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Abstract

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Keywords

Social and Emotional Learning, Principal Leadership, Education, Urban, Beliefs, Attitudes, Influence, Grounded Theory

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An Investigation of Principals' Social and Emotional Learning Beliefs and Attitudes

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With recent educational demands placed on academic accountability, it is difficult for many people to determine or acknowledge where or how focusing on social and emotional learning (SEL) can be beneficial. In this paper we focus on principals' beliefs and attitudes about social and emotional learning. Principals influence implementation through their school priorities, vision, expectations, and emphases. We used grounded theory techniques and semi-structured interviews with K-8th grade principals of public schools located in a state in the southeastern United States. When describing principals' beliefs and attitudes, late majority adopters held neutral attitudes and weak beliefs regarding SEL. In addition, a lack of understanding of the SEL concept became evident as principals did not express a clear understanding of SEL. Comprehensive training at the administrative and policy level is needed. Principals should implement targeted staff training providing key strategies for intentionally integrating SEL skills into their current curriculum. *Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning, Principal Leadership, Education, Urban, Beliefs, Attitudes, Influence, Grounded Theory*

Introduction

The education mission of schools can be reached most efficiently when efforts of academic, social, and emotional learning are integrated (Elias et al., 1997). Simply put, social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process where, in order to achieve important life tasks, children develop and improve their capacity to incorporate thinking, feeling, and behaving (Elias, 2004). SEL focuses on characteristics that are necessary to be successful not only in school, but in all areas of life.

According to Zins, Elias, and Greenberg (2007), the term "social-emotional learning" resulted from an evolution of multiple concepts, research and practices that included important contributions from moral and character education. Understanding elements of SEL as a means to improve and obstruct the educational and socialization processes is definitely not new, as they can be traced back many centuries (Dixon, 2012; Hoffman, 2009). Goleman's (1995) *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* brought SEL to the attention of the general public. The book posits that all humans are social and emotional beings first, and educational and social systems that don't take this into consideration will be unsuccessful in developing well-rounded people (Goleman, 1995).

The actual development of the phrase social and emotional learning can be traced to meetings held in 1993 of the group that is now known as the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, or CASEL (CASEL, 2003). In 2001, the National Conference of State Legislators solidified the emphasis on SEL by passing a resolution to back the teaching of social and emotional skills in schools (Hoffman, 2009). In 2004, Illinois led the way and became the first and only state to develop explicit, free-standing SEL goals and benchmarks for K-12 students (Dusenbury, Zadrazil, Mart, & Weissberg, 2011). As a result, other states

began considering the same route (Hoffman, 2009). Currently, SEL is integrated to some extent into mandated K-12 learning standards in most states. This is due largely to the 2013 update to the No Child Left Behind Act, which embraced the development of social and emotional competencies as part of Title IV- Successful, Safe and Healthy Students (Humphrey, 2013). No Child Left Behind was replaced by The Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015. This new law empowers states to create their own accountability and to find the best local solutions. It is unknown how that will affect the future and momentum of SEL. According to CASEL (2015), "there are five key competencies that are taught, practiced, and reinforced through effective SEL programming" (p. 5). These key competencies are self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2003). Self-awareness involves the identification and acknowledgement of one's own emotions, strengths in self and others, sense of self-efficacy, and self-confidence. Social awareness includes having empathy, respect for others, and perspective taking. Responsible decision making encompasses evaluation and reflection, and personal and ethical responsibility. Self-management incorporates impulse control, stress management, persistence, goal setting, and motivation. Relationship skills consist of cooperation, help seeking and providing, and communication. Just as students can learn academic skills, they can also learn SEL skills to be applied both inside and outside of the classroom (Zins & Elias, 2006). When focusing on emotional skills, it becomes clear that it is more about the reasoning and the behaviors related to that reasoning as opposed to the actual emotion (Hoffman, 2009). If youth can be taught such skills early, it allows them to discover more about themselves, and in turn strike the proper balance.

Given the context of schools, it stands to reason that schools are only as good as their principals. Whether principals realize it or not, their beliefs and attitudes are driving the motivation of their staff and students. The school principal's impact on the setting is important for a student's academic achievement (Cotton, 2003; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

There are many factors that affect leadership behavior such as school district size, socioeconomic status of the students, pressures from the staff, district and/or community, and the principal's own beliefs (Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990). Haberman (2001) insists today's administrators, especially those in urban settings, must evolve from white collar administrators into community workers. This is due to the expanded responsibilities of the job. Berkowitz, Johnston and Pelster (2012) stated,

> Teaching harder to the test is not a path to robust sustained success. Creating a caring school climate that nurtures social, emotional, and moral competencies and supports the motives and skills necessary for productive work (during and after schooling) instead is the true path to success in school and life. (p 12)

As the school leader, principal relationships intensely and directly affect teachers' attitudes, which is a factor affecting the schooling climate (Price, 2012). Those principals that have more autonomy form stronger relationships with staff (Price, 2012). Principals who affect change are those that establish a trusting school environment with all involved (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu, & Easton, 2010). The leader of a school has the greatest influence on the school climate (Berkowitz et al., 2012).

Significance of the Study

Schools are an important setting for social and emotional learning (SEL) and development. "SEL programs and teaching strategies can be effective when implemented comprehensively and with fidelity" (Snyder, Vuchinic, Acock, Washburn, & Flay, 2012, p.

12). When there is a lack of strong leadership and a well-organized and purposed implementation, programs often become more of a nuisance than an advantage (Greenberg, Weissberg, Obrien, Zins, Resnik, & Elias, 2003). Support of administration (e.g., school system superintendents) is the key in adopting and implementing an effective, sustaining SEL climate. School leadership such as principals and program coordinators can influence SEL implementation significantly by setting school priorities, setting a clear vision, securing funding and resources, allotting time for training, and much more (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). While school leaders at all levels may have slightly different priorities, the relevance of SEL remains the same. If there is a clear awareness of school principals' beliefs and attitudes about SEL, knowing how they will act when implementing the principles and practices of SEL is more likely. While there are some practical guides that list actions that principals should take when integrating SEL into schools, those guides do not explore the link between principal's beliefs and attitudes and the requisite actions they are expected to take (Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg, Domitrovich, Graczyk, & Zins, 2005). As such, this gap in the body of literature makes this study relevant and timely locally, nationally, and globally because of the important role that the educational leader, or principal, plays in the environment.

The Principal's Role in Advancing SEL

Social and emotional learning is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2013). Implementation of SEL often becomes harder when there is a lack of strong leadership and no well-organized or purposeful plan (Greenberg et al., 2003). Ideally, SEL is a collaborative effort on the part of all families, schools, and communities in order to enhance children's success; academically, socially and emotionally (Gordon, Ji, Mulhall, Shaw, & Weissberg, 2011). This concept of a collaborative effort aligns with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) in that it takes all levels of the individual, family, and school systems working together. It is important to have key champions of SEL within the school, but the principal should be the ultimate leader in this effort (Zins & Elias, 2006). The principal is needed to support and encourage diverse roles, continuing professional development and coaching, planning, program observation and assessment, and resource distribution specifically related to the integration of SEL concepts throughout the curriculum (Zins & Elias, 2006). The principal must encourage others so that their efforts can make a difference, and improve the possibility of successful implementation (Pasi, 1997). The principal must provide consistent feedback and follow up (Pasi, 1997). Experienced teachers are capable of creating and designing practical applications, are able to mentor less experienced teachers (Pasi, 1997) and serve as important leaders in implementation, but it is the principal's job to model and identify the right individuals to champion the movement.

Our purpose in this study was to explore school principals' beliefs and attitudes about SEL. From a theoretical standpoint, this study contributes to understanding principals' beliefs and attitudes about SEL. Ultimately, we know that beliefs and attitudes drive behavior and behavior drives environment (Ajzen, Czasch, & Flood, 2009; Bandura, 1997). Practical implications of this study include informing how administrators structure training for principals to acquire skills in influencing and integrating SEL into the overall school climate. Program designers (e.g., contract trainers, Cooperative Extension youth development educators) may also benefit from insight provided by the study into key strategies for supporting principals' efforts to champion SEL adoption.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What does SEL mean to principals?
2. What past experiences influence the way principals view SEL?
3. What positive and negative judgments do principals make about SEL?

Review of Literature

Research suggests that participants of SEL programming have greater school relatedness, better discipline, and enhanced educational outcomes (Denham & Brown, 2010; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). According to a meta-analysis study conducted by Payton et al. (2008), SEL programs "improved students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behavior, and academic performance; they also reduced students' conduct problems and emotional distress" (p. 7). The combination of these benefits results in the increased overall well-being of youth.

Schools play an important role in encouraging youth to succeed at cognitive development and social and emotional development (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Schools are the primary place where children learn how to exist in social environments, and where children begin to negotiate their position in such environments (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006). Schools are important because of their place in the community structure and the amount of time that youth spend there (Aviles et al., 2006; Baker, Dilly, Aupperlee, & Patil, 2003).

In a school environment, youth are exposed to large, diverse populations (as compared to home or extended family) in a safe place where caring and trusting relationships develop with adults beyond family. Youth are influenced to become responsible, caring, knowledgeable citizens through their interactions within the school environment. According to Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg (2007), "Schools are social places, and learning is a social process" (p. 191). Learning, particularly in school, leverages social bonds which makes social and emotional character development necessary for academic success (Elias, 2009). The school setting is ideal for providing services to children and for having a positive impact on educational outcomes and emotional development (Aviles et al., 2006).

"Successful leadership is critical to school reform" (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Walstrom, 2004, p. 27). The authority of principals has long been up for debate. Among the wealth of principal leadership studies regarding authority, most lean towards the effectiveness of principals in the role of facilitator instead of authoritarian (Bryk et al., 2010; Louis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). As a facilitator, there are more solid effects on the school climate opposed to instruction (Bouchamma, Basque, & Marcotte, 2014; Louis et al., 2010; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) define belief as "the subjective probability that an object has a certain attribute. The terms object and attribute are used in the generic sense, and they refer to any discriminable aspect of an individual's world" (pp. 96-97). In a practical sense, this definition suggests that principals hold basic beliefs about SEL. Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) also define attitude as "a latent disposition or tendency to respond with some degree of favorableness or unfavorableness to a psychological object. The attitude object can be any discriminable aspect of an individual's world, including a behavior" (p. 76). In all instances, an attitude involves liking or disliking, favoring or disfavoring. It requires making a decision and implies that principals make positive and negative judgments about SEL. These judgements are based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral information (Maio & Haddock, 2010), the three components of attitude. These components equate to people organizing their thoughts, feelings, and past experiences (Maio & Haddock, 2010).

According to Maio and Haddock (2010), the cognitive component of attitude refers to beliefs, thoughts, and attributes, but can be mainly based on the positive and negative attributes people associate with an object. They refer to the affective component as feelings or emotions connected to an object, specifically those feelings that arouse a response directly related to an object. The behavioral component refers to past behaviors specifically related to an attitude object (Maio & Haddock, 2010). Affective influences are post-cognitive. Before one can like something, they must first have some knowledge about it and have identified some of its discriminant features (Zajonc, 1980). Social interactions are dominated by the affective component. Feelings accompany all cognitions early in the process, although sometimes the feelings are weak and vague (Zajonc, 1980). The development of attitudes, in general, may also be understood within the specific domain of principal leadership and how principals develop awareness and increase knowledge about an object. In one study of the development of principal beliefs, less rigid beliefs regarding the assembly of knowledge and more tolerance of ambiguity warranted higher levels of multidisciplinary curriculum use (Arredondo & Rucinski, 1998). A recommendation of the study was that "more rigorous tests of relationships among principals' epistemological beliefs and their support of innovations or other supervisory practices would be a fruitful area for future research" (Arredondo & Rucinski, 1998, p. 294).

Framing principal epistemological beliefs within the realm of attitude formation leads to more concrete examples of how the components of attitudes have been explored. Peter Youngs (2007) looked at how principals' beliefs and actions influenced the experiences of new teachers. His study explored the cognitive, affective, and behavioral attitudes of principals. Principals' past experiences as teachers, as well as informal and formal professional development opportunities, greatly influenced how they viewed their present role as an administrator in the school. These experiences collectively form behavioral attitudes toward their role as an administrator. Cognitive attitudes describe a person's positive or negative beliefs about an object, while affective attitudes describe the emotions of a response about the particular object (Maio & Haddock, 2010). Principals who viewed themselves positively as leaders in the area of instruction were more focused on mentoring and honing instructional skills of novice teachers and found satisfaction in this approach. Principals who held positive cognitive attitudes toward their role as a disciplinarian were more focused on student behavior and were likely to feel less satisfied when addressing instructional issues directly (Carver, 2003; Feiman-Nemser, Carver, Schwille, & Yusko, 1999).

SEL is seen as an umbrella term covering a smorgasbord of concepts, which tends to diminish the quality of impacts in research (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002; Hoffman, 2009). The lack of framing or wobbly framing of SEL affects conceptual rigor (Humphrey, 2013). The wide array of definitions and broad focus areas create serious concerns regarding validity (Merrell & Gueldner, 2012). Some school-based intervention programs which proclaim best practices in the name of SEL actually have very little relevance to the concept of social and/or emotional content (Zeidner et al., 2002; Humphrey, 2013). This lack of clarity makes it almost impossible to build consensus on a common understanding of SEL (Humphrey, 2013). This study fills the gap of understanding with respect to principals' beliefs and attitudes toward SEL.

As lead researcher, I had both professional and personal interests in this study. As a program development specialist for 4-H Youth Development, a nonformal education organization, there were, and are, significant aspects of my position that focus on character education programming in elementary and secondary schools. From a personal perspective, I realized that my views had been shaped by my parents, who were both educators. It wasn't until my father passed away after 30 years of experience in education, 20 of those years as a high school principal, that I clearly realized how much influence a principal has on students. In the seventeen years since his death, people still share their stories about how he changed

their lives. Thus, it was only fair to acknowledge that, in my eyes, the principal influences every facet, both positively and negatively, of the school.

I believe that meaning is socially constructed, thus I acknowledge that I was an active participant in the interview process through my interaction with principals as I interviewed them. I actively chose a constructivist approach using grounded theory techniques because of the unavoidable relationship between the interviewees and myself as an interviewer. As a constructivist, I believe that every past experience shaped me and made me into the person I am today. My focus as a researcher was on understanding the principals' views of SEL and interpreting how they constructed meaning about SEL within their school setting.

As the secondary researcher, I had a professional interest in this study from both a methodologist and constructivist standpoint. As a program evaluator, I was, and am, very interested in the interaction between individuals' beliefs and attitudes and how this shaped the overall environment in which they were situated. The dynamic interaction between person and environment is essentially constructivist in nature. My personal bias is that program success or failure often hinges on how key individuals influence program deliver. This bias was particularly relevant in this study as we considered how principals, as overall school leaders, affect the people and the culture of the school.

Methods

We focused on principals' beliefs and attitudes about social and emotional learning. There were many strengths evident when using grounded theory techniques to guide a study, most importantly grounded theory techniques allowed the theory to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). The process of emergence occurred through initial and focused coding of the interviews. Through the process of constant comparison, theoretical categories were continually refined (Charmaz, 2008; Lingard, Albert, & Levinson, 2008). Use of grounded theory techniques had the potential to yield a lot of data; the abundance of data was considered a strength of the approach because of the relevance of the data to and depth of the study (Hussein, Hirst, Salyers, & Osuji, 2014). When employing grounded theory techniques, the data comes from the perspective of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). This direct line of communication lessened the opportunity of misrepresentation. Grounded theory's iterative process was appealing because of its flexibility. Data were simultaneously collected and analyzed, and the resulting knowledge was used to inform the next cycle of data collection (Lingard et al., 2008). Finally, while guidance was provided in developing and connecting the emerging theoretical categories, flexibility was afforded by having no preconceived destination in mind (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006).

The unit of analysis, of a study using grounded theory techniques, is "the level of abstraction at which you look for variability" (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013, p. 26). In grounded theory, specifying the unit of analysis was another way of naming the study participants and was necessary in order to understand, definitively, the main focus of the study. The unit of analysis may also include episodes, individuals, places and other as defined by the researcher. Distinctive elements of units with similar characteristics were compared, acknowledging their potential effect on outcomes. For this study, one way we defined the unit of analysis was by position or rank, specifically school principals. The initial purpose, from an interpretive viewpoint, focused on "the creation of contextualized emergent understanding" (O'Connor, Netting, & Thomas, 2008, p. 30; Scott, 2004). For the interpretivist, contextual factors played a key role in the response of participants. In addition, the researcher became a participant, and the interactions of the researcher and participant intertwined. This approach supported Patton's (2015) statement of using inductive strategies of theory development instead of using logical deduction from a priori assumptions as seen in a positivist paradigm.

The goal was to attain knowledge based on the lived experiences of the participants. The belief was that there was no real reality, which meant life was perception. Each individual had a different perception of what reality was. Realities included descriptions and interpretations unique to individuals (O'Connor et al., 2008). The word "grounding" from an interpretive perspective "contextualizes the information to the particulars of the participant(s) and the time and place of inquiry (O'Connor et al., 2008, p. 39). Interpretivists acknowledge that the reality of individuals may vary depending on the situation, time, and place. Multiple interpretivists witness an event, and yet each may have very different beliefs about what transpired. The interpretivist/ constructivist approach was used for this study.

Ethical Considerations

Potential ethical issues could have risen if proper procedures were not followed. There were no known ethical issues identified for this study. Participants signed an informed consent document. Also, the following measures were used to ensure confidentiality. In keeping with privacy rights and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used rather than the principal's name. Throughout and upon completion of the research, the electronic records were kept in a password protected file, and the hard copies were kept in a locked file cabinet. The study was approved by the LSU AgCenter Institutional Review Board (HE15-13).

Trustworthiness

A primary consideration in using grounded theory techniques was ensuring trustworthiness. At every phase of planning, we attempted to confirm the creditability, dependability, and transferability of the study, therefore enhancing the trustworthiness. Our intent was to uphold the integrity of the field through rigorous research processes. In the following sub-sections, we outline the steps taken to ensure the trustworthiness of this study.

Credibility

Discussing contrary information with colleagues was one way that we added to the credibility of our interpretation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). By having colleagues examine field notes, questions were raised that helped us examine our assumptions and/or consider alternative ways of looking at the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Carlson's (2010) assertion that "data should be continually revisited and scrutinized for accuracy of interpretation and for meaningful, coherent conveyance of the participant's narrative contributions" (p. 1105) was a cornerstone of our research process.

Reflexivity

Integration of perceptions, values and beliefs aligned with our philosophical position. Our creativity was an integral part of the inductive process (Cutcliffe, 2000). We needed to bring our values, beliefs, and prior knowledge to the surface, but it was equally important for us to not suppress that knowledge and to allow it to interplay with the data (Cutcliffe, 2000).

Dependability

Being able to effectively track the process and procedures involved in data collection and data interpretation was part of establishing the dependability of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). When considering dependability "…the goal is not to eliminate inconsistencies

but to ensure that the researcher understands when they occur" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 86).

Audit Trails

Detailed and thorough explanations of data collection and data analysis were provided. We used field observation notes, memo-writing, interview notes, and audio tapes as documentation for an audit trail and to provide the reader with an accurate account and mental picture of the processes involved in the study.

Transferability

Transferability allowed readers to decide if the research consisted of processes that would work in their setting or particular area of interest (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Because we used qualitative research methods, we were not as concerned with generalization or replication as we were the corroboration and substantiation of findings beyond the context of the study over time and across similar situations (Carlson, 2010). The use of thick and rich descriptions was a way to draw the reader in, to evoke feelings for and a sense of connection with the participants, and to provide an element of shared or vicarious experiences (Carlson, 2010; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In addition, thick and rich descriptions established the of relevance of the study to other settings for the reader (Carlson, 2010), allowing them to map out how this study may apply to their setting. We have provided a very detailed account of the settings encountered, the participants, and the procedures used for data collection and analysis (Carlson, 2010).

Participants

The participants for this study were K-8th grade principals of public schools in urban areas located in a state in the southeastern United States. While other units of analysis (e.g., assistant principals, teachers, superintendents, counselors) may have been plausible, this study was bound by the single unit of school principals.

Additionally, we selected urbanized areas. Urban, suburban, and rural school settings typically have substantial differences in educational context and policy (Hannaway & Talbet, 1993). Urban schools are plagued with the exacerbating negative influence of antisocial behavior as children are exposed to significant risk factors both at home and in the community (McCurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003). The prevalence of exposure to violence and other undesired circumstances makes the job of those serving the urban areas more difficult. Also, educational opportunities are often more varied in urban settings where local tax resources are greater.

The principal's years of experience served as another distinctive element. For this study it was preferred that participants had a minimum of five years of experience as principal at their current school. However, when collective years of experience as a principal at the current or other schools equaled five or more years, the individual was deemed eligible for study inclusion. This level of experience was selected with the idea that, by that time, the principal should be able to formulate and articulate their beliefs. Additionally, research suggested that schools perform better when they were led by experienced (more than three years) principals (Clark, Martorell, & Rockoff, 2009).

Finally, the principal's willingness to adopt new innovations served as another distinctive element. We targeted those principals whose SEL integration most aligned with the late majority adopter ideal type (Rogers, 2003). In Diffusion of Innovations, Rogers (2003)

stated that late majority adopters were the skeptics. They were those who may be reluctant, and their decision to adopt new programs may be based on economic necessity and/or peer pressures. These late majority adopters must first see favorable results (Rogers, 2003). For some it is perceived that SEL undermines the cognitive and academic functions of education instead of supporting them (Diamond, 2010; Furedi, 2009). Undermining suggests that teaching and encouraging the development of SEL skills takes away from academic performance. Therefore, the aim was to target those who have already displayed skeptical tendencies toward integrating new programming. The decision about the unit of analysis was critical to the scope of the study because it affected the time and resources needed to conduct the study (Guest et al., 2013).

We interviewed five females and three males for this study. We identified all males and one female as early adopters and the rest as late adopters. As the study progressed, we realized that we needed to include early adopters in the interview pool so that their responses could be compared and contrasted with those of the late adopters. We randomly selected pseudonyms for each participant.

Sampling and Data Collection

We generated a list of principals using the state Department of Education's website as the initial searching tool. Next, we reduced the school list using the identified urbanized areas as a filter. The lead researcher visited the individual school websites to seek contact information for principals. Using the generated list, we selected a principal from one of the schools meeting the K-8th grade criteria. The following pre-screening questions were used to determine if the principal met the study criteria: (1) How many years have you been principal at this school? (2) Have you implemented any new programs in the past 3 years? (3) Which of the following statements best describes you? (a) I am always the first to introduce new curriculum/programs; (b) I tend to wait before introducing new curriculum/programs until my colleagues have tried it; (c) I prefer to wait until all the kinks have been worked out before I introduce new curriculum/programs. We called each selected principal and posed the preceding questions. We classified principals who selected option "a" as early adopters and those who selected options "b" or "c" as late adopters. In the first round of interviews, we invited principals who selected options b or c to participate in the study and asked for permission to conduct an in-depth, face-to-face interview. In the later round of interviews, we invited principals who selected option a to participate in the study, so that we could compare and contrast the response from the two groups.

The lead researcher initially conducted three interviews within two days. Therefore, there was no opportunity to transcribe and review each interview before conducting the next interview. The interviews were recorded using an audio digital recorder. The recordings were sent digitally to a local transcription service for professional transcribing. Transcripts for interviews one through three were received at the same time. Once the transcripts were received, we took each individual transcript and read the complete document without making any notes. It was our goal to have an overall conceptualization prior to beginning the open coding. We then went back to the first transcript and began the open coding process by writing notes in the margins, as well as underlining comments and phrases that stood out. We left the document for a day or two and returned to it to re-read and see if anything new emerged. We moved on to transcript two, completing the same process of open coding by writing in the margins, underlining comments and phrases that stood out, removing ourselves from the document for a few days and returning to see if anything new emerged. At this point, we compared the initial codes of the first two interviews. We identified several related codes, and then began writing a few memos, pondering questions such as: How are these codes related?

Is there another word to describe this group of words? Memo writing was an extremely important component of our data analysis. The memos were our personal reflections, and they allowed us the opportunity to explore thoughts, feelings, and concerns without having to disclose our innermost thoughts to each other (Birks & Mills, 2011). Memos contained both the researchers' insights and analysis of the data and were used throughout the process to analyze ideas about the codes (Birks & Mills, 2011; Henwood & Pidgeon, 2003). Our experience aligned with Birks and Mills in that it helped us consider our data more conceptually (2011).

We moved on to the third transcription, repeating the same process of open coding, removing ourselves from the document for a few days and returning to see if anything new emerged. We repeated the process of comparing the initial codes of interview three to those of interview one and two, identifying related codes, and pondering if or how any of these codes interacted with the prior two. At this point, we began to make decisions about which initial open codes were most significant, moving more into the focused coding realm. Focused coding allowed us to see which codes were most significant and made the most sense. Once we completed the open coding and focused coding process on each of the three initial transcripts, we combined the transcripts into one document, sorted by each question. We began to look across all three interviews for similarities and frequency in the use of the codes. We asked the questions, what does this mean, what is similar and consistent across all interviews? After we finished the analysis of the initial three interviews, a clear theme emerged concerning principals' attitudes and beliefs, and we decided to employ theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2011). Theoretical sampling allowed us to shift our focus and probe more deeply into the themes that had emerged. New and amended interview questions were added to the protocol to allow for closer examination of the topics that had emerged. This is the point at which we shifted from interviewing late adopters to early adopters so that we could better understand principal perspectives. We thought that being able to compare and contrast responses from the late and early adopter groups would help us do this.

For this round of questioning, we added the definition of SEL to the interview protocol questions as well as planned for additional probing questions, if needed. We interviewed three additional participants. We repeated the same coding process of the data with the second set of three interviews. Once data analysis was complete, we discovered ambiguity encompassing knowledge of SEL, and that led us to the next theoretical sampling phase. For this round of interviews, we reviewed all the questions and selected the subset that was directly related to SEL for more in-depth interviewing. We felt that we had reached saturation in the responses to the following six questions once we completed the first six interviews. Thus, we omitted the following questions when interviewing the seventh and eighth principals: (1) How would you describe the central mission of your school? (2) Tell me something recently implemented at your school. (3) As principal, how do you influence change in the school environment? This gave us additional time for probing more deeply with the new questions. We chose five words or phrases that were central to the idea of SEL. We randomly selected the words goal-setting, decision-making, relationship building, emotional regulation and empathy each representing a competency of social emotional learning as defined by CASEL. These key words were placed on index cards. We interviewed two additional principals, an early adopter and a late adopter. Participants were shown the key word, and then asked four questions, specifically related to the word on the card. This set of questions was asked for each word:

1. When you see this phrase or word, what are your initial thoughts as it relates to building student skills?
2. What is the school's role in building this skill in students?

3. What words describe how you feel about your school's responsibility for integrating (_____)?
4. What past experiences do you (personally) have with building student's (_____) skills?

Again, we conducted interviews until no new themes emerge from the data.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using handwritten, color coded methods. At first the data was analyzed using initial (open) coding which included a constant comparison of the data to find similarities and differences (Charmaz, 2011). Open coding allowed us to take a very quick review of the data remaining open to explore whatever theoretical possibilities can be differentiated (Charmaz, 2011). In this step, we sought to refine themes to see if a theory emerged (Emmel, 2013). The comparisons allowed us to facilitate higher level conceptual explanations (Emmel, 2013).

After the initial coding process, we shifted to focused coding which included more directed, selective, and conceptual codes enabling us to synthesize and explain larger segments of data (Charmaz, 2011; Rich, 2012). In focused coding, decisions were made about which initial codes were most significant, and which codes made the most analytical sense (Charmaz, 2011). We embraced Charmaz's (2011) more circular approach to data analysis in that we did not use a totally linear process. As "Aha!" moments arose, we circled back to previous statements, ideas, and transcripts as we tried to understand the data. We coded the transcripts along with an independent analyst. Themes were compared and discrepancies were discussed and resolved. We met throughout the data analysis and interpretation process to discuss concerns and insights and to review materials.

Results

We organized the results section as follows: Principals' beliefs and attitudes about SEL, followed by the lack of a clear understanding of an SEL definition. The final section explored the perceived importance of SEL, even though it is not fully understood.

Principals' Beliefs and Attitudes about SEL

Initial interviews were conducted with Valerie, Rita, and Cherie, who were all classified as late adopters. We really wrestled with understanding what we were hearing from them, so we read and discussed the interview transcripts several times. We kept coming back to the overriding idea that no strong feelings or beliefs were expressed about SEL. This led us to classifying their attitude toward SEL as neutral. Both Valerie and Rita were clearly neutral, and Cherie was neutral and not overly excited about what SEL embodied. Yet some of the things she said led us to believe she could lean in a positive direction. Therefore, the idea of late adopters having neutral to mildly positive feelings regarding SEL was an area of emergence. Even with this lack of enthusiasm regarding SEL, each participant mentioned that they did feel it was important. While it may be important, there was no urgency to integrate the SEL components into the day to day functioning of the school. As an example, Rita mentioned, as she shrugged her shoulders and tilted her head, "you know, I'm open to that" as if saying I would do this if I had to, or it would be great if someone else would do this. This neutral attitude toward SEL led to the first theoretical sampling characteristic to be explored.

We felt that we needed to contrast the perceived neutral attitude of late adopter principals with that of early adopter principals. Thus, we sought out three principals whose

responses to the screening questions indicated that they were early adopters. As we reviewed the transcripts of the interviews with the early adopters, we perceived an attitude of intentionality and empowerment. The principals in this group, Sharon, Alan, and Kevin, indicated that while SEL was undervalued in schools, it was important and needed. With this group of participants, integrating SEL was not an unreachable goal, it was something they were currently striving to make happen. They were actively planning, seeking, and engaging in new programming opportunities. As an example of how these principals tackled the integration problem, Kevin told us about his successful outreach that was in its' fourth year of implementation:

> I contacted Tools of The Mind and talked to them about what their program looks like. It was clear that it wasn't necessarily a direct fit with what we were currently doing. So, what we did was, I arranged for an assessment of what their classrooms would look like, versus what ours would, so we had a consultant out, and really assess whether it was the right fit, or not. Once she came in and we talked about some of the adjustments that this would mean to our teaching, it was very clear that it was a direction we were excited about going in. So, we had scoped out what a partnership would look like. The problem was, it was a cost far more than any of us had budgeted for professional development. So I did two things; I searched out other schools across the city who would be interested in also taking advantage of the program, which would allow us to split the cost; we did find one school in our network that was really excited by the opportunity. So we partnered with them. That got us almost there, and then I enlisted organizations, uh, a development team to go after a very specific grant, and they were able to secure a three-year grant for us. That allowed us to do the program. We're really excited about what it brings to our school. I think it's one of the most important things that we have as a school and, it's working out really well. We're also getting some of, we've definitely increased our academic achievement.

It seemed to us that the main questions for early adopter principals was "how can we make this happen," not "can this happen." To us, this exemplifies their intentionality toward SEL.

We also observed that principals who were early adopters empowered teachers more than those who were late adopters. Both Alan and Sharon shared examples of how they empowered teachers, and in both cases, they referenced giving teachers the freedom to lead and figure things out on their own.

Lack of a Clear Understanding of SEL

As we compared the six interviews, we also noticed that the late adopter principals did not possess a concrete understanding of SEL. Clearly, if a person does not have a working understanding of a concept, it is hard to hold an obvious attitude about that concept. For the early adopter principals, their familiarity with some of the concepts related to SEL allowed them to intentionally empower teachers and promote SEL in their schools. We contrast this with the late adopter principals who lacked familiarity with, and thus understanding, of SEL concepts. When asked to explain the meaning of SEL, all principals focused on the two words social and emotional and then tried to tie their understanding to those words, or they used the words social and/or emotional to explain SEL. This lack of unified understanding supported many of the issues previously identified in the field of SEL. According to CASEL (2003),

> Social and emotional learning involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (p. 1)

Principals often used the words social and emotional to explain SEL but could not really give any other strong examples of what that means. When asked what SEL meant to them, principals had a wide variety of responses ranging from "I don't know" to "It's everything." This wide range of understanding is clearly one of the barriers in getting to the beliefs of the principals. Beliefs are derived from an individual's understanding. This understanding may be an accurate or inaccurate representation, yet regardless, that understanding will drive beliefs. If principals lack the understanding to form a clear definition, the ambiguity of it all affects their beliefs and in turn their attitudes and actions related to SEL.

As we reflected on the ambiguity surrounding SEL, we began to wonder if the phrase SEL was a hindrance in getting to attitudes and beliefs. We wondered what would happen if the questions were built around the definition, irrespective of the phrase. In other words, would the answers change or remain the same if the key phrase "social and emotional learning" was not used during the interviews? This line of questioning led to the next phase of theoretical sampling. In this phase, we revised the content and structure of the interview questions to use a series of key words related to SEL instead of the phrase SEL. We interviewed two more principals: an early adopter principal (Ned) and a late adopter principal (Lorraine).

The interesting thing about interviews seven and eight was that even though the questions changed, the way in which the principals responded still aligned with the differences identified earlier between early and late adopters. We again observed that the early adopter principal possessed an attitude of intentionality and empowerment surrounding SEL, and the late adopter principal held a neutral attitude toward SEL. A new theme did emerge from the final two interviews: school responsibility. This theme emerged directly from the responses to the new question: What is the school's role in building this skill in students? Overwhelmingly, both Ned and Lorraine felt the school had a huge role in building students' SEL skills. This is most succinctly expressed by Lorraine's statement that the school plays a "major role…ultimately it's my schools' responsibility." She went on to describe the importance of building proper knowledge and competence and providing professional development for staff as key. Ultimately, neither of these principals shied away from the reality that the schools have a huge responsibility. While both Ned and Lorraine indicated it should be a joint effort between home and school, they acknowledge that the responsibility percentage is very heavily tilted towards the school. Due to the ever-changing societal dynamics and environments to which children are exposed, the roles seem to be reversed. The old way of thinking was that, as it relates to social and emotional aspects of life, children were learning those things at home and the schools were simply reinforcing the skill building. Today it seems that in many cases, school is the only place that children are exposed to these important skill building opportunities. Ned referred to the term "in loco parentis," meaning in the place of the parent, and indicated that from the time children enter the campus, schools are responsible for doing the job that the parents should be doing. He believes that in some cases, children were receiving this skill building both at home and school. However, in most cases, it was only taught during the school hours. Similarly, when asked what words describe how they felt about their school's responsibility for integrating SEL, their responses reflected their sense of responsibility. Ned simply stated, "It's our job, it's what we do."

Perceived Importance of SEL

All the principals we interviewed acknowledged the importance of SEL. Rita contended that mandates such as PBIS has forced schools to begin to look at how to include it in purposeful ways. One principal even proposed that SEL was important enough that "It needs to be a recognized field within education." Yet another principal noted the difficulty of SEL integration because of competing scholastic and even social demands: "it's super important, but you are also driven as a teacher by the deadlines of next week's assessment, or next week's Mardi Gras parade, or student's achievement ceremony, or whatever it is."

Even though they all indicated SEL was important, we found that each of them related the integration of SEL to something different. Valerie related it to leadership, having positive roles and positive thinking. Rita was more engulfed in those that have social challenges, behavioral issues, and may present themselves as disruptive. Cherie focused more on individual learning and making good choices. Sharon insisted the education community needed to shift from the intervention side to being more proactive on the prevention side. Alan saw it as something that should be integrated throughout the curriculum and the entire school day. Kevin saw SEL as an investment with a payoff that may be way down the road. This presents a problem for administrative stakeholders because what is deemed important today may restrict time available for another meaningful idea tomorrow.

SEL is important for many different reasons, and honestly the reasons presented are all valid reasons. One thing to note is that principals are only seeing it from their perspective and their individualized lens, and therefore, are picking and choosing the components they feel apply to their school community. They are relying on aspects which they can visualize and have seen prior success.

Limitations of the Study

We have identified several limitations of the study. First, all interviews were conducted in a single state in the southern part of the United States. Additionally, the interviews were conducted during the school day, which could have been a limitation as we encountered several interruptions. Finally, the lack of a clear SEL definition within the literature and practice raises questions about individuals' understanding of the concept.

Discussion

The themes identified in this study were: neutral attitude of late majority adopters toward SEL, lack of clear understanding of an SEL definition, and perceived importance of SEL. For late majority adopters having a neutral attitude means that they don't view SEL either positively or negatively, and they are neither working for it nor against it in their actions.

While we could not find studies that referred specifically to attitude and stage of adoption, we could find studies that had implications for practice and future research. In order to move late majority principals, it could imply that training focuses on trialability and observable results achieved over time as referenced in Hanley, Shearer, and Livingston (2019). Trialability suggests that we should provide principals with a trial size piece of an SEL evidence-based program to help them see if the concept fits their school prior to fully committing to a program. It is imperative to have innovators, early adopters and early majority adopters of SEL share their success stories and the benefits of the program to their schools.

Ultimately, principals' beliefs and attitudes may affect the place SEL has in their school. The model presented in Figure 1 illustrates how we propose that these factors interact to influence the SEL school climate.

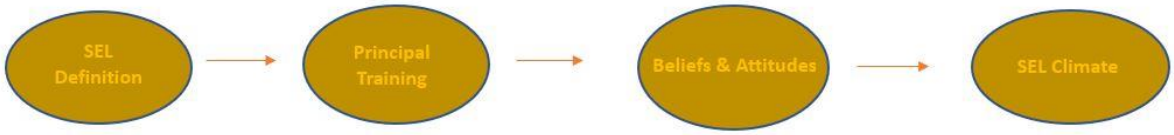

Figure 1. Conceptual model of the interaction of the definition of SEL and principals' training, beliefs, and attitudes with the integration of social emotional learning into the school climate

Throughout this study, it was clear that the principals did not possess a clear understanding of an SEL definition. This lack of understanding of the SEL definition as seen in the wide array of definitions and broad focus areas create serious concerns that lead to a wobbly framing or even a lack of framing of the SEL concepts (Humphrey, 2013; Merrell & Gueldner, 2012). The lack of clarity about the understanding of an SEL definition makes it almost impossible to build consensus on a common understanding of SEL (Humphrey, 2013).

This lack of understanding of the definition of SEL has several implications, one of these is that SEL skills should be established as the foundation of the school so that they can be more meaningfully embedded into the climate of the school through both planning and implementation phases. The definition of SEL is key in that the climate depends on a definition that is shared and understood by all. Because we know from previous research that SEL skills mediate academic, civic, and workplace success, principals may structure school curriculum with embedded SEL concepts, and provide training to staff so they are better prepared to support SEL (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). One recommendation for future research would be to conduct a Delphi study with principals to build consensus around the definition of SEL. Additionally, a quantitative study looking at the relationship between principals' understanding of the SEL definition, their beliefs and attitudes, and ultimately the school climate would help us better understand how training needs to be developed.

Perceived importance refers to the level of importance a principal applies to integrating SEL into their school in relation to the totality of responsibilities and duties of the principal. This is supported by a study conducted by Bouchamma, Basque and Marcotte (2014) that suggested that principals assigned importance to components of school leadership based on perceptions of self-efficacy in areas like management of education services, human resources, and educational environment. This implies that comprehensive training for principals is key to SEL success. We recommend that principals both seek trainings for themselves and create trainings for teachers on how to embed SEL skills into the curriculum. In addition to training, implementation support will be key to success. Implementation support includes establishing school priorities, establishing a defined vision, obtaining adequate funding and resources, and allotting time for training of staff. Ultimately, comprehensive training of school personnel at all levels seems to provide the best path forward for both creating a common understanding of SEL and implementing SEL concepts at a level that positively impacts the school climate.

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