth-grade students housed in the same area, with a core group of teachers, and a common set of classes that are only offered on that team (Freshman Academy, n.d.) . Freshman Academies can have one or more teams that allow for smaller groups of teachers and students to work together. It is suggested that a team keep numbers small to help address small class sizes for students.

Various Freshman Academies, there are more in-depth supports that schools can offer. One support is a Freshman Seminar course. Which is a class that helps students become familiar with high school while also addressing areas such as time management, goal setting, study skills, and career exploration (MacEwen, 2019). Furthermore, the course supports the development of the social and emotional learning competencies (MacEwen, 2019). With adherence to the guidelines of this program, social and emotional learning can give students the opportunity they

need to overcome challenges and succeed, especially during the middle school to high school transition (Durham, n.d.). Additionally, according to the Academies of Nashville (n.d.), the Freshman Seminar course allows students to explore college and career readiness.

There is additional support for ninth grade students that can occur inside and outside the classroom. Other supports that are offered in a Freshman Academy include interdisciplinary teaming for students to make connections, different or modified schedules, college visits, developing a ten-year plan, and teaching students specific organizational strategies (Freshman Academy, n.d.). These organizational strategies can include addressing note-taking skills, study skills, and having students keep planners and agendas. Social emotional learning is a specific support that can either be taught explicitly or embedded into many of the interventions in place for ninth grade students. Also, building relationships is a strong support in Freshman Academies and this can be accomplished by interventions (academic and behavior), parent conferences, student recognitions, and enrichment activities. Supports for freshmen that address academics include double blocking of certain classes, tutoring during advisory time and alternative academic programs for students who are not on track (Freshman Academy, n.d.).

The purpose of these supports is to help increase academic achievement, increase attendance rates for students, and decrease disciplinary infractions. All of these are areas that can prevent or hinder students from making progress in their freshman year all the way to graduation. In short, there are many supports that schools can consider when intervening and advocating for ninth grade students.

Interdisciplinary Teams

An essential component of small learning communities is interdisciplinary teaming. Interdisciplinary teaming refers to the grouping of teachers that all support the same group of students in their SLC (Teaming, 2013). The definition of interdisciplinary teaming is a team of teachers with a few hundred students or less in common that assume responsibility for student educational progress over the course of their high school experience (Oxley, 2008). They are organized with teachers across various subject areas to create a more student-centered educational setting (Oxley, 2008). Within interdisciplinary teaming, teachers have common planning times where they collaborate and discuss students they have in common. Common planning time also allows teachers to collaborate how their curriculum and instruction can connect to provide meaningful learning experiences for students (Oxley, 2008).

Interdisciplinary teaming is a proactive approach that establishes stronger relationships between students and teachers (Teaming, 2013). Moreover, in this team approach, students receive social, emotional, and academic support due to more personalized learning experiences that they will have (Teaming, 2013).

There are many benefits of interdisciplinary teaming. One benefit is the relationships that students will have with teachers and their peers and the positive impact those relationships can have on their learning (Teaming, 2013). Interdisciplinary teaming also help teacher develop and communicate a consistent message and create coherent instructional practices (Oxley, 2005). Other benefits of interdisciplinary teaming include self-determination, identify, personalization, support for teaching and learning, and accountability (Oxley, 2008).

Emotional Intelligence and Social Emotional Learning

Emotional intelligence and social emotional learning are often linked together due to the focus on an individual's emotional well-being. Emotional Intelligence (EI) is often used in the business world. It is the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions (Cherry, 2020). On the other hand, social-emotional learning (SEL) gained popularity in schools and academia. Social and emotional learning is a common expression for emotional intelligence instruction in schools (Edutopia, 2001). EI can be mastered and improved over time through the process of social and emotional learning (Gibson, n.d.). SEL and EI focus on similar competencies/components which are self-awareness, self-management, and social skills. Self-awareness is having the cognitive ability to recognize and understand moods and emotions, whereas self-management is having the ability to control moods (The Editorial Team, 2020). Also included are social skills involving managing relationships and building networks (The Editorial Team, 2020). Strengthening emotional intelligence and social emotional skills can allow students to have good communication skills, which can lead to better learning, friends, academic performance, and employability (Busch, 2017).

Emotional Intelligence

IQ or Intelligence Quotient measures an individual's intelligence, but intellect alone is not a guarantee of identifying personal emotions (The Editorial team, 2020). Emotional intelligence is typically abbreviated EI or EQ. Emotional Intelligence can be defined as having the ability to perceive emotions, generate emotions, understand emotional knowledge, and regulate emotions (Howell, n.d.). Emotional Intelligence gained popularity from Daniel Goleman in the early 1990's after writing several books on the subject matter (Craig, 2020). Goleman expanded the idea of emotional intelligence from the work done by John Mayer and Peter

Salovey (Craig, 2020). Mayer and Salovey broke down the emotional intelligence into four branches which include identifying emotions on a nonverbal level (perception), using emotions to guide cognitive thinking (facilitation), understanding the information emotions convey and the action emotions generate (understanding), and regulating one's own emotions for personal benefit (regulation) (The Editorial Team, 2020). The impact of emotional intelligence aids in one thinking before reacting, a deep sense of self-awareness, and empathy for others (Cherry, 2020).

There are five components of emotional intelligence and they are self-awareness, self-regulation, social skills, empathy, and motivation (Craig, 2020). There are several competencies that are associated with each of the five components. Some of the competencies include self-regard, flexibility, problem solving, interpersonal relationships, and assertiveness (Craig, 2020).

Just as an individual's intellect can be measured, so can emotional intelligence be measured through a variety of emotional intelligence tests. The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence (MSCEIT) is an emotional intelligence test that measures the aforementioned four branches of emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2002). Another emotional intelligence test is the Emotional and Social Competence Inventor (ESCI), which measures the demonstration of individuals' behaviors through their perceptions. The ESCI breaks down four of the five components as well as twelve additional competencies tied to them (Boyatzis & Goleman, 2017). The first component is self-awareness, which focusses on emotional self-awareness. Self-management is another component and focuses on emotional self-control, achievement orientation, outlook, and adaptability. The third component is social awareness which focuses on empathy and organizational awareness. The final competency is relationship management focuses on influence, conflict management, inspirational leadership, and teamwork (Boyatzis & Goleman, 2017).

Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning plays a vital role in helping students navigate through their academic and life experiences. The components of social emotional learning, or SEL, can benefit students as they transition to high school. Social emotional learning is a process in which children and adults learn to incorporate thinking, feeling, and behavior into important tasks (Sims, 2004). Furthermore, SEL is an approach to instruction that takes into account the emotional components that either help or hinder learning in school (Reilly, 2018). SEL can fuse together multiple qualities in school that include culture and climate, academic supports, classroom management strategies, and intervention practices (Reilly, 2018). SEL is culturally inclusive and contextually relevant in schools (Newman & Moroney, 2019). As stated by Reilly (2018), SEL must operate in a caring responsive school environment and under the notion that the student's emotions must be considered in teacher approaches. SEL includes five competencies that are taught to enhance students readiness and those include self-awareness (to recognize one's own emotions), self-management (to regulate behaviors and work towards goals), social awareness (to be able to empathize with others), relationship skills (to be able to effectively communicate, listen, collaborate, and maintain healthy relationships, and responsible decision making (to have constructive choices) (Newman & Moroney, 2019). According to Gayl (2018), research suggest that teaching the five competencies can help with long-term academic and career success. There are other components relevant to Social Emotional Learning. For example, service learning and experiential activities incorporated with learning are both very important components of social emotional learning (McBride et al., 2016).

SEL can be integrated into academics, in order to unify instruction and/or have a curriculum that drive a SEL programs (Berman, 2019). SEL approaches are done effectively

through intentional classroom instruction from preschool through high school (Weissberg & Cascanno, 2013). Additionally, SEL programs can be used as a targeted approach, early intervention, or a treatment response (Newman & Moroney, 2019). The targeted approach emphasizes strategic teaching, modeling and facilitation by the teacher as they address the application of SEL (Weissberg & Cascanno, 2013). Early intervention strategies are where teachers and staff informally and formally address SEL by creating a safe, caring, and highly engaged classroom environment (Weissberg & Cascanno, 2013). According to McBride et al. (2016) the implementation of SEL programs can influence positive peer relations, which in turn helps young people follow positive and productive paths. Another benefit of teaching social emotional skills are healthy relationships, less emotional distress, and a decrease in behavioral issues (Newman & Moroney, 2019). Other benefits of SEL include increase reading and math scores, higher graduation rates, and the development of techniques that increase the ability in coping with stress (Gayl, 2018). Lastly, SEL can have a positive impact on the overall school climate (Weissberg & Cascanno, 2013). The remaining research will address the different types SEL programs and integrating SEL in school to support students.

Integrating SEL Practices

SEL is important in schools because it increases the student's capacity to learn and also prepares students for college and career readiness (Yoder, 2014). SEL can be integrated school wide by various practices. These practices can include teaching SEL skills is explicitly, SEL instructional practices, and integrated SEL into core curriculum. There are several teaching practices that promote the SEL competencies and they include self-reflection and self-assessment, balanced instruction, academic press and expectation, cooperative learning, teacher language, and classroom discussions (Yoder, 2014).

Addressing SEL Explicitly Through the Competencies

Explicit SEL instruction allows time for teachers to dedicate their focus on the five competencies and address age-appropriate topics and strategies aligned to each of the competencies (SEL Competencies, 2020). The explicit instruction allows consistent opportunities for student to develop, practice, and reflect on SEL competencies (SEL Competencies, 2020).

Self-Awareness

Self-awareness is the ability to center one's feelings, thoughts, actions and to be able to recognize how other individual perceptions (Morin, n.d.). Another definition states that self-awareness is a skill that helps people recognize their feelings and find ways to address those feelings (Spezzano, 2019). Self-awareness is the cornerstone of emotional intelligence (Ackerman, 2020). According to Morin (n.d.), individuals who have strong self-awareness can recognize their strengths and challenges, have a growth mindset, recognize other individual needs and feelings, and can understand and speak about their feelings. People who are self-aware tend to have good psychological health and a positive outlook on life (Ackerman, 2020). Additionally, self-awareness develops over time and can be public or private (Morin, n.d.). Private self-awareness is when a person is aware of something about oneself that other people might not be; on the other hand, public self-awareness is when a person is aware of how others see them (Morin, n.d.).

Self-awareness is composed of two executive functions which include metacognition and social thinking. Meta-cognition addresses self-monitoring, assessing success and failures, the impact one's actions have on others, thoughtfulness, and developing solutions (Thinking Skills, 2020). Alternatively, social thinking deals with describing how one feels, recognizes causes of

emotional experiences, the comprehension of non-verbal cues, and the ability to exhibit care towards others (Thinking Skills, 2020). Armstrong (2017) shares ways to promote self-awareness in schools which include utilizing self-awareness assessments, having students keep personal journals for reflection, connect content to students' personal lives, teach mindfulness meditation, and have students create autobiographies. Additional activities and practices essential to classroom instruction could include students generating vocabulary words that extend their emotions, group discussions that allows students the opportunity to discuss their emotions, and allowing student the opportunity to reflect on what they have learned during class (CASEL, 2017). To conclude, self-awareness is the ability to be aware of thoughts and experiences and possessing these skill helps people thrive at home, school, and in relationships with others (Morin, n.d.).

Self-Management

Self-management is the ability to regulate one's own behavior (Hughes et al., 1988). Another way to define self-management is a combination of behaviors that help people manage themselves (Suess, 2015). These behaviors include self-recording, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement (Hughes et al., 1988). Suess (2015) has named six traits of self-management that include self-control, transparency, adaptability, achievement, initiative, and optimism. Self-management helps develop skills related to managing time and commitments, the capability to learn new things independently, and building one's own personal network (Suess, 2015).

In classrooms, self-management is an instructional tool that has been used to transfer control of student's behavior from external reinforcers to themselves (King-Sears & Bonfils, 1999). Additionally, students are taught to observe, assess, and change their own behavior in classrooms (Schulze, 2016). Self-management helps students self-regulate social behaviors,

recognize appropriate and inappropriate responses, and make self-evaluations (King-Sears & Bonfils, 1999). Self-management also includes self-monitoring, goal setting, and self-instruction (Schulze, 2016). Goal setting is a procedure that helps students self-identify a target behavior and change it (Schulze, 2016). Self-monitoring involves teaching students to observe and record whether they are engaging in appropriate behavior in social situations (Bell et al., 2013). Moreover, self-monitoring and self-management help students maintain attention, solve problems, and track their own progress towards a goal (Bell et al., 2013). The following are examples of addressing self-management during classroom instruction: have students brainstorm ways keep themselves motivated, consider having students identify lesson objectives and set personal goals, develop short-term classroom goals, and discuss how individuals related to content areas persevered. though hard times (CASEL, 2017). Self-management strategies increase positive social behaviors, which provides skills necessary for student success in the classroom (Loftin et al., 2005). In short, these skills can help students gain the skills and confidence needed to navigate learning responsibilities more independently (Bell et al., 2013).

Responsible Decision-Making

Responsible decision-making is the ability to make beneficial choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms (SEL for Students, n.d.). Yoder (2013) defines responsible decision-making as student's capability to identify problems and obtain appropriate solutions related to the problems. These problems could be social or academic. Decision-making is not the same as problem solving. Decision-making occurs because an individual wants something to happen versus problem solving, which is used when a problem surfaces (Schmitz, 2018). Involving children in decision-making is critical to fulfilling the basic need for independence (Rubin & Schoenefeld, 2009).

Responsible decision-making includes being able to evaluate, reflect, solve problems, analyze situations, identify problems, and assume ethical responsibility (SEL for Students, n.d.). Furthermore, responsible decision-making involves several skills which includes: cognitive identification of problems, understanding different aspects, realistically evaluating the potential consequences, considering the well-being of other individuals, and reflecting on one's own actions (SEL for Students, n.d.). Good decision-making involves being a good listener, having a clear set of priorities, keeping an open mind, being flexible, and being realistic (Schmitz, 2018). Students participation in decision-making is a powerful component of engagement, which contributes to increased motivation for learning (Rubin & Schoenefeld, 2009).

On the classroom level, responsible decision-making activities include walking-through the steps of problem solving, have classroom discussions on whether historical figures or character make ethical decisions, and teach students a formula for making good decisions (CASEL, 2017). It is important for teachers to incorporate practices like modeling good decision-making, support students through the decisions they make, and enforcing classroom rooms and shared norms. Decision making also encompasses the ability to created, agreed and understand consequences to their behavior in class (CASEL, 2017).

Relationship Skills

The Collaborative of Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, defines the relationship core competency as the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with people and groups from different background (SEL Competencies, 2020). Additionally, relationship skills focus on being able to communicate clearly, listen effectively, cooperate with others, resist social pressure, negotiate conflict, and seek and offer help when needed (SEL Competencies, 2020).

Core areas addressed with relationship skills include communication, social engagement, relationship-building, and teamwork (SEL Competencies, 2020). According to Lawson (2003), good social skills require good communication skills. Effective communication skills involve knowing when and how to express oneself, recognizing verbal and nonverbal cues, and building interpersonal relationships (Wagner, 2019).

Relationship skills also involve teamwork. Teamwork consists of individuals who work cohesively, understand each other, develop a sense of mutual support, and the ability to focus on the importance of achieving team objectives. Also, individuals collaborate to use their unique skills and experience to get the job properly done (Das, n.d.). The core area social engagement focuses on students interacting with their community. Social engagement address skills such as working in groups, branching out, learning from one another, and civic responsibility (2019). Lastly, relationship skills for students extends to both students and teachers. Student-to-student relationships can help students with empathy, problem-solving strategies, and cooperation (Pepler & Bierman, 2018).

In the classroom, teachers can promote relationship skills with various lesson, activities, and teaching practices. One activity that promotes relationship skills includes allowing students to organize a classroom community service project (CASEL, 2017). Furthermore, teaching students on how to provide feedback can aid in relationship skills. Additionally, relationship skills teaching practices could include establishing classroom conflict resolution protocols, model good conflict resolution, and allow students to participate in class meeting to give students the opportunity to interact with one another. (CASEL, 2017).

Student relationships can also help students develop appropriate interaction skills with each other as well as understand other students' perspectives (Pepler & Bierman, 2018).

Conversely, negative peer relationships can also impact social-emotional development through bullying and exclusion (Pepler & Bierman, 2018). Positive student-to-student relationships have a direct impact on students' self-esteem and confidence (SEL Adventure, 2019). Relationship skills also address teacher-to-student interactions. Student-teacher relationships provide a foundation for educators toward improving the SEL environments (Konishi & Wong, 2018). Students who experience a caring relationship with a teacher have an increased desire to learn and enjoy school; therefore, they demonstrate greater academic success (Zakrzewski, 2014). Strong and supportive relationships provided by teachers are fundamental to healthy development of all students in schools (Konishi & Wong, 2018).

Social Awareness

Social Awareness is the fifth SEL competency. Social awareness is the ability to view things from other people's perspective, empathize with individuals, and understand social and ethical norms (La Rocca, 2017). Rockwell (2019) states that social awareness involves peer learning, empathy, perspective taking, respect for others, resolving conflict, and being able to communicate constructively. Social awareness skills can help students have better behavior along with increasing also increase engagement in school (LaRocca, 2017). In classrooms, social awareness provides a positive classroom climate, promote less risky behaviors, and improve relationships (LaRocca, 2017). Students with strong social awareness can more easily acclimate to their classroom environment, empathize with other students, and engage in fewer disruptive behaviors. This, in turn, creates a positive classroom climate, where students can focus on learning (Greenberg et al., 2003). Students with effective social awareness skills have better relationships with other students due to being able to resolve conflicts and communicate productively (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Teachers can implement various classroom practices and activities to promote social awareness. One example includes examining literature and texts and understanding the perspective characters (CASEL, 2017). Additionally, allowing students the opportunity to reflect on negative effects of stereotyping or what others may go through. Teachers can also model accepting others and allowing cooperative learning projects to build diverse working groups (CASEL, 2017). It is also important to allow all students to participate in class. One-way students can participate is helping organize class projects or community service projects (CASEL, 2017).

Students who are able to adapt to new environments, understand the needs and standpoints of others, and know where to get support when they need it are less susceptible to emotional distress and less likely to engage in risky behaviors (Greenberg et al., 2003). Additionally, in classrooms, social awareness maximizes student learning potential (Rockwell, 2019). Some skills that demonstrate strong social awareness include a student being able to find solutions during conflicts with others, emphasize with others that they care about their feelings, adapt to various social situations, and choose their peer group wisely (Ryerse, 2017).

SEL Instructional Practices

SEL instructional practices should be applied when schools implement the school wide SEL and the competencies. Instructional practices are techniques that teachers can use to help students become independent and strategic learners (Health and Life Skills, 2002). When teachers create an environment for learning, they motivate and focus on student learning by helping student know what is expected of them, providing students with opportunities for feedback, and assuring students they are capable of learning challenging content (Dean et al., 2012). Effective instructional practices can be used across grade levels and content areas, while

also being able to provide accommodations for various student differences (Health and Life Skills, 2002). Teacher language, self-assessment, self-reflection, cooperative learning, competence building, cooperative learning, and classroom discussions are all teacher instructional practices that promote social-emotional learning (Yoder, 2014). With SEL instructional practices utilized, students can begin to apply SEL independently and academically.

Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy in which teachers have students work together toward a collective goal (Yoder, 2014). Cooper (1995) defines cooperative learning as an instructional tool where students work together in small fixed groups on a structured plan. Cooperative learning is one of the most beneficial ways of ensuring that students are actively engaged in their learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). According to Yoder (2014), there are five basic elements of cooperative learning which include positive interdependence, individual accountability, promoting one another's successes, applying interpersonal and social skills, and group processing. Additionally, there are three types of cooperative learning. The first type of cooperative learning is formal cooperative learning where students work together in the same group for one class up to several classes to accomplish a shared goal (Brame & Biel, 2015). Next is informal cooperative learning where students work together to achieve a goal in a temporary group (Brame & Biel, 2015). Lastly, there are cooperative base groups, where students are in long-term groups (Brame & Biel, 2015).

There are many benefits when using cooperative learning as an instructional strategy. Advantages of cooperative learning include increased student retention, promotion of positive attitudes toward the subject matter, supports student's development of high order thinking skills, students become actively involved in their learning, and increased student satisfaction with

learning experiences (Cooper, 1995). On the other hand, not being able to cover the material, lack of control in the classroom, and the “hitch hiker” problem (where one student does the work while others reap the benefits) are all potential downsides to cooperative learning.

Cooperative learning is active learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). In the 1970s, Sir James Britton and others created a specific active learning procedure called cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Active learning occurs when students discover their own knowledge and require students to meaningfully engage the task assigned and engage with resources to complete the task (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Active learning includes conversing and interacting with others, generating new ideas, and each group determining their own direction (Johnson & Johnson, 2018). Additionally, active learning requires that students working in small groups to conceptualize, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate information and utilize conceptual frameworks that have been learned (Johnson & Johnson, 2018).

Academic Press and Expectations

Academic press comes together from multiple forces in school, which include school policies, practices, expectations, rewards, and norms (Murphy et al., 1982). Academic press refers to the implementation of meaningful and rigorous work while also expecting students to succeed (Yoder & Nolan, 2018). Academic press can come from both principal expectations and teacher expectations. Academic press expectations can come from the school principal to teachers to help them navigate through the curriculum and work to promote student learning outcomes (Lee et al., 1999). On the other hand, academic press can come from teacher expectations to students by the challenge of the academic work, the presence of specific standards for student achievement, and the amount of class time devoted to high quality instruction (Lee et al., 1999). Additionally, teacher practice involves ensuring that all students

feel responsible for their successes and failures and students understand the connection between effort and results (Yoder & Nolan, 2018).

Classroom Discussions

Classroom discussions are a research-based instructional practice used to promote SEL (SEL for Students, n.d.). Classroom discussions give students the opportunity to practice their thinking about course material by engaging in dialogue while the teacher facilitates (Cashin, 2011). Additionally, classroom discussions allow student to interact with one another, express their knowledge, understanding and opinions on a topic (McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003). Furthermore, during classroom discussions, the teacher articulates a specific process for thinking about a concept and then encourages students articulate to that process (Barton, 1995). According to SEL Practice (n.d.), the goal of classroom discussions is to allow students to take ownership of the process by asking each other questions, building on ideas, and having academic discourse. It is important that with classroom discussion that teachers assure students have sufficient prior knowledge relating to the topic, that there are clear guidelines and expectations, that students are given equal opportunities, and that there needs to be a summarizing activity (McLeod, Fisher, & Hoover, 2003). Student participation in class discussions promote active learning and student accountability as students share their knowledge ((McLeod et al., 2003). In short, when classroom discussions are utilized, students are making meaning of content which in turn allows them to be more engaged in their learning as well as have more opportunities to practice SEL skills (SEL for Students, n.d.).

Self-Reflection

Self-reflection provides the opportunity to enhance meaning, encourage insight, and process complex learning (Costa & Kallick, 2008). Self-reflection is an instructional practice that allows students the opportunity to connect the dots and internalize their learning (Vogels, 2017). Additionally, self-reflection links current experiences to previous learning (Costa & Kallick, 2008). Self-reflection provides the opportunity to draw cognitive and emotional information from several sources as well as evaluate and synthesize information from their learning (Costa & Kallick, 2008). Strategies that guide self-reflection include discussions, interviews, questions, and journal logs (Costa & Kallick, 2008). There are several benefits of the practice of self-reflection and that includes motivation, analysis, discovering solutions, processing and making ideas significant (Alrubail, 2015). Self-reflection is a component of self-awareness, which is a SEL competency.

Integrating SEL Skills into Core Curriculum

Integrating SEL techniques includes many of the strategies mentioned previously. Teachers will have the capability of implementing these strategies throughout the year. Many SEL skills can be taught in isolation, but it is most effective when SEL skills are integrated in school culture, curriculum, and counseling services (Ark, 2017). SEL signature practices can be embedded in lesson plans by including welcoming rituals, such as morning meetings, engaging strategies like Socratic Seminar or jigsaws, and optimistic closure (Srinivasan, 2019). Additional ways to address SEL in lesson plans is to include presses that involve reviewing, reflecting, and recognition (Bryner, 2018). Reviewing allows students to be self-aware of their own learning process while reflecting provides students the opportunity to understand how the SEL skills play

in their learning for that particular lesson (Bryner, 2018). According to *Trends & Best Practices* (2018), integration of SEL into academics includes elevating student voice, which allows students to become leaders, decision-makers, and problem solvers. Additionally, integration should be interactive where core curriculum involves student-led discussion, interactions with students, and teamwork (Trends & Best Practices, 2018). Integrating SEL into core curriculum happens when teachers build students sense of identity and their ability to learn, overcome challenges, and influence the world around them with the work they perform and the thoughts they share (Fisher, 2019). Furthermore, integration involves the opportunity to equip students to become active and involved citizens in the classroom (Fisher, 2019).

SEL Related Approaches

SEL related approaches are either directly aligned to SEL or create opportunities for social emotional learning (Effective SEL Programs, 2015). SEL related approaches include, but are not limited to, mindfulness, student-centered learning, technology, early warning systems, and college and career readiness (Effective SEL Programs, 2015).

College and Career Readiness and 21st Century Skills

In the early 1990s, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, or P21, developed a framework for 21st century skills for preparing students for success in the workforce (Mosensoh & Fox, 2011). The framework includes three domains which are learning and innovation, information, media, technology skills, and life and career skills (Mosensoh & Fox, 2011). The 21st century skills that P21 identified are closely aligned with SEL skills. The subdomains that P21 identified include creativity, critical thinking/problem solving, communication, collaboration, self-direction, social and cross-cultural skills, leadership, responsibility,

productivity, and accountability (Durham, n.d.). These subdomains connect to many of the SEL skills related to the five competencies such as solving problems, communication, perspective-taking, self-motivation, empathy, respect for others, and ethical responsibility (Ross, 2019). Improvement of SEL is critical to child development as it directly relates to success in adulthood. Additionally, SEL is linked to successful employability skills i.e. 21st century skills (Posamentier, 2018). SEL skills have become a necessity in the 21st century workplace (Posamentier, 2018). SEL and employability skills benefit by providing individuals the opportunity to thrive in their positions (Posamentier, 2018). Self-motivation, time management, problem-solving, communication, and relationship building are attributes employers seek (Posamentier, 2018). In short, SEL skills are positively linked to individual success in the workplace. In years past, 21st century skills were focused on schools in order to improve student success after graduating high school, SEL is vital for students and is also strongly connected to 21st century skills.

Teaching Mindfulness

With the many demands to students, both academically and socially, it is imperative for pupils to have the ability to quiet themselves in the midst of the noise around them to eliminate distractions and anxiety. Mindfulness is a practice used to focus on the present moment (Trafton, 2019). Specific practices include meditation, yoga, breathing, and concentration (Leland, 2015). Mindfulness is important because it helps students become more connected with the educational community because these communities can sometime bring out anxiety, isolation, and depression (Leland, 2010). Mindfulness can enhance academic performance and address mental health (Trafton, 2019). In addition, the practice can help with reducing stress and student suspensions (Trafton, 2019). Using mindfulness helps students learn to slow their thoughts, listen,

communicate effectively, and maintain focus (Hormich-Lisciandro, 2013). In short, the practicing of mindfulness helps students organize their lives which allows them to organize their thoughts and emotions (Hormich-Lisciandro, 2013). Mindfulness in an SEL related approach because it aids in students owning and centering their emotions.

Metacognition and Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness is an extension of metacognition. Thinking about your own thinking is the at of metacognition (Gelder, 2009). Students are able gain insight into their process of learning and take control of their learning with metacognition (Jones-Carey, 2018). Metacognition is about what you are thinking while mindfulness is about how you think as you go about tasks (Gelder, 2009). Being mindful in the present while learning allows students to be aware of how their own learning is taking place (Jones-Carey, 2018). Metacognition and mindfulness are both specific practices of the social emotional learning competency self-awareness. Mindfulness is a crucial stage in the metacognitive process of monitoring, evaluating, and regulating a student's learning process (Global Metacognition, 2019).

Metacognition was introduced by John Flavell in the late 1970's as a critical component of learning (Moua, 2012). Metacognition involves three components which include the metacognitive experience, metacognitive knowledge, and metacognitive strategies (Moua, 2012). Metacognitive experience is the internal response to learning. Metacognitive knowledge connects the learning process to beliefs of how to learn and the process of the strategies that help you learn (Moua, 2012). Metacognitive strategies are the processes designed to monitor the progress of learning and the imminent tasks. Self-regulation and self-reflection are important components of the metacognitive process (Moua, 2012).

There are four levels of metacognitive learning. Students who are unaware of the metacognitive knowledge are on the tactic level. They do not stop to think and evaluate about what they are thinking. Aware learners are able to think about their thinking, but it is not deliberate, focused, or planned (Global Metacognition, 2019). Furthermore, when students know to apply specific strategies to help them learn, then they are classified as strategic learners. Last, reflective learners are able to reflect on their learning as it is taking place (Global Metacognition, 2019).

Technology

Technology can provide a way to supplement SEL instruction and assist with any barrier's schools may face when trying to balance academic instruction with social emotional learning (Foster SEL Through Tech, 2017). Technology can strengthen SEL by providing self-directed learning, assessments, personalization, ensuring fidelity of programming, and building agency (Berlinski, 2016). There are technological supports that teachers can utilize to integrate SEL. One of the technology tools is collaborative platforms such as video conferencing and Google Classroom (Zimmerman, 2019). These platforms allow students to work together along with facilitating SEL skills (Zimmerman, 2019). Other technology supports include artificial intelligence and mixed reality (Zimmerman, 2019). Furthermore, game-based learning solutions and computer applications promote core elements such as responsible decision-making, communication, and peer collaboration (Foster SEL Through Tech, 2017). They also improve engagement and confidence of students (Foster SEL Through Tech, 2017). Technology can drive SEL in and out of the classroom environment.

SEL Complementary Programs

There are many programs that have elements of social-emotional learning but are not comprehensive enough to serve as a primary SEL program (Effective SEL Programs, 2015). These programs are called complementary programs and can be used with other evidence-based programs to support SEL (Effective SEL Programs, 2015).

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

SEL gives schools a foundation for implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS (Carmichael, 2017). Conversely, PBIS provides a framework for promoting social-emotional competencies that support the whole student. SEL and PBIS complement each other and support the same philosophies. SEL is a process where students acquire skills and knowledge to help them understand how to manage their emotions, show empathy for others, build positive relationships, act responsibly, and achieve goals (Carmichael, 2017). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or PBIS is a proactive approach the school utilizes to improve school safety and increase positive behaviors (Lee, n.d.). Similarly, PBIS focuses more on identifying, recognizing, and encouraging desired student behaviors rather than strictly punishing misbehaviors (Carmichael, 2017). Through PBIS, students and staff members work cohesively to create a school wide program that clearly outlines positive behavioral expectations, provides incentives for meeting those expectations, promotes positive student and staff relationships, and allows schools to make data-based decisions (Bradshaw et al., 2015). It is important that teachers and staff model and reward prosocial behaviors with PBIS (Carmichael, 2017). Students tend to emulate what they see and also need positive role models.

PBIS involves a multi-tiered support system, where there are three tiers of supports for students and teachers (Lee, n.d.). Tier one is prevention for all students, tier two is more targeted on some students, and tier three is intensive and individualized prevention for a few students (Tiered Framework, n.d.). It is important that in each tier, students are taught specific behavior expectations and strategies (Lee, n.d.). The guiding principles of PBIS include explicit instructions, tracking student behavioral progress, gathering data and use to applying data to make proper decisions regarding school behavior interventions, along with understanding that students can learn behavioral expectations for various situations (Lee, n.d.). To conclude, PBIS is an approach that systematically and consistently prevents negative student behavior while promoting a positive school culture (Bradshaw et al., 2015).

Restorative Practices

Restorative Practices is another widely used complementary SEL program. Restorative practice is the application of restorative justice, which is an approach to crime and wrongdoing that places accountability on the wrongdoer to repair the harm (Thonsborne & Blood, 2013). Restorative justice is the opposite of retributive justice, which tends to isolate wrongdoers from any connection to resolving the conflict with those they have harmed. In other words, retributive justice focuses on blame and punishment (Thonsborne & Blood, 2013). In schools, retributive justice punishes students by giving them a consequence, like suspension, without students understanding the impact of what they did. Restorative practice is a process through which social-emotional skills are further learned and refined (Gulbrandson, 2018). Restorative practices promote areas such as inclusiveness, relationship-building and problem-solving through restorative methods such as circles (Porter, 2007).

SEL and Restorative Practices approaches student behavior by promoting affirmative school culture; while also allowing students an opportunity to develop and utilize positive skills (Gulbrandson, 2018). Restorative practice utilizes communication techniques focused on affective statements and proactive community building activities (Riley, 2018). Restorative practices can reduce problems like bullying and violence while also changing student behavior and building healthy school communities (Porter, 2007). Additionally, the approach can also boost outcomes like improved school climate, decrease suspensions, and reduce the number of conflicts in schools (Gulbrandson, 2018). Restorative practice is not a one size fits all approach; however, it does allow those who cause harm in a situation to come together with those who they harmed, which improves school settings (Riley, 2017).

SEL and Character Education

Social emotional learning is important for students because it goes beyond the brain and it helps students connect their emotions and their heart. Helping to build up a students' character is closely related to supporting social emotional learning.

Character education can be a component of social emotional learning. Character education promotes core virtues, moral sensitivity and commitment, ethics, and personal growth (Kidron, 2018). Character education can be promoted throughout a school in many ways. Character education can be promoted by direct instruction, language-based curriculum, positive language, visual representation in the school, and school climate approach (Brooks & Kann, 1993).

According to the Elkind and Sweet (2020), there are several character educational programs which includes: *Character Counts*, *Habitudes*, *Good Character* and *A Foundation for*

a Better Life. The most well-known character education is *Character Counts*. *Character Counts* is unique for the six pillars that it encompasses which include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Program Overview, n.d.). When learning about trustworthiness, there is an emphasis on students learning honesty in communication, loyalty, and refraining from cheating and stealing (Program Overview, n.d.). Learning about respect involves being tolerant, using good manners, and the “Golden Rule.” Planning ahead, doing your best, and doing what you are supposed to do are all skills students learn about related to responsibility (Program Overview, n.d.). While students learn about fairness, they learn how to play by the rules, being open minded, and how to engage with all people fairly. Being compassionate, empathic, and expressing gratitude is what students learn when they understand the character trait of caring. Lastly, when learning about citizenship, students learning how to be involved in their community, obeying laws, and expressing staying informed (Program Overview, n.d.).

Character Education promotes a focus on positive school climate, mindfulness, and growth mindset (Elkind & Sweet, 2020). Benefits of the programs include students reaching their academic potential, having the ability to succeed in school and after they graduate, and to become engaged, responsible and productive citizens (Elkind & Sweet, 2020).

Whole Child Approach and SEL

Another connection to social emotional learning is the whole child approach. According to Griffin and Slade (2019), ASCD launched the Whole Child Initiative. The goal of the initiative was to demonstrate to people the importance of moving students beyond becoming well-educated citizens to becoming productive participants in society (Griffin and Slade, 2019). The Whole Child approach encourages student growth and learning in every area. The core of

Whole Child Approach recognizes five tenets that include each child in school is healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (ASCD, 2020). Healthy students have access to nutritious school meals, engage in physical education, and have access to counseling programs(ASCD, 2020). Safe schools demonstrate caring about the general well-being of a child. If a child does not feel safe in school, they will have difficulty focusing, limited social interactions, and will experience absenteeism often (ASCD, 2020). Furthermore, engaged students are involved in real world connections, community involvement, field trips, and age appropriate responsibilities (ASCD, 2020). Supported students know they have the support of volunteers, parents, teachers, administrators, and counselors in school. Lastly, challenged students are able to go beyond their familiar activities into those which explore new opportunities and interests (Dennis, 2018).

The premise behind the Whole Child Approach is that for optimal learning to occur, the emotional and social well-being of students should be considered and addressed (ASCD, 2020). This approach supports SEL, cognitive skills, and academics. Schools can implement the Whole Child Approach in many ways which include: assessing beyond academics, creating a safe and trusting community, providing students with a well-rounded curriculum, promoting creativity in the classroom, and involving students in decision making (Paget, 2019).

Miller (2018) describes four core qualities that characterize the whole child approach. The first quality is to encourage experiential learning, where learning is more meaningful and relevant to students. Another core quality is personal relationships are just as important as the academic content. The third quality that Miller describes is holistic education expresses an ecological consciousness. Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the interior life of students which includes feelings, aspirations, ideas and questions that students bring to the learning process (Miller, 2008).

SEL and Culturally Relevant Teaching

In today's schools, embracing students' background and culture should be a priority in the classroom. America is the melting pot of the world. Schools and school districts bring together students from various backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities from all over the world. Culturally relevant teaching, also known as culturally responsive teaching, is a framework that allows educators to embrace students' background and culture. Culturally relevant teaching is when teaching incorporates student's interests, lived experiences, and background. It is a critical to improving success for all youth, college readiness, and student engagement and achievement (Knight-Manuel, Marciano, & Milner, 2019). There are three interconnected tenets with culturally relevant teaching, and they include student leaning and achievement, affirmation of student's cultural competence, and the facilitation of social, political, and critical consciousness (Knight-Manuel, Marciano, & Milner, 2019).

Simmons (2019) acknowledges that in order for students to embrace conversations that make them uncomfortable and decipher through divisive rhetoric, teachers need to explicitly address the idea of sociopolitical consciousness. Social emotional skills can aid educators in building communities that nurture courageous conversations that confront societal issues such as injustice, hate, and inequality (Simmons, 2019). Furthermore, SEL competencies and culturally relevant teaching can prevent violence and build more peaceful communities (Simmons, 2019). Embracing culturally relevant teaching allows educators to steer away from a one size fits all approach to SEL (Snyder & Cook, 2018). Social interactions, behaviors, and emotions are influenced by other factors like culture, making it is important to incorporate both SEL and culturally relevant teaching in classroom.

Culturally relevant teaching can be incorporated by all five of the competencies. Teachers can incorporate culturally relevant teaching into self-awareness by crafting a classroom culture that focuses on the contributions to many different groups of people (Honey, 2019). Discussions centering around challenging topics like privilege, power, and access in society is a way to infuse culturally relevant teaching and the competency self-management (Honey, 2019). Furthermore, educators can develop responsible decision-making and culturally relevant teaching through community-based projects led by students (Simmons, 2019). Culturally relevant teaching can be incorporated in social awareness by the discussion of current events and then enhance the relationship skill competency through debate (Simmons, 2019). It is imperative to embrace both social emotional learning and culturally relevant teaching practices as they are just equally important in supporting students in this diverse and growing world.

SEL and MTSS

SEL offers an opportunity to enhance functioning systems of support, including MTSS. MTSS, or Multi-Tiered Support System, is a systemic prevention focused framework that is used to address student needs (Gulbrandson, 2018). MTSS intertwines both academic and behavior support methods. MTSS is formerly known as RTI, Response to Intervention. MTSS includes multiple tiers to address student needs, a screening process which determines the students who need support, progress monitoring for each student, and data-driven decision making throughout the process (Gulbrandson, 2018).

One of the biggest components of MTSS as mentioned are the multiple tiers in which students can receive academic or behavior support. Tier 1 supports address 80-90% of students (Connecting, 2018). This tier is a universal approach where every student receives high quality academic instruction and prevention. Tier 1 typically occurs in the day-to-day classroom setting.

Tier 2 focuses on about 5-10% of the student body. In this tier, the supports are much more targeted and research-based supports that can address the needs of students on an academic or behavior level (Connecting, 2018). Tier 2 can be classroom-based or small group interventions. The last tier is tier 3, which should support about 1-5% of students. This tier is highly intensive and a much more individualized approach to supporting students academically and behaviorally (Connecting, 2018). In tier 2 and 3, data is used to drive and support students. Special education students are an additional support beyond the 3 tiers of support in MTSS (Connecting, 2018).

SEL and MTSS are both grounded in the idea of supporting the whole child. It is important to that school leaders and educators know that SEL can and should support the MTSS framework, hence the complementary nature of the programs (Dunham, 2019). MTSS can also address building social and emotional skills for students by providing evidenced based SEL instruction and integration into all areas of academic instruction (Dunham, 2019). This idea can be integrated into Tier 1 of addressing SEL (Dunham, 2019). In tier 2, teachers can focus on small groups of students where they can use SEL instruction to improve students' SEL skills. Students in tier 2 need additional time to learn and practice SEL. Tier 3 involves one-on-one sessions and supports to help students develop their SEL skills (Dunham, 2019).

For many years, the “wait to fail” approach for students who did not satisfy the IQ achievement discrepancy model that was used to reveal students who may have had disabilities (Blackburn & Witze, 2018). This IQ achievement discrepancy model had many flaws; thus, states went to a much more immediate and focused intervention program called RTI, response to intervention. RTI and MTSS are similar but not the same. RTI has a strong emphasis on interventions in order to promote student's student growth (Blackburn & Witze, 2018). On the other hand, MTSS is designed to helps students in different academic and behavior situations and

the multiple tiers of support increase in intensity if needed (Blackburn & Witze, 2018). In short, RTI is used to raise achievement of lower performers through research-based interventions, whereas MTSS is designed to improve the education systems as a whole (Blackburn & Witze, 2018).

SEL and Mental Health

Mental Health in America is a major concern for both adolescents and adults as it can impact an individual's daily life. Mental health includes an individual's emotional, psychological, and social well-being that impacts the way people think, feel, and act (US Department of Health, n.d.). About 10 million students require professional help in grades K-12 (Balow, 2018). Mental health difficulties affect a student's success in school and in everyday life (CFC, 2015). The most common mental health diagnosis among adolescents include depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and bipolar disorder (Balow, 2018). Untreated and undiagnosed mental health conditions can possibly affect a student's ability to learn, develop, and grow. This can lead to issues such as low student achievement, chronic absenteeism, disruptive behavior, and an increase in dropping out of school (Go Guardian, 2019).

According to the Committee for Children (2015), SEL can have a positive impact on mental health, which can increase motivation to learn and decrease risky behaviors. Additionally, SEL can provide students with the skills they need to effectively manage their behavior, emotions, and relationship with others (Go Guardian, 2019). SEL is a proactive measure for mental health issues and can assist in reducing anxiety, suicide, substance abuse, depression, and impulsive behaviors in students (Go Guardian, 2019).

There are various SEL practices that assist with battling mental health challenges and they include coping skills, communication skills, relaxation techniques, self-regulation, and emotional identification (CFC, 2015). Additionally, the practicing of mindfulness can reduce stress that students face, that can also impact mental health (Go Guardian, 2019). The practicing of many of these skills can give students the tools they need to overcome the challenges that mental health may interfere with the learning process (CFC, 2015).

SEL and School Climate

Social-emotional learning and school climate go hand-in-hand. They are both vital to building a healthy school environment and they are complementary to each other (CASEL, 2018). The relationship between a positive school climate and SEL is interactive and occurs in all school relationships including student to student, student-teacher, and staff interactions (CASEL, 2018). School climate includes cultures, norms, practices and organizational structures of schools and how those elements work together to influence student growth (CASEL, 2018). Another definition of school climate is the patterns of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning, and leadership practices (AIR, 2017). Safety, cultural responsiveness, supportive relationships, student engagement, and high expectations are all areas that create a positive school climate that in turn can build social and emotional competencies (CASEL, 2018). According to Martin (2018), benefits of improving school climate include: improving academics and student behavior, reducing achievement gaps, cultivating cultural competence, and growing student engagement in schools.

Emotional and physical safety, connectedness and support, challenge and engagement, and peer and adult social and emotional competence are elements of school climate that are most closely related to SEL. Subsequently, SEL and School Climate have intersecting features. As

noted earlier, School Climate refers to a school's cultural context, physical environment, partnerships with families and community, and norms (CASEL, 2018). On the other hand, social emotional competence refers to SEL skills, values, perspectives and identity (CASEL, 2018). When these two intersect, a school has supportive relationships, safety, cultural competence and responsiveness, and challenging and high expectations (CASEL, 2018).

Martin (2018) states that without a positive school climate, all other SEL initiatives are likely to come to a standstill. If students do not feel safe in school, they are less likely to take risks necessary to sharing their emotional struggles, which is important for SEL skills (Martin). Furthermore, if students do not feel as though their peers, school leaders, and teachers respect and appreciate their unique qualities and cultural differences, progress in developing SEL skills are impacted (Martin, 2018).

Adult SEL

Educating students can be one of the most rewarding careers. Educators impact student lives on a daily basis. However, with the demands on schools, teachers are reporting record stress levels, leading to leaving the profession early for many educators (Committee 4 Children, 2019). Stress from teachers is reported as contributing factors attributed to a lack of classroom support, poor working conditions, and inadequate pay (NASBE, 2019). Before educators can effectively embrace, implement, incorporate, and teach students about social emotional learning in their classrooms, it is important that adults understand SEL and practice SEL skills and competencies. Much too often, adult SEL is ignored (Harrison-Berg, 2018). Understanding and practicing SEL can help educators combat some of the day to day stress and demands. In order for there to be an explicit focus on adult SEL, school leaders must team up to promote this within the school culture (Harrison-Berg, 2018). School leaders that prioritize adult SEL an educator's well-being

are taking the first step in improving student SEL skills, which can also foster higher student achievement (NASBE, 2019).

According to Robitalle (2019), when educators have strong SEL skills, they are more prepared to teach SEL skills to students, able to model SEL skills and competencies, and are better equipped to manage the stress and demands of the education profession. Strengthening SEL climate for adults includes establishing relationship building routines, incorporating a design for collaboration, and allowing educators to engage with each other as resources in problem solving (Harrison-Berg, 2018).

Establishing relationship building routines involves, creating routines that faculty members utilize to have positive interactions with one another. Additionally, these routines provide an opportunity for colleagues to build confidence in each other, create a sense of safety, and strengthen mutual respect in order to engage in adult learning (Harrison-Berg, 2018). Design for collaboration involves co-creating clear norms and positive team building experiences that empowers all areas of education (Harrison-Berg, 2018). Lastly, engaging each other as resources in problem solving involves leaders creating a space and time for educators to engage in collaborative problem solving around school wide issues (Harrison-Berg, 2018). Each of these areas allows educators to strengthen their self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management; all of which are SEL competencies.

Implementation Recommendations and Evaluating Effective SEL Programs

Implementing social emotional learning in any setting should be done in the most strategic and effective way. Implementation of any program takes time and should be done so proficiently. Jones et al., (2018) recommend the following for effective implementation: (1)

making sure there is sufficient time required to implement the program, (2) cover SEL beyond the school and classroom, (3) apply SEL in strategies in real time, (4) safeguard enough training to faculty and staff, (7) enable ownership and buy-in with adults, and (5) use data to drive SEL implementation decision-making.

It is important that when district and school leaders are considering social emotional programs for students and staff, they the program be evaluated using the S.A.F.E. criteria. SEL programs should be sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. Sequenced refers to the activities aligned to SEL and skill development. Active is in regard to the forms of learning that can be applied to practice and master new skills (Jones et al., 2018). Furthermore, focused in S.A.F.E, refers to how much time is spent developing social emotional skills. Lastly, explicit is about defining and targeting specific skills (Jones et al., 2018). When SEL programs effectively incorporate all of the S.A.F.E guidelines, the likelihood of positively impacting students and teachers SEL development increases significantly (Pearsall, 2020).

Other features for evaluating effective SEL programs include partnering with family and community, setting long term and short terms goals, and providing supportive contexts. Additionally, it is important that SEL programs build in ways to address adult competencies. It is important to evaluate effective programming and monitoring that it addresses emotional processes, social skills, and cognitive regulation (Jones et al., 2018).

Impact of Implementing Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning has positive impacts that benefit not just schools across the country, but all the individual students that schools serve. According to Durlock and Mahoney (2019), there are several positive benefits of SEL which include improved academic

performance, lower levels of stress, improved student attitudes, decrease in conduct issues with students, and improved social behaviors. According to CASEL, students who benefited from SEL programs showed an 11% gain in academic achievement (Gunn, n.d.). When students know their feelings are heard and respected by others, it is easier for them to relax and focus in school and in the classroom.

At-risk students are the group of students who are more likely to struggle in school and possibly drop out if they do not get proper supports. Many times, at-risk students struggle with attendance, grades, aggressive behavior, and can also struggle with trauma. SEL supports at-risk students by providing adequate tools to help them overcome obstacles and have long-term achievement (Gunn, n.d.). The long-term benefits can help at-risk students avoid poverty (Gunn, n.d.). Additionally, SEL and its competencies teaches students how to cope with disappointments they may face and help them find healthier ways to respond to the effects of trauma (Gunn, n.d.).

There are other ways SEL assists students and educators alike. SEL can help create culturally inclusive classrooms (Ascione, 2019). Furthermore, combined with technology, SEL in classrooms can provide students new learning experiences focused on understanding different perspectives. SEL can also help students with anxiety and social withdrawal that many of them experience in and out of school. Lastly, SEL can support teacher's trauma informed strategies to help students feeling known and supported (Ascione, 2019).

Social Emotional Learning - Supporting the 9th Grade Transition

The ninth-grade year can be one of the most challenging for students. Adolescents leave the comfort of middle schools and enter larger schools with more demands and sometimes less

supports. Social emotional learning can provide students the support they need to overcome those many challenges and succeed in the transition (Dunham, 2019). Aside from addressing SEL explicitly, integrating SEL into core curriculum, or specific SEL programming, there are other meaningful ways SEL can support the transition to high school and they include encourage students to participate in extra-curricular, connect students with peer mentors, build self-efficacy, and parental involvement.

Extra-Curricular Programs

After school programs are a natural setting for integrating social emotional learning (Hurd & Deustch, 2017). After school programs can include sports, performing arts, mentoring programs, and clubs or organizations. Integrating SEL into after school programs can help foster positive student development (2017). Positive student development can include improvement with academic skills and classroom behavior (Gonser, 2020). Many after school programs incorporate skills that SEL highlights such as collaboration and perseverance. Additionally, they offer an opportunity for student develop close and trusting relationships (Gonser, 2020). These relationships provide a way for adults to foster SEL development by giving adolescents autonomy, choice, and structure. After school programs also offer ways for young people to belong, positive social norms, and skill building (Hurd & Deustch, 2017).

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy skills are another way in which SEL can support the ninth-grade transition. Self-efficacy is defined as how much effort students put forth and how they persevere when tasks become challenging (LaRocca, 2017). Having high self-efficacy can allow students to recover from setbacks and put forth a high degree of effort (Kirk, n.d.). There are four areas of self-

efficacy and they include mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional state (Kirk, n.d.).

Mastery experience is one of the four areas of self-efficacy and this describes where an individual's personal experiences with overcoming obstacles and succeeding will build their self-efficacy (Akhtar, 2008). On the other hand, vicarious experience is observing other people and their ability to overcome can help raise a person's motivation to keep persevering (Akhtar, 2008). Additionally, verbal persuasion comes from influential people in an individual's life strengthening their mindset based off what they have told them. Lastly, emotional state refers to the state an individual is in can impact their judgement for self-efficacy (Akhtar, 2008).

Ninth-grade students need to learn self-efficacy through SEL so they can persevere through the many challenges during their first year of high school.

Peer Mentoring

Peer relationships are so important, especially as students grow older. Peer relationships play an important role for young people because many times teens and adolescents pay more attention to friendships than adults (Gewertz, 2017). Peer mentoring is way for students to be around the same age to support each other either socially, emotionally, or academically. It can be delivered one-on-one or in groups (*National Mentoring Resource Center*, n.d.). According to Garringer & MacRae (2008), peer mentoring can provide learning and growth for both the mentors and mentee , can aid in the transition to high school, support mentors the confidence and skills to prepare them for the real-world, and mentees have someone to look up to. Peer mentoring for a ninth-grade student can increase school attitude, connectedness, support

relationships with teachers and peers, and help improved areas like self-esteem (*National Mentoring Resource Center*, n.d.).

Parent Involvement

Students transition to high school needs to be supported by parents. Often times parental support decreases as students get to high school for various reasons. Students excel in schools when are also supported at home. (Furger, 2001). Additionally, when parents are engaged in their children's school lives, students not only have more support, they also have knowledge they need to become lifelong learners (Shafer, 2018). Schools can increase parental involvement by understanding the families in their communities, invite families to set SEL goals for their own children, and have a specific plan focused on SEL and family engagement (Shafer, 2018).

Summary

Considering the evidence presented in this literature review, there are several things that can be concluded. First, the transition to high school can be filled with many emotions including: excitement, fear, anxiety, and sadness. It is during this time in an adolescent's life that many things begin to change. Students must embrace a new location, new faces, a harder curriculum, and more demands academically. Additionally, students struggle with areas like self-esteem, peer pressure and bullying. All these factors can make for a stressful freshman year. Secondly, social emotional learning has many benefits such as increased attendance, high academic achievement, and decrease in disciplinary infractions. The integration of SEL into classrooms can support ninth grade students through a stressful transition from middle school. Thirdly, many teachers are already utilizing many SEL skills and techniques in their classrooms. SEL can be taught explicitly as well as integrated through instructional practices and SEL related approaches.

Intentional SEL instruction can support all students in school, is specifically designed for ninth grade students as they transition into high school.

Chapter 3. Research Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and examine the social emotional supports in Freshman Academy that assist in the transition to high school. The focus of the research was to understand what specific social emotional supports teachers used in classrooms helped students ease the transition to high school. The findings will help teachers and administrators who work specifically with ninth grade students identify what specific interventions are related to social emotional learning.

Research Questions

There are six research questions that guided this study. Additionally, this qualitative research study centered around one overarching question: What are the teacher perceptions of the supports related to students social-emotional well-being in Freshman Academy?

1. What are the organizational supports that have been implemented the Freshmen Academy?
2. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' self-awareness skills?
3. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' self-management skills?
4. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' social awareness skills?
5. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' responsible decision-making skills?
6. What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' relationship skills?

Research Design

A phenomenological qualitative research was used in this study. A phenomenological study portrays the shared meaning of several individuals of their lived experiences of a particular view (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was used to investigate and understand the perceptions of a group of teachers surrounding the phenomena of social emotional learning supports in the classroom.

Phenomenological studies typically involve interviewing individuals who have experienced the phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus of the research was to identify and examine specific supports teachers use and are associated with social emotional learning and how those supports can help students in their transition to high school.

Site Selection

According to McMillan and Schumacher (2010), one characteristic about qualitative research is that the behavior observers should occur naturally. Furthermore, in a phenomenological study, the individuals may be located at a single or multiple (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The sites will be at three local high schools in Middle Tennessee that include a Freshman Academy. All three schools are Title I schools. The following table displays each schools demographics.

Table 1.

School Demographics

	School A	School B	School B
Population	1,934	1,110	651
Black students (%)	36.4	33.8	82.5
White students (%)	22.6	43.6	12.3
Hispanic students (%)	36.5	16.1	4.6
Asian students (%)	4.4	6.6	0.3
Economically disadvantaged (%)	38.9	35.9	59%

Sample

Purposeful sampling was used in the research study. Purposeful sampling deliberately samples a group of individuals that can best inform the researcher about the research phenomena under examination (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Each of the eight participants of the research study was employed in three high schools in the same school district in Middle Tennessee. The participants also all work in the Freshman Academy. Two of the participants in the study were male and six were female. Additionally, two participants were Assistant Principals, one school counselor and one Dean of Students. The participants were involved in the study in the Spring 2020 semester. The background of the participants was diverse, including teachers and staff from different genders and various years of teaching experience. Teachers indicated if they would participate by filling out a brief survey sent out by the researcher.

Data Collection

The data collection in phenomenological studies are typically personal in-depth interviews in order to capture the essence of the experience perceived by the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Eight teacher and staff participants were selected for the

research study and were interviewed. Interviews with ninth grade teachers and staff were conducted virtually due to the COVID19 and the closing of schools. Each interview began with the purpose of the study being conducted. Participants then took part in a one-on-one interview.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and then identifying patterns and relationships (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). According to Cresswell & Poth (2018), qualitative research involves three main analysis strategies which include organizing the data, reducing the data into themes, and representing the data. Data analysis for the research study began with transcription of each interview that was conducted virtually and recorded. Transcription contains accurate verbatim data following the interview (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Following the transcription process was the coding of the information. Coding the data will begin with identifying segments of relevant information ((McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Also, coding will allow any relevant relationships with the information presented to be established. Then the codes were grouped to form categories and in turn the categories will be used to discover patterns (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). Finally, from the categories and patterns emerged significant themes related to the study.

Member checking was also used in part of the data analysis. Member checking refers to the process of “verification by the participants” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 331). Member checking was completed by rephrasing what participants stated during the interview.

Assessment of Quality and Rigor

Trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the study, the data collection and the data analysis accurately reflect the participants’ views of the issue being studied (Efron & Ravid,

2013). Trustworthiness in qualitative studies can involve triangulation, disciplined subjectivity, thick description, member checking and peer review (Efron & Ravid, 2013). In order achieve to trustworthiness in the study, varied perspectives were used in interviews. These varied perspectives are considered more than one source of data will be collected, which demonstrated triangulation (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The presence of triangulation addressed both credibility and dependability. Credibility refers to results being accurate, trustworthy, and reasonable (McMillan & Schumucher, 2010). Credibility was addressed by member checking in the interview process. Member checking occurred by sharing transcripts from the observations and interviews and discussing the interpretation (McMillan & Schumucher, 2010). Furthermore, trustworthiness was achieved by allowing the participants to review the transcribed notes after the the interview (McMillan & Schumucher, 2010).

Assessment of quality and rigor was provided by the transferability of the research study. Transferability is the profess of readers transferring information to other settings or determining if findings can be transferred (Cresswell & Poth, 2018, p. 263). Transferability in the study was demonstrated by the thick description provided. Thick description provides detailed descriptions of a case or situation observed (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). On the other hand, dependability and conformability was established by an audit of the data (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). This audit was conducted by an outside researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the fact that the study involves human participants, an internal review board, or IRB is needed. The IRB allows the researcher an opportunity to provide proper evidence that demonstrates that the study design follows their guidelines for completing ethical research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important for the researcher to consider and address all anticipated

and emergent issues in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For ethical consideration, participants provided verbal consent prior to their interview and were told that the study is optional and confidential. In the study, participants anonymity was protected by assigning each teacher a pseudonym (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, all teacher participants understood they were participating in a study and understood the purpose of the study. This was completed by each of the participants receiving an overview of the study prior to any interview. The overview included the purpose and significance of the study. All materials related to the study was kept in a secure location.

Summary

This chapter outlined the research methods used in the phenomenological qualitative study that will focus on identifying and examining the social-emotional learning (SEL) supports in Freshman Academy that assist in the transition to High School. The research design, research questions, site selection, sample and population, data collection strategies, data analysis strategies, assessment of quality and rigor, and ethical considerations were all components of this chapter. The following chapters will report the findings and conclusions related to the study.

Chapter 4. Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions teachers and staff members regarding social emotional learning in Freshman Academies. This study was intended to examine and identify the perceptions of the teachers and staff members in Freshman Academies regarding social emotional learning and use that information to support SEL in schools.

The data for this study included results from structured virtual interviews based on ten questions. The questions addressed the high school teachers' and staff perceptions of SEL and the competencies that students displayed. In some cases, follow-up questions were asked of the participants.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were educators within three high schools in Middle Tennessee. The participants selected for this study were selected based on purposeful sampling. An email was sent out to four local high schools in Middle Tennessee that had a Freshman Academy. Every member of the Freshman Academy received an email and recruitment information. Participants were asked to fill out a survey indicating their response to participating in the study. Teachers and staff members were selected based off voluntary interest. All individuals who participated in the study are referred to using pseudonyms.

Table 2.

Educator Participant Roles and Experience

Name	Gender	Role	Years of Experience
Kim	Female	School Counselor	8 years
Marie	Female	Teacher and team leader	19 years
Ashley	Female	Assistant Principal	10 years
Joanna	Female	Dean of Students	11 years
Stephanie	Female	Teacher	4 years
Sam	Male	Assistant Principal	10 years
Matt	Male	Teacher	5 years
Wilma	Female	Teacher	15 years

Interview Process

Interviews were scheduled after contacting each participant by email. Each interview was held on a day and at a time indicated by the participant. All the interviews were done virtually due to the COVID-19 and schools being closed. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using the ZOOM platform and accuracy of the transcript was checked by the researcher. Informed consent forms were provided to participants once they agreed to be a part of the study. Participants gave verbal consent prior to the virtual interview. Each interview began with an overview of the study. All participants were informed that the interview was being audio recorded. In order to eliminate researcher bias, participants were made aware that they may be asked to validate or approve verbatim comments from their interview.

Interview Data

This section reports data collected from participants in virtual interviews. Participants' views are represented as they relate to each research question.

Overarching Research Question

What are the teacher perceptions of the supports related to students social-emotional well-being in Freshman Academy?

All participants in the study perceived a lack for supports and resources related to social emotional learning. A few of the participants noted that there were not enough explicit SEL lessons that have been provided. Additionally, it was stated from Matt, that one school counselor did not have the capacity to work with all the ninth grade students and reinforce SEL. Joanna described not knowing much of the competencies during the interview and relayed to the researcher that those were all areas their school needed to grow in. The supports that teachers and staff perceived as supporting students were related to restorative practices, teaming, building relationships with students, and the Freshman Seminar course.

Research Question 1

What are organizational supports that have been implemented in this specific Freshmen Academy?

Throughout the interview, each participant identified multiple organizational supports that have been implemented in their respective Freshman Academies. Supports were identified as academic, behavior, or emotional.

Regarding Academic supports, all participants identified tutoring as a support. Tutoring ranged from lunch tutoring, after school tutoring, or tutoring during Advisory/Personal Learning Time (PLT). Joanna named credit recovery as an academic support for students as well as

Saturday School. Ashley identified more targeted academic supports where the academy used student's assessment data. Ashley stated, "It's important to put plans in place to intervene for students in structured ways."

Behavior supports in Freshman Academy included personnel support from a Dean of Students at all three schools. Joanna stated, "that as a Dean of Students I always give teachers suggestions of different interventions they can do, but a lot of times they may have their own. I know we rely heavily on parent conferences." In addition to having a Dean, several of the participants identified restorative practices as a behavioral support. Restorative Practices presented differently in each Freshman Academy. One school had a restorative assistant to provide guidance and practical steps of implementing restorative practices. Another school used in-school-suspension as a measure to reinforce restorative practices, rather than using it as a punishment for bad behavior. Sam described his role as an Academy Principal and utilizing Restorative Practices stating, "I will say my role has basically been using a lot of restorative practices in regard to making students feel welcomed and warm and fuzzy within high school." Other behavior supports identified included, check-in/check-outs with students, behavior intervention plans, parent communication, understanding root issues of ninth grade students, visibility of Freshman Academy leadership, and mentoring programs. Ashley identified three mentoring programs utilized in her Freshman Academy to support students that are at-risk.

Each Freshman Academy understood the importance of supporting students' emotional needs. Organizational emotional supports that participants mentioned include relationship with the School Counselor, referral to Social Workers and other mental health providers, relationship with Dean of Students, restorative strategies, and relationship with other students. Sam described check-in/check-outs with the school counselor as support, "...when she is focused on supporting

students, they actually have a check in, check out system as well.” Furthermore, Wilma mentioned the Dean of Student not just being a behavior support, but an emotional support too.

Wilma stated:

One of the things that we had this year in the Freshman Academy is that we had a Dean of Students just for the Freshman Academy. So, I think she was a place that a lot of students went when we they run into concerns.

Participants also reported the importance of building relationships with students as a support. According to Matt, “students who feel safe and connected, give students a reason to show up to class.”

Research Question 2

What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students’ self-awareness skills?

Teachers and staff perceived allowing students to express themselves (i.e. LGBTQ Club), completing personality and needs assessments, and allowing students to communicate their needs as supports related to self-awareness needs.

When describing supports that influence students’ self-awareness, some participants felt this was an area that was a struggle for students. Sam stated that, “I would just say that in most cases, a lot of my freshman are not aware of their own emotions. I think that we do need to strengthen capacity around self-awareness.” Ashley, another Freshman Academy Principal also said something along the same lines stating that, “some students are equipped, and some are not” regarding self-awareness. Joanna also said the same about Freshman in her Freshman Academy.

Others described student supports of self-awareness as teachers and staff allowing opportunities for students to express areas like identifying with LGBTQ and being comfortable with themselves.

Wilma stated:

We had the LBGTQ club. And one of the things that we did was have the rainbow flag and we can post that along with a little card. We can post it on the door for students who fit into that category felt like there was a trusted teacher they knew within the school where they could go and have those conversations with teachers who would not judge them for their personal choices.

Marie identified using the *Character Counts* program in her Freshman Seminar classes to aid in self-awareness for ninth grade students. Additionally, Stephanie identified personality quizzes in her Freshman Seminar classes that, “focus on the who the student is and their feelings.”

The other supports that were identified from participants included allowing students to be vocal about their needs and communicate respectfully in class. Additionally, the School Counselor provided needs assessments where students could identify their own feelings and the school counselor used that needs assessment to work with students on an in-depth level.

Table 3.

Self-Awareness Responses

	Restorative Practices	Reflecting on Personality Assessments	Creating student profiles	Communicating needs	Comfortable in skin
Joanna	X				
Sam					
Stephanie		X	x		

Matt	X				
Marie			x	x	
Kim				x	x
Wilma					x
Ashley	X				

Research Question 3

What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' self-management skills?

Teachers and staff perceived allowing students to remove themselves from the classroom environment and/or negative situations as a support the influenced students' self-management skills. Students demonstrate self-management by going to the hallway to calm down or going to see a trusted adult like the school counselor. Additionally, restorative practices gave student students the opportunity to manage their emotions when talking about conflict with peers.

Self-management, or regulating emotions, can be a struggle for ninth grade students. Stephanie stated that “this can be an area of struggle for students and an area we could improve on as an Academy.” Two participants, Ashley and Wilma, identified “allowing students to remove themselves” from situations as supports that are provided to students in Freshman Academy. Sometimes students will step out in the hallway. Another participant stated that students may remove themselves and go see the School Counselor.

Restorative practices are also designed as a support to help students with self-management. One participant identified a specific practice, Restorative Circles, where students will have to manage their emotions when talking to others about conflict.

Table 4.

Self-Management Responses

	Coping with adversity	Removing themselves	Advocating for needs with trusted adult	Restorative practices	Mindfulness of language
Joanna			x		
Sam				x	
Stephanie			x		
Matt					x
Marie					
Kim		X	x	x	
Wilma		X		x	
Ashley	X	X	x		

Research Question 4

What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' social awareness skills?

Teachers and staff observed informal and formal conversations about situations to allow students to understand other perspectives and feelings of others. These conversations, where during restorative conferences or with classmates provided students the opportunity to strengthen their social awareness skills.

Two participants, Marie and Joanna, suggested that social awareness is an area they need to work on developing supporting for students in their Freshman Academies. Marie stated, “They {students} don’t always understand that there is a time and place.” On the other hand, one participant identified having formal and informal discussions about situations allows student to be able to understand other perspectives and feelings of others. Informal discussions, Matt states, “teach awareness of what others are going through.” Meanwhile, formal discussions, such as restorative conferencing allows for this too, as one participant pointed out.

Wilma stated:

Basically, it's where instead of students actually sit down with other students and do a conference about what actually happened. Restorative conferences make a difference. I think sometimes away from the situation, students are able to see it in a different manner, from the perspective of what the teacher saw and what they saw, and how it affected everything else.

Table 5.

Social Awareness Responses

	Sympathizing and supporting friends	Collaboration	Open Dialogue and discussion	Providing feedback to others	Electronic communication	Restorative Practices
Joanna	X					
Sam	X	X	x			
Stephanie			x			
Matt						
Marie				x		
Kim					x	
Wilma					x	x
Ashley			x			x

Research Question 5

What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' responsible decision-making skills?

Teachers and staff perceived providing consistency and high level of support, allowing students to remove themselves from hostile situations, and the Freshman Seminar course as supports to emphasize responsible decision-making. Freshman Seminar specifically focuses on soft skills such a responsible decision making in the curriculum. Additionally, selecting pathway,

choosing courses, and managing grades were all identified supporting the influenced students responsible decision-making skills.

According to Sam, “about 75 to 80% of our students make effective decisions. And the goals are to have consistency and high level of support and model what you expect them to do.” These are supports that influence responsible decision making from an administrator’s point of view.

Regarding responsible decision-making supports, Joanna stated:

Well, what I've seen students do on their own, they will remove themselves if they feel like they're about to be hostile in a situation, and they do come to me or to the Academy principal to give information, even if it's about a fight. I've seen the students go to their teachers and counselors concerning their grades. If they're not, you know, just to be proactive to make sure they're going to pass the classes as far as supports.

One participant identified Freshman Seminar as a class that focuses on soft skills, such as responsible decision making. Ashley states that, “in Freshman Academy, students do career planning which allows them to make decisions about their future.” Matt also emphasized that career planning is the foundation to making better decisions.

Matt stated:

The starting point is getting them to think about their future the opportunities outside of high school. So, after high school, you have all these opportunities. However, you will not have those opportunities if you fail out of high school, or if you get expelled, or if you

constantly have a suspension. The first thing is to inspire them. There are these opportunities that exist and then connect that with something they want to do. You can't do that unless you behave here and do well here so that you can graduate. That is something that I constantly hammer throughout the course is that.

Other supports identified were “.....regularly praising students who make the right decisions,” according to Stephanie. Allowing students to select their pathway for the upcoming year and the courses a way for students to demonstrate responsible decision making. According to Kim, this allows students the opportunity to make decisions for “knowing what is best for them.”

Table 6.

Responsible Decision-Making Responses

	Planning for the future	Restorative practices	Reflecting on choices	Discussing choices	Removing themselves from situations	Proactive about grades
Joanna					x	x
Sam						
Stephanie				x		
Matt	X					
Marie				x		
Kim	X			x		
Wilma		X	x			
Ashley	X					

Research Question 6

What supports do teachers perceive as influencing students' relationship skills?

Teachers and staff observed the relationship they had with students has the most common factor that influenced student's relationship skills. The relationships from faculty/staff to student was identified as both formal and informal structures. Informal structures included sharing

personal experiences and providing a laid-back classroom environment. On the other hand, formal structures included AVID, Freshman Seminar, Advisory, incentives, and teaming of teachers.

Almost every participant perceived relationship with teachers as supports that influenced students' relationship skills. Participants identified relationships with students can be formal and informal. Stephanie stated that her classroom was "much more laid-back classroom," which allowed students to feel more comfortable. Also, Matt discussed "sharing personal experiences" as one way to informally build relationships with students. Wilma identified relationships with students as well as programming such as AVID and Freshman Seminar as supports that influence students' relationship skills.

Wilma stated:

Most of the relationship building in our school would be more on an individual basis of the teacher. But I would say, this year we had AVID. We also, always had a Freshman Seminar. And so, I think those are the opportunities that they've used.

Other supports identified by participants includes advisory, which is called Personal Learning Time, providing incentives for students in the Freshman Academy, and teaming of teachers.

Sam stated the following regarding supports for students:

I think that's actually our strength. Our teacher teams collaborate with each other. And so, our students and see our teachers actually collaborate with each other. So, in the classroom that's a natural instinct to also collaborate, so I've seen where we've done

project-based learning experts, where students are collaborating with each other difficult content.

Table 7.

Relationship Skills Responses

	Collaboration (in advisory)	Informal conversations with teachers/staff	Helping other students	Informally in the hallway	Extra- curricular activities	Incentives
Joanna						
Sam	X					
Stephanie		X				
Matt		X				
Marie			x			
Kim		X		x	x	
Wilma	x				x	
Ashley						x

Summary

The findings detailed in Chapter 4 include some verbatim comments provided by the eight individuals during one-on-one virtual interviews and in response to the open-ended questions asked by the researcher. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and examine the social emotional learning, or SEL, supports in Freshman Academy that assist in the transition to High School. Purposeful sampling techniques were used in this research study. Potential participants were contacted according to the methods approved by the IRB and the school district, which included emails. All participants gave verbal informed consent prior to participating in the video recorded interview. Additionally, the results revealed that several themes emerged as identified supports which included: (a) Freshman Seminar programming, (b) personnel supports to include Dean of Students and School Counselor, (c) restorative practices

programming, (d) building relationships with students, (e) advisory, (f) informal SEL practices, and (g) teaming. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings presented in chapter 4.

Chapter 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to identify and examine the SEL supports in Freshman Academy that assist in the transition to High School. This qualitative case study was conducted by interviewing 8 educators of various roles in the Freshman Academy. All eight educators were chosen through purposeful sampling. After gaining approval through the research department in the school system, a list of participants was obtained from the principals for three middle Tennessee high schools. An email was sent explaining the nature of the study to potential participants. Informed Consent was gained prior to each interview. Interviews took place virtually.

This research study consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 presents the introduction, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, and limitations and delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature. Chapter 3 presents the methodology, the data collection procedure, and the rationale for using this design. Chapter 4 outlined the analysis of the data collected. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the study, interpretation of the findings, and final recommendations.

Ninth grade can be a challenging year as many students' transition to a new and larger environment. Implementing structural changes and targeted academic and social-emotional supports in ninth grade can put more students on the path to graduation (Legters & Andersen, 2018). Social-emotional learning can give students the opportunity to overcome many of these challenges they face as they transition to high school. SEL contributes to improved academic performance, better attitudes and behavior, fewer discipline behaviors and reduced emotional distress, which in turn can help students have a successful year (NEA, n.d.).

Findings

Based off the six research questions and data collected, several emergent themes were present. The themes are the specific to social emotional learning supports related to the five competencies.

Importance of Social Emotional Learning

Throughout all the interviews, each participant identified why SEL was important in school. The responses ranged from each participant. Sam described SEL as an “important way to focus on the whole child.” Two participants said it is important to work through emotions and it is a way for students to take care of themselves, especially with the world changing. Matt stated, “SEL also allows students to have a safe environment and gives them a reason to show up to school.” SEL also provides students the opportunity to express themselves, communicate with their peers and teachers, and can help with classroom management. Ashley defined the importance of SEL to support mental health awareness and trauma that students experience. She also stated, “it gives them a leg up as an adult.”

Freshman Seminar

Freshman Seminar is a course that is widely used in high schools. All ninth-grade students in the schools that participated in the study take Freshman Seminar. Freshman Seminar is a course that helps students become familiar with high school while also addressing areas such as time management, goal setting, study skills, and career exploration (MacEwen, 2019). Furthermore, the course supports the development of the social and emotional learning competencies (MacEwen, 2019).

The content and material covered in Freshman Seminar touches on the social emotional learning competencies. Several participants discussed personality assessments that students take

throughout the years. The assessments provide students the opportunity reflect on themselves and their strengths, which highlights the competency self-awareness. Throughout Freshman Seminar, students focus on goal setting and career planning. One participant stating that the class is used to select their Academy pathway as well as set goals for the future, which embodies the competency responsible decision making. Matt points out that if students want to have a good future, they have to make good choices now. Additionally, Wilma states that, “Freshman Seminar provides students an opportunity to build relationships.” Relationship skills is another key SEL competency.

Marie also uses Character Counts program along with her Freshman Seminar course. *Character Counts* is unique for the six pillars that it encompasses which include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Program Overview, n.d.). These pillars can align to social emotional learning competencies and their strands, which include empathy, respect for others, and ethical responsibility.

Personnel Supports

Several participants in the study identified Freshman Academy personnel as supports for students. School Counselors and Dean of Students who specifically worked in Freshman Academy were reported as safe adults with spaces for students. When students needed to manage their emotions, teachers often suggest the school counselor or the dean as a place to go. This allows students better self-management skills, an SEL competency. Additionally, when students may have been involved in confrontations or known someone who may be involved in something, they used the dean and school counselor as supports. Working with the Dean of Students and/or the School Counselor fostered skills for self-management, relationship building, social awareness, responsible decision making, and self-awareness.

Restorative Practices

All the schools participating in the research study uses restorative practices in some capacity. One school, in particular, has a Restorative Practice Assistant that assists in implementation strategies and resources for school wide practices. Restorative Practice is the application of restorative justice, which is an approach to crime and wrongdoing that places accountability on the wrongdoer to repair the harm (Thonsborne & Blood, 2013). Restorative practices can include the following strategies that participants recognized: restorative conferencing, restorative circles, and restorative questions.

Restorative Conferencing embodies competencies self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision making. Restorative Conferencing is a restorative practice that is used to bring together multiple parties and allow them to either resolve conflict or repair harm (Wachtel, 2016). During these conferences, students are asked questions like: What happened? What were you thinking of at the time? What have you thought about since? Who has been affected by what you have done? In what way have they been affected? What do you think you need to do to make things right? These questions provide student the opportunity to reflect on their feelings and emotions regarding their behavior (self-awareness) and understand what others maybe feeling (social awareness). Restorative Conferencing allows students to reflect on their choices, allowing them to make more responsible decisions in the future. Lastly, restorative conferences allow students the opportunity to resolve conflict, which is part of the relationship building competency.

Building relationships

Building relationships with students seemed to be the commonality between all participants. Participants describe building relationships during their class time, between passing

periods, extra-curricular activities, club time, Freshman Seminar class, tutoring, and during lunch time in the classroom. Moreover, building relationships formally happens by a check-in/check-out system, one-on-one data chats with students

Informal relationships develop through conversations with students. Stephanie describes building informal relationships by students coming into her classroom and discussing things related to movies, pop culture and student life. Marie names, “transparency and relatability” as important factors in building relationships with students. Another participant states “sharing experiences” as ways to build relationships with students.

Advisory

In all three of the high schools that participated in the study, there is advisory time, also known as Personal Learning Time. Advisories are designed to meet the needs of students outside of a traditional classroom (Blad, 2019). Additionally, advisories offer that opportunity to build relationships with adults as well as peers (Cook-Deegan, 2017). Relationship skills are one of the SEL competencies that also highlights communication with others, collaboration, and resolving conflict, which can all be a part of advisory time.

In one school, during advisory time, the school counselor did check-ins with students and also administered needs assessments. The needs assessment allowed students the opportunity to understand their strengths and weaknesses in regard to their mental health. Understanding one’s own emotions and feelings is an area of self-awareness. The school counselor uses this information to work with students throughout the year on understanding their emotions and feelings.

Training and Resources

When asked about challenges that educators have faced with respect to students social emotional learning in Freshman Academy, each participant states they lack the training and resources to successfully implement SEL. Wilma and Stephanie both identify wanting explicit and formal SEL lessons for their students. There is also a lack of school personnel resources. School Counselors and Social Workers are usually relied on to support SEL skills and there are too many students and not enough personnel, one participant notes. Teachers knowing more about SEL would help alleviate the misconception that school counselor and other mental health providers support SEL. Sam stated that “teacher buy-in” is important when thinking about training them in SEL. Lastly, Matt identify needing additional training in restorative practices Table 8.

Connecting participants and themes

	Importance of SEL	Freshman Seminar	Personnel Supports	Restorative Practices	Building Relationships	Advisory	Training and Resources
Joanna	x			x	x		x
Sam	x		x	x	x		
Stephanie	x	x	x		x		
Matt	x	x		x	x		
Marie	x	x			x	x	
Kim	x	x	x		x	x	x
Wilma	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ashley	x			x			x

Implications for Practice

After a review of the literature and an analysis of the data collected, the researcher makes the following recommendations for practice.

- School leaders in education should first examine all aspects of social emotional learning and ways to address the practices in school. According to CASEL (2015), SEL can be taught explicitly, infused into teaching practices, and infusing SEL into academics. Additionally, complementary programs such as restorative practices and PBIS can reinforce SEL and the competencies. It is important that school leaders decide the best practices for their school district or school.
- School leaders should also provide professional development to educators on various aspects and levels of integrating SEL, specifically the competencies, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision making. Teachers need to know the SEL competencies in order to help support students in those areas.
- Administrators should continue implementation of programs like restorative practices and PBIS along with specific SEL strategies that work best in their schools. Teachers and staff should work together to develop a school wide implementation plan.

Recommendations for Future Research

Suggestions for further research are as follows:

- Expand the qualitative research study to include student perceptions of social emotional learning supports in Freshman Academy. This study would encompass how effective supports are for students.
- Conduct a qualitative study to examine how social emotional learning is incorporated into virtual instruction.

- Conduct a quantitative study to examine the impact of social emotional learning on student achievement, attendance, and behaviors. This study would be experimental study that would compare a school with explicit SEL practices and a school without the practices.

Summary

The findings from this study provide information about the participants' perceptions of social emotional learning supports in Freshman Academies. This qualitative phenomenological research study was guided by six research questions. The questions focused on identifying specific supports related to each of the social emotional learning competencies. In conclusion, the participants identified the following supports in their Freshman Academies that related to social emotional learning: Freshman Seminar programming, personnel supports to include Dean of Students and School Counselor, restorative practices programming, building relationships with students, advisory, informal SEL practices, and teaming. Furthermore, all participants stated they needed more training and understanding of SEL and access to resources to support SEL in their classroom. The two major supports that teachers and staff need in order to strengthen SEL at their respective schools is explicit lessons on social emotional learning and how to effectively integrate SEL into classrooms and schoolwide structures.

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APPENDIX: Interview Questions

1. Briefly describe how your role support Social Emotional Learning.
2. What specific academic supports are currently in place in the Freshman Academy for students? In your classroom?
3. What specific behavioral supports are currently in place in the Freshman Academy for students? In your classroom?
4. What specific emotional supports currently in place in the Freshman Academy for students? In your classroom?
5. What are the challenges you have faced with respect to students social emotional learning in Freshman Academy?
6. How do students display self-awareness in the Freshman Academy? In your classroom?
7. How do students display self-management in the Freshman Academy? In your classroom?
8. How do students display social awareness in in the Freshman Academy? In your classroom?
9. How do students display responsible decision making in in the Freshman Academy? In your classroom?
10. How do students display relationship skills in the Freshman Academy? In your classroom?

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