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Social and Emotional Learning: An Analysis of the Understandings and Needs for Teacher Professional Development in a Rural South Carolina High School

Tyler Crede Hook

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Social and Emotional Learning: An Analysis of the Understandings and Needs for
Teacher Professional Development in a Rural South Carolina High School

by

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DEDICATION

To my mom and dad, there are not words to properly convey exactly what both of you mean to me. I could not ask for two more loving and supportive parents. The love that we have for each other outlasts the time we share together, and it outlasts our memories. Thank you so much for always believing that I could do anything that I set my mind to. I know it wasn't always easy, but it was so worth it. As one chapter in our lives ends another exciting one is just beginning, and I am so blessed that I have both of you to always lean on.

To my grandmother, Colene Smith Hook, who passed away on March 4th, 2020, towards the end of this process. Thank you for helping to mold me into the person that I am today. Your kindness, generosity, patience, and love were genuinely one of a kind. Whenever people ask me why I went into teaching I always tell them about you and the value that you placed on education and helping others. You lived a wonderful life and I am honored to be the legacy of that story.

To Carolyn Grant Hellams, my high school Advancement Placement United States History and European History teacher, my mentor, and my friend. Your support, advice, and guidance have been a constant ever since I walked through those classroom doors at Lexington High School. Thank you for all that you have done for me and for so many others. I am thankful every day that you helped lead me towards your beloved “noble profession.”

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This doctoral dissertation is the culmination of over a decade of almost continuous study at the University of South Carolina that began in the Fall of 2009 when I entered as a freshman undergraduate. I could not begin to try and account for all the hours spent reading, writing, preparing, and studying to get to this point. I've never been the smartest or the most talented, but there is one quality that has never failed to sustain me and that is hard-work. This dissertation is a testament to what can be accomplished when you set your goals high and never give up on them.

I am deeply grateful to my family and my friends for their constant support throughout this process. It takes a great support system to sustain yourself, and I have been so blessed to have you all in my corner. To my colleagues past and present, thank you for the encouragement and the laughs. Teaching is one of the most challenging, yet rewarding, professions in our society. Thomas Jefferson once said, "Friendship is precious; not only in the shade, but in the sunshine of life." I have been fortunate to experience far more sunshine than I deserve because of all of you.

Lastly, the older than I get the more I appreciate the little things in life. One of the things that I seem to recognize more and more is that oftentimes the final destination is not nearly as important as the journey to get there. In the end, it is the level of joy that you find in the journey that truly matters.

ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a mixed methods action research study designed to evaluate current teacher competencies and practices at Central Midlands High School (pseudonym) to convey social and emotional learning (SEL) concepts, determine the social and emotional skills which students believe are most critical for their long-term success, and access the resources and professional development needs of teachers in order to better incorporate social and emotional learning elements into their curriculum. The study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data gathered from both teacher and student surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The focus of this study is to evaluate current teacher practices to convey the SEL skills outlined in the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate as well as identifying the noncognitive soft skills that students believe are most essential for their post-secondary success and where they require the most support. In addition, this research seeks to responsively access the professional development needs of educators to best meet the needs of both teachers and students to inculcate social and emotional learning concepts. The theoretical framework, researcher's positionality, and research design and methods are discussed in depth. Results of the study may be of interest to appropriate practitioners who seek to identify the critical professional needs of teachers to better include SEL into their classrooms. In addition, this research looks to illuminate the unique and specific needs of students in a rural setting with regards to social and emotional learning competencies and the soft skills regarded as necessary for post-secondary success.

Keywords: social and emotional learning, Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), competency, curriculum, implement, integrate

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

As our society, country, and world become more diverse and dynamic, the role of schools is ever changing and has solidly moved beyond its original purely academic mission (Halpern & Harvard University Graduate School of Education [HGSE], 2013). Research indicates that twenty percent of American youth have either a mental, emotional, or behavioral health disorder, which concomitantly impacts their performance in school (Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). As a middle level and secondary teacher with nearly a decade of experience in the classroom, I have noticed over the years that students are having difficulty dealing with increasing levels of stress, criticism, social interaction, and anxiety.

While the causes and effects of these issues are certainly wide-spread, social and emotional learning has become a progressively critical means to combat them. Klapp et al. (2017) assert, “There is growing evidence that social and emotional skills can be taught to students in school and teaching these skills can have a positive effect on later outcomes” (p. 1). The combination of critical thinking, problem solving, self-regulation, persistence, and social skills, often labeled as noncognitive or soft skills, are a critical component of development and growth for children. As it currently stands though, school programs and curriculums generally place little emphasis on these due to the increased emphasis on cognitive skills in preparation for high stakes testing and the educational

system's inability to effectively define or tangibly measure these skills (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). In addition, while noncognitive programs may become a routine component of most primary or elementary school programs, there is an increasing need for these efforts in the high school grades. Essentially, as students move up the schooling ladder from primary to elementary and from middle to high, the continuation of these programs seems to increasingly diminish just when students might need it the most.

The role of effective schoolwide SEL programs and initiatives is uniquely essential in the state of South Carolina with the State Board of Education's adoption of the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate (see Appendix A) in 2015. Developed by a coalition of business and educational leaders branded as "TransformSC" and approved by the South Carolina Board of Education, South Carolina Department of Education, and the South Carolina Chamber of Commerce (among other organizations), the Profile of the SC Graduate is a "shared vision of the knowledge, skills and characteristics needed for students to be successful in higher learning and careers" (South Carolina Council on Competitiveness, 2015, para. 1). The Profile emphasizes several noncognitive abilities and defines expectations for the following soft skills that students should develop for post-secondary success: creativity and innovation, critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, knowing how to learn, integrity, self-direction, perseverance, work ethic, and interpersonal skills. While the Profile of the SC Graduate identifies and stipulates the need for students to develop these key social and emotional skills, there exists a need for greater emphasis on wide-spread programmatic initiatives in South Carolina secondary schools to convey and teach these skills. This need is even greater in rural areas where higher rates of poverty oftentimes result in deficits of social

and emotional capital as well as a greater risk for mental health issues among children (Nichols, Goforth, Sacra, & Ahlers, 2017). Currently, there is no state-wide prescribed curriculum to support the SEL skills outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate, nor is there an assessment of the existing competencies or professional development needs of educators as it relates to school-based SEL.

Theoretical Framework

Social learning is a critical component of childhood development as individuals learn and grow through the process of achieving long-term academic and social success. Children rely on schools to serve almost as laboratories for socialization in order to develop the skills to cope in an increasingly complex social world. Unfortunately, major policy changes within our educational system over the last few decades have forced educators to spend more resources on preparing students for success on a test rather than success in the face of life's challenges. Social and emotional learning initiatives are an essential component in returning schools to their natural role in social development as young people require the tools and skills to navigate complex life and work environments.

Young people face a unique set of challenges and difficulties as they progress through their high school careers and prepare for post-secondary life and success. In addition, the challenges of our modern society have seen an increase in the need for effective SEL programs in schools to foster noncognitive life skills as well as the ability for students to develop emotional coping skills. School-based SEL is becoming increasingly accepted as a process or model to cultivate life skills to foster personal development as well as the implementation of “practices and policies that help students

and adults acquire and apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enhance personal development, social relationships, ethical behavior, and effective, productive work” (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017, p. 1157). Despite the considerable research suggesting this need for development of the whole child to better prepare them for life during and after schooling, there is a large gap in the research with regards to how to best accomplish this. This dilemma exposes a general lack of concrete and precise information and data concerning several aspects of social and emotional learning. An assessment of the impact of recent educational policies on social learning theory, learning -centered psychological principles, and positive youth development is necessary to better shed-light on some of these complexities.

Schools in our current educational climate have largely bypassed focusing attention on teaching SEL concepts in favor of prioritizing academic success. With the introduction of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002, classrooms and curriculums essentially have triaged the cultivation of SEL oriented educational environments, and many schools have largely abandoned them all together. Educators now feel torn between engaging students in the study of great leaders or cultivating great values (Devaney, O’Brien, Tavegia, & Resnik, 2005). With the repeal of NCLB in 2015 and the adoption of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), there is still no existing accountability system in any state to measure or account for SEL competencies in schools (Blad, 2017). While some researchers and proponents of SEL oppose any formal accountability systems, one must wonder if education systems have become so separated from SEL in the formal sense that schools and teachers must relearn how to implement it. Jones and Doolittle (2017) summarize this dilemma in schools by asserting that “various

stakeholders hold divergent and often incompatible views as to how or even whether SEL skills should be explicitly taught in schools” (p. 4). This is concerning given the current needs for learners in relation to social and emotional skills and the widely recognized benefits of SEL for young people and their long-term academic and personal success.

The role of social and emotional learning in the educational system has its roots in Bandura’s social learning theory (also known as social cognitive theory) and the fundamental belief that learning is a byproduct of observation, identification, and imitation. As it relates to educational influences on individual socialization, schools and educators play a critical role in influencing and adjusting social behaviors to prepare students to one day be effective members of our society (Raicevic, Nikolic, Vlasta, & Saracevic, 2017). Teachers promote and enhance students’ social and emotional intelligence by organizing learning so that it improves and enhances their interpersonal skills. Teachers routinely implement this concept in classrooms by steering student thoughts and actions to facilitate sharing and other positive social interactions in the elementary classroom all the way up to encouraging positive decision making and fostering critical thinking and collaboration skills via group projects in the high school setting. The individual teacher is given responsibility and autonomy to effectively develop these personal and social skills. For that self-sufficiency to be as effective as possible teachers must have the necessary training to effectively do so, as well as the freedom from school leaders to focus on prioritizing SEL skills and competencies in the classroom setting.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the American Psychological Association (APA) and a team of educational psychologists proposed a set of reforms for the K-12 educational

system at a time when it was perceived as being in a crisis. This team developed a set of learning-centered psychological principles grounded in Bandura's work which synthesized the personal and environmental factors which largely contribute to learning in a classroom setting (McCombs, 2003). The Learner-Centered Psychological principles exist as a widely accepted framework for reforming and developing a vision for schooling with the learner at its center. Principle eleven emphasizes social influences on learning and the impact that interpersonal relationships, social interaction, and communication can have on success in the classroom. This principle defines the belief that positive interpersonal supports, relationships, self-respect, and self-acceptance for students can help to establish higher and healthier levels of thinking and behaving within schools (American Psychological Association, 1997).

Crafting these educational environments in our modern society is critical given that "positive interpersonal support and instruction in self-motivation strategies can offset factors that interfere with optimal learning such as negative beliefs about competence in a particular subject, high levels of test anxiety... and undue pressure to perform well" (American Psychological Association, 1997, p. 6). Overall, schools must do more to establish these positive educational environments and combat the negative influences and dynamics which impact youth in our society. Unfortunately, students are routinely left without adequate coping skills to manage such challenges.

The need for effective SEL initiatives is critically important in the modern context of youth development given the massive shifts in social interaction that have seen an enhanced attention towards bullying and cyberbullying which has developed as a symptom of the proliferation of social media. Hinduja and Patchin (2017) quantify this

issue by highlighting the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) which found that 20% of high school students (grades 9-12) reported being bullied in the 2015 school year. Positive youth development (PYD) is both a field of practice and a framework for empowering young people's strengths, fostering positive interpersonal relationships, and enhancing access to programs, settings, and activities, that promote healthy development (Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma Jr., 2007; Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, Weissberg, 2017).

PYD has its roots in Bandura's work and his theory of self-efficacy: the concept that an individual's belief in their own capabilities enhances an individual's human accomplishment and well-being. In many ways, PYD is a process for enhancing and strengthening self-efficacy for long-term outcomes of individual success (Bandura, 1994). School-based SEL programs share fundamental overlaps with PYD initiatives, and both are critical components to combat these problems in schools as well as promote positive academic and behavioral growth in young people. Forward-thinking schools are increasingly recognizing the need to curb the assessment and achievement focus of the current educational model and put policies and practices in place which promote school based SEL interventions while concomitantly promoting PYD constructs (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

School-based social and emotional learning programs can positively affect the general academic, social, and emotional development of children with the intention of promoting long-term personal success. Despite public education's recent negligence with regards to fostering and inculcating these skills, progressive school systems can begin to reestablish SEL programs to prepare their students for emotional and social intelligence

in an increasingly complex and global society. For that process to begin in earnest, schools must initially assess what SEL competencies their teachers currently possess and concomitantly develop a plan for further professional support and growth.

Profile of the School and District

Central Midlands High School (pseudonym) is in a rural area of the midlands of South Carolina approximately 30 miles from the state capital of Columbia and serves three communities and nearly 750 students with three community-oriented elementary schools feeding into one middle school, which feeds into one area high school. The community and high school are diverse both racially and economically. According to the 2015 District Strategic Plan, almost half of the students receive free or reduced lunch, nearly 40% of the students identify as a racial minority, and about 80% of the high school graduates plan to attend either a two or four-year college every year. The South Carolina Department of Education (2017), awarded the high school two consecutive “excellent” ratings for the years 2013 and 2014 prior to the elimination of such ratings and granted the school the Palmetto Gold Award in General Performance for the 2013-2014 school year.

Central Midlands High School, as with the other high schools in the district, is primarily concerned with increasing general student performance on end-of-course state assessments and standardized test, as well as closing the achievement gap between white and minority students. Several initiatives have been instituted to try and reduce this gap including a school-wide individual learning time (Connections), implementation of the Literacy Design Collaborative curriculum model, and the encouragement of more student participation in Advanced Placement courses. These research-based practices were

specifically undertaken with the intention of leveling the playing field for all students and closing the achievement gap within the school. The 2015 District Strategic Plan highlights this by establishing several goals to narrow the achievement gap among various student groups. Performance goal XVII stipulates that the average score for African American students on the U.S. History end-of-course assessment (EOC) will increase from 65.1% in 2014 to 82% in 2018. Performance goal XVIII states that the average score for students receiving free and reduced lunch on the Biology EOC will increase from 74.8% in 2014 to 82% in 2018. While these goals and their resulting initiatives have narrowed the achievement gap among these demographic groups, a sizeable gap persists and is a major point of concern for the staff, administration, Board of Education, and the community.

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this mixed-methods action research case study is to focus attention on effectively preparing schools and teachers to equip students with the set of skills and competencies that allow them to be successful in our dynamic world by cultivating “life skills that foster personal development, academic achievement, and a more empathic school climate” (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p. 1). More specifically, by employing a mixed methods case study approach, this study looks to analyze the instructional staff at Central Midlands High School to determine their current awareness and implementation of SEL skills within their classrooms as well as identify professional development needs in order to better foster SEL outcomes for students in alignment with the Profile of the SC Graduate. In addition, this research seeks to pinpoint the non-cognitive soft skills which students from rural backgrounds believe are most critical for

post-secondary success. Feedback will be provided to the district and the state to aid in developing a professional training model for SEL that is specifically supportive of these teacher and student needs in the high school setting as well as aligned with the specific skills and traits outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate. Furthermore, these conclusions might be useful for other schools, district, and educational institutions that seek to foster more productive SEL competencies and outcomes to increase student academic achievement and long-term post-secondary success.

Problem of Practice

Research demonstrates an increased recognition, both domestically and internationally, of the integral role that noncognitive social and emotional learning skills play in students' academic and social success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Garcia & Weiss, 2016; Kyllonen, 2013; Lawrence and Vimala, 2013; Reicher and Matischek-Jauk, 2017). There is a clear recognition of the role that SEL skills play in the development of the inherent values and attitudes that facilitate a successful and fulfilled life as evidenced by the inclusion of the life and career characteristics in the Profile of the SC Graduate. As it currently stands though, there is not a state-wide prescribed curriculum, program, or initiative, to support the SEL skills outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate. This has left many high schools without any consistent program for SEL and even more inconsistent outcomes. The expectation has been established that students will possess these skills to be competitive in any college and career environment when they graduate from a South Carolina high school. Furthermore, a meaningful assessment of current teacher understandings as it relates to

developing SEL skills has not been undertaken nor have student desires and needs for noncognitive skills been surveyed.

In my experience, the primary reason for a lack of these programs in the secondary grades stems from two main areas: lack of teacher knowledge and preparation for teaching or conveying noncognitive skills and a lack of student understanding of the need for noncognitive skills and their necessity for post-secondary success. The lack of teacher preparation or training with noncognitive skills is a massive area of concern. As education progresses forward, “Education policy...must be enhanced to ensure that teachers are appropriately supported and trained, and that they receive instruction in both the subject matter and in learning how to teach it” (Garcia & Weiss, 2016, p. 10; Kyllonen, 2013; Lawrence and Vimala, 2013). The problem of practice for this study is that there is a need to analyze the current deficiencies and needs for the integration of social and emotional learning in classroom curriculums in a rural high school and the current student needs for social and emotional development.

To combat this lack of knowledge and preparation with teaching noncognitive skills, educational leaders must initially take account of the practices that are currently being employed to teach SEL in their school. Leaders should also survey students to identify the specific skills in which they need support to develop proficiency. All in all, leaders must begin to put policies in place that prepare teachers to convey SEL skills and concepts via appropriate professional development in a similar manner to how they provide training to refine pedagogical skills.

Research Questions

To accomplish this goal, the following research questions have been developed to guide the study addressed by this action research:

1. To what degree are high school teachers integrating strategies and practices to support the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate within their classrooms?
2. What resources do teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculum and instruction?
3. Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success?

These research questions attempt to “drill-down” and sift-through the large amounts of information that currently exist about SEL, while concomitantly discerning the best practices to convey SEL in high school settings. A key component of this research is that a gap in research exists on SEL as one progresses up the educational ladder from primary grades to high school, and the general lack of research data on the effectiveness of SEL programs for high school students (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p. 2).

Positionality

The complexities and challenges of our modern society require schools and other educational institutions to move beyond their original purely academic functions. “Social and emotional learning (SEL) is [becoming] increasingly accepted. . . as a process or model to cultivate life skills that foster personal development, academic achievement, and a more empathic school climate” (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016, p. 1). Currently, there exist a research gap as to the most effective strategies to impart SEL concepts to high

school students (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Given this general lack of concrete and precise information and data concerning the effectiveness of SEL programs, I have proposed an action research study to shed light on these areas.

Analyzing and understanding my own identity and positionality is critical to evaluate the place that I occupy in relation to my research, methods, and subject. The understanding of positionality in action research is vitally important because our identities influence our perceptions, which in turn define our biases, and inevitably shape the research process (Bourke, 2014). My identity as that of a white, lower-middle class, homosexual male who grew up in a very conservative Southern family certainly has impacted my focus on social and emotional learning. While I grew up in an environment where education and doing the right thing were highly valued (it could easily be said that I was the kid for whom modern-day schooling was made), I also understand what it means to struggle with personal growth and development in a school environment.

In addition, within my role as a middle and high school social studies teacher for the last six years, I have seen students struggle with increased levels of anxiety and the difficulty of navigating the intersection of adolescent social interaction and high-stakes academics. While I do my best to support my students with both my intrinsic and learned skills and knowledge, oftentimes I feel myself lacking the know-how to most effectively help students cope with social and emotional issues. These experiences certainly affect my role as a researcher, the types of research that I look to undertake, and the value that I find in research outcomes. While I am passionately motivated by my experiences, it is critical for the researcher in any study to detach their own personal feelings and ensure

that they do not impact the research methods and data collection (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

While my identity and experiences are my own, I am sure that I am not alone in feeling an inadequacy with regards to the knowledge and skills that support students with social and emotional development. Overall, my positionality and my action research goals are centered around the objective of ensuring that teachers are appropriately supported and trained in the teaching of social and emotional learning (Garcia & Weiss, 2016). As a product of my experiences, this intent gives me a unique positionality within this action research study.

As a current teacher at Central Midlands High School, my role in this study was that of an insider in collaboration with other insiders (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Through this position, I hope to generate important knowledge from the experiences, actions, and beliefs of other practitioners to build up a knowledge base that might be able to inform not only this site but the research community (Herr & Anderson, 2005). This research study was conducted within a high school in a rural area of South Carolina. Students in these schools have a predominantly low-socioeconomic status, and most of them are attending the same schools that their parents and grandparents attended (South Carolina Department of Education, 2017). In my experience, these school environments are generally resistant to change and will need a degree of professional development for the teachers to effectively employ SEL initiatives.

Given that I operated closely with not only my peers (insiders) in my role as the researcher, but also with my own students, I was forced to evaluate several aspects of my positionality in this study. Care was taken to ensure that teacher research groups were

formed spontaneously, that participation was voluntary, that the identity of participants was protected, and that participating teachers wanted to be involved in an effort to further SEL integration at CMHS and benefit students (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study design and data collection elements also considered that student participation in this study was totally voluntary and that it was undertaken with the goal of furthering SEL outcomes for them and their peers. Prior to participation, students and their parents provided written consent (Appendix F), they were informed of their rights as research participants, that their identity would be protected, and it was made clear to them that their participation was in no way tied to their grades or other outcomes (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This action research study was designed with the purposeful intent of being ethical in respecting the rights of research participants as well as considering the researcher's relationship to participants. Overall, I hope to build a consensus and highlight best practices in preparing students for social and emotional learning and development.

Research Design

Action research is both an appropriate and effective vehicle to answer these questions given its innate nature to force practitioners to analyze their own actions while simultaneously identifying and evaluating a common problem. In addition, the results and findings from action research have been embraced by practitioners as a “viable model for modifying, changing, and improving the teaching-learning process” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 2). Within the specific context of the problem of practice and research questions that I have identified, the lack of concrete knowledge or evidence about the need for and effectiveness of social and emotional learning almost demands an effective action

research study. More importantly perhaps, the results of this study might be compelling to other teachers and classrooms in an effort to impact the personal development of as many students as possible.

Within this action research study, a mixed methods approach was utilized to probe the current teacher practices, teacher needs, and student perceptions about social and emotional learning. Through the process of collecting both quantitative and qualitative data, the researcher was better situated to employ multiple data collection tools to probe various aspects of the research questions (Efron & Ravid, 2013). More specifically, this study utilizes a convergent mixed-methods design in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected separately and their results combined and analyzed together. By utilizing this approach, the researcher was able to compare the results from both data sets to identify whether their findings confirm or disconfirm each other (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The participants in this study are the entire teaching staff at Central Midlands High School (44 teachers in total) as well as all students at Central Midlands High School (738 students). According to demographic information pulled from the school's PowerSchool database, the demographic make-up of the teachers at CMHS is as follows: 55% female, 45% male, 91% white, 9% African American. As for the student body at CMHS, the demographic make-up is as follows: 67% white, 19% African American, 14% Hispanic, and 42% of students receive free or reduced-price lunch.

All teachers at CMHS were included in the research sample for this study. This form of convenience sampling was undertaken primarily because the teaching staff has a wide range of backgrounds and experiences with SEL which provides a more accurate

picture of current practices and needs for SEL integration at the school (Frey, 2018). In addition, the student sample for this research study is comprised of 18 students enrolled in my United States History classes at CMHS. Students enrolled in my U.S. History classes, which range from college prep, to Honors, to Advance Placement, were included in the sample due to their ability to reflect the range of SEL competencies and perceptions within the student body as a whole (Patino & Ferreira, 2018).

Data Collection

To answer research questions 1 and 2, quantitative data was collected from teacher surveys of current strategies and actions that convey SEL competencies in the high classroom, as well as professional development needs for further integration. Surveys were chosen as the primary quantitative data collection instrument due to their ability to collect information from a large and representative sample of the overall participants; in this case forty-four teachers at CMHS (Litwin, 1995). Surveys consisted of questions related to teachers' individual thoughts about current SEL practices, both in their own classrooms and the school, the nature of SEL competencies in the high school setting, and teacher experiences and needs with SEL targeted professional development.

To complement the surveys, interviews and observations were employed to collect qualitative data. Interviews are an invaluable tool to uncover what the researcher cannot actually observe, such as a subject's feelings, thoughts, and intentions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews were open-ended and allowed me as the researcher to connect with the teachers to better understand their thought processes, philosophies, and actions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Observations were also included in the research design to facilitate data triangulation. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), observations allow

the researcher to see a phenomenon in action in its natural setting. In this study, I was able to document from a firsthand perspective encounters with SEL integration in the classroom to corroborate or refute teacher responses and statements on surveys and during interviews concerning current SEL practices and future needs.

Research question 3 was approached in a similar fashion to research questions 1 and 2, with student surveys being the primary quantitative data collection tool while student focus group interviews were the lone qualitative instrument. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), surveying students allows the researcher to make inferences from a small sample which can be transferred to a larger population. Survey questions helped to evaluate which SEL skills or competencies students believe are most critical for their long-term success, as well as identified areas in which they believe they need further support. Student focus group interviews provided qualitative data to compare with the survey findings. Focus groups were chosen as the specific interviewing strategy due to their nature of facilitating conversations that students normally would not have on their own or one-on-one with the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Focus group questions were also open-ended, and as with the other collection methods in this study, selected because of their ability to best gather the most appropriate data to answer the research questions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Analysis & Synthesis

Care was taken to be as professional as possible with the analysis and synthesis of resulting data and findings. Data analysis for this research study was an ongoing process which occurred as data was collected, which led to modifications in the overall

investigation to better align with the research questions (Efron & Ravid, 2016). Initially, survey result data was compiled confidentially using SurveyMonkey, while teacher interviews, teacher observations, and student focus groups were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Initial data analysis began by taking transcripts and field notes from interviews and observations and coding relevant details which appeared interesting and relevant to the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Through the process of coding, commonalities and repeating patterns were highlighted in the data which yielded seven resulting themes for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe this process by saying, “The construction of categories is highly inductive. You begin with detailed bits or segments of data, cluster data units that seem to go together, then ‘name’ the cluster” (p. 210). Following analysis of the quantitative data, statistical results from the surveys were organized and analyzed separately (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Then results from both the qualitative and quantitative findings were integrated together with a side-by-side comparison method. With this technique, the quantitative findings are presented first and then the qualitative findings are presented to either confirm or disconfirm the statistical results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, the resulting themes were transferred into three overarching findings which address the research questions.

The data analysis and synthesis process guided me in drafting recommendations which might potentially impact SEL integration and competencies at this site. I addressed trustworthiness and validity in several ways within this action research study. First and foremost, I assessed my own biases and preconceived notions about the subjects that participated in this study. In addition, different data sources were triangulated to assess

the consistency of different perspectives and voices (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Data source triangulation involved surveys, interviews, and observations, with teachers and then surveys and focus group interviews with students. All in all, the use of multiple methods of data collection and analysis ideally produced a clearer understanding of current SEL competencies and outcomes.

Significance and Limitations of the Study

This action research study stems from and builds upon the limited research which exists on the practical implementation of social and emotional learning in high schools by discerning areas for teacher support and growth with regards to impactful SEL practices. The findings from this research study will specifically be used to provide Central Midlands High School and the district with feedback to develop a social and emotional learning curriculum by identifying current SEL competencies, areas of reinforcement, and areas of refinement. In addition, this research will provide the school community with a better understanding of student identified needs for SEL and noncognitive soft skills for post-secondary success in alignment with the characteristics outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate. These findings will allow Central Midlands High School to act responsively to the needs of a rural population with a high degree of poverty and to institute supports that will further the academic and personal achievement of its students. In addition, these findings might be useful in other educational environments and could provide key insights for schools and districts in South Carolina to establish SEL programs with consistent frameworks rooted in the noncognitive attributes in the Profile of the SC Graduate. More importantly, individual school leaders and stakeholders could

be emboldened with a much clearer understanding of the SEL practices that will help students develop and grow as whole, healthy, and successful individuals.

A significant limitation in this study was that several aspects of the data collection procedures had to be adjusted due to the COVID-19 global pandemic which has resulted in the closure of public schools including Central Midlands High School for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (beginning in March 2020). Teacher and student interviews were conducted remotely using Google Meet and Zoom teleconferencing platforms (teacher interviews were still one-on-one while students were interviewed together in a focus group format). Also, as it was not possible to perform in-person classroom observations due to the closure of school, the researcher experienced Google Meet and Zoom meetings between teachers and their students as a guest observer. The researcher's camera remained off and their microphone remained muted during the virtual meetings.

Organization of the Dissertation

The subsequent chapters in this action research study will initially provide an in-depth review of the relevant literature that exist about social and emotional learning. This will provide a clear analysis of the problem of practice within the context of current findings, as well as situate my research within a broader context. The succeeding chapters will outline the methodologies employed in the research, the research findings, and an analysis of the research findings. Based upon the results of the research, recommendations will be outlined to provide other practitioners with relevant and practical proposals to further social and emotional learning within their own domains.

Definition of Key Terms

I am providing this list so that readers will have a precise understanding of the terms used in this study.

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): One of the leading research and advocacy groups looking to advance the development of academic, social, and emotional competence for all children. CASEL'S mission is to help make evidence based SEL an integral part of education from preschool through high school (CASEL, n.d.-a).

Competency: Possession of sufficient knowledge or skill ("Competency," n.d.).

Curriculum: Includes the following elements within an educational institution: Pedagogy, or the various ways to implement a unit of study; areas of diversity; and co-curricular activities ranging from athletics to fine arts, library resources, counseling programs and support groups, and overall school climate (Schramm-Pate, 2017).

Implement: To carry out or accomplish, especially to ensure fulfillment by concrete measures ("Implement," n.d.).

Integrate: To form, blend, or incorporate into a larger unit ("Integrate," n.d.).

Social and emotional learning (SEL): "The process through which adults and children develop competencies in five areas: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making" (CASEL, n.d.-a, para. 1)

Self-awareness: "Knowing one's strengths and limitations" (CASEL, n.d.-b, para. 2).

Self-management: "Being able to control one's thoughts, behaviors, and emotions, to set and accomplish personal goals" (CASEL, n.d.-b, para. 3).

Social awareness: “Being able to recognize and respect differences and social and ethical norms of one’s community” (CASEL, n.d.-b, para. 4).

Relationship skills: “Being able to work cooperatively with others and resolve conflicts in order to establish healthy and rewarding relationships” (CASEL, n.d.-b, para. 5).

Responsible decision-making: “Making constructive and safe choices” (CASEL, n.d.-b, para. 6).

Teacher efficacy: A teacher’s confidence in their ability to influence and promote students’ learning (Protheroe, 2008).

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a clear recognition of the role that social and emotional learning (SEL) can play in the development of young people; specifically, students from low socioeconomic environments as they move through their secondary education career. With that said, the lack of a concretely defined state-wide curriculum for SEL has left many schools with inefficient or ineffective programs for student social and emotional development. A primary result of this lack of curricular development for SEL in the secondary grades stems from two main areas: lack of teacher knowledge and preparation for teaching or conveying noncognitive skills, as well as a lack of student understanding of the need for noncognitive skills and their role in post-secondary success.

The overall purpose of this action research investigation is to focus attention on effectively preparing schools and teachers to equip students with SEL skills which situate them for postsecondary success in our globally competitive society. More specifically, this study looks to analyze the instructional staff at Central Midlands High School to determine their current level of awareness and implementation of SEL skills within their classrooms as well as identify professional development needs in order to better foster SEL outcomes for students in alignment with the Profile of the SC Graduate.

Social and emotional skills, commonly referred to as soft skills in many professional contexts, are critically important for social growth and development as well as for postsecondary success in our modern society. As it currently stands though, school

programs and curriculums generally place little emphasis on these skills due to the increased emphasis on cognitive skills in preparation for high-stakes testing, and the educational system's inability to effectively define or tangibly measure these abilities (Garcia & Weiss, 2016, pp. 7-8). Within the state of South Carolina, schools may place little value on these competencies do to the fact that there is no state-wide prescribed curriculum for SEL nor are schools evaluated on their SEL programs on current state report cards or other evaluation models.

In order to evaluate for current competencies and needs for SEL professional development and student outcomes, the following research questions have been developed to guide this study as well as be addressed by this action research:

1. To what degree are high school teachers integrating strategies and practices to support the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate within their classrooms?
2. What resources do teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculum and instruction?
3. Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success?

Educational contexts will include a rationale for the critical importance of including and synthesizing social and emotional learning elements into existing secondary education curriculums. SEL programs can help to mitigate risk-behaviors in the high school setting as well as concomitantly improving classroom climates. The review will then evaluate the current level of guidance and support from state educational departments for SEL incorporation given the current climate of educational

accountability efforts and performance-based educational reforms. This literature review will also highlight the positive cost-benefits associated with SEL integration including its link to mindfulness practices in education, SEL as a vehicle for positive youth development initiatives (PYD), and restorative justice practices. Finally, this review of relevant literature will focus attention on the need for SEL integration in communities and schools of need with specific emphasis on supporting teacher training and professional development experiences for SEL.

Purpose of the Literature Review

The basic nature of the literature review in action research is that it serves to provide a summary of the existing research on a topic of study (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 227). In the context of this specific action research, the construction of a competent literature review is the building of a case which provides the context and the background about the existing understandings on social and emotional learning (Machi & McEvoy, 2016, p. 5). The materials and sources chosen for this literature review were selected because they both highlight and illuminate the current research regarding the lack of emphasis on SEL in current school curriculums as well as the causes for these deficiencies. In addition, these sources also highlight the critical importance of SEL curriculums within schools (specifically secondary schools).

This literature review primarily relies on existing literature and research sources gleaned from the educational research search engines/databases of ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) and Education Source (EBSCO). In addition, the research anthology *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* was utilized to glean key research articles on SEL. The majority of research pieces utilized in this review are peer

reviewed academic journal articles and academic reports relating to SEL. These sources were compiled, reviewed, and analyzed to provide a conclusive understanding of current research with regard to SEL characteristics within the educational system.

The Need for SEL

Parents, school administrators, teachers, and others educational leaders should be cognizant of the literature which highlights the plethora of benefits for young people as it relates to social and emotional learning skills. There are growing consensus that social and emotional learning skills can help young people to cope with and the challenges of adolescence while concomitantly building a set of noncognitive skills and competencies essential to postsecondary success. Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron (2013) found that social and emotional abilities help students to make positive decisions in the face of significant social, emotional, and mental health barriers consistent with adolescence in our modern society (p. 4). Focusing on SEL skills can also lead to better learning outcomes by fostering a more positive and inclusive classroom and school environment.

There is a growing body of research-based conclusions which highlight the positive impact of SEL elements on student outcomes. One of the greatest challenges facing young people today is the growing mental health challenge of depression among adolescence with nearly 13% of young people aged 12-17 reporting at least one major depressive episode (National Institute of Mental Health, 2017). Reicher and Matischek-Jauk (2017) synthesized their own research in conjunction with existing literature related to adolescent depression and SEL programs on an international scale. This research indicated that SEL programs are critical to improving classroom climate and reducing bullying as well as fostering a community of learners where students feel valued. In

addition, the research also found that SEL programs support teachers in building positive relationships with students to both identify and prevent mental health challenges through the facilitation of positive social interactions, expressive writing, and the promotion of anti-stigma interventions related to mental health.

Their findings were corroborated by a 2011 meta-analysis of 213 studies of SEL implementation in schools by Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger (2011). These researchers confirmed that students receiving quality SEL instruction scored 11 percentage points higher on academic assessments. Durlak et al. also noted that these students exhibited less emotional distress and demonstrated more motivation to learn as evidenced by spending a larger amount of time on homework when compared to their control peers (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Lawrence and Vimala (2013) analyzed the relationship between self-concept and achievement motivation in high school students. Research indicated a strong positive relationship between the two concepts and revealed that students who have a high self-concept have a great understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, have a higher degree of achievement motivation, and less distractions from exposure to technology. These outcomes are consistent with targeted SEL competencies and were noticeable less present with compared with controlled peers.

Kyllonen (2013) highlights the increasing awareness of the importance of non-cognitive soft skills for success in the workplace and the role that SEL skills can place in postsecondary success. He highlights that non-cognitive skills can be taught (as evidenced by research in early childhood intervention programs) and the targeted focus on these skills can have a net positive outcome on an individual's social and emotional

competencies. Positive growth with regards to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making are universally understood as key competencies for workplace success.

All these research studies qualify the growing consensus that social and emotional interventions, whether they be targeted or general, are critical to promote adolescent's behavioral and academic skills. These findings also reinforce the importance of continuing SEL programs as students transition into the high school setting where they are oftentimes marginalized. The long-term benefits of these conclusions are even further supported by the cost-benefit nature of SEL as outlined by the innovative study "The Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning." This research inquiry was requested of the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education (CBCSE) at Teachers College of Columbia University by the NoVo Foundation and CASEL in order to apply cost-benefit analyses measure to studies of SEL programs. The analysis of these research findings indicated that SEL programs can easily pass a cost-benefit test and the proactive nature of preparing young people with non-cognitive skills resulted in an average \$11 benefit for every \$1 spent on SEL programs. In general, effective SEL programs more than recouped their costs by decreasing the likelihood of substance abuse, mental health issues, and social welfare reliance. These findings further clarify and support the understanding that the implementation of SEL programs are a powerful and beneficial investment in the lives of children within our society (Belfield et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework for SEL

Young people face a unique set of challenges and difficulties as they progress through their high school careers and prepare for post-secondary life and success. These

challenges have resulted in an increase in the need for effective SEL programs in schools to develop emotional coping skills. Despite the considerable research suggesting the need for development of the whole child to better prepare them for life during and after schooling, there is a large gap in the research with regards to how to best accomplish this task. This dilemma exposes a general lack of concrete and precise information and data concerning several aspects of social and emotional learning (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullota, 2015; Brackett, Elbertson, & Rovers, 2015). An assessment of the impact of recent educational policies on social learning theory, learning -centered psychological principles, and positive youth development is situated to better shed-light on some of these complexities.

The concept of social and emotional learning has its roots in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (also known as social cognitive theory) and the fundamental belief that learning is a byproduct of observation, identification, and imitation. Bandura asserts that human behaviors are a function of observation and modeling where the learner detects how a specific behavior is performed, codes that specific behavior, and then accesses that coded information in order to guide their behaviors during similar situations in the future (Bandura, 1977). Much of this observational learning is achieved via a series of punishments and reinforcements where influences are intended to either encourage or deter an individual to exhibit specific behaviors in the future. Emotional responses develop in much of the same way as an individual "witnesses the affective reactions of others undergoing painful or pleasurable experiences" (Bandura, 1977, p. 2). Bandura built upon existing cognitive learning theories by pushing forward the idea that most individual behaviors are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the

influence of models where another individual demonstrates how actions ought to be performed (as evidences by Bandura's seminal Bobo doll experiments). Bandura also believed that behavior was a byproduct of reciprocal determinism, the notion that one's behaviors are best understood by considering the joint effects of personal characteristics and environmental attributes (Bandura, 1977, pp. 39-40). All these elements are clearly identifiable in the school and classroom setting on a daily basis and substantiate the role of schools and educators as facilitators of socialization.

Schools and educators play a critical role in influencing and adjusting social behaviors to prepare students to one day be effective members of our society. In many ways, schools are foundational laboratories for Bandura's social learning theory as educational environments oftentimes define individual socialization (Raicevic, Nikolic, Vlasta, & Saracevic, 2017). Teachers promote and enhance students' social and emotional intelligence by organizing learning so that it improves and enhances their interpersonal skills. Teachers routinely implement this concept in classrooms by steering student thoughts and actions to facilitate sharing and other positive social interactions in the elementary classroom all the way up to encouraging positive decision making and fostering critical thinking and collaboration skills via group projects in the high school setting. The individual teacher is given responsibility and autonomy to effectively develop these personal and social skills. With that said, for that self-sufficiency to be as effective as possible teachers must have the necessary training to effectively do so, as well as the freedom from school leaders to focus on prioritizing SEL skills and competencies in the classroom setting (Raicevic et al., 2017).

In the 1980s and 1990s, the American Psychological Association (APA) and a team of educational psychologists looked to propose a set of reforms for the K-12 educational system at a time when it was viewed as being in crisis. This team developed a set of learning-centered psychological principles, grounded in Bandura's work, which synthesized the personal and environmental factors which largely contribute to learning in a classroom setting (McCombs, 2003). These principles exist as a widely accepted framework for reforming and developing a vision for schooling with the learner at its center. One of these principles, principle eleven, emphasizes social influences on learning and the impact that interpersonal relationships, social interaction, and communication can have on success in the classroom. This principle defines the belief that positive interpersonal supports, relationships, self-respect, and self-acceptance for students can help to establish higher and healthier levels of thinking and behaving within schools.

Crafting these educational environments in our modern society is critical given that "positive interpersonal support and instruction in self-motivation strategies can offset factors that interfere with optimal learning such as negative beliefs about competence in a particular subject, high levels of test anxiety... and undue pressure to perform well" (American Psychological Association, 1997). Overall, schools must do more to establish these positive educational environments and combat the negative influences and dynamics which impact youth in our society. Unfortunately, students are routinely left without adequate coping skills to manage these challenges.

School-based social and emotional learning programs can positively affect the general academic, social, and emotional development of children with the intention of promoting long-term personal success. Despite public education's recent negligence with

regards to fostering and inculcating these skills, progressive school systems can begin to reestablish SEL programs to prepare their students for emotional and social intelligence in an increasingly complex and global society. For that process to begin in earnest, schools must initially assess what SEL competencies their teachers currently possess and concomitantly develop a plan for further professional support and growth (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullota, 2015).

Performance Based Educational Reform Impacts Rural Schools

The educational system in the United States continues to be defined and impacted by the performance-based educational reform movement which has prioritized academic results over other outcomes. U.S. educational policy over the last twenty years has focused itself on classifying schools based upon standardized test scores. This has manifested itself in an assessment-heavy educational climate which has forced educational systems to reallocate capital and resources towards success on these assessments and away from the social needs of developing children. Teachers in our country find themselves prioritizing test scores over social learning which has resulted in the disengagement of many students from the educational process. This emphasis has also had the deleterious impact of pressuring teachers to have results on these high-stake tests while also dealing with the social needs of their students; a task that many teachers are ill-equipped and untrained to manage (Darling-Hammond, 2015).

The need to focus on the development of the whole child has been marginalized over the last twenty years in our country with the introduction of The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). NCLB built off of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1994 and required all schools to meet state

standards by 2014 as well as demonstrate annual growth and movement towards that goal (Blad, 2017; Devaney, O'Brien, Tavegia, & Resnik, 2005; Reeves, 2013).

Meeting the provisions of NCLB was particularly difficult for rural schools, like Central Midlands High School, where the unique challenges of resources and geography were exacerbated and strained by Federal mandates. Reeves (2003) writes that rural schools were far more likely to have difficulty complying with the mandates of NCLB given that rural schools often face declining populations in addition to being in communities of poverty. Both factors traditionally leave rural school district with declining budgets. These financial issues oftentimes force rural schools to slash programs and personnel which puts a strain on the necessary resources to comply with NCLB. Rural schools were at a far greater risk of being labeled (or mislabeled) as being “in need of improvement” due to their inability to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) under NCLB. This classification forced many rural schools to reallocate existing resources towards meeting AYP and focusing attention on “high-stakes” test performance in spite of other initiatives (Blad, 2017; Devaney, O'Brien, Tavegia, & Resnik, 2005; Reeves, 2013).

Reeves (2013) highlights that rural schools struggling to meet AYP most certainly would not have the financial resources for social and emotional programs as they might be forced to eliminate mental health counselors, school psychologist, and professional development initiatives for teachers. Transportation, another budgetary constraint in rural school districts, is another source for emotional strain for rural students as they oftentimes face excessively long bus rides. Reeves (2013) asserts that “Students with long bus rides reported that they were stressed and tired, that their grades have dropped,

they participate in fewer after-school activities, and they spend less time with their families” (p. 9). The school-choice component of NCLB potentially exacerbated this issue as it allowed students attending schools classified as “in need of improvement” to attend another school of their choice.

The replacement of NCLB with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 presented some degree of positive momentum for the reintroduction of social and emotional learning in secondary schools, but also highlighted just how underdeveloped SEL elements were in many state education curriculums. Gayl (2017) writes that the adoption of ESSA has allowed state agencies and school to re-think their approach to education with regards to SEL initiatives. Under ESSA, educational leaders have far greater autonomy and flexibility to define educational outcomes as well as greater flexibility to allocate resources where needed given that the specter of AYP is no longer hanging over schools. ESSA requires all state-level department agencies to submit a plan for compliance to the United States Department of Education. Gayl (2017) asserts that states should articulate a plan for SEL in their ESSA plans and should use the funding requirements for Title I money to fund SEL initiatives in schools with the greatest needs. In many ways, ESSA has freed up educational systems to begin addressing the inclusion of SEL competencies within their curriculums.

The Lack of Clarity and Support for SEL in State Standards

While ESSA has freed up school systems to refocus and reprioritize SEL programs and curriculums within school systems, the vast majority of states either do not have free standing standards for SEL or only include very limited state standards or

curricular elements for the implementation of SEL. As it currently stands only eleven states have freestanding standards for SEL at the K-12 level (Eklund et al., 2018).

Dyminicki, Sambolt, and Kidron (2013) assert that one of the most impactful actions that states can undertake to emphasize the important need for SEL programs is to either adopt SEL outright or integrate SEL benchmarks into existing standards. They highlight Illinois's SEL standards, adopted in 2003 as a part of Illinois's Children's Mental health Act, which articulate three clear goals for SEL competency:

1. Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.
2. Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.
3. Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts. (Dyminicki, Sambolt, and Kidron, 2013, p. 8)

Within each one of these 3 goals in a system of 10 standards with individual benchmarks within each standard that run all the way up through the end of a student's high school career and focus attention on skills such as social awareness for diversity and advocacy for the rights of others. Dyminicki, Sambolt, and Kidron (2013) write that this inclusion of SEL standards for high school students is an important contribution that states can make to position students for postsecondary success.

In addition to individual state adoption of SEL standards several private organizations and organizations affiliated with postsecondary institutes have existing initiatives which are designed to assist states and individual school districts with SEL

adoption and implementation. The National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) is a U.S. Department of Education funded program which provides support and guidance for a wide range of educational stakeholders with SEL elements. In addition, The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Collaborative Districts Initiative (CDI) for CASEL provide evidence-based approached and practical guidance for SEL implementation on the state and district level (Dyminicki, Sambolt, and Kidron, 2013).

Eklund, Kilpatrick, Kilgus, Haider, & Eckert (2018) undertook a systematic review of existing preschool and kindergarten through 12th grade SEL standards across all 50 states within the United States and the District of Columbia in order to further investigate this consistency of programs or curriculums for SEL across our nation. Eklund et al. emphasize that the adoption of ESSA and other educational policy changes have put school leaders in a unique position to prioritize SEL. With that said Eklund et al. (2018) state that “despite repeated calls for SEL standards, gaps within the SEL literature might limit the practicability of such standards, thereby reducing the rate at which they can be adopted” (p. 318). In addition, a lack of clear data, evidence, and assessments, have resulted in a slow response to incorporate SEL on the state level.

The review of existing preschool through 12th grade SEL standards conducted by Eklund et al. (2018) revealed that despite several states having well developed curriculums and standards for SEL inclusions, in addition to the resources of several private and university affiliated programs to assist states and districts with practical implementation of SEL, the vast majority of states, including South Carolina, do not currently have an existing curriculum or defined K-12 standards for social and emotional

learning. As of 2018, South Carolina only had age-specific SEL oriented standards for preschool as well as grade-specific SEL oriented standards incorporated into health and physical education course for grades K-12 (Eklund et al., 2018; South Carolina Department of Education). Eklund et al. contend that teachers desire to address to behavioral and social-emotional needs of their students but the lack of standards and guidance for SEL has inherently inhibited teacher's access to evidenced-based materials for SEL instruction. Teachers in South Carolina arguably facing a similar dilemma of wanting to address the SEL needs of their students while simultaneously existing in an educational system where resources and guidance are lacking.

Much of South Carolina's current orientation towards SEL is defined by the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate, a vision for postsecondary skills and attributes that students should possess when they graduate from high school. Gayl (2017) outlines and describes the Profile of the SC Graduate:

South Carolina's vision specifies that all students will 'graduate prepared for success in college, careers, and citizenship' and has developed the Profile of the South Carolina Graduate as the basis of its plan. This framework identifies the knowledge, skills, and life and career characteristics that each student should have upon graduation from high school, which includes self-direction, global perspective, perseverance, and interpersonal skills that are important aspects of students' social and emotional development. (Gayl, 2017, p. 2)

While the articulation of this vision is a critical launching pad for further SEL integration, Gayl (2017) goes on to say that the implementation of such a vision requires

professional development of teachers in order to develop SEL capacity as well as the identification of evidenced-based SEL interventions.

SEL As a Vehicle for Positive Youth Development

Successful schools in our modern educational setting not only prepare students in the domains of reading, writing, math, science, etc. but they also prepare students to be socially and emotionally competent, imbued with character and like skills that situate them for healthy and productive lives. With that said, it is clear that many schools do not have clear and specific programs for SEL during the school day and instead achieve an inconsistent level of SEL development within their students. Leverett, Duffell, Humphrey, Stepney, and Ferrito (2015) write about the disparate elements of SEL-related programming within schools and how those elements can be harnessed to best orient students towards behavioral and academic success. Elias et al (2015) assert that every school addresses SEL and character development to some degree given that the collision of children and adults on a daily basis has some impact on children's competencies and the types of people that they grow up to be. With that said, this process is oftentimes informal, haphazard, and the effects and long-term impacts almost immeasurable given the lack of formal and standardized process for SEL inculcation (pp. 33-34).

Elias et al. (2015) present positive youth development (PYD) as a way to harness the benefits of SEL in order to impact school-climate, culture, and social and emotional outcomes. PYD programs seek to instill positive life skills with a focus on the Five "Cs:" competence, confidence, connection, confidence, and compassion. With a strong emphasis on highly developed after school programs, PYD is a vehicle for provide a high degree of youth engagement, positive relationships with adults and peers, and a sense of

efficacy. PYD after-school programs generally are most impactful when integrated with SEL efforts during the school day. For many students, especially those in communities of need, after-school programs as a product of PYD initiatives may be a critical opportunity to learn essential SEL skills (pp. 40-42).

The Afterschool Alliance (2018) build upon this research by highlighting the positive impacts that PYD afterschool programs can have on the SEL development of children as an extension of school day activities. They assert that afterschool programs offer the flexibility and adaptability to offer students personalization for SEL development. Such after school programs also offer students relevant and engaging opportunities for supportive peer relationships which help to develop conflict resolution, goal setting, and time management skills. In addition, PYD oriented afterschool programs can be a vehicle for diversity awareness and empathy (p. 6).

To evaluate the effectiveness of, and outcomes associated with, PYD programs, Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg (2017) undertook a meta-analysis review of eighty-two universal school based SEL interventions involving nearly 100,000 kindergarten through high school aged students. Outcomes demonstrated that SEL elements enhance PYD programs with positive results in the areas of sexuality, criminal incidence, mental health, and relationships. Taylor et al. (2017) assert that “school-based, universal SEL interventions reviewed in this study achieved these ends during follow-up in terms of significantly improving skills, positive attitudes, prosocial behavior, and academic performance” (p. 1166). Overall, findings from this research validate that outcomes from PYD programs are both consistent and durable as well as the fact that students experiencing school based SEL interventions demonstrate significant positive benefits.

This sustained approach to meeting the social and emotional needs of students is critical to developing a supportive and inclusive school environment, as well as fostering effective noncognitive skills, given that many schools do not have well-defined or consistent programs for SEL competency.

Growth Mindset Via Social and Emotional Learning

Perhaps one of the most impactful realizations in educational psychology over the last few years has been the recognition that students' perceptions of themselves and their abilities can be impacted and molded by the insights of teachers and other adults. Within the context of schools, these individuals greatly impact the experiences of young people and their beliefs as to what they can and cannot achieve (Yeager et al., 2016). Growth mindset, or mindfulness, is the belief that the one's abilities to take on challenges, develop persistence and resilience, and move beyond attributing failure to a defined level of "smartness" can be altered and heightened via determination. The idea of a growth mindset stands in stark contrast to fixed mindset which assumes that one's intelligence is a fixed quality and impervious to alteration (Brougham & Kashubeck-West, 2017; Myers, Wang, Black, Bugescu, & Hoeft, 2016; Yeager et al., 2016). Along with the growing understanding about the critical importance of SEL competencies in the school setting has been the recognition of growth mindset practices as a practical application of noncognitive skills. For students in many educational settings, growth mindset is a manageable vehicle towards positive SEL integration and outcomes (Myers, Wang, Black, Bugescu, & Hoeft, 2016).

David S. Yeager, in concert with several key psychological and educational researchers, analyzed the role that growth mindset can play in addressing pressing

educational needs for students in a noncognitive. Yeager et al. (2016) investigated the impact that psychological interventions can have when scaled up to measure growth mindset versus fixed mindset in the transition to high school. The general results of this study determined that students transitioning to high school (9th graders) were significantly impacted by SEL-oriented growth mindset programs which “began to raise the grades of the lowest performers, while increasing the learning-oriented attitudes and beliefs of [both] low and high performers” (p. 388). These growth mindset programs showed positive results with regards to increasing the GPAs of low performing students across their freshman years. In addition, this research study yielded positive outcomes with self-reporting of behavioral interventions and indicated that growth mindset interventions can have meaningful impacts on student behavior (Yeager et al., 2016).

Conclusions also determined that teachers who convey growth mindset interventions work hand-in-hand with students to build relationships of trust and redirect students’ beliefs that academic challenges are challenges to be overcome rather than evidence of fixed incapacities (Yeager et al., 2016). These findings are significant for educational leaders because they legitimize the need for growth mindset competencies as elements of SEL in schools. In addition, they also highlight the need to train and prepare teachers to function in such a capacity that they can help students to overcome the fixed perceptions of their abilities.

The need to focus on improving growth mindset interventions as a function of SEL competencies is critically important for students who live in challenging socioeconomic environments where poor academic performance is oftentimes a symptom of poor attendance. Brougham & Kashubeck-West (2017) support Yeager et al.’s (2016)

growth mindset concept and implemented a research design to study the impacts of growth mindset interventions on students' fixed mindset symptoms of inconsistent school attendance and the resulting low academic performance. The participants in this research study were students from disadvantaged backgrounds at two urban high schools. As a part of the research design, the treatment group received targeted growth mindset interventions from school counselors over the course of three separate sessions. The research findings demonstrated that the interventions resulted in overall stronger growth mindset beliefs and improved student attendance both of which traditionally yield improved academic performance. The conclusions support the hypothesis that growth mindset elements are an impactful part of efforts to improve the overall academic performance of young people who live in challenging and disadvantaged atmospheres. While this study was specifically conducted in an urban school environment, these findings could also be replicable in rural environments given similar demographics, characteristics, and challenges (Brougham & Kashubeck-West, 2017). Overall, the simple task of fostering a growth mindset within students can help create resilience and a propensity towards learning in children, social and emotional skills that are the foundation for enhanced academic achievement and personal success within life.

Preventive, Positive, and Restorative Behavior Practices

Managing student behaviors in the educational setting has routinely been an issue (and challenge) of importance throughout the history of American education. This management has taken on the aims of correcting behavior in the short-term which is oftentimes punitive and reactionary in nature or employing teaching techniques to help students develop self-disciplinary skills for proactive avoidance. The more desirable

latter outcome requires young people to exhibit prosocial behaviors under their own volition which demands well-established social and emotional competencies (Bear, Whitcomb, Elias, & Blank, 2015). The goal of instilling within children proactive social behaviors is increasingly being viewed as the product of comprehensive schoolwide restorative approaches to discipline which emphasize and prioritize relationships and repairing the harm caused by offending behaviors (Roland, Rideout, Salinitri, & Frey, 2012).

Haymovitz, Houseal-Allport, Lee, & Svistova (2018) investigated the impacts that school-based SEL programs can have when addressed in the form of restorative practices in the school setting. Standing in stark contrast to zero-tolerance disciplinary policies, restorative justice practices look to restore damaged relationships by encouraging offenders to take responsibility for their actions (p. 46). They write that school leaders maintain positive relationships by knowing what steps to take when conflict arises and having a common set of procedures in place to focus on solutions and relationship reparation when offenses occur. Haymovitz et al. (2018) analyzed the outcomes of applying a three-year programmatic series of restorative practices called Social Harmony in a school setting. Results from this study indicated the observation of “stronger preparedness and self-efficacy of faculty and staff members to identify and address social-emotional concerns, better relationships, more positive perceptions of self and others, and improved school climate” (p. 51).

Bear et al. (2015) address the prevalent positive disciplinary approach of schoolwide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) initiatives as a version of SEL competency within the school setting. SWPBIS programs are

characterized by the following elements: clearly defined behavioral expectations, direct teaching of behavioral expectations, reinforcement of appropriate behavior, system for responding to inappropriate behavior, and data-driven decision making. The authors state that SWPBIS and SEL both prioritize correction and seek to provide all students with critical life skills which invariably lead to academic success (p. 458). Perhaps the most prominent element of SWPBIS, the use of external rewards to reinforce appropriate behaviors, is not a common element of SEL initiatives. Overall, these interconnected approaches to SEL development demonstrates a promising path towards promoting safe and healthy school environments while also fostering effective social and emotional skills for students.

SEL Implementation in Communities of Need

While there is a growing body of research which indicates the need for all young people to develop social and emotional competencies, educationally marginalized youth who grow up in disadvantaged communities, whether they be rural or urban, are in even greater need of these abilities. Marginalized or at-risk youth are at a greater risk of dropping out of school due to ineffective educational systems, poverty, mental health issues, and lack of supportive relationships. Unfortunately, these children exist in systems which routinely underserve their needs and fail to both address and support them socially and emotionally (Slaten, Rivera, Shemwell, & Elison, 2016; Meyers, Tobin, Huber, Conway, & Shelvin, 2015; Sepanik, Safran, Saco, & MDRC, 2018).

Just as school systems want to avoid one-size-fits-all approaches with regards to instruction and assessment, schools should be cognizant of avoiding these standardized constructs when employing SEL initiatives. Slaten et al. (2016) assert that the current

systematized SEL programming fails to meet the needs of students on the margins and might account for mixed outcomes. The authors attempt to investigate the gap in SEL literature with regards to programmatic impacts on high school students of color, poverty, and marginalization. Their implementation of a hip-hop based SEL program (Fulfill the Dream) resulted in students reporting a positive change in their self-awareness, hope, positive self-talk, and critical consciousness. In addition, the focus on relevant approaches to SEL yielded more authentic adult relationships, increased metacognitive skills, and a greater focus on future goals. Implications from this research demonstrate not only the heightened need for SEL interventions for at-risk students but also the need to ensure that those interventions are authentic and relevant for students (Slaten, Rivera, Shemwell, & Elison, 2016).

Students from rural communities, like those students at Central Midlands High School, face significant challenges with exiting the public education system without basic effective noncognitive skills let alone college readiness skills. School systems in rural, often low-income, environments face a unique set of challenges ranging from wide distances from urban centers, geographic size, low population density, and trouble attracting and retaining skilled teachers. The totality of these issues can make basic education and SEL implementation an almost impossible task in the very environments which need it the most (Meyers et al., 2015; Sepanik et al, 2018). Sepanik et al. (2018) write about the implications of SEL and noncognitive components being employed in rural environments. They determined that rural schools which supported the AVID college readiness system (ACRS), which has SEL elements imbedded within its framework, reported a positive school environment as well as positive responses with

regards to study habits, engagement in school, and postsecondary expectations (Sepanik et al., 2018).

Despite these positive findings, rural school districts may struggle to implement organizational changes which support SEL effectively given the budgetary and resource constraints endemic in many of these school systems. Meyers et al. (2015) write about these challenges and highlight that rural schools offer some positives toward institutional change (close-knit school communities, self-sufficiency) while also suffering from notable challenges (resistance to change, limited resources, high turnover). The authors highlight one approach to mitigating these challenges with the designation of a central leader to guide SEL implementation in rural settings and assert that oftentimes in these rural school districts school-based mental health specialists, psychologists, or social workers, provide training or consultation with teachers and administrators to facilitate SEL implementation (Meyers et al., 2015).

Meyers et al. also touch on the opportunity for rural school districts to address the personnel challenges associated with SEL implementation by engaging in organizational consultation via partnerships between universities and rural school districts. These partnerships provide school leaders an outlet to seek out relevant professional development opportunities in SEL while concurrently pursuing shared goals and reducing professional isolation. In addition, organizational consults can provide new and innovative ideas and approaches, as well as facilitate much of the planning and training for SEL with faculty and staff within schools. Overall these efforts are critically important given the unique challenges and needs present in rural communities and the

inherent difficulties endemic within SEL implementation in these regions (Meyers et al., 2015).

Integrating SEL into School Curriculums

Throughout the last few decades, various educational theorists, psychologists, researchers, and leaders have identified and evaluated the need to develop students' noncognitive and social decision-making skills for successful outcomes in life. Given that students spend countless hours interacting with each other, it is imperative that schools develop acceptable communication and social skills in addition to the traditional academic skills. Proponents of SEL understand that profound academic learning cannot occur unless children feel as if they are a part of a supportive and safe community. Within the school setting, children are members of a unique community and environment where socialization naturally occurs. To foster a positive learning community, students must exhibit positive personal, social and emotional skills (Usakli & Ekici, 2018). With that said, much of the work of imparting these SEL skills is placed squarely on the shoulders of school personnel who must embrace this responsibility of addressing the vital needs inherent within developing the whole child. To meet these goals, we must develop these infrastructures and social and emotional competencies within our school curriculums and academic programs (Usakli & Ekici, 2018; Battistich, Solomon, Watson & Schaps, 1997; Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013).

Beginning to approach the challenge of addressing SEL implementation in schools can be an overwhelming one and should begin with the local decision that SEL should be integrated into the school curriculum. With that said, the selection and design of an evidence based SEL program takes a great deal of time and commitment. These

efforts are uniquely challenging in the high school setting where it is no longer efficient to deliver structured SEL-oriented lessons during the school day as is the norm in elementary school settings. The movement of students from classroom to classroom makes the integration of stand-alone SEL programs problematic in addition to the need for more targeted SEL programs to combat risk-behaviors among teens (Williamson, Modecki, & Guerra, 2015). Consequently, high school intervention programs generally are more focused on changing behaviors and avoiding negative outcomes such as dropping out of the school system, high-risk sexual behaviors, substance abuse, and violence. Teachers also face obstacles with SEL implementation given their subject-oriented pedagogical preparation in addition to the various time demands in the high school setting (Jennings & Frank, 2015). Despite these challenges, it is critical to remember that SEL implementation in the high school setting *can* work and school leaders must take the initiative to build up replicable and generalizable SEL interventions which are applicable to a diverse student population (Williamson et al., 2015).

Durlak (2015) asserts the critical idea that SEL implementation occurs through the use of effective change strategies and the application of systematic methods specifically designed and undertaken to increase the likelihood of programmatic success. Durlak writes that program outcomes cannot be interpreted appropriately without key data and information which monitor implementation to better evaluate the level of implementation that was achieved. He states that quality implementation is the mutual responsibility of many stakeholders within the school setting. For example, school administrators cannot move forward with SEL initiatives without effectively communicating and consulting with teachers; the very individuals within the organization

charged with committing the time and energy to implement programmatic initiatives effectively.

School leadership is one of the most critical factors for successful SEL implementation given that the beliefs and capabilities of an individual school's leadership are central to shaping the culture of that school, and concomitantly, the environment that SEL implementation will develop within (Patti, Senge, Madrazo, & Stern, 2015). Patti et al. discuss the need for effective school leaders to possess strong emotional intelligence skills, as well as knowledge about SEL characteristics, to effectively implement the change that is oftentimes needed for SEL interventions to begin. By pulling together the skills and resources inherent in systems thinking and self-reflection, school leaders can begin to engage in the facilitation of meaningful conversations which can foster an environment where teachers and other school personnel can have critical conversations about SEL implementation (Patti et al, 2015). In addition, the ability of school leaders to effectively to build a shared vision, set goals based upon that vision, coach building personnel, and establish reflective practices are all vitally important element to establishing meaningful SEL programs and curriculums (Patti et al., 2015).

When implementing SEL programs, school leaders must be cognizant of the factors which influence the sustainability of SEL implementation within the school setting. He writes that despite factors such as staff turnover and training which can present potential problems, SEL leaders must foresee potential problems and plan for program sustainable from the beginning of implementation. Durlak presents two key factors which can lead to the sustenance of SEL implementation:

1. Teachers who emerge as positive role models for other can sustain the school's commitment and motivation.
2. Programs that are integrated and become part of the entire school and its daily practices, as opposed to being operational in only some classrooms, are more likely to continue. (Durlak, 2015, p. 402).

While these factors do not translate to immediate or lasting success with SEL implementation, they are critical factors when considering the lasting impacts of implementing, and sustaining, a social and emotional competency program.

The role of addressing and enhancing students' social development is a complicated issue, and while school administrators often fulfill the leadership and directive responsibilities in the school setting, they are not always best positioned to directly interact with students. Usakli & Ekici (2018) assert that school psychologist or school counselors are best positioned to direct and lead SEL initiatives given that they are direct service providers for students. They present the notion that the job description of a school psychologist might be modified to best position them to support staff development, give in-service training, consulting teachers, and communicating with parents regarding SEL developments. In addition, the authors highlight the concern that school psychologists may have limited knowledge of published research and evidence based SEL programs but are best situated to enhance SEL outcomes in the school building (Usakli & Ekici, 2018). While the implementation of SEL programs is far from an infallible undertaking, the recommendations and insights provided here provide educational leaders with strategic approaches to situate students towards long-term social and emotional competency.

Summary

Chapter Two highlights and analyzes a growing body of research which demonstrates that SEL programs can have a positive impact on the academic and behavioral outcomes of students. The chapter notes how the concentrated focus on standardized testing with the implementation of No Child Left Behind has narrowed the focus and resources of educational institutions to address the social and emotional needs of children. This issue is magnified in rural school systems where resource and geographic challenges make SEL implementation more difficult. With that said, the adoption of ESSA (in place of NCLB) has freed up school systems to begin prioritizing SEL programs and initiatives. The lack of clarity or consistency for the implementation of SEL curriculums in many state standards has left teachers and other educational professionals without a clear avenue for guidance for SEL enactment or professional development resources. With that said, the articulation of a vision for SEL outcomes with the implementation of South Carolina's Profile of the SC Graduate is a positive step in the right direction.

Also presented in this chapter is an analysis of the outcomes of SEL implementation in the school setting. Focusing attention on SEL-oriented policies, programs, and initiatives such as positive youth development, mindfulness, restorative behavior practices highlight how such approaches to SEL advancement provide a promising outlet towards developing students' social and emotional growth. These approaches to SEL are even more critical in communities of need where school systems can benefit from partnerships with universities and educational organizations which can provide the infrastructure and resources for SEL implementation.

Finally, action steps for the integration of SEL into school curriculums are emphasized and discussed. Specific attention is given to the nature of SEL integration in the high school setting and the importance of supporting school personnel with research-based interventions and ongoing professional development.

The many SEL elements discussed here provide tools for educators to integrate SEL competencies into their teaching, and in doing so, increase their student's academic and behavioral outcomes. All the concepts discussed in this chapter help to facilitate the understanding that the development of social and emotional literacy within students, and the systematic and ongoing integration of SEL into school curriculums, will help our students achieve success both now and in the future.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Social and emotional skills are critically important elements for postsecondary success in the context of both college and career readiness. Social and emotional learning is a critical component of childhood development and SEL programs are necessary in schools for students to develop social interaction and emotional coping skills.

Unfortunately, schools have largely circumvented focusing attention on teaching SEL concepts in favor of prioritizing academic success in the current achievement-focused educational climate. Currently, there is little formal emphasis in South Carolina schools on these competencies. This problem stems from the fact that teachers generally lack the knowledge and preparation necessary for teaching noncognitive skills, and students largely fail to recognize that noncognitive skills are critical for post-secondary success.

To assess the current attitudes, practices, and professional development needs more accurately for SEL competency in public schools, the following three questions have been developed to guide this study:

1. To what degree are high school teachers integrating strategies and practices to support the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate within their classrooms?
2. What resources do teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculum and instruction?

3. Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success?

This chapter will outline an action research study which is intended to shed light on the lack of SEL proficiencies in education. This plan will first detail the research design and intervention including the approach of a mixed methods study, as well as the researcher's role within this investigation. Secondly, the participants in this study will be analyzed including the sample group and the purpose of selecting such a sample group. Then, data collection tools will be discussed in depth including the selected measurement tools of surveys, interviews, and observations. Lastly, research procedures will be discussed in depth along with data analysis methods.

Research Design and Intervention

This research study utilizes action research to investigate teacher integration of SEL concepts into their pedagogy, the professional development needs which impact their ability to integrate SEL into their teaching, and student understandings of SEL skills. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) assert that the inductive nature of action research allows researchers to “gather data to build concepts, hypothesis, or theories” (p. 17) in order to develop the ideas of how to best tackle the problems that persist in education today. At its core, action research in education is undertaken with the goal of efficiently and effectively proposing solutions to problems in order to foster better outcomes for all students. By evaluating and understanding the variations in educational outcomes with regards to SEL practices and needs in schools, educators might be better positioned to respond effectively to the developmental needs of students.

Given the general lack of concrete and precise information and data concerning the effectiveness of SEL programs, I have developed an action research study with a case study design to provide a degree of clarity on these issues. Creswell (2016) writes that a case study research design allows for the evaluation and study of specific process or groups in order to generate assumptions about a specific case. This study takes an in-depth look at practices, needs, and assumptions about SEL within the school site of Central Midlands High School (CMHS). CMHS is a rural high school in central South Carolina serving approximately 750 students. According to the 2015 District Strategic Plan, about half of the students at CMHS receive free or reduced lunch, but nearly 80% of students plan on attending either a two or four-year college. School and district initiatives are focused on closing the achievement gaps on standardized tests in keeping with the standards-based focus in current educational trends. Ideally, conclusions will emerge through this study about SEL competency which might be impactful to the school and district as they move forward in implementing programs and initiatives to improve SEL competency and outcomes.

Mixed methods research studies in the school setting are undertaken to better understand the experiences of the individuals being studied as they engage in an activity, experience, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013). In this context, mixed methods research provides a means to better understand where CMHS teacher competencies and practices currently stand with SEL and where they seek to improve their practices. This study also seeks to assess and better understand the experience of CMHS students and identify the specific social and emotional learning skills which they perceive need further support. These two concepts were considered

simultaneously since the outcomes and findings from teachers could be directly applied to address the finding from students. In that same vein, the specific SEL skills that students identified as critical for their success, might drive professional development decisions for teachers in the future. Overall, the goal of this mixed-methods action research study is to position teachers to focus on targeted social and emotional development skills that will better address the needs of their students and ultimately alter their personal schooling experiences.

A case study approach was identified as the ideal vehicle for this research given the interwoven relationship between teacher and students in this study. Yin (2013) asserts that case study research designs are useful for yielding logical models which may demonstrate a relationship between both empirical findings and theoretical relationships. This particular case study engaged both the faculty and students at Central Midlands High School during the Spring semester of the 2019-2020 school year. Surveys and interviews with both teachers and students, as well as classroom observations of teachers, were used as data collection instruments to collect detailed information from multiple sources in keeping with the characteristics of a case study approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Teacher surveys collected quantitative data, which was compared with qualitative findings from both teacher interviews and observations. The measurement of these methods was based upon the frequency with which teachers addressed evident competencies of social and emotional learning and consistencies among their responses to professional development needs (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Likewise, student surveys yielded quantitative data, which was compared with the qualitative results from student

focus group interviews. Student responses to surveys were measured and integrated with student interviews to highlight ways the qualitative interview findings support the quantitative survey findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Ultimately through this process, both teachers and students provided key understandings as to the culture and environment for SEL understandings and integration at Central Midland High School.

Within this action research study, my role functions as an insider in collaboration with other insiders given that I am currently a teacher at CMHS, and I will be utilizing other teachers and students within the school building as research participants. Herr & Anderson (2005) state that “these insider collaborations around inquiry hold great potential for both improving professional development and democratizing organizations” (p.46). It was my intention that such a position within this process allowed me to obtain meaningful feedback that will be impactful with regards to teacher professional development needs about SEL among other factors outlined in the research questions. In addition, this positionality was undertaken with the intention and goal of being as democratic as possible in my research, while concomitantly having wider implications for my research findings. Overall, it was my objective for this mixed methods approach to sort through the various elements of SEL competency at this site while also developing a better understanding for the genuine implications of SEL practices in education.

Participants and Research Sample

The participants in this study were the teaching staff at Central Midlands High School (44 teachers in total) as well as students enrolled in my U.S. History courses at CMHS (18 students in total). In the researcher’s opinion, the participants in this research study are also generally representative of the average rural high school teacher and

student in the United States, and this also happens to be the school where I currently teach. The sample size for this study was selected with the objective of maximizing information to the degree that a level of informational saturation was achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This research study began by identifying a minimum number of participants who would be sampled among both teachers and students and progressed forward as data was forthcoming and concomitantly analyzed.

The research sample in this study would be characterized as typical purposeful sampling with elements of convenience and network sampling. This sampling method was selected to best help investigate the research problem and address the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Typical purposeful sampling reflects the average person or instance of the phenomenon being researched; in this study, the teachers and students at CMHS are representative of the typical teacher and student in a rural high school setting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

All teachers within the building at MCHS were included in the research sample because of their potential in demonstrating and exhibiting SEL elements in their daily lessons as well as their insights as to professional development needs for teachers to better incorporate SEL. Initially, all the school's teachers (44 in total) were invited to participate in a survey and five randomly selected teachers (of those who responded to the survey) were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. A convenience sampling method was used to enable the researcher to gather information and meet the needs of the research questions (Frey, 2018). Convenience sampling is the selection of a research sample based upon time, location, and availability. Teachers within this site were incorporated into the research sample because I am also a teacher at CMHS (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, network sampling was employed to identify two teachers who exhibited a wide range of SEL knowledge and integration in their classrooms to participate in teacher classroom observations. Network sampling functions by identifying key individuals who are ideal study participants and then allowing them to refer you to other participants through the interview process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Essentially, the five teachers who participated in the interviews suggested colleagues who might provide notable evidence of SEL integration, and two of these names were chosen at random to participate in teacher classroom observations.

The range of sampled teachers extends from those who have little knowledge or integration of SEL competencies to teachers with a large degree of SEL knowledge and integration. CMHS has a teaching staff with a wide range of experience levels as well as a diverse set of backgrounds and pathways to certification ranging from alternative route to career changers to college and university teacher preparation programs. In addition, many of the sampled teachers at this site grew up in this rural area and attended this same school.

The student research sample is comprised of 18 total students; three students who were enrolled in each of my three United States History courses and my three Advanced Placement United States History courses for the 2019-2020 school year. Students specifically enrolled in my classes at CMHS were included in the research sample because of their ability to provide insights as to the SEL proficiencies high school students believe are necessary for their long-term post-secondary success (Patino & Ferreira, 2018). This convenience sampling method was used due to the researcher's first-hand knowledge of and relationship with these students (Frey, 2018). Some of these

students come from challenging homes and critically need social and emotional learning, while other students come from stable wealthier homes and likely have a high degree of social and emotional capital (Meyers, A. B., Tobin, R. M., Huber, B. J., Conway, D. E., & Shelvin, K. H., 2015).

Data Collection Measures, Instruments, and Tools

Within this mixed methods action research study, the researcher administered teacher surveys, conducted teacher interviews, conducted teacher classroom observations, administered student surveys, and conducted a student focus group. Following collection, the data was analyzed using a triangulation process. This triangulation process ensured reliable and valid data collection in order to accurately and comprehensively answer the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Three data sources, surveys, interviews (both individual and group), and observations, were utilized to answer the three questions guiding this study, as evidenced by the triangulation matrix (see Table 3.1).

Teacher Surveys

Initially, online surveys were administered to teachers to collect preliminary data. These surveys consisted of questions related to teachers' individual thoughts about current SEL practices, both inside their own classrooms and the school as a whole, as well as the nature of SEL competencies in the high school setting (see Appendix B). Survey questions utilized Likert- scale response options (Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) designed to assess current levels of knowledge, current practices, and needs for professional development with SEL integration in the classroom. A neutral option was omitted from the Likert-scale response options since "neutral responses do not

add much to our understanding of peoples’ attitudes and opinions” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 117).

Table 3.1 Triangulation Matrix

Research Question	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3
1. To what degree are high school teachers integrating strategies and practices to support the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate?	Teacher Surveys	Teacher Interviews	Teacher Observations
2. What resources for further professional development do teachers say they need to better incorporate SEL elements into their instruction?	Teacher Surveys	Teacher Interviews	
3. Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their post-secondary success?	Student Surveys	Student Focus Group	

Surveys are utilized in both qualitative and quantitative research to “systematically describe the facts and characteristics of a given phenomenon or the

relationships between events and phenomena” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 5). In this study, surveys served to provide quantitative numerical data to represent teacher understandings and notions of SEL and the ways they manifest themselves via integration of SEL elements into pedagogy and lessons. Surveys were designed with the goal of eliminating random error by including a fairly large and representative sample (Litwin, 1995). In this case, all classroom teachers within the building will were sent the survey to maintain a more genuine reflection of SEL practices within the school.

Teacher Interviews

Interviews were included in this study to follow up with the survey results from teachers. Interview questions were designed to elicit responses which would provide meaningful insights to meet the needs of the research questions (see Appendix C). Well-designed questions that will probe the sample and yield impactful and insightful information are critical to effective interviews in action research (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As suggested by Merriam and Tisdale (2016), all interview questions were open-ended and formatted using familiar language that is understandable to the interviewees. In addition, care was taken to avoid leading interview questions, as well as simple yes-or-no type questions, which might guide the participants towards a particular answer or line of thought (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, coded, and carefully analyzed for patterns and repeating themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Teacher interviews were conducted in private with the teachers via Google Meet video conferencing in order to foster an environment in which participants felt free to honestly share their experiences with and perspectives on SEL. The researcher personally conducted the interviews and recorded

the responses using the recording feature in the Google Meet software and later transcribed by the researcher. One-on-one interviews were scheduled at times convenient to the participants. In addition, care was taken to avoid altering or impacting participant responses (Creswell and Creswell, 2019). To accomplish this, I engaged in self-reflection to avoid the projection of biases which may have altered questioning procedures and participant responses.

Teacher Observations

Teacher observations were conducted as the third phase of the triangulation process, specifically for research question one. Observations are an invaluable data collection method for qualitative studies given that they occur within the natural environment and are essentially a firsthand account of the research topic; in this case current competencies for SEL in the classroom (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In these observations, the researcher's role can be defined as "participant as observer" given that I am a classroom teacher in the school being studied (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The observer's role was known to the teacher's being observed, but not explicitly made clear to the students given that observations were designed to record and analyze teacher actions in accordance with the research questions. Field notes on teacher actions in their classrooms were used to collect qualitative data in an unstructured format and were transcribed later by the researcher. Merriam & Tisdell (2016) highlight that a key challenge with observations is the need to record observations in as much detail as possible to eliminate observer bias or extraneous factors from influencing the data. With that in mind, care was taken to ensure that field notes recorded

strictly what was seen via teacher actions and concomitantly student behaviors in the classroom setting.

Student Surveys

To meet the needs of the third research question, an online survey was administered to students to collect preliminary quantitative data. Surveys are an ideal vehicle for quantitative research to “identify and assess needs ... assess opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions” (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 107). Student surveys also utilized a Likert rating scale (Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree) designed to reflect on and assess their own social-emotional competencies in order to better identify which competencies they believe are most critical for future outcomes (see Appendix D). Just as with the teacher surveys, a neutral option was omitted from the Likert-scale responses to glean as much meaningful data as possible from students (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Overall, these surveys provided a better understanding of general student needs with regards to the social and emotional skills which they believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success. Survey validity was prioritized and maintained by ensuring that the survey questions were non-leading in nature in an effort to ensure that results genuinely reflected survey participants views on SEL competencies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Student Focus Group

Focus groups (group interviews) were the second triangulation instrument used to collect qualitative student data to compare with student survey responses. A second data source allowed me to collect more varied perspectives on SEL competencies and provided an additional layer of validity to the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Students were interviewed as a group to determine which SEL skills or competencies they believe are most critical for their long-term success, as well as identify areas in which they believe they need further support. The focus group interview format is ideal for children given that they are less intimidated by a group setting and might be more emboldened to speak up and express their genuine views (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Hennick (2014) affirms the usefulness of focus groups by adding that they elicit “interactive discussion through which data are generated, which leads to a different type of data not accessible through individual interviews” (p. 2). In addition, focus group research was prioritized over individual interviews given the researcher’s desire to avoid any ethical or professional issues with working one-on-one with students in this context. As with the teacher surveys, focus group questions were open ended and designed to illicit appropriate and meaningful feedback from students. In my role as the moderator, I was vigilant in maintaining the group’s focus on the subject matter being discussed in order to provide meaningful feedback in accordance with the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The focus groups were conducted using Google Meet, recorded using the recording feature in the Google Meet software, and later transcribed by the researcher. Students were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity and these pseudonyms are used to identify them in this study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). The recordings from these focus groups were also transcribed, coded, and carefully analyzed for patterns and repeating themes.

Data analysis for mixed methods research serves to winnow down a massive quantity of collected data into categories, themes, and patterns (Efron & Ravid, 2013).

The overall analysis process for these data sources was undertaken to aggregate the data into about five to seven themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The transcription of interviews and observations was completed in an ongoing manner to better manage the large amount of data. The analysis process also naturally aided with data management as it progressed from initial category construction based upon early transcript analysis to more concrete categories with the assigning of category codes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Procedure

This action research study was undertaken with the goal of revealing current teacher practices with SEL, teacher professional development needs for further SEL integration, as well as student notions of SEL competencies for college and/or career success. The procedures for this research study are outlined in depth in an effort to maintain transparency and clarity with regards to characteristics and administration of data collection tools. To meet the needs of research questions one and two, teachers were surveyed, interviewed, and observed collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The research procedures for these elements are as follows:

Initially, an online survey developed by the researcher was emailed via the district's Gmail account to all the 44 teachers at Central Midlands High School using SurveyMonkey. This format was chosen because of the lack of encumbrance on responding teachers, but also because of the ease of data collection as SurveyMonkey automatically facilitates "data collection into organized spreadsheets for data analysis [and] reducing data entry errors" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). SurveyMonkey was also used to administer the survey because it has built-in privacy protection to protect

participants' name and responses (SurveyMonkey Inc., 2019). The email to faculty contained the purpose of the survey, a very brief overview of SEL with a link to more information, as well as the time frame for completing the survey (two weeks). A follow up/reminder email was sent to teachers exactly one week after the initial email thanking them for their potential participation and reminding them of the end date for response to the survey. The survey results were immediately coded and analyzed to look for patterns (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Following administration of the surveys to teachers, one-on-one interviews with teachers were undertaken to supplement the data collected from the surveys. The names of the 37 teachers who responded to and completed the survey were written on a popsicle stick, those popsicle sticks were placed inside a cup, and five sticks were drawn at random. This form of two-tier random sampling was selected for the sake of study efficiency (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Two-tier sampling provides two layers of sampling by selecting a smaller subgroup to sample within the overall case. Within this study, conducting one-on-one interviews with a much smaller number of teachers rather than interviewing all forty-four teachers within the building. Interviews were conducted digitally in roughly thirty-minute segments. Interviews were scheduled at a time convenient to the teacher which ideally allowed participants to respond more honestly and openly to the interview questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Interviews were digitally recorded in Google Meet, transcribed, coded, and carefully analyzed for patterns and repeating themes. The researcher also made notes during the interview in the event that there are issues or discrepancies with software's

recording (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The Dragon Anywhere application was utilized to transcribe and code the recordings from interviews. Dragon Anywhere is a multiplatform mobile dictation software for iOS and Android which can complete detailed notes, complete reports, and manage digital workflow (Nuance Communications, Inc., 2019). In addition, interview participants were assigned an identifying letter (Teacher A-E) which corresponded to the order in which they participated in the interviews. This was done to protect their privacy and to ensure that their responses were honest and open (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Following the teacher interviews, two teachers at CMHS were identified to be observed by the researcher based upon feedback in the one-on-one interviews. The five interviewed teachers were each asked to name one teacher who they believe incorporate SEL elements into their classroom instruction on a routine basis. As with the interviews, the names of these five teachers were written on a popsicle stick and two popsicle sticks were drawn at random from a cup. This sampling approach helped to identify patterns across the various ranges of SEL integration among teachers by identifying key participants and using their references to guide the researcher to other participants (Johnson & Christensen 2000). I was specifically looking for elements of SEL competencies on display in teachers' classrooms during the observations in accordance with the first research question. These characteristics and elements were observed through both the direct actions of the teachers and implicit demonstrations of SEL competencies by students. For example, I noted instances of positive student interaction in a group setting, elements of self-direction and self-regulation among students, teacher

praise and positive reinforcement, and patterns of students demonstrating growth mindset and a solid work ethic.

Due to the closure of schools in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, these observations were conducted online during Google Meet and Zoom video calls between teachers and their students rather than teachers' classrooms during instruction. Both observations took place at a day and time of the observed teachers' choosing for exactly thirty minutes. Observations were semi structured in nature and the researcher composed descriptive notes about the teacher-student interactions and the overall environment. Semi structured observations begin with a set of characteristics that the researcher is looking for when they enter the observed environment. In this case, SEL competencies on display in teacher to student interactions and student to student interactions. This semi structured approach allowed these features to highlight themselves naturally within the observed environment given that I pre-identified the qualities that I was looking for (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Efron and Ravid (2013) also add that descriptive notes aim to record what happened during the observation without inferring feelings or responses to what is happening. These direct observation notes primarily focused on detailing the needs of this specific action research investigation, but also record analyses of the individuals, activities, interactions, and dialogues in these learning spaces (Efron & Ravid, 2013). The observation notes were transcribed using a word processor, coded, and analyzed to look for patterns. In addition, all observed teachers were assigned an identifying number (Teachers 1 and 2) so as not to confuse them with the teachers who participated in the interviews. In addition, all students were given a pseudonym within the observation notes to protect participant privacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

In order to derive a sample which meets the needs of the third research question (Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success?), 18 students were invited to participate in a survey (three students from each of my six U.S. History classes). These students were selected by placing their names in alphabetical order by last name (one roster per class period) and selecting every fifth student from each class roster (Robinson, 2014). Prior to participation, students and their parents provided written consent to participate and have their responses recorded and they were also informed of their rights (see Appendix F).

This online survey was developed by the researcher and was emailed via the district's Gmail account to each one of the 18 students using SurveyMonkey. Just as with the teacher survey, this format was chosen primarily because of the ease of data collection, as well as SurveyMonkey's built-in privacy protection to protect the participants' name and responses (SurveyMonkey Inc., 2019). The email to students contained the purpose of the survey, a very brief overview of SEL with a link to more information, as well as the time frame for completing the survey (two weeks). A follow up/reminder email was sent to students exactly one week after the initial email was sent thanking them for their potential participation and reminding them of the end date for response to the survey. These survey results were also coded and analyzed to look for patterns in the resulting data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Following the student surveys, five of the 18 surveyed students were asked to participate in a student focus group to enrich and expand upon the survey data. These students were selected by placing their names in alphabetical order by last name and

selecting every third student on that list. If a student declined to participate in the focus group, then the student who immediately preceded their name on the list was asked to participate. Students participated digitally in two 30-minute focus group sessions which were scheduled during normal school hours. As with the surveys, students and their parents provided written consent to participate and have their responses recorded. Once they agreed, the students were assigned an identifying letter (Students A-E) for purposes of confidentiality in reporting the findings from the focus groups.

Participants could all see and hear each other during both sessions in an effort to maintain the integrity of a focus group environment (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Students were given three minutes in order to respond to each one of the ten focus group questions, and the researcher/facilitator took care to ensure that all members of the focus group had the opportunity to express their views freely and openly and that no members dominated the conversation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The focus group sessions were digitally recorded in Google Meet, transcribed, coded, and carefully analyzed for patterns and repeating themes by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Efron & Ravid, 2013).

Treatment, Processing, and Analysis of Data

Following data collection, the researcher took care to ensure that the resulting information was both analyzed and synthesized in a professional manner. Data analysis was an ongoing process which commenced as soon as data was collected. The goal of data analysis is to “bring meaning and order to the mass of collected data by looking for recurring themes, categories, and patterns” (Efron & Ravid, 2016, p. 166). As the research process unfolded, emerging ideas and understandings resulted in revisions to and

refinements in the investigation. Overall, the analysis process was inductive in nature with analysis of the individual data collection instruments (surveys, interviews, and observations) yielding general understanding about the problem of practice and the research questions. My goal and intentions were that this process would guide me in drafting recommendations that would be made to my school and district for better SEL outcomes to potentially effect local change.

Initial data synthesis methods for all three research questions included transcribing the data and reviewing the transcripts as needed. Survey data from both teachers and students was collected from SurveyMonkey, interview audio recordings were transcribed using the Dragon Anywhere application, and observation descriptive notes were re-typed. This was all undertaken to ensure that I clearly analyzed and made sense of all of the data to better identify significant patterns and themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The transcription process made way for initial category construction via coding. The process of coding, or “organizing the data by bracketing chunks (or text or images segments) and writing a word representing a category in the margins (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 193). The coding process developed through the identification of similar topics throughout the observation notes. These topics were grouped together and transferred into codes which allowed the researcher to identify themes, patterns, and emerging understandings. While some codes were predetermined, most emerged from the data. The early coding process utilized color to highlight groupings and themes as data analysis progressed. The next phase of the coding process involved reading back through the transcriptions of the data and writing codes next to corresponding and appropriate

portions of the text (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Finally, coded categories were reevaluated for streamlining or grouping, alphabetized, and assembled in one location for a preliminary analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, a Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)-certified colleague reviewed the researcher's coding of the data to ensure validity and reliability.

Issues of data validity and reliability were addressed in several ways within this action research study. Overall, the goal of this study is to produce outcome validity and ensure that the research findings lead to possible resolutions with regards to the problem of practice (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 67). First and foremost, I was cognizant to assess my own biases and preconceived notions about the subjects that are participating in my action research. In addition, different data sources were triangulated to assess the consistency of different perspectives and voices (Efron & Ravid, 2013, p. 183). This was accomplished via the incorporation of surveys, interviews, and observations with teachers, and surveys and focus group interviews with students as data collection instruments. A third validity strategy applied in this study was the use of peer debriefing to review and ask questions about elements of the research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The use of multiple validity strategies ideally produced a clearer and more accurate understanding of current SEL competencies and outcomes. Data reliability was primarily addressed in this action research study by documenting the procedures of the case study in detail while also documenting the steps in the research process in detail (Yin, 2009). A major part of this process was the checking of transcripts to identify and avoid transcription errors which might impact analysis and alter findings.

Overall, this action research study builds upon the limited research which exists on social and emotional learning, while concurrently providing new insights and generating new ideas on the best practices to promote foster SEL competencies in students. The findings from this research study might be useful in similar educational environments and might provide some degree of “leg-work” with regards to discerning the most critical needs to promote SEL within their school environment. The limitations of this study are that it cannot consider every need for social and emotional learning, nor can it analyze every environment to assess current practices and competencies, but can only analyze a specific environment, regardless of that environment’s generalizability.

Summary

This chapter described the mixed methods research design that was used in this study of teacher practices, knowledge, needs, in teaching SEL in high schools as well as student understandings for SEL skills. An explanation of the researcher’s role within the student, the participation sample and the overall research process was provided. In addition, data collection methods were reviewed (observations, surveys, and interviews). Issues of ethics and trustworthiness were explored and analyzed, and potential limitations of the study were identified. This chapter outlined the researcher’s specific plans to conduct a helpful and informative study with the intention that it will yield benefits to the specific school site studied as well as provide information that may be potentially useful to other schools and districts.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS FROM THE DATA ANALYSIS

As discussed in earlier chapters, the lack of focus among schools as it relates to developing students' social and emotional skills stems from a lack of professional knowledge and preparation among teachers, as well as students' lack of awareness that noncognitive skills are critical for post-secondary success. The purpose of this mixed methods action research case study is to analyze the extent to which faculty at rural Central Midlands High School currently understand and incorporate SEL elements into their curriculums, teachers' needs for further SEL professional training, as well as students' understandings about the role that SEL skills play in their post-secondary success.

This study examined Central Midlands High School teachers with the objective of evaluating their current awareness and professional knowledge of SEL elements, the extent to which they currently integrate SEL approaches into their daily lessons and curriculums, and the level of professional support and development that they require to further incorporate SEL approaches into their classrooms. In addition, this study also examined Central Midlands High School students in order to assess the specific SEL skills which they believe are vital to their success after high school.

This chapter presents the results and significant findings generated from both quantitative and qualitative data. The information analyzed herein was collected from five sources: Teacher surveys, one-on-one teacher interviews, teacher classroom

observations, student surveys, and student focus group interviews. This study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. To what degree are high school teachers integrating strategies and practices to support the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate within their classrooms?
2. What resources do teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculum and instruction?
3. Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success?

These three research questions provide the structure and organization for the chapter, and the data is presented in sequence with the research questions. This chapter will present the major themes identified as responses to the three research questions before concluding with an interpretation of those resulting patterns to yield findings for each research question. In addition, this chapter concludes with a brief summary of the findings for each of the three research questions.

Data Presentation and Interpretation

The data analysis process for this research study largely conducted in an ongoing manner which facilitated adjustments in the design of the study to best meet the needs of the research questions (Efron & Ravid, 2016). Within this mixed-methods design, initial data analysis began with the qualitative results yielded from teacher and student interviews and teacher observations. Both interview transcripts and observation transcripts and field notes were coded by looking for responses and insights which appeared noteworthy and relevant to addressing the research questions (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). The categories which emerged were then listed, clustered based upon similarities, and then each category was highlighted with a different color for organizational purposes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Efron & Ravid, 2016). Repeating patterns were identified within the categorized codes and then set aside. Quantitative data from both teacher and student surveys was organized into pie charts and compared to the categories and patterns which emerged in the qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Efron & Ravid, 2016). Results from qualitative and quantitative findings were then integrated together using a side-by-side comparison method (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Within this chapter, quantitative findings are presented first for each of the emerging themes and then qualitative findings are presented to either support or contradict the statistical results.

The analysis process for the five data sources described above was used to develop the seven themes presented below. The themes are analyzed and organized by research question progressing from research question number one through research question number three. Each finding is presented as it relates to each research question and is supported with quantitative and qualitative evidence from the five data sources, as well as connections to relevant research.

Research Question One

Research question one states: To what degree are Central Midlands High School teachers integrating strategies and practices to support the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate within their classrooms? Research question one was designed to assess the degree to which teachers at Central Midlands High School are integrating social and emotional learning skills in their classrooms based upon their existing level of

professional knowledge and current pedagogical practice. This research question was also designed to examine teachers' current beliefs about the value of promoting social and emotional competence via their pedagogical choices to incorporate these elements in their classroom curriculums.

Chapter 3 of this study described the methodology of this study, which used both quantitative and qualitative sources to obtain data to respond to the three research questions. Quantitative data was obtained from teacher survey results and qualitative data from teacher interviews and teacher observations. Table 4.1 lists the question numbers from the two research instruments that support the findings for research question one.

Table 4.1 Data Sources for Research Question One

Instrument/Data Source	Question Number
Teacher Survey	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Teacher Interviews	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Teacher Observations	N/A

Theme 1: Critically important to support social and emotional competencies within the school setting

The first teacher survey question indicated that 98% of teachers strongly agreed or agreed that that SEL skills are necessary to help prepare students for the workforce (see Figure 4.1).

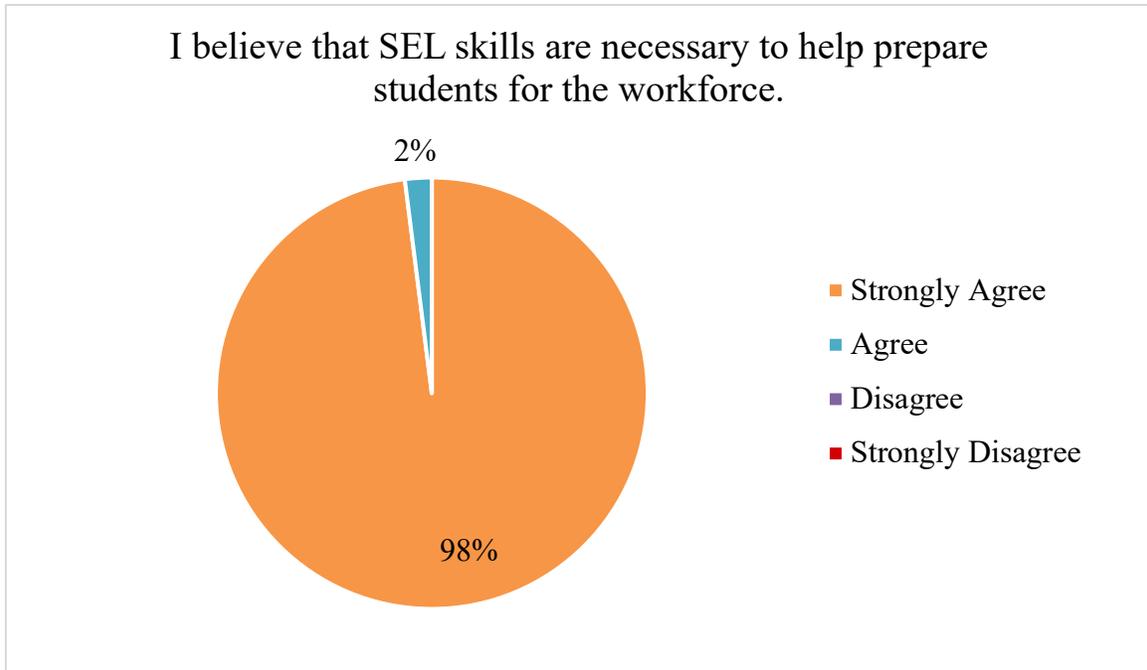


Figure 4.1 SEL and Preparation for the Workforce

Teachers further expanded upon these findings during their interviews as they elaborated upon their belief that SEL is an integral part of student development and one of the reasons why they incorporate SEL into their classrooms. Teacher interview question #1 asked teachers how important it is for schools to promote SEL competencies within the school setting. Teachers mainly agreed that SEL is an important element in education. Teacher A explained,

Social and emotional learning is so incredibly important in schools and education today. I see the need for it not only in my students but in my own children as well. I think that our society puts more pressure on kids than ever before to be a certain way...thanks to social media...and a lot of kids come to us in high school with self-esteem issues and they just aren't good with social interaction.

Every teacher interviewed echoed their belief that social and emotional learning was a critical component of education and described the merits of integrating SEL into their curriculums and classrooms. Teacher B said that SEL “is our way of preparing these kids for life after high school is over. It encompasses everything from how to follow directions, to how you get along with your co-workers to how you even get up in the morning and get to work.” Teacher C remarked that SEL is the ideal vehicle to “instill within these kids a degree of empathy about the people around them. If there is one thing that I think we see our world needs more of is the ability to be kinder and more empathetic to other people.” Teacher D commented that SEL “is more important than ever” with Teacher E adding “especially since I feel like parents do less and less of teaching these things at home.”

Teacher observations further added to the patterns that resulted in Theme 1 as teachers prioritized students’ social and emotional well-being during distance learning. During online help session Google Meet meetings, teachers routinely discussed and checked on the mental and emotional well-being of students who were at home due to the wide-spread quarantine and closure of schools during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Teacher 1 began her help session meeting by first asking students what they had been doing while quarantined at home. Students immediately began telling their classmates what activities they had been participating in at home to stay occupied and keep busy. One student, Jake (pseudonym), commented, “We’ve been doing some puzzles and taking walks. My mom keeps making sure that we are doing our schoolwork, too, but I’m a little bored.” After students had a few moments to share what they had been doing while at home, Teacher 1 made it a priority to tell students,

Make sure that that you take care of your mental and emotional health. I know this is a really unprecedented time. I'm not sure if we will go back to school this year but they only thing that you can control is your mindset. You need to try and balance keeping up with your schoolwork and distance learning while also not becoming overwhelmed. Remember you can do all of this stuff at your own pace.

No one is going to be penalized for missing a deadline or something like that.

Teacher 2 had a similar exchange with her students during her Google Meet as she was quick to ask about their social and emotional health at the outset of the meeting. A female student, Suzanne, stated that she “was doing okay at home but missed everyone at school and missed her routine.” Teacher 2 then pointed out that it is important to establish a sense of routine at home during quarantine to better cope with the circumstances.

Theme 2: SEL skills used to address undesirable student behaviors, foster positive student interactions, and collaboration

Teacher surveys responses largely indicated that teachers generally incorporate SEL into their curriculums. Figure 4.2 shows responses to teacher survey question 2 (“I incorporate SEL competencies into my curriculum to address the alleviation of bullying in our school”), where 88% of teachers either strongly agreed or agreed with that statement. In contrast, a small number of teachers (12%) disagreed that they utilized SEL skills to address the alleviation of bullying in the school.

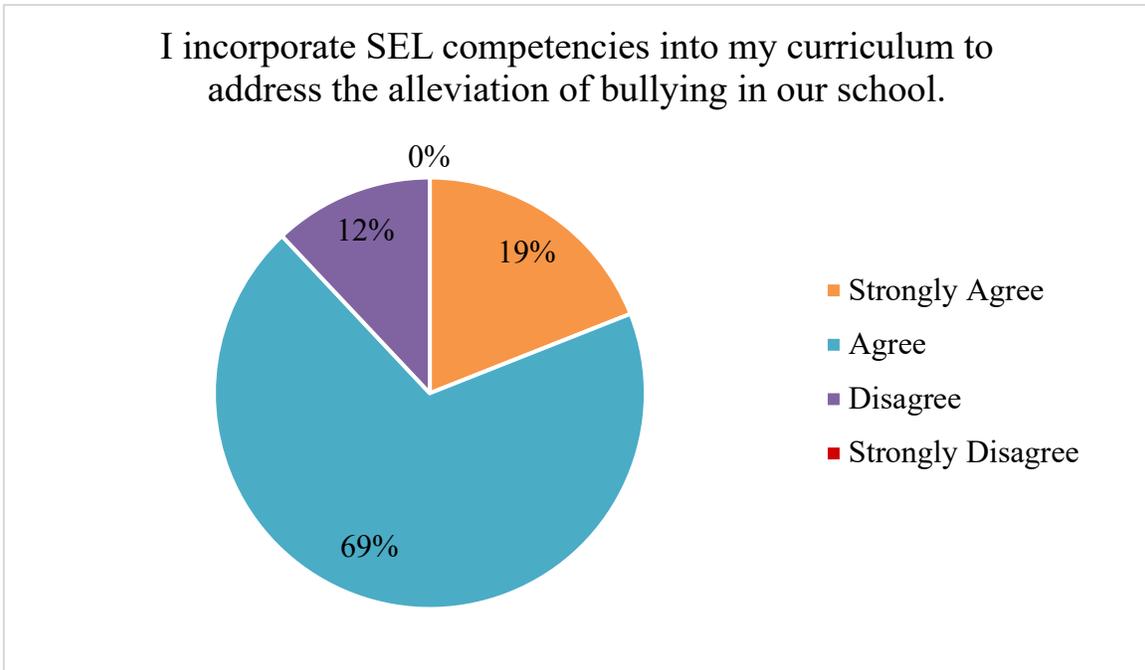


Figure 4.2 SEL and Bullying

On teacher survey question 3, 83% of teachers indicated their application of SEL skills in the classroom when they strongly agreed or agreed that they use SEL strategies to help students work constructively (see Figure 4.3). Furthermore, 94% strongly agreed or agreed that they applied SEL skills to address poor student behavior in their classes in teacher survey question 4 (see Figure 4.4).

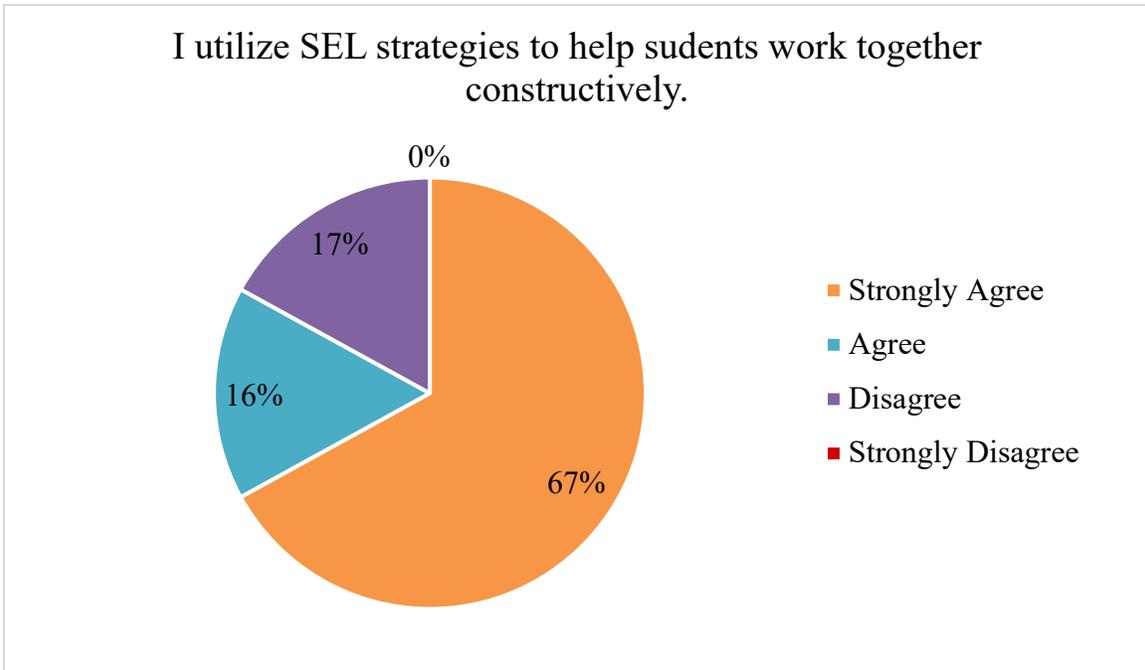


Figure 4.3 SEL and Student Collaboration

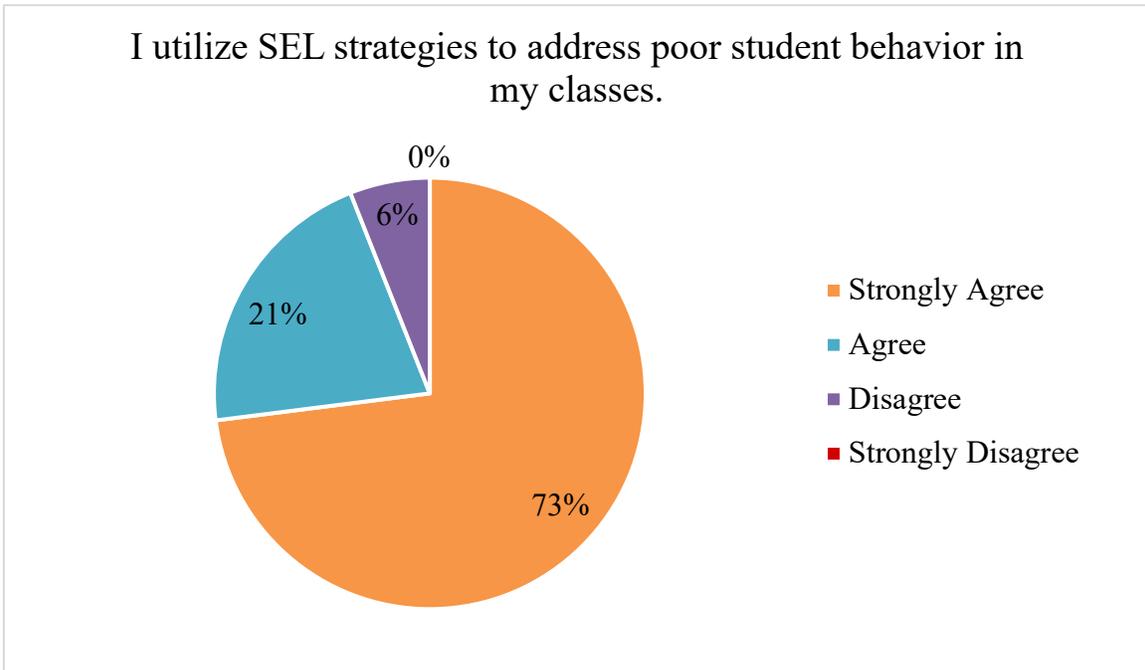


Figure 4.4 SEL and Poor Student Behavior

Teachers interviews also indicated that a general level of SEL integration is currently occurring at Central Midlands High. Teachers discussed the ways in which they

presently employ SEL elements into their curriculums to impact student growth. In teacher interview question #2 (Does Central Midlands High School currently support SEL skills and competencies among students?), teachers asserted their belief that Central Midlands High School as an organization successfully promotes social and emotional learning among students. Teacher A said,

Even though I don't really see my colleagues teach on a consistent basis, every time I go in and do an observation of another teacher in my department, I see things that I would say are helping kids to develop socially and emotionally. We may not have the formal 'feel-good' character education programs like they get in middle school, but I think most [student's] graduate from here with strong SEL skills."

Teacher B remarked,

I know that for me personally, I take time during Connections [independent learning time] to talk with my students one-on-one, to make those personal connections with them, and to help them develop as people. I mean, I don't know if that perfectly fits in with SEL, but I think it's important. I know that time period can be used in a lot of different ways, and some teachers just use it as a study hall, but I really feel like it's necessary to talk with kids about how they are doing, let them know that they can talk to me if they just need an ear-to-bend or anything like that. Sometimes we talk about their job, their grades, trouble with their friends, trouble at home, getting a date for prom. I just think that those conversations and relationships...that's how we really prepare kids for life after high school, we support their growth as people, and truly I think most of my

colleagues do the same thing. It's just kind of a part of the fabric, a part of the culture, of this school.

Teacher C added

I do think that our school does a pretty good job with social learning and that the majority of our teachers have elements of that in their classrooms. I graduate from [Central Midlands] and even way back then I felt prepared for the world after high school both socially and emotionally. A lot of SEL just comes naturally with what most teachers do. If you look to build relationships with kids, if you have them work in groups, if you incorporate a Socratic Seminar for a lesson, if you hold them accountable and make them stick to deadlines, if you correct them when they say something rude to a peer, you're building up their interpersonal skills. You know...I think to myself that those skills and lessons are probably a heck of a lot more important than what they get in Algebra 2...in the grand scheme of things. Now that I think about it though, it probably wouldn't hurt to think about some type of consistent schoolwide way to work with [students] on social growth.

Teachers D and E echoed these sentiments with Teacher D adding, "I think our School Counselors do a great job with supporting the kids on an emotional level" and Teacher E interjecting "I can't tell you how many times I've seen our [Assistant Principals] really work with kids when they get in trouble. We don't just let them screw up and hang out there on their own."

The incorporation of SEL into classrooms on a routine basis was explained further by CMHS teachers in their answers to teacher interview questions 3 and 4. When asked in Question 3 about the types of activities or strategies that they incorporated into their

classrooms to help foster SEL competencies, teachers had a wide variety of answers.

Teacher A said,

I start every single class with something called ‘Good Things,’ and that is when we take anywhere from five to ten minutes and we go around the room and students just share whatever good things they have going on in their lives. It’s that simple, but kids will share anything with you ranging from getting a free extra chicken sandwich in their bag at Chick-fil-A, to getting a raise at BI-LO, to getting into their dream college. It’s a pretty basic little thing but I think it has a big impact on the kids and it always starts our class off on a positive note.

When asked by the interviewer where she developed or learned about the Good Things strategy, Teacher A stated that she heard about it from a friend and fellow teacher that teaches at a Capturing Kids Hearts school.

Teacher B stated that she focuses on helping kids to be effective communicators, “As an English teacher I think it’s incumbent upon me and my colleagues to help these kids to effectively communicate their needs and to do it in a constructive way through collaborative work and also through journaling.” Teacher C added to this by describing an English II unit of study on identity, diversity, and unique perspectives, adding,

When I think about social and emotional learning in our world today, I really think about young people being able to understand who they are as human beings, and therefore be able to understand people who are different from them and their unique life experiences. That unit introduces texts from multiple perspectives, and from diverse perspectives, which our students usually respond really well to. I think things like that help prepare them for life in the ‘real world.’

Teacher D said, “I feel like modeling appropriate social interaction is really important for kids. I think they see all of us [teachers] communicating with each other in a cordial, respectful, and professional way and that helps them to see how it’s done.”

Teacher D also went on to add,

I try to correct students when they talk in an inappropriate or mean way to their classmates. Sometimes it’s like playing whack-a-mole trying to correct everything but I think it’s important to set the tone that this is how you effectively communicate with your peers.”

Furthermore, Teacher E added that she prioritizes teaching student’s responsibility, self-management, and self-regulation skills: “I really try hard to hold kids accountable for doing their part as students. A lot of times it’s hard because I think our natural instinct is to nurture, but I have to remind myself that I am still nurturing them by holding [students] to deadlines and making them responsible for their actions.”

Teacher interview question 4 asked teachers to describe how SEL impacts group work in their classrooms, and teachers all agreed that SEL is relevant to group and collaborative work. Comments included: “Hearing and respecting different perspectives and ideas is so important. Kids really struggle with knowing how to handle that” (Teacher B) and “Group work is where students learn from each other. Sometimes I’m just as amazed by how kind and helpful kids are as I am by how often they don’t function well when in group settings” (Teacher C). Teachers D and E both asserted that group work in the classroom is almost a breeding ground for effective SEL skills with Teacher D saying,

Partner and group work in my classroom are really where I see who has strong people skills and who still needs some support. I try to think hard about my groupings when doing a collaborative activity so that I can get some kids out of their comfort zone. Sometimes it's as easy as pairing a strong student with a struggler and sometimes I try to put students together who you know would never really interact socially during the school day. When they first get together it's always kind of uncomfortable but more often than not it works out fine. But that's what they have to be able to do in the world these days, work with and be productive with people who aren't exactly like them.

Teacher observations further illustrated a general level of SEL integration at Central Midlands. There were several instances during both observed teachers' Google Meet help sessions where the teacher had to remind students about proper behavior during a virtual meeting as well as correct them about talking over each other and not dominating the conversation. Teacher 1 stated towards the beginning of her meeting, "We all need to make sure that don't talk over one another, that you raise your hand to indicate that you have something to share, and that we continue to respect each other's statements and thoughts." Teacher 2 delivered a similar message to her students and had to redirect and correct one of her students, Michael, who responded negatively to a fellow classmate who was sharing what he had been doing at home during quarantine. Teacher 2 remarked, "Michael, we need to remember that if we don't have anything productive or positive to say that it's better to just not say anything at all."

Theme 3: Lack of an emphasis or focus on the skills outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate

When asked in teacher survey question 5 whether they were knowledgeable about the student skills and outcomes outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate, only 37% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they were knowledgeable, 49% disagreed, and 14% strongly disagreed (see Figure 4.5). Furthermore, Figure 4.6 illustrates the responses to teacher survey question 6, which asked whether or not Central Midlands High School emphasizes the Profile of the SC Graduate. In response, 37% of teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that the Profile of the SC Graduate is emphasized, while 42% disagreed that the Profile was emphasized, and 21% strongly disagreed.

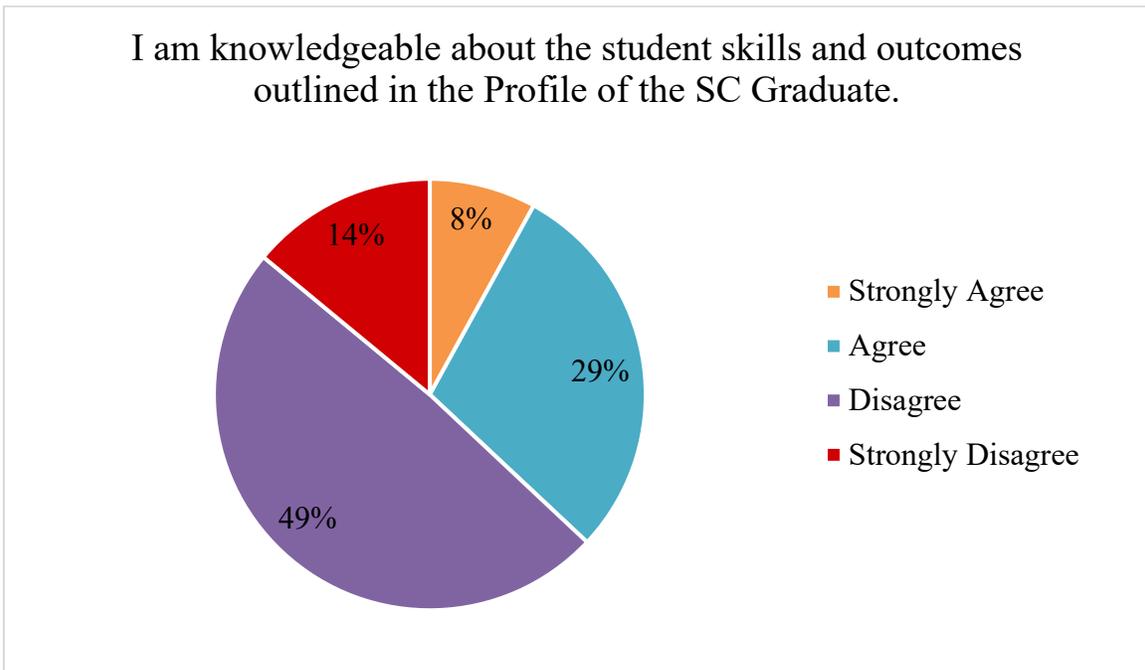


Figure 4.5 Teacher Knowledge About the Profile of the SC Graduate

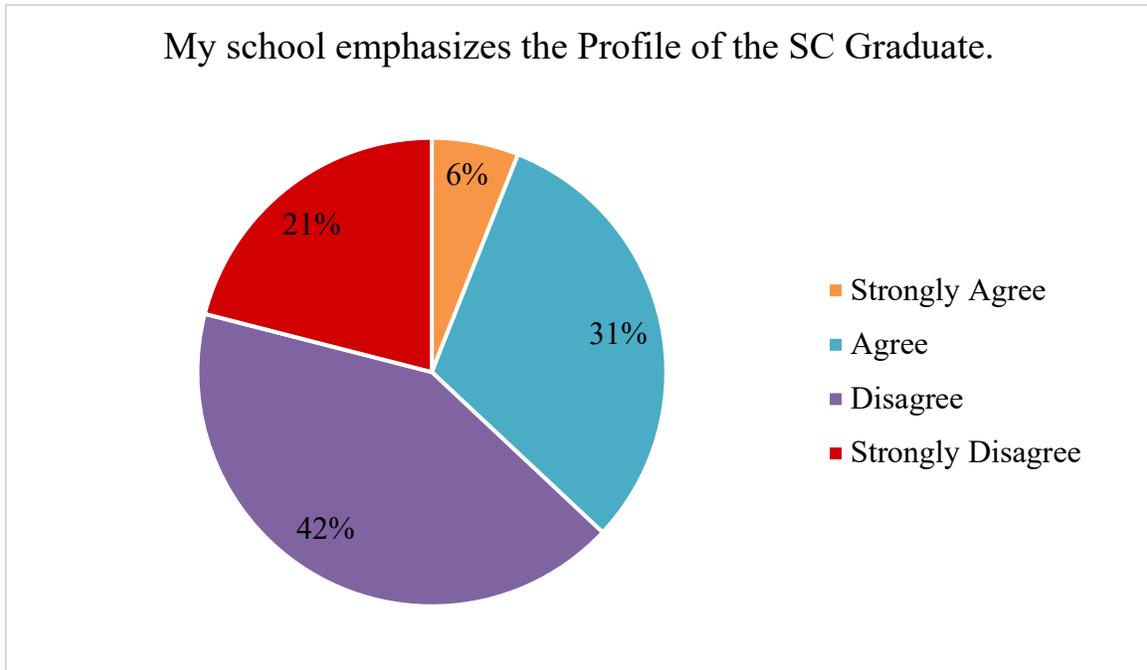


Figure 4.6 School-Wide Emphasis on the Profile of the SC Graduate

Teachers indicated their lack of knowledge about the Profile of the SC graduate, as well as the lack of school-wide emphasis at Central Midlands on the Profile of the SC Graduate, in their responses to teacher interview question 5 (How well do your coworkers in this building incorporate SEL elements into their classroom environment?). Teacher C responded to the question by stating,

Even though I would agree that most of our teachers are integrating SEL stuff into their classrooms, there really isn't any guidance or consistency from one classroom to the next. There aren't any school or district-wide programs for SEL...at least I'm not aware of any at the high school level. That Profile of the [SC] Graduate poster is really all we have to go off of in terms of what specific skills these kids need, but I wouldn't say the fact that teachers are focusing on

social or emotional growth has anything to do with the Profile of the SC Graduate.

Teacher B added, “I honestly couldn’t tell you off the top of my head what is on that [Profile of the SC Graduate] poster. I just know that it gets checked off in observations that I have it up in my room.” Teachers D and E both offered that they had never really looked at the [Profile of the SC Graduate] poster nor read exactly what it says, let alone received professional development or training.

Teacher observations were consistent with both teacher survey and interview results. While there was no specific observed focus on the Profile of the SC Graduate both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 did address skills that are outlined in the Profile. The two observed teachers primarily focused attention on students’ self-direction and self-regulatory skills while in quarantine as well as student interpersonal skills during Google Meet help sessions. A noted example of this was when both Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 specifically reminded students to stay focused on completing assignments and to find a healthy balance between distance learning schoolwork and personal enjoyment. Teacher 2 stated, “I good strategy you can use to keep from getting overwhelmed with schoolwork is to work for about 30 minutes and then give yourself a 15-minute break. We’ve tried to keep assignments manageable but please don’t feel overwhelmed.”

Research Question Two

Research question two was as follows: What resources do teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculum and instruction? This evaluation is necessary given the role that educators play in the development and socialization of children in the classroom setting and the training necessary to facilitate

such learning (Bandura, 1977). The data sources for research question two are presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2 Data Sources for Research Question Two

Instrument/Data Source	Question Number
Teacher Survey	7, 8, 9, 10
Teacher Interviews	6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Theme 4: Lack of teacher training and preparation for SEL integration

Survey results indicated that most teachers at CMHS believe that they lack training in social and emotional skill development. When asked in teacher survey question 7 if they have received specific training in teaching SEL skills which have helped them to incorporate these strategies into their teaching, only 22% strongly agreed or agreed, while 78% disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Figure 4.7).

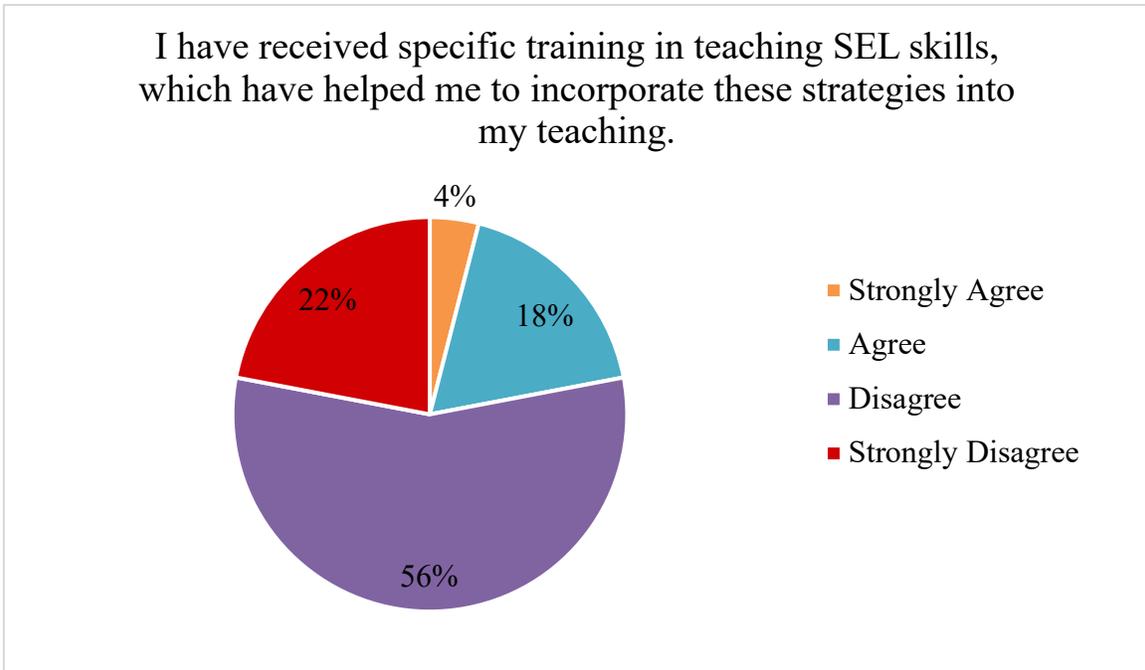


Figure 4.7 Teacher Training for the Incorporation of SEL Skills

Similarly, teacher survey question 8 asked about teachers receiving training or information specifically on the Profile of the SC Graduate. Results showed that 12% of teachers strongly agreed or agreed that they had received training on the Profile of the SC Graduate while 88% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement (see Figure 4.8).

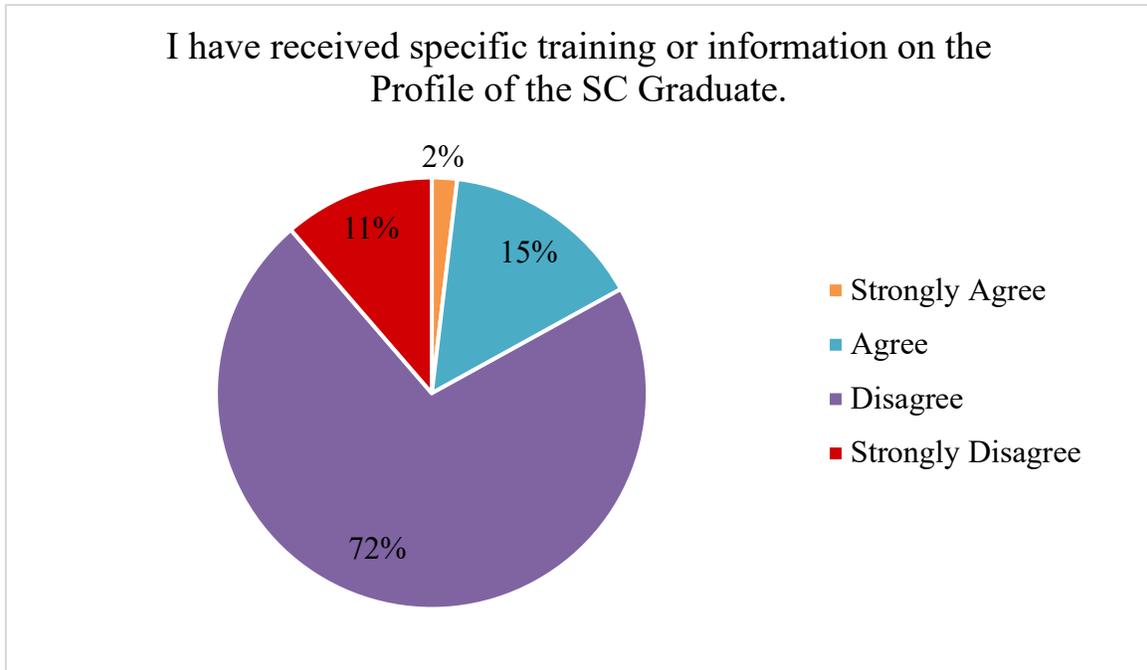


Figure 4.8 Teacher Training on the Profile of the SC Graduate

Interviewed Central Midlands teachers substantiated the lack of teacher training and preparation with SEL in teacher interview question 6, which asked, “To what degree where SEL skills or competencies taught or conveyed during any teacher training or induction program that you may have gone through?” Of the five teachers interviewed, four of them graduated from a university teacher education program with a master’s degree (Teachers A, C, D, E) and one teacher received their certification via The Program of Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE) in South Carolina (Teacher B). Teachers A, C, D, and E did not recall any significant SEL training from their teacher education programs. Comments included: “Not that I recall; if there was any training on SEL it was mainly a byproduct of things like teaching diverse students or classroom management” (Teacher A); “Than main things I learned about SEL were more so from my student teaching experience than from any formal education classes or teacher

program” (Teacher C); “I was in grad school so long ago they probably had no idea what SEL was” (Teacher D); “Everything you learn in teacher preparation programs is so theoretical. It takes actually being around kids and forming those relationships to understand social and emotional needs, in my opinion” (Teacher E).

When asked about any training that they might have received in an alternative certification program, Teacher B did not recall anything noteworthy, but added,

I honestly can’t say one way or the other whether I did or not. When you are in an alternative certification program like PACE, you simply don’t know what you don’t know. Any skills or know-how that I have in teaching social and emotional learning I either gained from my personal experiences just going through life, or I gained those skills by being in the classroom with kids from one day to the next. The again, who’s to say that I am really doing it very well at all. I guess I still don’t know what I don’t know.

Teachers also indicated the need for professional development when they were asked Interview Question 7, “What changes need to be made in order for you to better emphasis SEL during instruction?” Responses revealed that teachers want further training and professional development in SEL. Teacher A said that “teachers need training with [SEL] so that there is a standard level of understanding just like we do with other pedagogical knowledge. Teacher B added, “Once again, it’s one of those situations where you don’t know what you don’t know. I have no idea if I am doing right by my students because I’ve never received any PD on SEL.” Teacher C shared the following,

There needs to be a level of awareness and training with SEL. When I think about all of the PD sessions that I’ve set through that really weren’t developing me

professionally, or really applicable to me in my classroom, it kind of makes me mad because this is the thing that we should be trained on and learning about.

That training should be ongoing, and it should be consistent across the board for teachers in this school, district, and state.

Teachers A and D agreed that they have never experienced a PD or training session that was targeted towards SEL with Teacher D stating, “I honestly couldn’t tell you right this moment what resources are available to us for SEL skills.” Finally, Teacher E said that “too many high schools are so content focused that a lot of teachers aren’t provided with the training and education that they need to effectively implement SEL.”

Theme 5: Concern about not having a school-wide vision or plan for SEL integration

Central Midlands High School teachers communicated their desire for a greater school-wide prioritization of SEL from school leadership in their responses to teacher survey question 9 (“My school could benefit from greater administration support and prioritization of SEL within the school curriculum”). Figure 4.9 displays teacher, where 94% strongly agreed or agreed that CMHS could benefit from greater administration support and prioritization of SEL within the school curriculum. 6% of teachers disagreed with this statement. CMHS teachers also indicated that they strongly believed that CMHS would benefit from a schoolwide vision for SEL integration (95% strongly agree or agree, 5% disagree; see Figure 4.10).

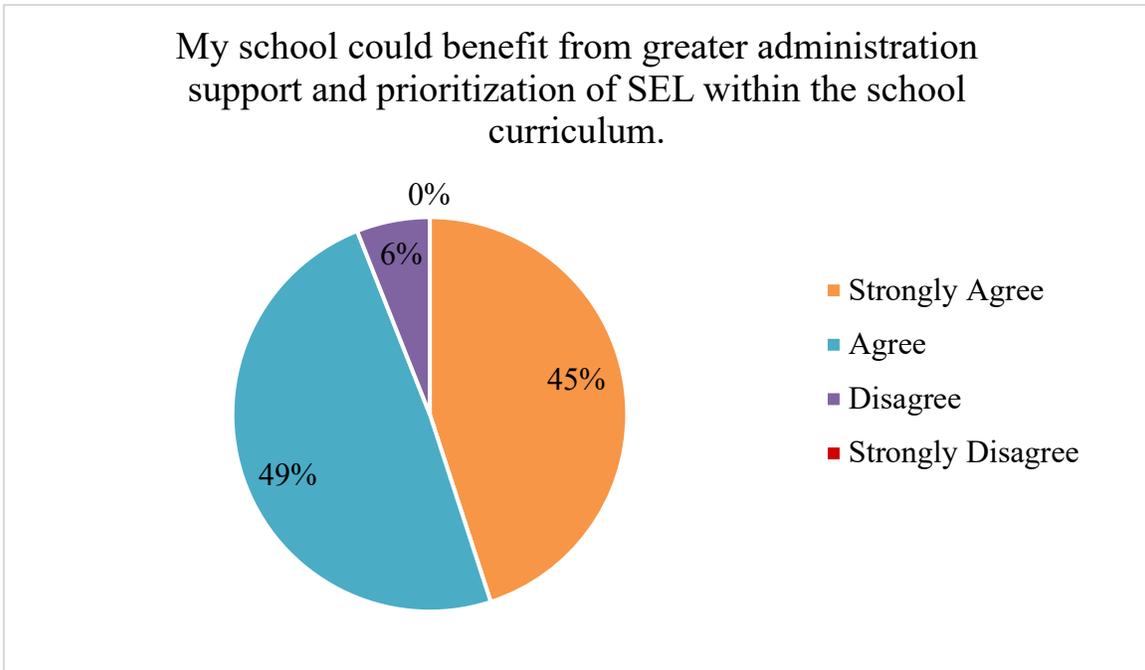


Figure 4.9 My School Could Benefit From Greater Administration Support for SEL

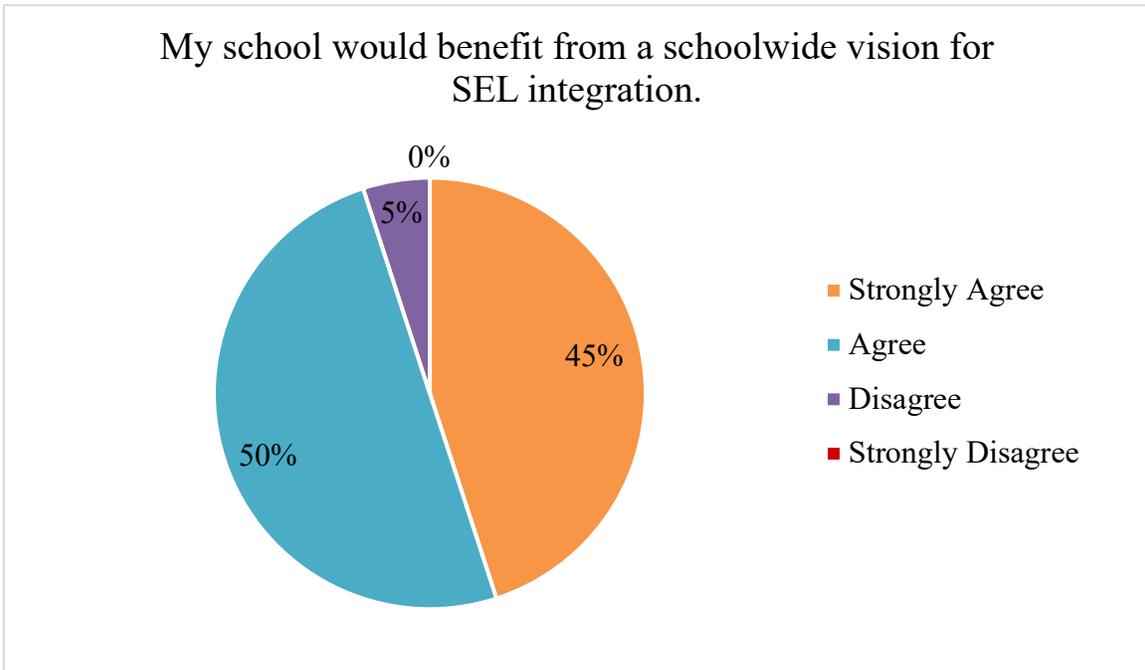


Figure 4.10 My School Would Benefit From a Schoolwide Vision for SEL Integration

Teacher interviews also suggested that teachers want a school-wide plan and vision for SEL implementation. Comments in response to the question “What could your school leadership could do to better emphasize SEL?” included: “Come up with a school-wide plan for SEL” (Teacher A); “Develop a plan for professional development on SEL and provide resources to teachers” (Teacher B); “I just want [administration] to continue to support us and provide us with the resources and training that we need to help these kids develop socially and emotionally” (Teacher C); “Set the expectation across the board for SEL integration in the school and show us what that should look” (Teacher D); “Well, now that I’ve thought about it, I need to know why I’m required to have that Profile of the SC Graduate poster up when no one has ever discussed it with us!” (Teacher E).

Teachers also defined how a school wide vision for SEL could impact Central Midlands (teacher interview question 10). In response, Teacher B said, “I think it would really help academic performance. I’ve always believed that kids can’t learned when they don’t feel cared about. I think Maslow had a little something to say about that.” Teacher A relayed that “it would just level the playing field where everyone was on the same page with this. I also think it would do a lot to help boost our school’s climate and staff morale. Teacher D commented that “it would allow us to prioritize the training and professional development that we need to effectively do SEL. Teacher E stated, “We could feel confident that students are leaving here with the skills that they need to be successful. I feel pretty comfortable speaking for my colleagues in saying that we would benefit from a PLC dedicated specifically to SEL. In addition, Teacher C agreed about creating a PLC and added,

We have a strong administrative team that is us typically very student and teacher oriented. I wouldn't necessarily attribute us not having a schoolwide vision for SEL to them dropping the ball or anything like that. I genuinely just think that this is one of those areas in education that unfortunately gets overlooked or that people don't have enough experience or awareness about. Our school really needs a PLC geared towards SEL that can collaborate and look at ways to better implement SEL skills consistently across our school. I also think that we need to include students in that process and see where they are coming from. All in all, I really believe that our entire school community would benefit from a formal plan to focus on SEL across the board at [Central Midlands].

Research Question Three

Research question 3 stated: Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success? The data sources for Research Question 3 are presented in Table 4.3.

Table 4.3 Data Sources for Research Question Three

Instrument/Data Source	Question Number
Student Survey	1, 2, 3, 4, 5
Student Focus Group	1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Theme 6: Students value strong interpersonal skills and relationships

Central Midlands High School students indicated their strengths and weaknesses with regards to specific social and emotional learning skills and competencies via the results on student surveys. When asked in student survey question 1 whether it was

important for them to have strong and positive relationships with friends and family members, 98% of students strongly agreed or agreed with that statement, while only 2% disagreed (see Figure 4.11).

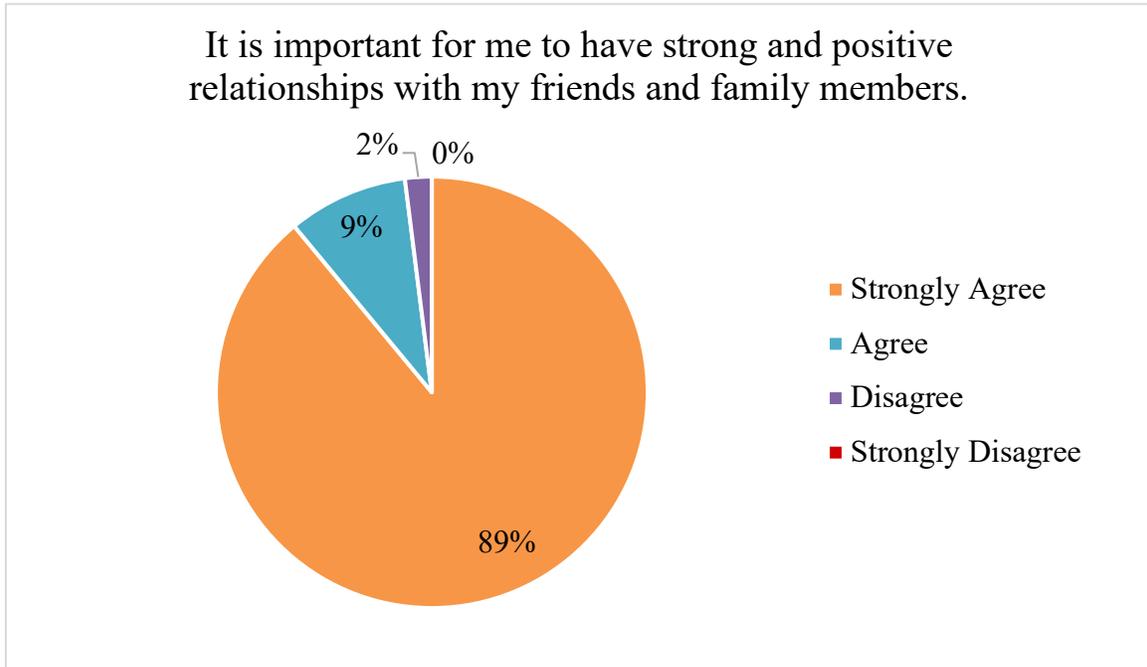


Figure 4.11 Important for Students to Have Positive Relationships With Friends and Family

In a focus group, students were asked the same question (How important is it to have strong and positive relationships with your friends and family members?). Student A responded by saying, “I think that it’s super important. I would always want to have a great relationship with my parents and my family. And my friends are like one of the best parts of my life.” Student B added,

“It’s probably one of the most important things to me. My mom and I (I wasn’t raised by my dad) butt heads sometimes, and we’ve gone through periods where we really didn’t get along for certain reasons but making sure that we always

come back together is really important. I don't know where I would be without my mom. She has had to deal with a lot, but she is one of the strongest people that I know. I feel like I've learned a ton from her about how to tackle tough things in life...without having a strong relationship with her I don't know if I would feel as comfortable as I do about going to college and going through the next chapter of life. And then I think it goes without saying that you need a strong and supportive friend group. Those things are just essential to be able to get by from one day to the next.

Student C said,

“A really good relationship with your family and friends might be like the most important thing for you to have in this world. Like [Student B] said, it's just so essential to have those strong and supportive relationships to be able to tackle the things that life throws in front of you every day. I can't imagine what my mental or emotional state would be if I couldn't talk to my parents about things or blow off steam and decompress with my friends.

Student D shared the concern that “while I have a pretty good relationship with my family and friends, I feel like there are a lot of kids who don't and also have a lot of trouble making and keeping friendship.” Student E commented,

I really think that it's one of the most important things to have for social and emotional health. A lot of our peers struggle with social situations due to anxiety, bullying, social media, and just everything else that's out there. I think we also have a lot of students who have really hard home lives, kids who have divorced

parents like me, just a whole range of social problems that make it hard to have that positive support system.

Figure 4.12 shows that students indicated less concern about their ability to make effective choices and work towards completing goals. CMHS students were asked in student survey question 2 whether it is important for them to make the right decision rather than the easy decision. 79% of students either strongly agreed or agreed with that statement, while 20% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed.

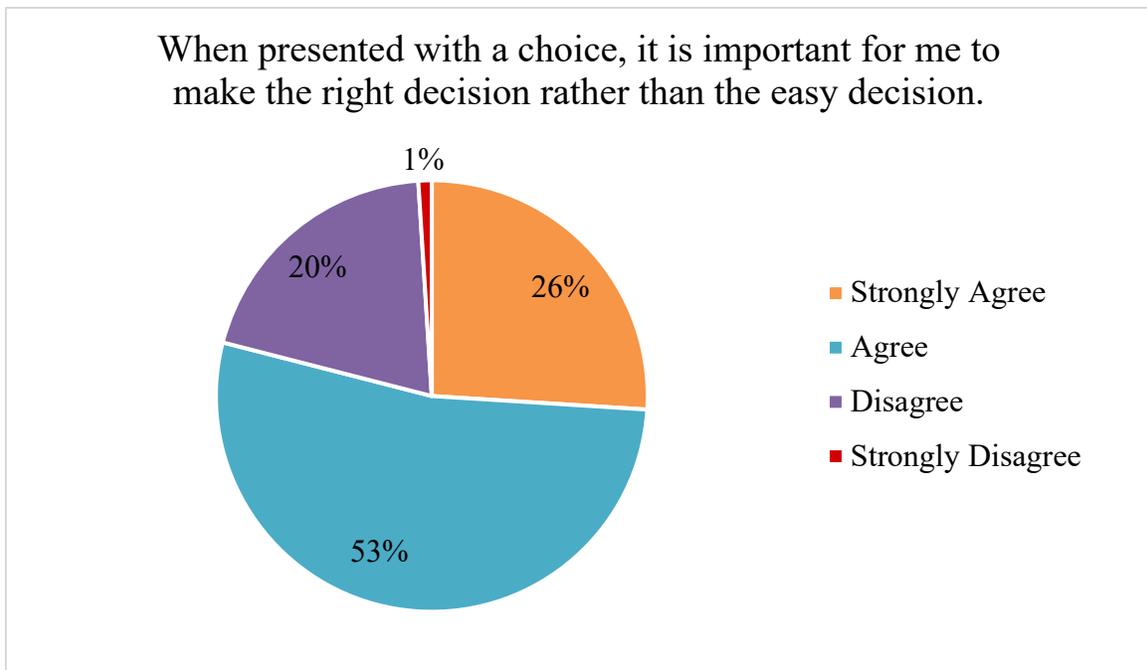


Figure 4.12 Important for Students to Make the Right Decision Rather Than the Easy Decision

Students responded to the same question (When presented with a choice, it is important for you to make the right decision rather than the easy decision?) within the focus group and shared the following comments: “I mean, I obviously think it’s really important to do the right thing versus the easy thing” (Student D); “The choices that you

make really matter. We talk about that a lot in my youth group at church” (Student A); I think it’s pretty important. I guess the word for that would be integrity. It’s really tough to do though if you’re just talking about little choices that you make from day to day” (Student C); “Yeah, I guess it depends on if you are talking about something like whether or not to go to Chick-fil-A when you shouldn’t necessarily spend extra money even though you won’t to. Sometimes you deserve to do what’s easy” (Student B); and Student E added,

I agree with [Student B]. Are we talking about something small from day to day or are we talking about some social justice type stuff? I think the world is so crazy that sometimes you deserve to do what’s easy without feeling bad about it; especially if we are talking about things that aren’t like super impactful to anyone but me.

In response to student survey question 3, 84% of students strongly agreed or agreed, 15% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed, with the statement, “If I have a problem while working towards an important goal, I should still keep working to achieve that goal (see Figure 4.13).”

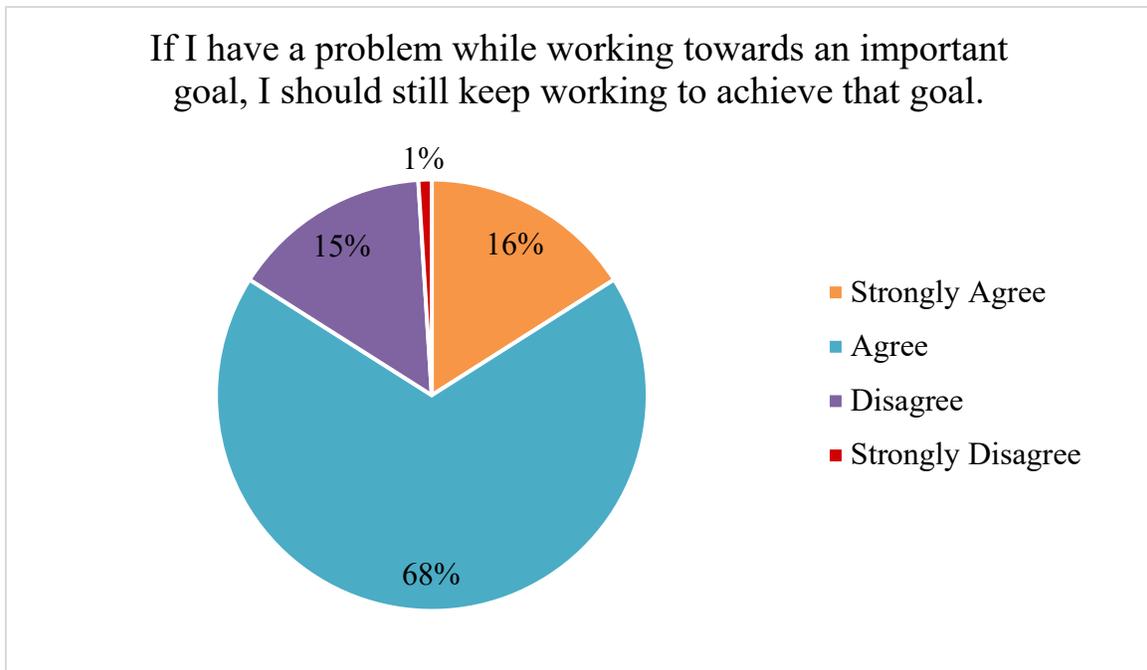


Figure 4.13 Important for Students to Keep Working Towards a Goal

Students were asked the same question in the focus group (If you have a problem while working towards an important goal, should you still keep working to achieve that goal?), and their responses yielded similar patterns. Student A said, “I’m not always great at doing that. Sometimes I give up pretty easily if something gets too challenging. That’s definitely something that I need to do better with.” Student B added that she agreed with Student A’s comments “but sometimes you need to just give up on something and let it go. That’s a pretty healthy social and emotional skill to learn as well.” Student C stated,

Having perseverance is something that I really pride myself on. I feel like I’ve overcome a lot of stuff and that I’m pretty resilient. It’s not always easy for kids our age to stick with something especially when it feels like there is always another option or another distraction to take your attention away from what you’re doing. Whether it is an essay in AP Lang or studying for my Chemistry test, I

always try to stick with it until I get the results that I want. Then again, I do get that there are sometimes when you just need to let something go and that can be really healthy as well. It just depends on what you're talking about.

Student D asserted that “we watched a TED Talk in English one time about ‘grit’ and like the idea of not giving up on something. I think that’s a really important skill to have but it’s definitely one that I need to work on.” Finally, Student E commented,

I just think there are a lot of factors that lead to people, and maybe more specifically people my age, giving up on something once they’ve started. I think everyone is guilty of wanting instant gratification and I’m guilty of giving up on something pretty easily when I don’t get it. I know that being persistent is something that colleges and businesses are really looking for. Then again, I agree with what others have said about something being okaying with saying ‘I did all I could do’ and just walking away.

Theme 7: Students value being respectful of diversity and differences among people

Student survey question 4 asked students whether it is important for them to get along with students who are different from them. Notably, 97% of students either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, while only 2% disagreed, and 1% strongly disagreed (see Figure 4.14).

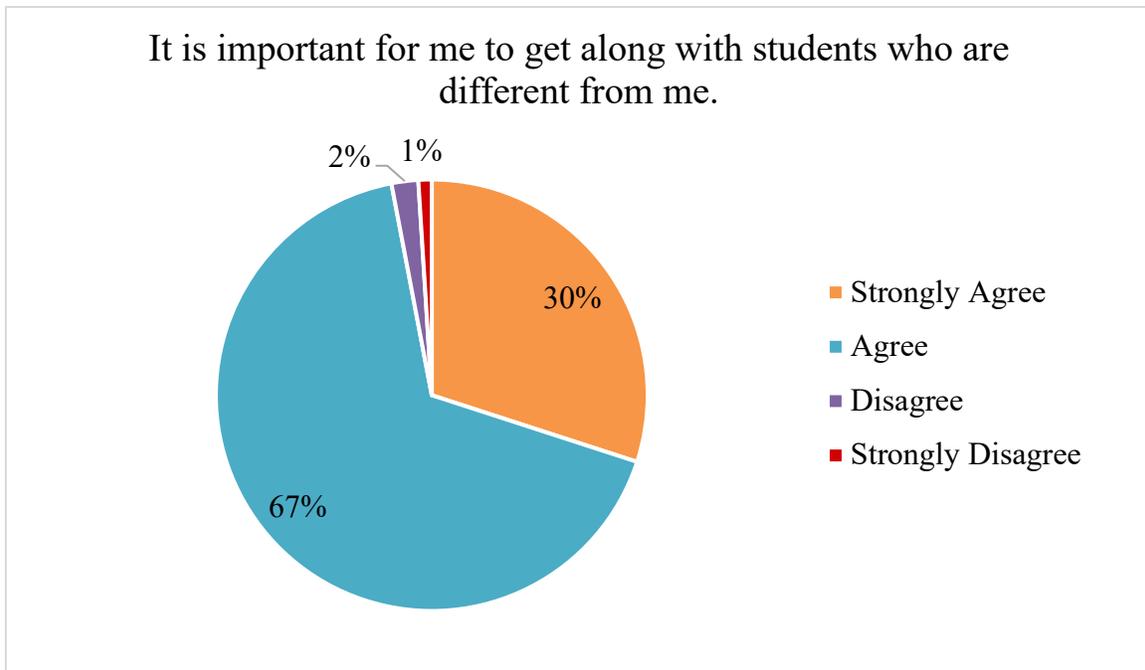


Figure 4.14 Important for Students to Get Along With Students Who Are Different From Them

Students were asked whether it is important for them to get along with students who are different from them in student focus group question 4. Student A responded by saying that “it is really important to get along with people who are different from you. I think that’s something that’s going to matter regardless of what you choose to do after high school.”

Student B said,

I agree. I think it is one of the most important things that we have to be able to do, but I think that people our age are much better at it then like our parent’s generation. I also think that our teachers at [Central Midlands] do a really good job of forcing us to work with a lot of different people. I mean it’s easy to always work with your friends our people that you know, but a lot of times teachers will assign you a partner or a group with people that you might not normally talk to.

It's kind of funny how much you enjoy getting to know those people. I mean this is a small school and most of us have known each other since we were little, but it's always good to get to know different people better. I don't know...I just know that you have to be able to get along with different types of people in life. So, I think that's a super important thing to be able to do.

Student D commented,

Yeah, I agree too. I just think like what if my college roommate next year is just totally different from me. I mean, unless she is just like not nice or something then we are going to have to figure it out and learn to live with each other. I think that's just a part of growing up and getting older. You have to branch out of your comfort zone and only hanging out with your 'clique.'

Student C and E agreed with their peers that getting along with students who are different from them was one of the most important skills for success after high school and also added that they've had to learn to work with different types of people at their jobs after school. Student C works at the local BI-LO while Student E works as a server at a local barbecue restaurant.

Students were also asked in student survey question 5 whether it is important for them to have a global perspective and understanding about the world. 92% either strongly agreed or agreed with that statement, 4% disagreed, and 4% strongly disagreed (see Figure 4.15).

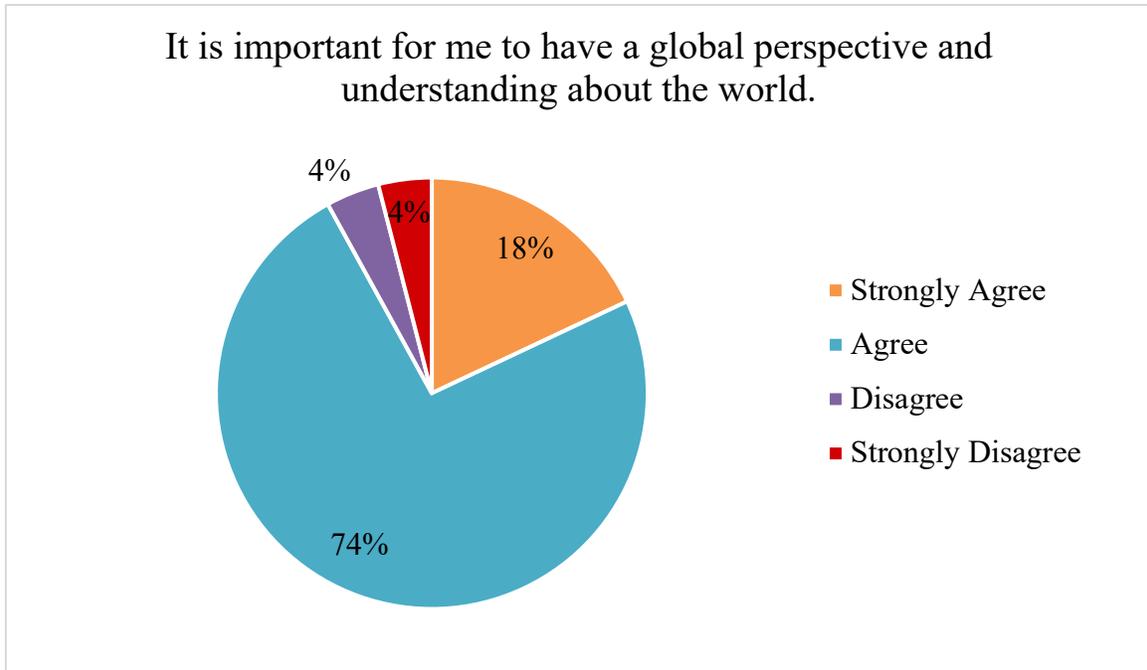


Figure 4.15 Important for Students to Have a Global Perspective.

Students were asked the same question (Is it important for you to have a global perspective and understanding about the world?) in student focus group question 5. Comments included: “I think it’s important. We always have exchange students here and I feel like I learn so much from them each year” (Student E); “I think it’s probably more important for us here at [Central Midlands] than maybe other places because this is such a close-knit area. I think people around here just don’t have a whole lot of exposure to global things” (Student A); “I think having a global perspective is important. I think the world is more connected than ever and I want people in other countries to respect us like we need to respect them” (Student C); “I think it’s important to respect all people regardless of their ethnicity or nationality. Being globally minded is a part of that” (Student D); “I agree with [Student D] but I also think that it depends on what your career

goals are. I feel like I have a pretty good awareness of other cultures and countries”
(Student B).

Interpretation of Study Results

The distinct sets of data from this study revealed a number of interrelated results about the environment for social and emotional learning at Central Midlands High School. Employing content analysis within a triangulation mixed-methods design, both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (interviews and observations) data have been presented and analyzed concurrently, yet separately, to look for similarities in themes and patterns (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Patterns emerged from repeated phrases, ideas, and commonalities in participant responses to interviews and observations, which were compared to survey results. The resulting themes from this process provide a unique perspective in response to the overarching three research questions which attempt to determine teacher practices, needs, and student understandings, related to social and emotional learning at Central Midlands High School.

Finding One

Research question one analyzes the degree to which Central Midlands High School teachers integrate strategies and practices to promote the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate. Three subsequent themes (Themes 1, 2, and 3) emerged in response to research question. The first theme to emerge from data analysis was that CMHS teachers noted their belief that it is critically important to support social and emotional competencies within the school setting. Survey data highlighted the overwhelming acceptance among CMHS teachers (98%) that strong SEL competency is essential for student growth, development, and success, and that schools should be

actively supporting SEL skills. Teachers interviews and observations were analyzed and compared to the survey data. In the interviews, teachers almost unanimously expressed that in their view, social and emotional learning was a critical component of education, and therefore essential to be integrated into public education curriculums and classrooms. During observations, it was noted that teachers intentionally focused a significant portion of the online help session time on allowing students to socialize and make interpersonal connections. Concurrently, teachers were clear to let students know that their mental and emotional health was of utmost importance while students were at home and away from the typical school setting.

The second theme to emerge for research question one is that CMHS teachers also routinely utilize and incorporate SEL skills and elements to address undesirable student behavior and foster positive student interactions and collaboration. Survey data shows that the vast majority of CMHS teacher are currently employing some degree of SEL in their classrooms to specifically address poor student behavior. Teacher interviews and observations (???) supported the surveys as teachers explained the specific techniques that they employ to foster social and emotional competency within their own classrooms. Teachers also stated in the interviews that there is no model or standard for consistency from one teacher to the next for how to integrate SEL. Some teachers commented that they utilize specific SEL oriented techniques in their classrooms (Good Things protocol), some teachers focus on student collaboration skills while others prioritize self-regulation skills, and other teachers allow the curriculum to drive SEL outcomes.

Teacher observations continued to highlight this pattern of teachers using SEL to address student behavior. Teacher primarily reminded students to be respectful and

follow normal social protocols during a virtual meeting. Unlike the responses during teacher interviews, the observer documented a noticeable degree of consistency between the two teachers and the skills and competencies that they focused attention on or communicated to students. During these meetings, the observer did witness teachers addressing poor student behavior and address bullying (or at least negative student interactions) but did not evidence the utilization of strategies to help students work constructively during help sessions. With that said, these help sessions are a unique situation within education, and it would not have been appropriate or expected to observe the wide range of typical classroom interactions during these meetings.

Furthermore, the third theme which emerged was the lack of a specific emphasis or focus on the skills outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate at Central Midlands High School. Survey data underscored that a strong majority of teachers felt like they have little knowledge, training, or preparation, with the specific skills and attributes that students need to be post-secondary ready (as outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate). In addition, teachers overwhelmingly feel like the Profile of the SC Graduate is not prioritized at CMHS. Teacher interviews resulted in consistent findings with the survey data as teachers relayed that they have never really concentrated on the Profile of the SC Graduate in their classrooms, and that it is not emphasized at the school outside of a poster hanging in the classrooms. Teacher observations were consistent with this pattern in the sense that teachers did not specifically mention the Profile of the SC Graduate. With that said, teachers did generally address students' self-direction, self-regulatory, and interpersonal skills, all of which are included in the Profile of the SC Graduate.

These three themes were derived from data which was collected to address the research questions in this study. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data yielded similar findings. With regards to research question one, it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of teachers at Central Midlands believe that SEL is important to student success. CMHS teachers are attempting to integrate some degree of SEL skills into their teaching practices, but this is being done in an inconsistent manner with very little intentional focus on The Profile of the SC Graduate.

Finding Two

Research question two seeks to evaluate the resources that teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculums and instruction. Two subsequent themes (Theme 4 and 5) emerged in response to research question two, the first of which was that there is not a specific emphasis or focus on the skills outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate at Central Midlands High School. Teacher survey data indicated that the vast majority of teachers believe that they have not received training or professional development specific to teaching social and emotional skills and integrating them into their classrooms. Consequently, even fewer teachers reported having received SEL training specifically on the Profile of the SC Graduate and the competencies that it outlines. Teacher interviews substantiated the survey data as teachers found it difficult to recall receiving any SEL training during teacher preparation or induction programs. Interviews also detailed that CMHS teachers were interested in and desired ongoing SEL professional development and training.

Theme 5 developed from repeated results in the data which highlighted the concern among CMHS teachers that there is not currently a school-wide plan or vision

for social and emotional learning integration. Teacher survey results revealed that an overwhelming number of teachers (94%) agreed that CMHS would benefit from great administration support and prioritization of SEL. Likewise, an equal number of teachers (95%) agreed that CMHS could benefit from a schoolwide vision for SEL integration. When compared and contrasted with the survey data, teacher interviews corroborated survey findings related to wanting a school-wide plan for SEL. Teachers commented that school leadership could best support them with SEL implementation by furthering a consistent plan to prioritize SEL in the school. In addition, almost all of the interviewed teachers mentioned the idea of creating a SEL PLC (professional learning community).

The two themes that emerged for research question two were derived quantitative and qualitative data which produced findings which supported each other. With regards to research question two, the findings suggest that teachers at Central Midlands want professional development specifically aimed towards SEL integration in the school curriculum as a part of a school-wide vision for SEL competency.

Finding Three

Research question three looked to examine the skills and social and emotional competencies which high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success. Two themes (Theme 7 and 8) emerged from the data analysis process. One of these themes is that Central Midlands students prioritize strong interpersonal skills and relationships for success in their post-secondary goals. Almost all surveyed students (98%) at CMHS agreed that having strong relationships with family and friends were important to them. Students supported these results in focus group

interviews where they discussed the vital nature of strong relationships for success both presently and in the future.

Comparatively, students expressed far less concern about SEL competencies related to self-direction and integrity, and the student responses to both surveys and focus groups were less consistent. Survey results revealed a lower level of agreement and mixed findings as it relates to students' concerns about making "right versus easy choices" and "working towards a goal despite challenges." Student focus group responses in relation to these same skills and competencies revealed that students generally want to do what is right versus what is easy, but several students stated that it depends upon the two choices presented in a specific situation. Responses also indicated that it can be emotionally healthy to make the easier choice in certain situations. Furthermore, focus group interviews yielded inconsistent findings with some students asserting that it can also be emotionally healthy to walk away from something that is challenging.

The second theme to emerge in response to research question three was that Central Midlands students highly value being respectful of diversity and differences among individuals. Student survey data results revealed that an overwhelming number of students (97%) agreed that it is important for them to get along with student who are different from them. Student focus group interviews were aligned with these results as multiple students stated that this skill was one of the most important SEL competencies for them to develop. Likewise, a pattern emerged with student responses around the SEL competency of having a global perspective.

These two themes emerged from patterns in the data which supported two SEL competencies which students may prioritize over other competencies. The findings for

research question three suggest that students believe that strong SEL competency around interpersonal skills and a respect for diversity and differences are critical to their long-term postsecondary success.

Conclusion

The purpose of this action research, mixed-methods study was to analyze the extent to which faculty at rural Central Midlands High School currently understand and incorporate SEL elements into their curriculums, as well as students' understandings about the role that those SEL skills play in their post-secondary success. To maintain accuracy and validity, the teachers and students' own language was preserved whenever possible. The examined data in this chapter supported three overall findings. These three findings were supported by teacher and student surveys (quantitative data), as well as teacher interviews, student focus groups, and teacher observations (qualitative data). The three overarching findings are as follows:

1. The vast majority of teachers at Central Midlands believe that SEL is important to student success and are attempting to integrate some degree of SEL skills into their teaching practices, but this is being done in an inconsistent manner.
2. Teachers want professional development specifically aimed towards SEL integration in the school curriculum as a part of a school-wide vision for SEL competency.
3. Students believe that strong SEL competency around interpersonal skills and a respect for diversity and differences are critical to their long-term postsecondary success.

Further analysis and interpretation of these findings will be utilized to potentially benefit the community at Central Midlands High School and provide information which might be valuable to other schools and districts for successful SEL implementation into school curriculums. Furthermore, these findings will be expounded upon to provide suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS AND RECOMENDATIONS

A large body of existing research builds upon and supports the idea that adolescents need social and emotional support for their long-term personal development. To meet this need, teachers must possess the knowledge and skills to provide social and emotional competency development and foster an environment for learning and growth in this area. Teachers must also be willing to learn and grow as they continually try to meet the ever changing social and emotional needs of their students. The problem persists in education, though, that many teachers do not currently possess the pedagogical skills to integrate SEL elements into their curriculums. Furthermore, many school organizations are left wondering what the essential training and environmental needs are for teacher readiness to impart SEL strategies, and which specific skills students need support with the most.

This action research, mixed methods study was committed to examining the current teacher practices, preparedness, understandings, and perceptions, related to SEL integration at Central Midlands High School. This study looked at the extent to which teachers still need further support for, and professional training with, SEL to better assimilate elements into their teaching practices. Also, students provided insights as to which specific SEL skills, competencies, and proficiencies, they need further support with.

An in-depth literature review of relevant SEL works was undertaken to build a knowledge base to inform the work of this study. The researcher used a mixed-methods approach, employing both qualitative and quantitative data sources. Data were collected through teacher surveys, interviews, and observations; as well as student surveys and focus group interviews. Triangulation of these data sources was utilized to ensure research cogency and efficacy.

The following three questions were designed to guide this study:

1. To what degree are high school teachers integrating strategies and practices to support the SEL skills detailed in the Profile of the SC Graduate within their classrooms?
2. What resources do teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculum and instruction?
3. Which skills and social and emotional competencies do high school students believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success?

Summary of Research Findings

The implementation of this action research analysis yielded data-driven, clear, concise, and relevant, research findings in response to the three questions guiding this study. The findings disclosed that the vast majority of teachers at Central Midlands believe that SEL is important to student success and integrate some degree of SEL skills into their teaching practices, but in an inconsistent manner. Secondly, teachers desire professional development specifically aimed towards SEL integration in the school curriculum as a part of a school-wide vision for SEL competency. Finally, the students at

Central Midlands believe that strong SEL competency around interpersonal skills and a respect for diversity and differences are critical to their long-term postsecondary success.

This chapter commences with a discussion and refinement of the research findings resulting from each of the three research questions, followed by recommendations for Central Midlands High School and a plan for implementation for these recommendations. Finally, the chapter concludes with recommendations for further study and a final reflection by the researcher.

Research Question One

Research question one examined the degree to which teachers at Central Midlands are currently integrating SEL skills as outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate into their classrooms. Research question one was also intended to discern whether CMHS teachers had a basic degree of understanding about social and emotional learning competencies. This question was also designed to identify teacher beliefs and understandings about the value of promoting SEL skills in education. The question was informed by teacher surveys, one-on-one teacher interviews, and teacher observations.

Theme 1 resulted from an analysis of teacher perceptions and beliefs about the importance of promoting social and emotional competencies within their students. Overall, teachers indicated that they had a general understanding of social and emotional concepts, but they believed that it is critically important to support these social and emotional competencies within the school setting. Teacher surveys indicated that 98% of teachers at CMHS believe that SEL skills are necessary to prepare students for the workforce. In one-on-one interviews, teachers espoused their belief that SEL was not only a critical component of education, but an invaluable element to success after high

school. Furthermore, observations showed teachers prioritizing and focusing attention on students' social and emotional needs while they were at home in quarantine during distance learning.

Research supports the theme that many teachers believe SEL is indispensable for student success. Teacher responses, comments, and observed actions also closely align with Bandura's social learning theory and demonstrate the role of social learning in the school setting (Bandura, 1977). Schonert-Reichl, Kitil, & Hanson-Peterson (2017) feature a national survey of 600 pre-school through 12th grade teachers. This survey concluded that teachers overwhelmingly understand, value, and support the importance and impact of SEL in the classroom and its potential outcomes for their students. Schonert-Reichl et al. (2017) highlight the following:

Teachers believe that social and emotional skills are teachable (95%) and that promoting SEL will benefit students from both rich and poor backgrounds (97%) and will have positive effects on their school attendance and graduation (80%), standardized test scores and overall academic performance (77%), college preparation (78%), workforce readiness (87%), and citizenship (87%). (p. 16)

Despite this wide-ranging teacher belief in the impact of SEL for students, there exists a lack of uniformity with regards to how SEL is integrated and implemented from site to site, and certainly within Central Midlands High School.

Theme 2 indicates that teachers at CMHS principally utilize SEL skills to correct student behaviors while concurrently promoting positive student interactions and collaboration within the classroom setting. Teacher responses to surveys showed that 88% of teachers incorporate SEL skills into their curriculums to alleviate bullying, 83%

incorporate SEL strategies to aide students in working constructively with others, and 94% reported applying SEL skills to address poor student behavior. Teacher interviews supported survey results with teachers describing ways in which they and other CMHS faculty and staff incorporate and utilize SEL elements on a routine basis. These methods ranged from relationship building during independent learning time to providing emotional and social support through school counseling services to utilizing journaling protocols in the classroom and modeling appropriate peer to peer communication for students. Teacher observations also supported this pattern as teachers were observed employing SEL strategies primarily to address poor student behavior and address bullying during online help sessions.

Research supports Theme 2 and the general practices with SEL currently occurring at Central Midlands. As discussed in Chapter 2, Raicevic et al. (2017) assert Bandura's social learning theory to characterize how schools and teachers apply social and emotional learning concepts to shape and ultimately define an individual child's social behaviors. Raicevic et. al (2017) explain that teachers are given a large degree of autonomy to develop social and interpersonal skills in the classroom setting. The facilitation of these interactions in the elementary school years sets the foundation for social and interpersonal growth and refinement in the secondary school years. The findings for this action research study appear to confirm that the majority of teachers at Central Midlands seem to be applying SEL to build these social skills, while also integrating SEL to modify and refine these interactions in their classrooms. Furthermore, the findings from Theme 2 highlight the impact of students' natural routine of

observation, identification, and imitation in social learning, again in keeping with Bandura's view of the role of schools in socializing children (Bandura, 1977).

Theme 3 denoted that while the majority of teachers at CMHS attempt to utilize and integrate SEL skills into their classrooms, there is currently no school-wide emphasis or focus on the Profile of the SC Graduate at Central Midlands. Teacher surveys emphasized this trait when only 37% of teachers agreed that they were knowledgeable about the student skills and outcomes outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate, while 49% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed with this statement. Also, 42% of teachers disagreed with the statement, "My school emphasizes the Profile of the SC Graduate" and 21% of teachers strongly disagreed. Teacher interviews provided more insight and context in this area with teachers relaying that despite the ubiquitous presence of the Profile of the SC Graduate posters within the school, few teachers have any genuine knowledge about the Profile and its role in SEL development within Central Midlands. Furthermore, teacher observations noted a focus on skills that are generally found on the Profile of the SC Graduate (self-direction, self-regulatory, and interpersonal skills), but there was no observed intentional mention of, or concentration on, the Profile of the SC Graduate during online help sessions.

Theme 3 is also reinforced by existing literature and research on SEL. Eklund et al. (2018) was reviewed in Chapter 2 with regards to their analysis of existing preschool through 12th grade SEL state standards. Their review of existing state curriculums revealed that South Carolina was in line with a majority of states in the U.S. in not having designated SEL standards; though more and more states are developing such standards. The Profile of the SC Graduate, while a significant initial step towards a formalized and

consistent integration of pre-K-12 SEL integration, has not provided for a localized school-wide plan or focus on SEL integration.

Central Midlands teacher sentiments in Theme 3 are also strongly aligned with the nationwide survey of 600 teachers conducted by Bridgeland et al. (2013). The authors report that “SEL is occurring organically, many schools do not view SEL as a core part of the education mission and many efforts are fragmented” (p. 30). This statement would seem to explain the fragmented nature of SEL incorporation at CMHS, as well as the juxtaposition between the prominence of Profile of the SC Graduate posters within classrooms, yet the lack of understanding or focus on the actual skills outlined on those posters.

Research Question Two

Research question two (What resources do teachers need to better incorporate SEL elements into their high school curriculum and instruction?) was developed to determine what Central Midlands teachers believe needs to happen for them to be better positioned to incorporate SEL practices in their pedagogy and curriculums. More specifically, this research question delved into whether teachers believed that they needed more professional development and training to support SEL in their classrooms. In addition, this question looked to analyze the level of school-wide organizational support from leadership that teachers desired to cultivate an effective environment for SEL integration at CMHS. The question was informed by teacher surveys and one-on-one teacher interviews.

Theme 4 indicated that a majority of teachers at CMHS believe that they lack training and preparation for SEL skill development within their classrooms. When

teachers were asked in a survey if they had received specific training in teaching SEL skills which have helped them to incorporate these strategies into their teaching, 78% of teachers at CMHS either disagreed or strongly disagree with this statement. Likewise, 88% of Central Midlands teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that they had received training or information specifically on the Profile of the SC Graduate. Teacher responses in interviews also indicated the lack of training and preparation for SEL. CMHS teachers confirmed that their teacher education programs (both formal college programs and alternative route) lacked any significant focus on social and emotional competencies. In addition, interviewed teachers divulged that they have never experienced a PD or training session that was targeted towards SEL during their time at Central Midlands.

This Central Midlands teacher sentiments are strongly aligned with the nationwide survey of teachers conducted by Schonert-Reichl et al. (2017). The authors' findings detail a less than positive depiction of SEL in pre-service teacher education with a study of nearly 304 colleges of education in the U.S.,

Key findings revealed that while courses included information on Teachers' SEL competencies, only two dimensions – social awareness and responsible decision-making – were included in more than 10% of required courses. For Students' SEL, less than 1% of courses analyzed included the SEL competencies of self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and self-management. For the relationship skills SEL dimension, only slightly more than 1% of courses scanned included this dimension. (p. 48).

In this study, the concept of students' SEL refers to one of CASEL's three categories of social and emotional learning (SEL of students, SEL of teachers, and the learning

context). SEL of students, which is referred to as student's SEL in this piece, is grounded in the belief that social and emotional skills can be taught to students in the educational setting. The wide-spread lack of any substantial teacher preparation for SEL in the U.S. is evident at Central Midlands High School and has left teachers at this site without any consistent professional knowledge of how best to impart SEL skills to students.

Theme 5 emerged from teachers consistently voicing their desire for a greater school-wide vision, prioritization, and plan for SEL at Central Midlands. In surveys, teachers overwhelmingly affirmed (94% strongly agreed or agreed) that CMHS could benefit from a greater prioritization of SEL with support from school leadership. In that same vein, 95% of teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that CMHS specifically would benefit from a schoolwide vision for SEL integration. Teacher interviews built upon these findings as they expressed their unanimous desire for school-wide professional development specifically targeted towards SEL, as well as greater administration support for teachers to integrate SLE into their teaching practices. Teachers interview comments also expressed the desire for a schoolwide professional learning community (PLC) aligned with a school-wide vision for SEL.

As detailed in Chapter 2, this dichotomy is also supported by Eklund et al.'s (2018) assertion that teachers recognize the importance of behavioral and social-emotional learning, but oftentimes lack the standards and guidance for effective SEL instruction. Bridgeland et al. (2013) assert the need for schools to support teachers by adopting school-wide SEL programming, "Research corroborates the need for systematic SEL instruction. By applying SEL programming on a schoolwide basis, social and emotional skills may be taught, practiced, and applied to a diverse number of situations

reflecting daily student life” (p. 31). The authors also add that by adopting a school-wide vision for SEL, administrators and school leaders are better positioned to provide teachers with the meaningful professional development to implement SEL with fidelity. They state, “Some teachers report it is easier to implement SEL in their classrooms after they themselves improved their social and emotional competencies and learned the associated language, enabling them to better model SEL positively for their students.” By developing and enacting a school-wide plan and vision, school leaders can effectively support a consistent vision or mission for SEL competencies at Central Midlands.

Also discussed in Chapter 2 was the critical need for effective school leadership in successful SEL implementation as considered by Patti et al. (2015). The authors assert that critical nature of a school leadership’s in defining a culture and an environment for learning within a building also extends to the defining culture and environment for successful SEL implementation. The role of school leadership to develop the tone and identity for SEL focus, as well as establish systems for SEL sustainability, are paramount for Central Midlands to implement and integrate SEL with fidelity as they progress forward (Patti et al, 2015).

Research Question Three

Research question three focused attention on students at Central Midlands High School and evaluating which social and emotional skills and competencies they believe are most critical for their long-term post-secondary success. Students responded to their needs in specific social and emotional competency domains ranging from interpersonal relationships to positive decision making to respecting differences and diversity. Research question three was measured using student surveys and student focus group

interviews and these data sources provided clarity as to which specific areas students needed more support with compared to others.

Theme 6 developed from student responses and statements which indicated that they believed it was very important to have strong and positive relationships with friends and family members. CMHS student survey results showed that an overwhelming number of respondents strongly agreed (89%) that it was important to have strong and positive relationships with family and friends. Contrastingly, survey results indicated that CMHS students had less concern about making effective choices and working towards completing goals, as 79% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that it is important for them to make a right choice rather than an easy choice when presented with a decision (21% either disagreed or strongly disagreed). Also, 84% of students either agreed or strongly agreed that if they have a problem working towards an important goal, they should keep working to achieve it, while 16% of students either disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement.

Focus group interviews also supported the greater student concern about having positive interpersonal relationships versus effective choice making. Several student responses stated that having a positive relationship with family and friends was one of the most important aspects of social and emotional health. In contrast, student responses indicated less concern about effective decision making and working towards goals. Students described that while both SEL competencies are still very important, there are times when it is just as healthy to make choices that are personally satisfying as well as knowing when to walk away from a course of action that might be draining to your emotional health.

The findings for Theme 6 are consistent with current literature and the belief that SEL can help students to build positive and supportive relationships with friends and family. Taylor et al. (2017) detail the impact of school based SEL interventions, (within the context of positive youth development initiatives) on improving students' prosocial behaviors and overall relationships. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, schools that have a well-defined program and plan for SEL can achieve these outcomes in the typical school environment. For those school sites that do not currently have such a plan, including Central Midlands, PYD initiatives via a targeted after-school program can achieve the same outcomes (Taylor et al., 2017).

Theme 7 indicated that students at Central Midlands value being respectful of differences among people. When asked in surveys whether they believed it is important to get along with students who are different from them, 97% of students either agreed or strongly agreed. Similarly, students were asked in surveys whether it is important for them to have a global perspective and understanding about the world. In response, 94% of students either agreed or strongly agreed while 4% either disagreed or strongly disagreed. This pattern was also identified in focus group interviews as students stated their belief in the universality of needing to respect and get along with people from different backgrounds regardless of their postsecondary plans. In general, students also vocalized their belief that it is important for them to have respect for people of different cultures, backgrounds, ethnicities, and nationalities.

Theme 7 is consistent with literature and research which support SEL's ability to develop competencies in the areas of respecting differences and diversity among people. Dymnicki, Sambolt, and Kidron (2013) discuss Illinois's SEL standards and their focus

on developing social awareness and interpersonal skills to maintain positive relationships. More specifically, these standards value social awareness for diversity and ensuring that those competencies are built upon within students (Dyminicki, Sambolt, and Kidron, 2013). Overall, if students at CMHS have identified this competency as critical to their current and postsecondary success, then Central Midlands other schools can meet this need through prioritization and better integration of SEL into the school culture and curriculum.

Recommendations

This action research study examined the extent to which Central Midlands High School teachers currently understand and practice teaching social and emotional skills to enhance outcomes, student achievement, and postsecondary readiness. It sought to evaluate the resources that teachers needed to enhance their knowledge, ability, and readiness to teach these essential competencies. It also assessed CMHS students to determine which specific social and emotional competency skills they believe are most critical for their long-term success. The three recommendations that follow are each designed to address the three research questions that guided this study. In addition, these recommendations are based on the findings that were discussed in Chapters 4 and 5 and are intended to help Central Midlands High School move towards a robust and efficacious integration of SEL to impact both the school building and the school community as a whole.

Recommendation 1

Design and implement a sustained SEL professional development program. Such a professional learning program should include the establishment of a school-wide SEL

professional learning community (PLC) for teachers to provide peer supported pedagogical integration of SEL elements. Professional development and SEL training should focus attention on the Profile of the SC Graduate and preparing teachers to knowledgeably and effectively work with students to support the world-class skills and life and career characteristics within that framework. Furthermore, a school-wide vision for SEL should be just that, school wide in scope. With that said, school leaders should account for the growth and development of all staff members and their knowledge of SEL, from school counselors to media specialist to support staff members.

I will establish a targeted social and emotional learning professional learning community among my colleagues at Central Midlands. This PLC will be centered around intentionality for practical SEL implementation. It would be voluntary in nature and would be directly focused on supporting teachers at CMHS by sharing ideas, strategies, best practices, and identifying both success and areas of improvement for better SEL integration within classrooms. Educators within this PLC will be encouraged to both read and share relevant and pertinent literature regarding SEL in education and may explore the development of an SEL oriented book club for professional learning. A key element of this PLC will be to organize peer classroom observations and engage in constructive and meaningful feedback amongst peers. This will be undertaken in an effort to document and reflect upon changes and progression with teacher practices for SEL competency.

This recommendation is rooted in the clear evidence which supports the assertion that teachers need ongoing professional development, guidance, and encouragement when developing SEL implementation and integration protocols in the school setting. Bridgeland et al. (2013) state,

SEL programming is more effective when teachers are trained properly in SEL techniques, terminology, and methods. For example, 95 percent of teachers acquire the knowledge and skills needed for applying SEL in the classroom when training and SEL coaching are combined. (p. 33).

Establishing such a professional development initiative will ensure proper teacher training to integrate SEL into CMHS classrooms. In addition, it will also lead to enhanced SEL program sustainability given that teachers who are confident in their abilities will enhance the delivery of SEL program skills and initiatives (Bridgeland et al., 2013).

Recommendation 2

Develop a school-wide plan and vision for social and emotional learning integration at Central Midlands High School that is rooted in a long-term SEL action plan. Central Midlands High School should craft a clear vision for SEL within the school community that brings together all stakeholders. This vision should be developed with the intention of building consensus around the merits of social and emotional learning within the community while also serving as the stimulus for driving SEL instruction and practice within the school building. Central Midland's long-term commitment to SEL practices should include a clear and detailed action plan that prioritizes the skills outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate to enhance the social and emotional well-being of all students while also enhancing their long-term academic and personal success.

Such a school-wide plan and vision should be undertaken with the inclusion and consideration of student voices within this space (Senge, 2012). The development of an SEL plan and vision should incorporate and be responsive to the surveying of the entire

CMHS student body to better understand students' collective feelings and needs regarding their social and emotional development. Students must also play a prominent role within the development and implementation of an SEL action plan and should have a membership position within any committees or formal organizations which are tasked with defining a school-wide vision or plan for SEL at Central Midlands.

Crafting and implementing a full-scale shared vision for SEL has the potential to dramatically change the dynamics and future of this school. With that said, CMHS must be sure to pull together all stakeholder resources within the community to craft a shared school vision. Senge et al. (2012) characterizes the power of a full-scale shared school vision as,

A process of involving everyone together in deciding and developing the future of the school system. It doesn't mean taking people's inputs, selecting some of it and discarding the rest. It means establishing a series of forums where people work together to forge the future direction of the school. (p. 342)

By including and harnessing the resources of the wider school community to craft and implement an SEL vision and action plan, school leaders can ensure that there is widespread buy-in to aid faculty and staff in understanding the value of SEL to not only the school and its students, but to the wider community as a whole (Senge et al., 2012).

Recommendation 3

A school-wide vision for SEL at Central Midlands should prioritize and focus attention on purposefully embedding within students strong competencies with interpersonal skills, developing and sustaining positive and supportive relationships, and respect for diversity and differences among individuals. By focusing attention on these

specific skills, Central Midland is effectively responding to the wants and needs of its student population, and by extension fulfilling within them the skills and competencies which they believe are essential for their post-graduate life. Faculty and staff influence within this recommendation would be chiefly to model and demonstrate for students both positive interactions as well as respect for differences in their professional interactions with colleagues and students. Modeling is a critical element in adolescent observation and development within the socializing role of schools and their intrinsic elements (Bandura, 1977).

Such a focus on these specific SEL skills within a school-wide framework will be contingent upon their prioritization within the school-wide SEL vision. Effectual school leadership will also be essential to move the school community towards realization of that school wide SEL vision. Leithwood and Louis (2012) define the critical nature of such quality organizational leadership by stating, “Leadership is all about organizational improvement. More specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (p. 4). Through the effective management of forming and implementing a school wide SEL vision for Central Midlands which prioritizes strong competencies with interpersonal skills, positive relationships, and respect for diversity, school leadership can better position themselves to clarify the ways that SEL relates to long-term student success and better foster integration within school-wide values.

The findings and recommendations from this research study will potentially be presented to school leaders at Central Midlands High School, as well as school district

leaders, in hopes that they can better facilitate a more positive, efficient, and effective integration of SEL elements into the school curriculum. District leaders might possibly find these findings and recommendations especially pertinent at this time given the statewide focus and concern about students' social and emotional well-being during distance and e-learning arrangements. Furthermore, the researcher will register to present a session centered around this research during district wide professional development in-service days with the intention of presenting these findings and recommendations to impact and aide other schools in the district with SEL implementation and integration. Lastly, the researcher will apply to present these findings at PD fairs in the hopes of extending this research to as many schools and educators as possible.

Suggestions for Further Research

This research study examined SEL at a rural South Carolina high school. Teacher understandings and efforts to integrate SEL into their teaching practices, needs for further professional development with SEL, and student needs for SEL were investigated at CMHS. To continue investigating and prioritizing the social and emotional needs for students and the schools that serve them, further research is suggested.

One key area that needs further study is the effects of providing effective SEL professional development for teachers. Bridgeland et al. (2013) assert that "there is a gap in research analyzing the effect of systematic schoolwide SEL instruction and evaluation versus individual, interventional, or ad hoc approaches" (p. 31). This domain is recommended for further research so that educational leaders can better understand the long-term effects of targeted training for teachers and other educators. In addition, by

looking at the outcomes of specific SEL professional development efforts, administrators might be better positioned to evaluate the cost versus benefits of such efforts.

Another area which necessitates further study is the need for, an impact of, social and emotional learning on high risk and underperforming students. Students categorized as English-language learners, students who identify as LGBTQIA+, and students diagnosed with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) and learning disabilities (LD) need further consideration to determine where schools can best support their learning and growth. Further research on how learning among high-risk student populations functions in relationship to students' social and emotional competencies could provide schools with valuable insights to inform SEL implementation. Moving forward researchers and schools must be cognizant to focus time and attention on those students who need time and attention the most.

Final Reflection

The research process which fostered this investigation looked to analyze the culture, understandings, practices, and needs for better SEL outcomes at Central Midlands High School. While this research potentially holds a degree of value for the profession of education as a whole, it certainly holds great value to the researcher on a personal level. One particular student comment caught the researcher's attention during student focus group interviews: "I just want to be a better me than I was yesterday." This pithy statement succinctly touches upon the overall value of social and emotional growth in education. It reminds those of us within the field that the impacts of social and emotional learning for students are innumerable, and the value of fully prioritizing integration of SEL competencies into state, district, and school curriculums,

immeasurable. It is beyond time for educational leaders and institutions to focus on the emotional health and welfare of young people while concurrently ensuring that they are imbued with the social skills to be effective and successful in our modern world.

In addition, given that the researcher is a teacher at the research site, there was much gained in the way of relationships and gratitude for the students, staff, and the community at Central Midlands High School. Without question, the researcher gained a deeper appreciation for the quality of educators and the commitment they possess to their students and to their community as a whole. Furthermore, the researcher was able to develop a greater respect for the self-awareness of the students at CMHS, the degree of self-awareness they possess concerning their capabilities and limitations, as well as their trust in the public education system to prepare them both academically and socially for the world beyond K-12 schooling.

While my insider role within this study allowed me to better develop these relationships and perceptions, it also fostered limitations of practice which are inherent in any action research design, yet critical to recognize and note. Bloomberg and Volpe (2018) characterize limitations by stating, “Limitations may arise from, among other things, restricted sample size, sample selection, reliance on certain technologies for collecting data, and issues of researcher bias and participant reactivity” (p. 18). The first limitation in this study is the fact that sampled teachers are representative of a specific environment where many of them not only attended Central Midlands High School but also grew up in this district and community. Therefore, there is concern that this sample may not be inclusive of all teachers. Another limitation in this study given was that much of the research data for this study was conducted while the school building was closed

and both teachers and students were engaged in distance learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. Both interviews and observations were conducted remotely, and the original research design for those particular data collection tools had to be adjusted accordingly. The nature of this digital format may have resulted in interview responses being different from what they would have been within the school building and normal school setting. In addition, there was concern on the part of the researcher that teacher observations would not accurately record or be representative of the genuine climate for SEL at CMHS.

If I were to repeat this study or conduct a study with a similar design and format in the future, I would be more mindful about the nature and quality of the researcher developed data collection elements. Specifically, focusing on ensuring that both survey and interview questions are more intentional and pushing study participants towards struggle in their thoughts and responses. In addition, I would be more purposeful in evaluating the leading nature of both interview and survey questions, especially when working with students or adolescents in this context.

Summary

This action research study was designed to provide insights about the environment around social and emotional learning at Central Midlands High School with the belief that these findings could better position school leadership to make impactful decisions moving forward. Social and emotional learning is a critical component of modern education and is essential to short-term academic and social outcomes, as well as long-term post-secondary success for students. The findings that have emerged from this research study illustrate that Central Midlands High School teachers recognize the value

of SEL, and are attempting to integrate SEL into their curriculum, but ultimately want support and guidance to better implement SEL in an effective manner. Furthermore, Central Midlands students desire an SEL concentration which prepares them with the skills and aptitudes which they believe are essential to their future success. It is the researcher's hope that these findings and outcomes might also be useful to other schools who are in a similar position to Central Midlands in that they need guidance and clarity for better SEL integration.

This investigation began by discussing the specific and unique needs for SEL in our current society, as well as the inherent benefits associated with schoolwide SEL programs such as increased self-regulation, levels of persistence, and overall social skills. Much of the lack of awareness for SEL in public education centers around the impact of educational legislation from the last twenty years which has prioritized a laser focus on content preparation over the social and emotional well-being of students, especially at the secondary level. These potential outcomes are currently not being satisfied in many states where there is no statewide curriculum or guidance for SEL implementation, and therefore very little direction for individual schools. This dilemma is apparent in South Carolina where there is a framework for SEL, The Profile of the SC Graduate, but very little direction on how to best integrate its tenets into school curriculums. In order for schools and communities to begin reversing these realities around SEL, states, local districts, and individual schools must prioritize the full integration of SEL from pre-K through high school.

Moving forward, teachers must be trained and prepared to integrate SEL into their curriculums and develop SEL competencies within their students. This training must

begin at the pre-service level and continue on throughout their careers. Schools must also be aware to focus resources on the specific SEL skills which students believe are most critical for them to be successful in our modern world and culture. Noted author Madeleine L'Engle (1972) writes in her memoir *A Circle of Quiet*, “A self is not something static, tied up in a pretty parcel and handed to the child, finished and complete. A self is always becoming” (p. 10). These words serve to remind all educators that the social and emotional health of our children and our society as a whole is more apropos than ever. Educational and public policy leaders, at all level, must make the right choices to pay social and emotional learning outcomes the awareness and attention that it deserves within our educational system.

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APPENDIX A

PROFILE OF THE SOUTH CAROLINA GRADUATE

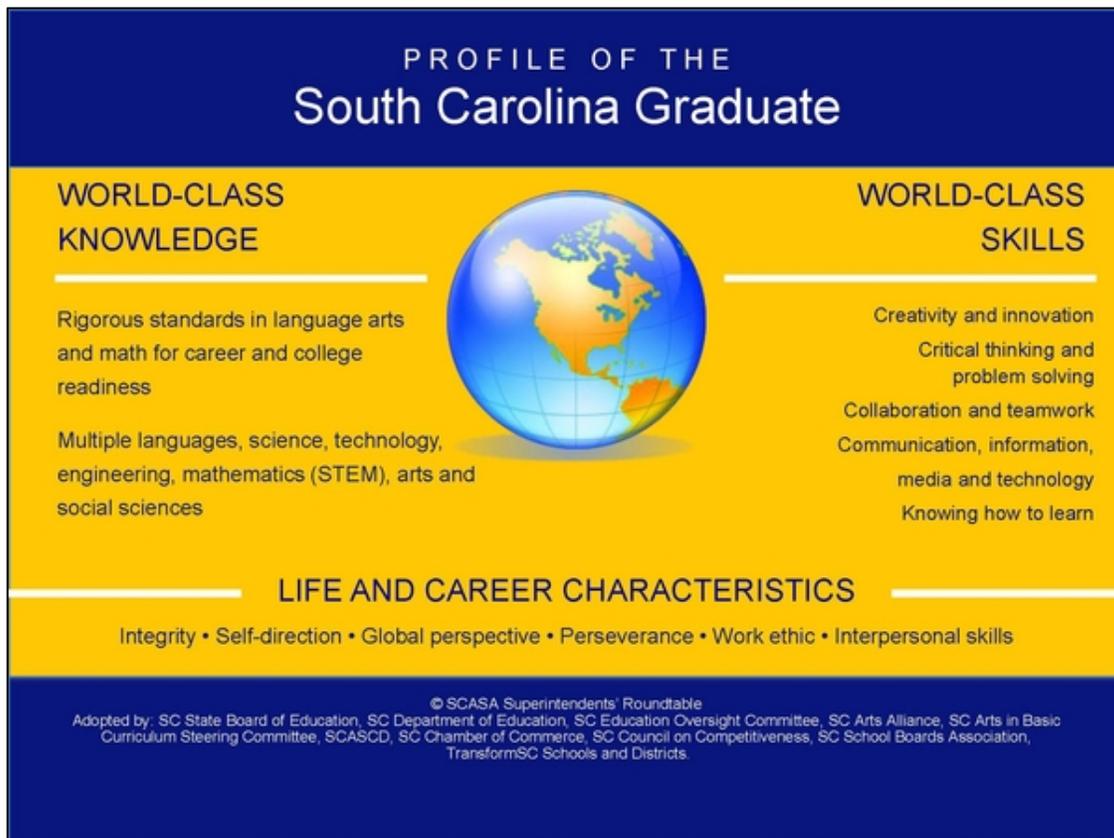


Figure A.1 Profile of the South Carolina Graduate

APPENDIX B

TEACHER SURVEY QUESTIONS

Social and emotional learning is defined by CASEL as “The processes of developing competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (www.casel.org).

1. I believe that SEL skills are necessary to help prepare students for the workforce.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. I incorporate SEL competencies into my curriculum to address the alleviation of bullying in our school.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. I utilize SEL strategies to help students work together constructively.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. I utilize SEL strategies to address poor student behavior in my classes.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. I am knowledgeable about the student skills and outcomes outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. My school emphasizes the Profile of the SC Graduate.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. I have received specific training in teaching SEL skills, which have helped me to incorporate these strategies into my teaching.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. I have received specific training or information on the Profile of the SC Graduate.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. My school could benefit from greater administration support and prioritization of SEL within the school curriculum.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. My school would benefit from a schoolwide vision for SEL integration.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX C

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Social and emotional learning is defined by CASEL as “The processes of developing competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (www.casel.org).

When thinking about this definition, how important is it for schools to promote these competencies within the school setting?

2. Does Central Midlands High School currently support SEL skills and competencies among students?
3. What activities or strategies do you incorporate into your classroom to help develop social and emotional competency?
4. Describe how SEL impacts group work in your classroom?
5. How well do your coworkers in this building incorporate SEL elements into their classroom environment?
6. To what degree were SEL skills or competencies taught or conveyed during any teacher training or induction program that you may have gone through?
7. What changes need to be made in order for you to better emphasize SEL during instruction?
8. What could your school leadership do to better emphasize SEL?
9. How could a school-wide vision for SEL benefit your school?

10. Do you have any other thoughts to add about SEL and/or its implementation in your classroom or school?

APPENDIX D

STUDENT SURVEY QUESTIONS

Social and emotional learning is defined by CASEL as “The processes of developing competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (www.casel.org).

1. It is important for me to have strong and positive relationships with my friends and family members.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

2. When presented with a choice, it is important for me to make the right decision rather than the easy decision.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

3. If I have a problem while working towards an important goal, I should still keep working to achieve that goal.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. It is important for me to get along with students who are different from me.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. It is important for me to have a global perspective and understanding about the world.

Strongly Agree Agree Disagree Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX E

STUDENT FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Social and emotional learning is defined by CASEL as “The processes of developing competencies, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making” (www.casel.org).

1. How important is it to have strong and positive relationships with your friends and family members?
2. When presented with a choice, how important is it for you to make the right decision rather than the easy decision?
3. If you have a problem while working towards an important goal, should you still keep working to achieve that goal?
4. Is it important for you to get along with students who are different from you?
5. Is it important for you to have a global perspective and understanding about the world?

APPENDIX F

LETTER OF INVITATION FOR PARTICIPATION IN ACTION RESEARCH

Dear _____,

My name is Tyler Hook. I am a doctoral candidate in the Instruction and Teacher Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in curriculum and instruction, and I would like to invite you to participate. This study is sponsored by myself in concert with my programmatic requirements as a doctoral candidate.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the lack of social and emotional learning (SEL) proficiencies in education by assessing the current attitudes, practices, and professional development needs for SEL competency in public schools. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an initial survey about basic understandings of SEL, following the survey some participants may be chosen at random to meet with me for an interview about more personal understandings of SEL. Some students may be randomly asked to participate in a group discussion about student needs with regards to SEL.

In particular, you will be asked questions about *and* we will discuss addressing poor student behavior, bullying, preparing students for the workforce, classroom instruction and curriculum, developing student-staff relationships, professional development needs, among other topics. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place and should last about 30 minutes. The interviews will be audio *recorded* so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The tapes will only be reviewed by members of the research team and destroyed upon completion of the study.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

For those who participate in the focus group phase of the research study, others in the group will hear what you say, and it is possible that they could tell someone else. Because we will be talking in a group, we cannot promise that what you say will remain completely private, but we will ask that you and all other group members respect the privacy of everyone in the group.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED], or my faculty advisor Dr. Linda Silvernail at [REDACTED].

Thank you for your consideration.

With kind regards,

Tyler C. Hook

APPENDIX G

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION

Consent Form for Participation in an Action Research Project

Research Project: Social and Emotional Learning: An Analysis of the Understandings and Needs for Teacher Professional Development in a Rural South Carolina High School

Location: [REDACTED]

Dates: April 2020 to May 2020

Principal Investigator: Tyler Hook

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to help with this research. The purpose of this study is to shed light on the lack of social and emotional learning (SEL) proficiencies in education by assessing the current attitudes, practices, and professional development needs for SEL competency in public schools.

Benefits: The most substantial benefits of the research is the potential for feedback to be provided to the district and the state to aid in developing a professional training model for SEL that is specifically supportive of these teacher and student needs in the high school setting as well as aligned with the specific skills and traits outlined in the Profile of the SC Graduate. Furthermore, these conclusions might be useful for other schools, district, and educational institutions that seek to foster more productive SEL competencies and outcomes to increase student academic achievement and long-term post-secondary success.

Risks, Inconveniences, Discomforts: There are no risks associated with this study. Your responses are completely anonymous, and the questions themselves are not personally probing ones.

Cost of Participation: The only cost to you is the time you take to participate. I am asking you to take 60-90 minutes in total of your time if participating in all phases of the study, so there is a minor inconvenience involved.

Confidentiality of Records: I will treat your identity with professional standards of confidentiality. The information we obtain will be analyzed statistically, and general findings will likely be published in academic journals, but individual participants' identities will not be known.

Withdrawal: Participation is voluntary (no compensation). Participants have the right to withdraw their informed consent to participate in this action research study at any time without penalty. Participants must submit a signed written intention of withdrawal indicating the date from which they no longer wish to participate in the research study. In the event of subject withdrawal from some or all study components, investigators can retain and analyze data collected from the subject up to the time of withdrawal, so long as the analysis is within the scope of the IRB-approved activities

Contact Information: Tyler C. Hook, University of South Carolina, College of Education

Participant's Rights: Concerns about your rights as a research subject are to be directed to, Lisa Johnson, Assistant Director, Office of Research Compliance, University of South Carolina, 1600 Hampton Street, Suite 414D, Columbia, SC 29208, phone: (803) 777-6670 or email: LisaJ@mailbox.sc.edu.

Consent Statement: I have read the above statement, understand the nature of my participation in the research, and I freely agree to participate. I recognize my right to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the project without fear of any prejudice and recognize that my activities and data generated by my participation will remain strictly confidential. I also understand that at the conclusion of the study I can choose to destroy any records of my participation, and that if I desire, I can request a copy of the final report describing the research's conclusions.

"I _____ (Print name) agree to participate."

_____ (Signature)

_____ (Date)