

**School Counseling and Social Emotional Learning Programs**

Helena Stevens

Minnesota State University Mankato

### **Abstract**

School counselors implement social emotional learning (SEL) programs to support students' holistic development and to prepare them for both academic and personal success. It is imperative that school counselors use evaluation research as they continue to refine their implementation and program selection efforts. This phenomenological qualitative case study investigated the experiences that two groups of students had with an SEL program. Three themes emerged including inconsistent experiences, disconnected perceptions about social-emotional needs, and the importance of using students as stakeholders. Implications for school counselors and counselor educators are provided.

*Keywords:* school counselor, social emotional learning, program evaluation, qualitative research

## **School Counseling and Social Emotional Learning Programs**

School counselors implement counseling programs to enhance students' academic, career, and personal/social development (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2017). Fully implemented school counseling programs are associated with positive academic success and school behaviors (Burkard et al., 2012). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) lists the knowledge, skills, and competencies that a school counselor should have when implementing a school counseling program (ASCA, 2019a). In addition, ASCA also lists the types of programs school counselors should be implementing and the importance of utilizing collaboration with school-wide staff and principal leadership (ASCA, 2019a). Such programs may include positive behavior interventions, character education, drug and alcohol prevention/intervention, anti-bullying, self-esteem, and academic success.

School counselors implement social emotional learning (SEL) programs at individual, small group, and school-wide levels to help students thrive, socially, emotionally, and academically (ASCA, 2019b). These programs can be designed to be prescriptive and educational or reactive based on school climate and student needs. SEL programs are designed to impact a student's personal and social development and to increase their competency in making positive life choices and to decrease maladaptive behaviors (Moreno-Gomez & Cejudo, 2019). Specific SEL programs may include, but are not limited to self-esteem, friendship, growth mindsets, mindfulness, anger management, stress reduction, character development, and coping skills.

SEL programs impact not only students' growth and success, but the school as well. Rieki et al. (2017) found in their study that school climate and emotional well-being

are positively and significantly correlated. Reynolds et al. (2017) studied the relationship between school climate and academic achievement and found that a student's school identification mediated the relationship between school climate and their achievement. What can be understood from the research is that a parallel and influential process occurs in schools between the emotional well-being of students and the type of school climate that exists within the school. Therefore, school counselors may implement SEL programs that support student development and positive school climate in order to maintain an affirmative influential parallel process.

### **Social Emotional Program Implementation**

School counselors consider the needs of the school climate and students as they plan, prepare, and deliver SEL programs. Given that SEL programs positively impact students' growth (Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Dimmitt et al., 2011; Drulak, et al., 2008; Lapan & Harrington, 2009; Lapan et al., 2012; Sink & Stroh, 2003; Trusty et al., 2005; Whiston & Quinby, 2009; Whiston et al., 2010), school counselors need to have a holistic understanding of factors that will aid or hinder positive program outcomes and student growth as they embark on planning and implementing SEL programs.

Developing high quality and effective interventions is merely the first step when considering impacting the SEL of adolescents in schools (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Meyers et al. (2012) contend that quality implementation affects successful outcomes. To broaden the scope of quality implementation, school counselors face the task of creating comprehensive school counseling programs amidst a variety of personal and systemic conditions (Scarborough & Luke, 2008). Reflected across personal and systemic conditions are causal conditions, phenomenon, context, actions, intervening

conditions, and consequences, which serve as components involved in both the contributions of school counselors and students. Abbott (2017) uncovered that middle school students are more likely to learn when the information is presented within a context that students consider valuable.

School counselors' characteristics affect the SEL program implementation process and consequently the program's learning outcomes for students. Lochman et al. (2009) found that school counselors' agreeableness and conscientiousness were positively associated with the completion of a prevention program session objectives, frequency of sessions scheduled, student engagement, and parental engagement. Additionally, the researchers found that counselors who were cynical about organizational change had inadequate levels of engagement with parents and students.

A school counselor's cognitive connection to the students is another factor that influences program choice and implementation. Sattin-Bajaj et al. (2017) found in their study that school counselors who were cognitively disconnected between understanding the needs of their students and their ability to support those needs, inadequately utilized resources and programming to support their students. Researchers have also noted that self-efficacy alone is a significant predictor in a school-based professional's ability to adequately implement an SEL program (Klingner et al., 2003).

### **Social Emotional Program Evaluation Gaps**

Program evaluation, as an element of the accountability section in the ASCA National Model, is an imperative component when delivering comprehensive school counseling programs. ASCA states that a school counselor, "uses formal and informal methods of program evaluation to design and enhance comprehensive school

counseling programs” (2019a, p.11). Program evaluation outcomes provide the data to design, transform, and drive the services that school counselors provide. Evaluation outcomes attempt to answer the question: How are students better because of the school counseling programs? Program implementation can be wide ranging, but it often lacks specific emphasis across research and best practices in school counseling. Specific gaps may include: (a) addressing how student engagement and connectedness impact program outcomes, (b) utilizing peer helpers for intervention efforts, and (c) including the voices of students when evaluating SEL programs.

Positive school climates that support students’ feelings of connectedness provide an environment where students are more likely to be engaged with learning programs and achieve desired learning outcomes (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2017). Evaluation research in education has indicated that positive relationships between teachers and students support high levels of student engagement with learning programs (Quin, 2017; Strati et al., 2017). When evaluating program outcomes school counselors must consider the relationships between students and individuals involved with program implementation to understand how those relationships have impacted students’ connections and engagements to the SEL programs.

Garringer and MacRae (2008) support that using peer helpers is an efficient way to deliver programs to reach more students, increase student engagement, and support student development. Current research on school counseling program evaluation often fails to address how utilizing student peers facilitates program implementation and impacts the outcomes and student experiences within SEL programs.

There is a lack of research that explores using *students' voices* during program implementation. Student voice, according to Bergmark (2008), helps develop character strength and builds a moral community. Giving students the power of voice allows them opportunity to be an active part of their classroom, school, and community (Bergmark, 2008). As school counselors implement and evaluate SEL programs, using students as stakeholders and including their voices in the planning, implementation, and evaluation procedures should be a core element in the process.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological case study was to explore the experiences that two groups of students had while participating in an SEL program. The researcher sought to understand the lived experiences of the students in order to evaluate the program outcomes and provide recommendations for school counselors who implement SEL programs. The questions addressed in this study included: (a) What experiences did students have with the social emotional learning program? (b) How did the program support the social emotional learning needs of the students? and, (c) What suggestions did participants have about the implementation of the SEL program and subsequent SEL programs?

### **Method**

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to understand the experiences of the participants and to understand the outcomes from the SEL program. Phenomenology, according to Creswell (2014), is “a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by the participants” (p.13). A case study, as defined by Gerring (2004) is “an in-depth study of a single unit” (p. 341). The unit in this study is the high school in which

the SEL program was implemented. This approach involved an analysis of a minimal number of participants through intentional focus to develop patterns and relationships of meaning (Creswell, 2014).

### **Participants**

This study utilized purposeful sampling methods. High schools that provided consistent implementation of the program, as perceived by the researcher, were identified to be potential research sites. From the list of sites, one was selected to be the case study. The site was in a South Texas school district in an urban area. The school vice principal served in a collaborative leadership role with the school counselor and aided in the delivery of the SEL program for at least two years. The school counselor was licensed and had been working in her position for eight years and had been overseeing the implementation of an SEL program for two and half years when the study took place.

Students had to be at least 14 years old to participate. The school counselor identified the student council group to be a relevant entity from which to choose participants because those students had participated in various aspects of the SEL implementation. Those students were given an advertisement for the study. Students who wanted to participate received parental consent and consented to join the study. The study was advertised to the school to find students who had not participated in the implementation and would be willing to participate. Consequently, there were two groups of student participants: one group of students who had participated in various aspects of the implementation of the program as members of the school's student council committee, and a second group of students who had received a character



education program for at least two years but did not participate in the implementation of the program. The two groups were labeled as SC for students who participated in implementation via the student council and NC for students not on the council who were recipients of the program. Three of the participants were male and five were female. A total of 10 participants (vice principal, counselor, and eight students) participated in the study.

The high school in this study was designated by the state as academically unacceptable because test scores for students on the state examinations were substantially low (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2020). An online search on this campus provided demographic information that the student population is comprised of 95% Hispanic, 5% African American, 3% White, 0.3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.2% American Indian students (TEA, 2020).

### **Social Emotional Learning Program: Character Development**

The SEL program that was researched in this study is a character development program. The curriculum, *Character First*, contained nine-character traits per series, one for each month of the school year. During the time of this study the school was implementing series four of the character program, which included the following traits: availability, compassion, deference, dependability, determination, persuasiveness, thoroughness, thriftiness, and wisdom. For each trait the curriculum contained an animal example, historical example, arts and crafts, a song, and discussion questions.

According to Cubukcu (2012), “character education is a planned and systematic approach for teaching moral constructs such as respect, honesty, and responsibility in order to advocate for students to become good citizens” (p.1526). School counselors

may use character education programs to create healthy learning environments that help each student incorporate values necessary for achievement (Britzman, 2005). However, there are a lack of studies available that document the degree to which character education programs are accepted and implemented (Hollingshead, 2009). Therefore, research that investigates the experiences or outcomes of character education as delivered by school counselors is lacking.

### **Implementation Procedures**

The school counselor was responsible for all aspects of the program. The vice principal provided leadership and guidance to the counselor and utilized tenants of the program to reinforce learning when dealing with discipline. Additionally, other school stakeholders were given roles in the implementation and each of those stakeholder's roles are explained below.

#### ***School Counselor Implementation***

The school counselor was the point person responsible for leading all the implementation efforts. She received one initial training on the components of the program prior to implementing series one. Since that training, no further trainings were conducted for the school district. The school counselor noted that she spent between three to four hours overall each month providing materials and information to teachers and school clubs. In addition, during lunch period, the school counselor provided students with a slide show of pictures and information about the character trait of the month via a large projector screen.

### ***Teacher Implementation***

Once a month the school counselor sent emails to the teachers and provided them with materials, resources, and information about the character trait of the month. During homeroom periods teachers were responsible for teaching the character trait for the month and discussing the curriculum. They were expected to use roughly 10 minutes of each homeroom period. Teachers, who were also assigned as club advisors, were given responsibility to guide students in the club to decide how to deliver content related to the monthly themes. Teachers and club advisors did not receive training for implementation and had the freedom to choose how they wanted to implement each month's theme. The school counselor noted in her interview that not every teacher adequately implemented aspects of the program during homeroom periods.

### ***Student Council Club Implementation***

The counselor utilized a student council group (SC) to assist in implementation but noted that it was left to the group advisor to decide how they wanted to implement aspects of the program. Students had to meet specific GPA standards, be in good academic standing, and not have significant behavior infractions (suspensions, behavioral referrals) to be on the council. Any student who met these requirements could be on the council. The council met once a week to conduct business, with the addition of deciding which methods to employ for delivering content on the monthly themes. Student implementers utilized verbal advertisement, poster creations, community service, and video announcements as methods for implementation. The school counselor noted that she often had little time to spend preparing materials and

implementing the program. Therefore, utilizing student clubs was an important tactic to increase implementation efforts.

In this study, students who did not participate in any implementation aspect of the program were utilized. These students would have received the program tenants during homeroom and lunch periods. The students in this group (NC) reflected students who struggled academically, behaviorally, or who had been suspended from the school due to behavior infractions. Theoretically, these students could benefit the most from the desired character learning goals.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with all participants utilizing interview protocols. There were separate interview protocols for each group of participants (vice principal, counselor, two student groups). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Additionally, after the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, and emerging themes identified, a focus group was conducted with the students. The first interview asked each participant (vice principal, counselor, two student groups) a series of questions related to the overall research question. The second interview served to ensure that data had been transcribed accurately and to allow participants to add or change their responses.

The researcher spent a period of two weeks at the site observing the planning and preparation of the SEL program that the school counselor undertook. Additionally, the researcher observed the delivery of one of the lessons. Lastly, the researcher kept a reflective journal throughout the process, which was maintained before and after interviews, as well as during observations.

## **Data Analysis**

Hermeneutics was used for the analysis of the data. This approach is foundational in phenomenological research. The goal of this approach is to analyze the life-word of people using qualitative methods and non-directive interviewing techniques to collect information (David, 2012). The analysis of the data, with this lens, aims to interpret the meanings of the experiences from the spoken word of the participants. This analysis assumes that meanings are not given but developed in conversation, are socially constructed, and are constantly being created in the interactions (David, 2012). This analysis was conducted using coding, conversations with colleagues, storyboards, and flow chart drawings that outline the ideas, interview quotes, and themes that emerged in the study.

The data obtained through the interview protocols, observations, and focus group were processed through two cycles of coding. The first round of open coding produced preliminary themes. Those initial themes were presented to the focus group and the conversation was transcribed. The second round of coding utilized axial coding. During this process the data, which were deconstructed during the initial coding process were re-examined, re-sorted, and analyzed until they were meaningfully constructed into the final themes.

### ***Lens of the Researcher***

Experience as a school counselor and personal experiences as a high school student contributed to my perspectives as I considered what constituted effective program implementation and developmentally relevant programs for adolescents. Being an at-risk adolescent myself, I chose school counseling as a profession to help

adolescents who needed extra guidance. My school counselor was pivotal to my success in life and consequently influenced my choice to become a school counselor. My experiences working with at-risk youth in alternative high school settings provided insight into their holistic social, emotional, cultural, and developmental needs. My professional experience also exposed me to the significant lack of programming to support those holistic needs and the critical role that a school counselor may have in remediating student deficiencies.

### ***Trustworthiness***

In order to increase trustworthiness, the researcher employed member checking with the participants to ensure accuracy in their interview transcripts, a focus group to discuss initial themes, consultation with counselor educators who had school counseling experience when solidifying themes, and kept a researcher journal. To minimize bias, the researcher kept a reflective journal throughout data collection and analysis processes to track personal feelings and reactions to experiences the researcher had over the course of the study. In addition, the researcher consulted with a colleague, who had a school counseling background, about thoughts and general findings from the study.

### ***Triangulation of Data***

In qualitative research, triangulation of data increases the effectiveness and strength of a study (Patton, 2002). In this study, data triangulation occurred through use of data from different sources, including individual interviews with the vice principal, counselor, two groups of students, live observations, and the focus group. Use of data from different sources enhanced the trustworthiness of the current study.

## Results

Three themes emerged from the study that included inconsistent experiences, disconnected perceptions about social-emotional needs, and the important of using students as stakeholders. Student quotes are coded as NC, for non-student-council participants and SC for student council participants.

### **Inconsistent Experiences**

The accounts of the participants' experiences and their connection to the program were highly related to their own perceptions of their connection to the school. The narratives from the two groups of students revealed that the groups had very different experiences with the program due to the connections they had with the school: being in a council group or not being in a council group. The first question in their initial interviews asked about their overall experiences with the character education program. NC1 stated, "I wasn't really affiliated with school, like I would just do my work and leave, like I would just come to school and then leave, mind my own business." Enrollment in the school assumes affiliation by standard alone but the student's perception of being connected to the school was at the forefront of his answer as opposed to any experience with the SEL program, which had been implemented for nearly three years.

Most of the students who were not on the council had little to say about their experience with the program but had ample to say about their connection to the school. NC2 commented, "I don't know, like I'm not even a part of that, I'm not really school affiliated." She continued with, "It seems like sometimes we have a disconnect here at school between like here's our teachers, and our counselors, and our principles and everybody." Additionally, NC4 reflected, "If the majority of the kids act bad then you're

automatically part of that pool but what you have to do is separate yourself from the pack.” He further stated:

I’m not the smartest person in the school, I’m struggling at, I’m not really anything you know, I’m just another student but the teachers they can tell who wants to be here and who doesn’t. I guess [teachers should] try to make more of a bond or a connection with the students, or just check on them more often.

The students from the council also felt their categorical identity disconnected them from the school. For one student on the council, that perception precluded how she saw herself affiliating with the school and the school’s programs. SC1 stated:

Instead of talking to us, see they only do that to the bad kids that are always in the office because they’re always there and they’re like oh we already know you so it’s like but me it’s like I’m a good kid and they don’t really pay attention to me either way.

While she was involved with implementing aspects of the program, she perceived the program as not for her, rather for the “bad kids.” Additionally, SC2 commented that:

part of joining (the council) it is to be a part of the school, if you’re not in our group you’re not a part of us, that’s kinda a negative of student council that we don’t really talk to people about it. We do a lot of stuff in school and some people don’t know it, it’s just always the same people.

SC3 also reflected on the separate experiences of council members from non-council members:

Being in the council we try to set ourselves as role models of the school and so it’s like really like we want to keep a good title of ourselves mmm to represent the school in a good way. I would want a better understanding of like peoples’ outside lives to student council.



The reflections from the initial question, “tell me about your experience with the program,” yielded little to no reflections about the program but rather provided insight into their perceived identity and connection to the school, and what that meant to them in respect to how they saw themselves apart from the rest of the school and their peers. This finding provides critical insight into social conditions that impact successful implementation of SEL programs.

### **Disconnected Perceptions about Social-Emotional Needs**

Data from the study revealed inconsistent perceptions from the vice principal, counselor, and groups of students regarding their perspectives related to the capacity of the program to meet the social-emotional needs of the students. The vice principal felt the program was a means for life guidance and that the program would ensure students were set up for future success personally and professionally. She stated:

You know our kids come from a wide variety of homes and you know as I was growing up and my peers you know, character and so forth was developed in the homes and depending on church and your parents so forth values, but times have changed, and parents are basically almost too busy to develop that and so were finding it necessary to develop children so that when they move forward they will be good citizens.

The vice principal placed a lot of value in the outcomes that the program could produce and instill in the students.

Like I said we’re the last stop before they get out there, some of them are going to go to college some of them are going to go straight into the workforce, and so umm they’re our future and if we don’t make sure we’re doing our part then we missed it, we missed the boat to just make sure.

She concluded with, “with character first, everything else follows.”

The school counselor perceived the program as an opportunity for students to be recognized for their character values and positive behaviors. She reflected that by participating in the program and by behaving well, students could earn a certificate that would be an important artifact to produce in their college applications. She commented:

I was showing the teachers how we're going to start making, on professional looking paper so that way when they're applying for colleges or scholarships, that's an award they can put down, that they actually earned a reward for character, which to me that's huge you know.

The different perceptions of the needs of the students from the vice-principal and school counselor were evident in the way the student council participants understood the value of the program. Their reflections connected more with opportunities to be involved in the community, with their peers, and their actual social-emotional needs. Student council members reflected on their involvement with implementing the program in terms of the requirements for community service and the positive experiences they had due to those requirements. SC2 stated "In school I was just like, I just wanted to do something different and actually volunteer and actually help others." SC1 also commented:

I never really did that all my other years so it's like my last year I'm getting to do things around the school and I'm able to go around like to elementary schools, like earning like the courage to do stuff and go out because I would be at home doing nothing.

Additionally, SC 4 reflected:

It just actually just shows me how to be responsible and how to like, like get out in the world and like do like help people or just volunteer and help people like help organizations. It has brought my self-esteem higher because now I see

myself like, because I used to see myself like oh I can't do that you know, but now like I've grown to be more responsible to like myself and I'm like yes I can do that, I can help people like I can just go volunteer like I'm not going to be like nervous I'm not going to be like shy you know I'm going to be open and be like hey do you need help or like you know.

SC 3 understood his experience regarding the importance of community involvement, which makes sense developmentally for teenagers, "all I know about the program is that it just helps me like events for the school and also like giving back to community."

Students not involved with implementation of the program reflected differently in terms of what they needed from the SEL program. Their ideas were very specific and relative to what they were dealing with in their everyday lives. NC 4 reflected:

I would start a club that people who want to go to that have problems because I know a lot of people who are frustrated and have problems here at school and I know that at home when they go home, they probably have no one to talk to.

NC 2 commented similarly:

Something like where the kids just come and talk and vent because I know a lot of kids that have like issues and they need to vent and all that and if they can't do it at home then they should be able to do it somewhere.

Students' ideas, when asked what types of programming they would want at school continued to be very specific. NC 3 noted, "I think like a lot of bullying so something like that, I think they should enforce that more because they don't like that I was harassed my freshman year. Yeah, focusing more on what's going on with the student."

NC 2 reflected:

Stress. Because in high school, well middle school high school like depending on what classes you're taking um, you're going through a lot of stress and people

also stress because whatever happens at home and you know, and now I think our generation younger, the young people go through a lot stuff that like our parents never went through and its shocking and they don't know how to give them advice because they never gone through that.

Several students stated that they wanted support for depression, and they wanted a place to go when they were having personal problems. The irony in their comments is that both the vice principal and school counselor viewed themselves as a people who students could go to when they needed guidance; however, the students did not reflect that in their narratives. The disconnect in the data stems from the students not connecting that the SEL program values would help them combat these identified issues, even though the principal and counselor firmly believed the program would. This finding provides important insight for school counselors as they consider which programs will support the social-emotional needs of the students.

### **The Importance of Using Students as Stakeholders**

The students offered important programmatic considerations based upon their social-emotional needs. This finding illustrates the assertion to continue to use students' voices as stakeholders when implementing and evaluating programs. Although their reflections about the program predominantly reflected their perceived connection to the school, they were aware of how implementation did not support better experiences with the program when they were asked about how the program could be improved. Students from the council and students not on the council both had focused ideas for further implementation of the program.

SC 1 commented:

They [kids] get lazy and they don't want to remember stuff and I think they should help kids instead of just leaving them, because they will need it later on in life, responsibilities, and we're letting them get away with being lazy instead of making it.

NC 2 reflected:

I would like to know more because they're telling us a word about what were supposed to be following for that month and then they don't tell us what like how to do it you know; they didn't teach us about them and that I would want to know more but they didn't give us more.

She continued saying:

It would have helped us more to learn about it and to actually use it because really what they do is they tell us the word and we know what the word is because we hear it, but we don't know the definition of it or anything and see with people coming in we would actually learn it and actually use it in our life.

NC 3 had specific implementation ideas as she reflected:

I would like go to classes and talk about it or bring kids in like this and talk about like character first you know I think that we should do more stuff with it like you know a project out of the nine weeks about it or something.

Furthermore, SC 3 noted:

I would give the information on the announcements and everything and I would have at least one class to like maybe your English class because that's more of like that, like go over this word more about it and teach you more about it.

Lastly, NC 4 provided a deep reflection on the continued need of this program:

Yeah, I wanted a little bit more. I believe students should because I mean this this knowledge is not only for right now but it, it pertains to the rest of your life, I

think everybody should have the chance to be heard I think everybody should have the chance of making improvements to themselves even if the situation at home is not really what it should be, and no one should go unseen and if somebody is falling off the direction, which society I guess wants us to go, then they should be put back on track if they're acting out or if they're, we should try to find a solution for it and try to fix it and I think that's what this program does it aims directly at that, I commend it for it.

The vice principal and school counselor both communicated an understanding that implementation efforts were not as strong as they could have been due to teachers' time constraints, lack of materials and resources, and limited training for both teachers and the student groups involved. Missing from both of their reflections was the importance of using students in planning, implementation, and evaluation.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study reflect the lived experiences that two groups of students, a school counselor, and a vice-principal had from a SEL program. Based on the data gathered, three themes emerged in this study that included inconsistent experiences, disconnected perceptions about social-emotional needs, and the importance in using students as stakeholders. School counselors who implement SEL programs might find these results helpful as they consider factors that aid or hinder implementation and affect learning outcomes.

When answering the research question regarding the experiences that students had with the SEL program, there were striking reflections from the students about their connections to the school, staff, and their peers. When provided with an opportunity to express their experiences about a SEL program, the students first focused on their school affiliation and experiences based on their perceived affiliations. Subsequently,

they focused on their experiences with the program where there were explicit inconsistencies between the two groups of students due to their perceived connections to the school. This finding suggests a parallel process that is not addressed in the research on SEL program implementation but that has been addressed in the education field, where research highlights the influence that school climate and school connectedness have on students' engagement and achievement (Abbott, 2017; Quin, 2017; Riekie et al., 2017).

The researcher sought to understand whether the program met the SEL needs of the students. The students reflected a specific disconnection from their peers. Feeling connected to their peers is an element that must be addressed for programs to yield the desired outcomes, as education researchers have noted (Reynolds, et al., 2017, Strati et al., 2017). Peer helpers were utilized in the program implementation and as school counselors continue to utilize peer helpers in implementation aspects, careful attention needs to be given the quality of the peer relationships within the school to anticipate elements that would impede the implementation. As noted in the conceptual best practices by Garringer and MacRae (2008), school counselors may benefit from focusing on addressing school climate elements, such as students' feelings about the relationships they have with their peers and school-wide staff to further understand facets that could impede their SEL program implementation and learning outcomes.

The data revealed that the administrator and school counselor had different impressions from the students regarding the students' social-emotional needs. The capacity of the program was well understood by those school leaders involved in its implementation. However, students described more specific social-emotional needs

(e.g., depression, stress, emotional support) than the learning capacities of the program. The perception held by the school counselor and vice-principal was a motivating factor for program selection, implementation efforts, and continued support for the program to be delivered. The disconnect from the *actual* needs of the students inhibited their ability to select programs that would result in effective learning outcomes.

This finding supports the previous research by Sattin-Bajaj et al. (2017) highlighting the importance of school counselors being cognitively connected to the needs of the students. Like Leming and Yenol-Hoppey's findings (2004), students appreciated the program's capacity to help them and expressed a desire for the program to be continued. The findings in this study add to the research by providing knowledge related to the types of programs from which students can benefit. This information supports the value in surveying the needs of the students prior to program selection and implementation.

Finally, the study sought to know what suggestions students would have regarding the SEL programs. The importance of using participant voices and including students as stakeholders was a significant theme from the data. Students, when provided an opportunity to share their thoughts and reflections, had ample to say about implementation tactics and student needs. This finding supports the intentional practice of using students as stakeholders when considering implementation efforts and program selection (Bergmark, 2008). The students had specific ideas for not only implementation tactics and their involvement with said tactics, but also ideas for programs that could meet their developmental needs socially and emotionally. When students feel connected to their school and empowered to use their voice, they are more motivated



and engaged in school-wide programs. School counselors should continue to include students as stakeholders in program selection and implementation processes.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations related to this study. The site selected was only one of several high schools that were implementing the program. The other high schools may have had a different set of implementation efforts that were yielding more effective learning outcomes related to character values. Consequently, this study's findings have minimal generalizability to the population. The results may have been different if one or several sites had been selected for comparison. Another limitation concerns the types of questions and the setting of the study. A different setting (both time and place) and set of questions may have produced different findings. An additional limitation involves the fact that the data collected only consisted of interviews and one observed session. The lack of other data (e.g., lesson plans, teacher interviews, analysis of sessions) limits the breadth and scope of the study findings.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research in this area may explore the degree to which students accept and engage with school-wide delivered programs. Additional research that aims to address students' level of engagement with their school, perceptions of their self-concept and connection with their peers and school staff will provide further understanding of the school climate elements that impact SEL program implementation and learning outcomes. This study's findings suggest that future research related to SEL program effectiveness would be meaningful and useful to students.

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### **Biographical Statement**

Helena Stevens is an assistant professor at Minnesota State University Mankato in the counseling and student personnel department. This research was completed for doctoral dissertation fulfillment at Texas A&M Corpus Christi.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Helena Stevens, Department of Counseling and Student Personnel, Minnesota State Mankato, Mankato, MN, 56001 Contact: [Helena.stevens@mnsu.edu](mailto:Helena.stevens@mnsu.edu)