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Practice wisdom : an exploration of school social workers experience with social and emotional learning curricula : a project based upon an independent investigation

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Gordon David Gross
Practice Wisdom: An
exploration of school social
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social and emotional learning
curricula

ABSTRACT

Of all of the professions that exist in a school setting, social workers are trained specifically in the three main theoretical tenets of social and emotional learning programs: systems theory, cognitive behavioral theory and psychoanalytic theory. Yet there is little in the literature about what the role of social work should be as a stakeholder in implementing a SEL curriculum.

This qualitative research was designed to investigate what could be learned from the practice wisdom of school social workers in elementary schools that have adopted a SEL curriculum about their experiences and the roles they have adopted. This study employed a sample of convenience recruited utilizing a snowball sampling strategy.

Major findings were that most social workers in this sample were both consultant/trainers around the system-wide implementation of SEL in schools and spent some time in the classroom delivering the program, either as a co-teacher or alone. Most of these social workers had tremendous freedom/flexibility around determining what their participation would be in their school's SEL program. Regardless of the specific SEL program their school had adopted, these programs tended to be seen as a base that could be augmented by other SEL programs or materials created to meet a specific need.

PRACTICE WISDOM: AN EXPLORATION OF SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS
EXPERIENCE WITH SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING CURRICULA

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2010

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the history of education in America, numerous interventions to inspire and aid in school success have been implemented. Most recently among these is the addition of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) to some elementary school curricula. SEL programs are designed to help children develop self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Since the late 1990's SEL programs have increasingly been integrated into elementary school classrooms.

Within the scheme of education in the United States, school success has been solely based on and directly correlated with graded assessments of students' cognitive abilities (Sternberg, 2002). Issues of social and emotional development have been deemed "private concerns that should be left at the door when a child enters school to go about the business of acquiring academic knowledge" (Elias, M.J., Zins, J.E., Weissberg, R.P., Frey, K.S., Greenberg, M.T., Haynes, N.M., Kessler, R., Schwab-Stone, M.E. & Shriver, T.P., 1997, p. 8). It is only recently that this previously held conceptualization of education has been challenged.

The origins of SEL, championed by a small group of educators including Howard Gardner from Harvard and James Comer from Yale, became more widely acknowledged with the 1995 publication of Daniel Goleman's book, *Emotional Intelligence* (Areglado, 2001; Panju, 2008). These researchers argue that our education system is too narrowly focused on traditional cognitive abilities such as reading, writing and arithmetic (Elias et al., 1997). The authors cite many other factors contributing to successful learning or lack

thereof including: the impact of home life; student's and their family's relationships with teachers and school staff; the safety of the school environment and attention to a child's emotional development (Comer, 2003; Gardner, 1983; Gardner, 1993; Goleman, 1995). Neuroscience and trauma research contributed greatly to this shift in understanding the importance of emotions in learning and cognitive development (Davies, 2004, Herman, 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). What was originally seen as a distinction between emotional development and cognitive learning is now understood to be a false-dichotomy. The clear distinction between academics and social and emotional development are becoming blurred (Comer, 2003; Elias et al., 1997).

Emotional Intelligence raised questions like: What does it mean to be smart? and What *kind* of smart are we talking about? to a wider public (Gibbs & Epperson, 1995; (Goleman, 1995). This work challenged the long held belief that a person's IQ was, to some degree, their destiny (Goleman, 1995). Emerging from these kinds of questions and from this kind of thinking, some saw a "missing link" in education – the importance of bringing concerns of social and emotional development both into the classroom and into the school curriculum (Elias et al., 1997).

Greater public awareness of Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* brought educators a platform for introducing social and emotional learning into school curricula (Elias et al., 1997). The publication of *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* in 1997 was the first comprehensive guidebook for implementing school-based social and emotional learning programs (Elias et al., 1997). The book asks one fundamental question --"Is it possible to attain true academic and personal success

without addressing [social and emotional learning skills]?” And for the authors, the answer is "no" (Elias et al., 1997, p. 3).

Proponents of SEL use research-based methods to make the case that SEL programs not only help students with their social and emotional development but that these programs are directly correlated with academic success. (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg & Wahlberg, 2004). According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing SEL, SEL programs increase students’ standardized test scores by an average of 11%. (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, Pachan, 2008).

While SEL programs are yet to be a fully integrated and mainstreamed part of the United States Department of Education’s agenda, addressing children’s social and emotional development in school curricula is gaining significant ground at the state level. In 2003, the state of Illinois enacted the Children's Mental Health Act, which identified public schools as a primary venue for delivering social and emotional education and support (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). Similarly in 2006, New York State enacted major new legislation addressing children's mental health. A major theme of the legislation is that "social and emotional development forms a foundation for success in school and in life" (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010, p. 19).

While there is no single, standardized program, SEL curricula share common goals and strategies for implementing curricula into a classroom. These include: storytelling and biography, group discussion, self-reflection and goal setting, role-playing, cooperative and small group learning, among others (Elias et al., 1997). Similarly, there is consensus in the literature that in successful programs, the SEL

curriculum is implemented school-wide with the participation of all stakeholders in the school (McCombs, 2004). The role of the teacher is best articulated in the SEL literature (Dasho, Lewis & Watson, 2001; Elias et al., 1997; Fleming & Bay, 2004; McCombs, 2004; Mugno & Rosenblitt, 2001; Pasi, 2001). Most often social work is not mentioned as a separate stakeholder and, even when social work is mentioned, no specific role is spelled out (Kress & Elias, 2006; Pasi, 2001).

Of all of the professions that exist in a school setting, social workers are trained in the three main theoretical tenets of SEL programs: systems theory, cognitive behavioral theory and psychoanalytic theory (Cohen & Sandy, 2007; Cooper & Lesser, 2008; Sue & Sue, 2008). Acting as interpreters, clarifiers, informers, and mediators, the charge of school social work is to help students successfully participate in and complete school (Huxtable & Blythe, 2002). School social workers' assessments are anchored in a biopsychosocial knowledgebase that is consistent with the goals and vision of SEL. School social workers already fulfill many roles unique to the needs of their particular environment. These include but are not limited to: advocacy work for students and families; individual and group counseling with students; providing crisis response services; acknowledging socioeconomic factors, cultural background and adaptive behavior responses and connecting students and families to community agencies (Dupper, 2003; Huxtable & Blythe, 2002; Openshaw, 2008). Still, there is little in the literature about what the role of social work should be as a stakeholder implementing a SEL curriculum.

This qualitative research is designed to investigate what can be learned from the practice wisdom of school social workers in elementary schools that have adopted a SEL

curriculum. What have been their experiences and how do they think the role of school social work in SEL programs can best be articulated? Through an exploration of their experiences, a more nuanced understanding of the social work role in SEL curricula may be advanced.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Precursors to SEL Curricula in Schools

In the beginning

In the late 1960s, education and child development scholars from Yale University collaborated with the New Haven Public Schools to provide clinicians access to "observe, record and study children in school" (Comer, 1980, p. xiv). The need for this kind of research was based on an understanding that children's environment – their social, political and physical reality – is a determining factor in their school success or lack thereof (Comer, 1980; Hernandez Jozefowicz, Allen-Mears, Piro-Lupinacci & Fisher, 2002; Openshaw, 2008; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The clinical knowledge that was acquired in this research sowed the seeds of a paradigm shift in education and laid a foundation upon which SEL stands today (Cohen, 2001; Haynes, 2007).

James Comer, one of these original researchers, a child psychologist based at the Child Study Center at Yale University, is the founder and director of the New Haven School Development Program (SDP). The SDP is "a research-based, comprehensive K-12 education reform program grounded in the principles of child, adolescent, and adult development" (Yale School of Medicine, 2010 ¶ 1). The three fundamental questions driving the work of the SDP include: "What do children need to function well in school?; How can adults work together to support child development? and What kind of school environment must we create to support child development?" (Comer, 2003, p. 13).

In 1968, these types of questions were new (Haynes, 2007). According to Comer, at that time, "school reform experts, schools of education, school people, and policy

makers were all talking about cognitive-linguistic factors... No one was talking about social-emotional factors. Nobody was talking about relationships" (Comer, 2003, p.12). Through their research, the SDP was able, and continues to this day, to acknowledge that success in school is a far more complex endeavor than simply the transmission of information.

Questioning cognitive learning as supreme

Another significant precursor to SEL programs is *Frames of Mind* (1983), written by Harvard University Professor of Cognition and Education and Psychology, Howard Gardner. Gardner questioned fundamental assumptions about the nature of intelligence. In this book, Gardner introduced the idea that intelligence is culturally bound and American culture has too narrow a definition of intelligence. Gardner argues that there are multiple intelligences including: linguistic; musical; logical-mathematical; body-kinesthetic and personal intelligences (Gardner, 1983; Goleman, 1995; Panju, 2008).

Whereas traditional education is built on cognitive learning, Gardner believes this is too limited a view of human intelligence. Expertise is the culmination of a person's experience, their innate skills and their cultural context. Gardner acknowledges a diversity of human capacities and advocates for a more open, pluralistic view of intelligence (Gardner, 1983).

In *Frames of Mind* (1983), Gardner also discusses and critiques the gold standard of measuring intelligence – the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) score. Persisting to this day, the IQ test and its cousin, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) is used as a means to stratify students according to their score. These classifications come with a stigma and are used to determine an educational track that a student will follow in school (Ravich

2010; Suzuki & Valencia, 1997). This testing often misses skills and other personal traits that a student may possess that can contribute to success in their life (Gardner, 1983).

Nationwide acceptance

The creation and proliferation of SEL can be directly traced to the ideas presented in Daniel Goleman's 1995 book *Emotional Intelligence* (Elias et al., 1997; Merrell & Gueldner, 2010; Panju, 2008; Pasi, 2001). With its release, *Emotional Intelligence* caused a sensation—positing a revolutionary premise that emotions are central to a person's successful development. Echoing the work of Gardner, Goleman directly challenged the long held belief that IQ was the single most important factor in predicting children's outcomes in later life and Goleman gained nationwide attention for this idea (Goleman, 1995).

Featured on the cover of the October 2, 1995 issue of Time Magazine, *Emotional Intelligence* represented a profound change to our culture's conception of what it means to be smart. The article explains that, for Goleman, "Nowhere is the discussion of emotional intelligence more pressing than in schools, where both the stakes and the opportunities seem greatest" (Gibbs & Epperstein, 1995, p. 64). The influence of this book is broad—there are over five million copies in print and it has been translated into thirty languages (Goleman, 2010).

Goleman's book ignited a discourse that raised questions about the value of Emotional Quotient (EQ) versus Intelligence Quotient (IQ). The book's full title *Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ* and the premise that the book, as announced on the cover, "redefines what it means to be smart," acknowledges the critical role that emotions play in life. In Goleman's book, a belief that "a view of human nature

that ignores the power of emotions is sadly short sighted" (Goleman, 1995, p. 4). In other words, a person's ability to be aware of their own emotions and those of others is an essential component of humanity.

In *Emotional Intelligence*, Goleman raises the point that people of "modest IQ" can fair well in society while some with high IQ will "flounder." For Goleman, "our emotions have a mind of their own" (Goleman, 1995, p. 20). Book smarts can take a person so far but ultimately, it is in our capacity to manage our emotions and social interactions that we are able to live more fully, "to mobilize and inspire others, to thrive in intimate relationships, to persuade and influence, to put others at ease" (Goleman, 1995, p. 113).

What is SEL?

SEL is a framework for students to develop their social and emotional awareness of both themselves and those around them. SEL goes beyond academic learning to try and help student's self esteem so that they can feel more confident in school, in their interactions with their peers and in their relationships with teachers. The curriculum is geared to help children become "knowledgeable, responsible and caring citizens" (McCombs, 2004, p. 25).

Key skill sets for SEL programs include five main areas 1) Self-Awareness – the ability to recognize and name one's own emotions 2) Self-Regulation – verbalizing and coping with anxiety, depression and anger and also recognizing positive aspects of one's life including social supports 3) Self-monitoring and performance – focusing on tasks at hand, goal setting, ability to manage feedback and remain optimistic 4) Empathy and perspective taking – becoming a good listener and understanding others' perspectives and

others' point's of view and 5) Social skills and handling relationships – managing and expressing emotions effectively, working in a team, problem solving, and sensitivity to social/non-verbal cues (Franklin, Harris & Allen-Meares, 2006, p. 488; Merrell & Gueldner 2010; Pasi 2001).

Through SEL programs, school can help students in their social and emotional growth and development. While there are manifold ways in which these goals are addressed, through experiential exercises, role playing, reflecting on characters in literature and other media, discussions about making choices and exercises promoting face recognition are just some of the ways that children learn to integrate their thoughts, feelings and behaviors through SEL (Elias et al., 1997). It is through these kinds of activities that students work towards SEL program goals of filling the "missing link" in education by acknowledging that cognitive learning and memorization alone do not meet the needs of all students to thrive.

Theoretical underpinnings for SEL

Ideas familiar to most social work clinicians underscore the theoretical basis for SEL curricula. According to authors Cohen and Sandy (2007), the three theories that offer a fundamental architecture to SEL programs are systems theory, psychoanalytic theory and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Some programs, including PATHS, have also expanded their theoretical framework with the addition of practical application of research on neurobiology and brain organization (Greenberg, Kuché & Riggs, 2004).

Systems theory acknowledges the influence of environment and context on an individual (Sue & Sue, 2008). The Eco-Behavioral Systems model used in SEL underlies the school wide and community-wide framework for SEL. By incorporating all aspects of

a child's life into social and emotional development, systems theory strives to create consistency and reinforce skills and values (Cohen & Sandy, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2004).

Psychoanalytic theory acknowledges both conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions that shape "who we are, how we act and what we learn" (Cohen & Sandy, 2007, p. 65). This theoretical viewpoint attends to the previous and ongoing psychological development of a child. Understanding this aspect of a child helps school staff and faculty to appreciate a child's behavior in the context of a child's psychological makeup.

CBT is used in skill-building and prevention work. It is an effective and efficient means for both teachers to promote and for students to learn the building blocks for social and emotional development. CBT uses a goal-oriented, problem-solving, systematic technique to treat people with a wide range of conditions (Wright, Basco & Thase, 2006).

The theoretical use of neurobiology and brain organization is based in research which helps to provide age appropriate activities; understanding the impact of trauma on learning and behavior and ideas of acquisition and consolidation of information (Bechara, Damasio, Bar-On, 2007). In the advances in neurobiological sciences, it has only recently become clearer that the debate of nature vs. nurture is a false one. In his book, *Brain and Culture* (2006), Bruce Wexler explains succinctly "our biology is social in such a fundamental and thorough manner that to speak of a relation between the two suggests an unwarranted distinction. It is our nature to nurture and be nurtured" (Wexler, 2006, p. 13).

Overview of SEL Curricula in American Schools

No national mandate

The United States Department of Education has yet to fully integrate and mainstream SEL programs on a national level. Currently, states are the primary force behind large-scale implementation of social and emotional development curricula in schools. In 2003, the state of Illinois enacted the Children's Mental Health Act, which identified public schools as a primary venue for delivering social and emotional education and support. Similarly in 2006, New York State enacted major new legislation addressing children's mental health. This legislation is promoted on the basis that "social and emotional development forms a foundation for success in school and in life" (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010, p. 19).

The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization founded in 1994 by Daniel Goldman and educator and philanthropist, Eileen Rockefeller Growald, "works to advance the science and evidence-based practice of social and emotional learning" (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2010, ¶ 1) in schools. CASEL's mission brings together research experience from academics and classroom experience from educators. CASEL is an umbrella organization promoting SEL through public policy as overall educational reform, not promoting any one particular curriculum. In 2003, CASEL published a guide, which assessed 80 different SEL programs. An updated guide is currently in process and it will be completed in 2011 (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2010).

Over the past decade or more, models of SEL curricula have proliferated rapidly and are available for adoption by schools, e.g., Community of Caring, The Efficacy

Program, Open Circle, Learning for Life and Lyons Quest to name a few (Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning, 2003). Three other programs that have been mentioned prominently in the literature and widely adopted by elementary schools that have SEL curricula are Second Step, The Responsive Classroom and PATHS (Alvarez & Anderson-Ketchmark, 2009; Greenberg et al., 2004; Rimm-Kaufmann & Chiu, 2007; Walther-Thomas & Brownell, 1999).

Jennifer James, a cultural anthropologist and founder of Committee for Children, created Second Step as a violence prevention program in 1986. Dr. James and her colleagues at Committee for Children discovered a "remarkable consistency in the literature that suggested violent offenders (both adults and young people) lacked a core set of social and emotional skills" (Committee for Children, 2010, ¶ 3). This program aids in the development of empathy, impulse regulation, problem solving, and anger management to help give children the skills needed to avoid violent behavior (Committee for Children, 2010).

The Responsive Classroom is specifically designed for elementary school use and is based on three core concepts: Empathy Training, Impulse Control and Anger Management. These concepts are utilized not only in classrooms but also in the lunchroom, on the playground, within the school office, and as an approach to school-wide discipline (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2010b). The Responsive Classroom approach was created by teachers on the basis that children learn best when they have both academic and social-emotional competencies (Walther-Thomas & Brownell, 1999).

The guiding principals behind Responsive Classroom clearly mirror SEL's main tenets that academic success requires social and emotional skills including cooperation,

assertion and self-control. The Responsive Classroom also reflects the systems theory perspective that:

Knowing the children we teach-individually, culturally, and developmentally-is as important as knowing the content we teach.

Knowing the families of the children we teach and working with them as partners is essential to children's education and How the adults at school work together is as important as their individual competence: Lasting change begins with the adult community (Northeast Foundation for Children, 2010a).

The PATHS SEL program is a comprehensive and developmentally based curriculum, "intended primarily to improve both social-emotional functioning and specific neurocognitive functioning, as well as to secondarily affect academic functioning" (Greenberg et al., 2004, p. 170). This program is marketed as a violence-prevention curriculum. Similar to Second Step, PATHS focuses on strategies such as encouraging development of essential skills in emotional literacy; positive peer relations; and problem solving. The PATHS program is specifically designed to be implemented by elementary school teachers for children in grades K through 6 (Greenberg et al., 2004).

Critiques of SEL and Emotional Intelligence

While SEL programs are looking for the interventions that work best, based on research, it must be noted that for some, "to date there have been relatively few studies that offer robust scientific evidence indicating program impact beyond the benefits of school-based programming alone" (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2007, p. 59). Also, Hoffmann (2009) critiques the very nature of SEL programs, not only their claims of having a basis in scientific research. Hoffman is concerned about a bias in the aim of SEL programs because "not all cultures interpret emotional experience in the same way" (2009, p. 540). Specifically she says, "It is important to situate these discourses within a

politics of schooling that is cognizant of the very real issues of power that legitimize certain discourses on emotion and delegitimize others" (Hoffman, 2009, p. 548).

In the fray that happened as a result of Goleman's book, many people have offered serious criticism of the very notion of Emotional Intelligence as a concept that can be used in a way that is scientifically meaningful. Author Kevin Murphy, in *A Critique of Emotional Intelligence* (2006), acknowledges that there are "some reasons for optimism about the future of emotional intelligence" (Murphy, 2006, p. 346) but that ultimately it is ultimately poorly defined and poorly measured. For Murphy, the relationship between emotional intelligence, social skills and general intelligence is not well understood. "The most widely publicized claims about the relationship between emotional intelligence and success in school, in the workplace, and in life are not supported and, in some important cases, are almost certainly untrue" (Murphy, 2006, p. 346).

Overview of Social Work in Schools

School social work has a more than one hundred year history of delivering services to students, while acting as a link between school, community and home (Kelly, 2009). As of 2002, there are over 14,000 social workers serving schools in the US (Huxtable & Blythe, 2002, p. 43). According to Kelly, et al., (2010) school social work is a large and growing field. School social workers frequently work in multiple schools and have a large caseload.

School social workers are mental health clinicians operating officially in the school setting. This role may involve running groups and conducting individual therapy sessions. School social workers often work with students who have developmental or

learning disabilities, helping to make appropriate accommodations and reduce the impact of stigma on these students (Dupper, 2003).

The mission of school social work is to help students successfully complete school (Huxtable & Blythe, 2002). This is accomplished through a wide variety of interventions that help to overcome obstacles to a student's school success by ameliorating environmental stressors and enhancing the coping skills of students. Often, the students who receive the interventions are those who are most vulnerable due to behavioral, social and environmental factors (Dupper, 2003). According to Openshaw (2008), the four main multifaceted roles of school social workers are for 1) consultation, 2) assessment, 3) direct intervention and 4) assistance with program development.

One role of the school social worker is to advocate for students by building trusting relationships between the major players in students' lives. Acting as mediators, school social workers enhance communication and encourage understanding between sometimes-conflicting parties. In this capacity, school social workers interface with the students, families, schoolteachers and school officials, as well as the neighborhoods and organizations that are direct and indirect influences on students' lives (Dupper, 2003).

Still, there is no universal consensus on what roles school social workers should perform and there is little understanding of specifically how social workers should spend their time during the school day (Kelly, 2009). Because of the complexity of the school social workers' job, "role confusion" persists. Beyond this role confusion, schoolteachers and staff may not understand or acknowledge the work school social workers do. In addition, social workers often face unrealistic expectations in their ability to alleviate students' behavioral difficulties. These misunderstandings can result in low status for the

school social worker within the school organization. This low status can, in turn, make it difficult for school social workers to be effective (Dupper, 2003).

Social Workers Role in SEL

The teacher's role in implementing SEL in the classroom is well articulated (Dasho, Lewis & Watson, 2001; Elias et al., 1997; Fleming & Bay, 2004; McCombs, 2004; Mugno & Rosenblitt, 2001; Pasi, 2001). While social workers have been invited to participate in implementing SEL programs, their role has not been spelled out clearly. This is evidenced by the decided lack of mention of social workers in SEL research literature.

One of few mentions in the literature about social workers is an example of how social workers failed to be integrated into an SEL program in New Jersey (Kress & Elias, 2006). Merrell & Gueldner mention briefly that school social workers participate in SEL programs. In the *School Social Work Journal*, Allen (2009) describes the intervention system by an SEL team for bullying and conflict resolution. While this article does not specifically address a social worker's role in this system, it speaks generally to a process in which a social worker can be a significant player. The *Social Worker's Desk Reference* (2009) mentions social workers and SEL together, in passing in an example of a school social worker's role as "working to prevent school violence and increase SEL" (Kelly, 2009, p. 43). No further elucidation about the role of social workers in SEL is mentioned.

The term school social worker is used interchangeably with the term school counselor. Pasi (2001) discusses the role of the counselor in SEL programs as being "In the unique position to serve as a valuable resource to teachers, administrators and students alike in the important goal of fostering social and emotional competence in the

school community. By virtue of their educational background and professional role, they can provide the implicit and explicit leadership a successful [SEL] program requires" (Paso, 2001, p.48). Similarly, Pellitteri, Stern, Shelton, & Muller-Ackerman state in *Emotionally Intelligent School Counseling* (2006) "there has always been a connection between emotional intelligence and the work of the professional school counselor" (p. 3).

While this may be the case, there is a distinct absence in the literature about what social workers do in schools that have SEL programs. This is surprising because social work training and function in schools has long been concerned with social and emotional functioning of children and this overlaps with SEL.

In Summary

Social and Emotional Learning programs have been introduced into schools throughout the United States during the last decade to help students address social and emotional development. In the literature about these programs, the roles of teachers and administrators have most often been addressed. While the goals of school social work and SEL programs have significant overlap, there is little in the literature about the role of the school social worker. This study is designed to begin to fill that gap.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Project Purpose and Design

Social and emotional learning programs (SEL) have been increasing in number at the state level for well over a decade in this country (Merrell & Gueldner, 2010). While there is no single, standardized program, SEL curricula share common goals and strategies for implementing curricula into a classroom. There is also consensus in the literature that in successful programs, the SEL curriculum is implemented school-wide with participation of all stakeholders in the school (McCombs, 2004). The role of the teacher is best articulated in the SEL literature. Most often social work is not mentioned as a separate stakeholder and, even when social work is mentioned, no specific role is spelled out. This qualitative research is designed to investigate what can be learned from the practice wisdom of school social workers in elementary schools that have adopted a SEL curriculum about their experiences and the roles they have adopted; and how they feel the role of social work should best be articulated in SEL curricula.

This study employed a qualitative design that involved face-to-face interviews with twelve school social workers that practice in elementary schools that have adopted a SEL curriculum. A snowball sampling strategy was employed. The interview schedule consisted of a combination of demographic background information and a series of more open-ended questions designed to probe participants' experience working in an elementary school with an SEL program (see Appendix C). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by this researcher. A content analysis was conducted on the transcribed interview data and analyzed for recurrent topics and themes.

Characteristics of Participants and Recruitment Strategy

The criteria for participation in this study included being a school social worker with a BSW or MSW degree and having worked in an elementary school that has adopted a SEL curriculum for at least one year. Participants were recruited utilizing a snowball sampling strategy. Potential participants were located through professional connection, acquaintance and a contact at The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the leading organization that promotes SEL. The recruitment process included dissemination of emails to contacts that were asked to share the recruitment materials that were developed (see Appendix B) with potential applicants. Contacts were also asked to share the recruitment materials with colleagues that might refer potential applicants. The recruitment materials included contact information and asked potential participants to contact the researcher by phone or email in order to set up a phone call screening.

The screening process entailed a series of questions confirming that the potential participant met the study requirements of having a MSW or BSW degree and having worked in an elementary school that had an SEL program for more than one school year. An interview was then scheduled at a mutually convenient time and place with potential applicants that met study requirements and agreed to participate. The study design stipulated a face-to-face interview with twelve participants. In the end this researcher was only able to recruit eight eligible participants, all with MSW degrees.

Data Collection and Analysis

Five of the eight participants were seen in face-to-face interview at the schools where they were employed. One interview took place at this researcher's office. One of the remaining two interviews had to take place over the phone and one took place using video conferencing on Skype.

Interviews lasted up to an hour and were digitally recorded. This researcher also took some supplemental notes during the interview. This researcher manually transcribed all interviews. Subsequently, a content analysis was conducted on the transcribed data and coded for recurrent themes.

Informed Consent Procedures

At the time of the initial phone contact, the informed consent procedures were discussed with participants. Participants were also mailed a copy of the Informed Consent to review prior to the interview. The Informed Consent describes the study, the participation required, precautions and confidentiality and risks and benefits. It also makes clear that participants have the right to not answer a question or to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the study being written up. It also gives contact information for withdrawing from the study or if a participant has further questions or a complaint.

At the time of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask any remaining questions about the study or informed consent procedures. They were then required to sign two copies of the informed consent before the interview could begin, one for this researcher and one for the participant's personal records.

Potential Risks and Benefits to Study Participants

There are a few anticipated risks to participating in this study. Participation in this study is voluntary. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) and can withdraw participation anytime before the results are written up. Should a participant choose to withdraw, all related materials would be destroyed. In any experience of self-reflection, it is always possible that strong feelings can emerge that a participant may want to process further with other colleagues and/or administration.

There are no financial benefits to participants for participating in this study. It is the hope of this researcher that participants will benefit from knowing that they are contributing to building the professional knowledge base about the role of social work in implementing Social and Emotional Learning curriculum in elementary schools. Participants may also benefit from having this opportunity to reflect on their experience with these programs.

Precautions to Safeguard Confidentiality

Strict confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study process. Once the interviews are complete, all identifying information about the participants will be removed. The digital recordings and their transcripts will be identified by a numeric code and secured in a zip drive specifically related to this study that will be kept in the researcher's home in a secure location during the research and for a period of three years thereafter in keeping with federal regulations. After that time, these materials will continue to be secured until they are no longer needed and then will be destroyed. In any reports or presentations, data will be disguised in aggregate form only and quotations will

be sufficiently disguised to prevent identification with a particular participant. If a participant chooses to withdraw before this study is written up, all data pertaining to their participation will be destroyed.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Demographics

Participants ranged in age from 36 to 63, with a mean age of 46. All of the participants identified themselves as female (100%). In terms of ethnicity, seven participants identified themselves as European-American/Caucasian (87.5%). One participant identified herself as African-American (12.5%). All of the participants had Masters in Social Work degrees (100%). Three participants had LCSW certification (37.5%), four had LICSW certification (50%) and one participant had an MSW and additional school councilor certifications (12.5%). See table 1 and table 2.

This study was comprised of seasoned social workers, with a minimum of eight years since having received their degree and as many as 29 years since having received the degree of MSW. The amount of experience working in schools was also high, with a mean of 6.625 years work experience in schools that have SEL curricula.

Table 1:
Demographic Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
1	36	Female	Caucasian
2	37	Female	Caucasian
3	39	Female	African American
4	43	Female	Caucasian
5	48	Female	Caucasian
6	48	Female	Caucasian
7	54	Female	Caucasian
8	63	Female	Caucasian

Table 2:
Professional Experience

Participant	Degree	When granted	Certification	When granted	Years working with SEL curriculum
1	MSW	1999	N/A		3
2	MSW	2002	LICSW	2007	7
3	MSW	1998	LICSW	2000	5
4	MSW	1992	LCSW	1999	5
5	MSW	1996	LCSW	1996	2
6	MSW	1998	Type 73 School Certification	1998	8
7	MSW	1993	LICSW	1993	13
8	MSW	1981	LICSW	1983	10

The first question asked participants, "Tell me about the SEL program at your school." Six (6 = 75%) participants answered that their school use the Second Step program, one (1= 12.5%) answered Lyons Quest (1 = 12.5%) and one (1 = 12.5%) answered Steps to Respect.

Participant 3

We use a curriculum that's called Steps to Respect, which is billed as an anti-bullying curriculum.

Participant 6

The district encourages the use of the social and emotional learning Lions Quest... program international base social and emotional learning program. It's one component of it but a big component of it. It's curricular-based.... It's designed for teachers and social workers and other personnel to provide it. It can take the teacher pretty much through the school year.

Participant 7

My understanding is that there was some requirement that there would be some kind of violence prevention curriculum in the schools. So the superintendent at the time was supporting Second Step be adopted in all of the classrooms.... They bought a Second Step kit for every single classroom including the preschools.... There are weekly lessons with lesson cards where the script is basically given to the teacher. It's very easy to do. In those pictures there are sort of talking points and there is almost always a role-play or some kind of practicing of the skill that they are learning. In this kindergarten kit they use puppets, which makes it a lot of fun... and there's three units in Second Step. The first one is learning about emotions, basically empathy training. Then there is problem solving and then anger management. So it's very specific, building on the previous lessons and the previous units. And then they also... they'll give you books that can go along with the theme to support, to supplement it. There is also a whole family piece.

Participant 8

It's called Second Step... the teachers do it. It's a packet. It's a pre-established curriculum that goes from kindergarten through fifth grade. It's a series of pictures that are shown to the children. The teachers do their curriculum and they talk about feelings, nonverbal communication, what you see in the pictures, what you think might happen... There's a lot of open discussion.... There is a different set of cards in each grade. They focus on different topics in each grade.

While the schools may have officially adopted one SEL program, the six participants (100%) that actually participated in implementing the SEL curriculum in the classroom (as opposed to the two participants that were exclusively trainers of the SEL curriculum and consultants around school wide implementation of SEL) seemed to feel free to augment the base program with materials from other SEL programs or materials they created.

Participant 3

I use kind of a version of it [Steps to Respect] because it's geared towards the older kids. So I have to kind of make modifications and changes so that it's age appropriate for kindergarten and grades one and two.

Participant 5

So I take the Second Step program, which starts off with just looking at faces and trying to determine one's feelings, which helps.... Sally Garcia Winters is a speech and language pathologist that works a lot with autism and so I blend her stuff into this because if you look at the kids with autism.... it's really important for them to look at the specific clues. I try to really slow it down and then we try and do it again and again and again and then we make games into it.

Participant 6

Depending on the need it may not be me pulling the Lions quest curriculum it might be pulling from a whole different program based on the issue be it bullying, be it relationship with peers, mean girl issues, all kind of things conflict resolution, peer mediation... Whatever is needed that I will go and address the concern... there's a lot in regards to special needs kids very often going in and talking to a classroom with parent permission and consent, to suggest ways of assisting or not assisting a student with special needs... so there's a variety of reasons why I would go in.... If there was a concern at recess then we'll have to do a diagnostic, then work to develop a plan to deal with any of those concerns.

Participant 8

I supplement that with another curriculum that I used to do more of when I was not the only person in the building as a counselor and that's... 'Be Cool' is the curriculum, it's a James Stanfield piece and it has videos. It deals with five different areas: bullying, teasing, criticism, anger in yourself and anger in other people. And some of the teachers have really liked to piggyback those two [Second Step and Be Cool] curricula.... It's kind of a give-and-take.... If I'm working with a child and an issue comes up, I'm going to get back into the classroom with a classroom teacher to be sure that it's being addressed globally.

All of the participants (8 = 100%) appeared to have a vision of SEL being implemented school wide, whether their particular setting had achieved it or not.

Participant 1

We adopted Second Step which is a program put out by committee for children.... so we really just follow their scope and sequence and every year our SEL team puts together a pace chart and we look at the scope and sequence of each grade level and we put out when each grade level should be teaching the lesson and pace it so that during the same amount of weeks each class will be doing unit one and then again for unit two and then again for unit three. And then we did that because we found that then we could correlate our school-wide assemblies and incorporate SEL into those. And then we know all of the children and the parents have had that language exposure by that week in school.

Participant 2

It was primarily Second Step and when I was hired. ... they were trying to implement it school wide... from K to six.... We tried to then develop school rules that matched the curriculum. We tried to use a similar language... and then look at how to implement it more.... in other settings in the school. Like playground, cafeteria, you know, hallways.

Participant 6

[The SEL curriculum is] designed for teachers and social workers and other personnel to provide it.

The second question asked was, "What have been your social work roles in the context of working in a school that has an SEL curriculum?" Of the eight participants, five (5 = 62.5%) indicated that they participate in the implementation of the SEL curriculum in the classroom and act as trainers of the curriculum to other stakeholders in the school; two (2 = 25%) acted exclusively as trainers of the SEL curriculum for all stakeholders and one (1 = 12.5%) was only involved with the implement of the SEL curriculum in the classrooms.

Participant 1

Support: help them understand what we are expecting of them. At the start of it we had said that we would go in and co-teach each with them if they wanted to so we can role model... how the lessons should look. Education: teaching them. We spent quite a few hours just training them on the program. Committee for children came in, they sent a trainer to train a core team so that we can go back and train

everybody. Certified, noncertified, everybody has had training.... It all came about to make this as easy a transition for the teachers. We did a lot of training with all of our staff.

Participant 2

I trained all the teachers... during a two-day professional development and the idea was that teachers were going to spend... time doing their curriculum, one hour or 45 minutes and then reinforcing whatever lesson was taught. And I was going to be a coach and... co-teach with the teachers until they felt comfortable.

Participant 3

I do three classes of 30 minutes each. And then I'll do... we have four classrooms on each grade level so by doing six weeks... Six week sessions of 30 minutes each I can get through all of the K, one and two kids. And the other counselor does the third, fourth and fifth graders. So we hit the whole school for a six-week block [per classroom] during the course of the year.

Participant 6

I do a lot of teacher training... for instance we're putting together a peer mediation program so I'm to provide information for the teachers to teach their kids. So I'm putting together a power point so they can cover, for instance, an "I message" so students understand how they can begin to settle a conflict.

Participant 7

I am on the anti-bullying task force and we are trying to decide what programs the school district should adopt. Whether we say, everyone needs to be Second Step, or there is another program that is still in the process. So, if it's that every teacher needs to be teaching Second Step then I might be in more of a training role.

Question three asked the participants, "How was it decided that this would be your role?" Four of the participants said that their role in participating in and/or implementing came as a top down decision.

Participant 3

I think there is a push in the district and in the state that school counseling programs have a little more comprehensive model and that we're more proactive versus reactive. That really has been the push... We didn't have any way for the counselors to be in the classroom. And so this felt like a way that not only could I get in the classroom but also do something a little bit more specific and constructive.

Participant 4

[The] school is part of the safe and supportive learning communities grant and there needed to be a facilitator for that role and so I'm the facilitator. I applied for

the posting... A posting came out from central office and anyone could apply and I applied and I got the position. And from there took on a role as a facilitator for [the] school. So I'm the facilitator, the coordinator. And then with regards to me actually teaching the classes, that just comes into my role as following the comprehensive counseling policy for the district, where counselors have to teach the three components academic, personal/social, and career.

Participant 5

I'm not exactly sure why, but you know... I agree with it [SEL programming] so... I guess it came up when I was in an interview saying, "this is what I think is important," and my principal knew the curriculum and had seen it done but I'm not exactly sure if it was just because of my initiation.

Four participants (4 = 50%) explained that after it was decided their school would be implementing a SEL curricula, that they had flexibility or autonomy about how to implement the curriculum.

Participant 1

We all do what our strength is, whatever we can bring to the group. And having a mixed group, you know we have some classroom teachers on the core team and they obviously are stuck in classrooms all day so there are limitations to what they can do during the school day. So I can pick up. On that piece I just have more flexibility so I feel like I just end up doing more. So I just kind of specialized as the organizer because I have more flexibility than anybody on the team.

Participant 4

I have a lot of autonomy. Ultimately my principal is in charge but she doesn't really have anything to do with it. I just keep her updated on what's going on. It's written in our school improvement plan for teachers to do this training and one of our goals for this year was for more staff to be trained. So we had a little bit more than before but our school improvement plan our SIP plan is for all teachers to be trained and the curriculum to be embedded in all morning meetings.

Participant 7

I have a lot of autonomy about that. It's sort of changes from year to year.

Question four asked participants, "In your social work role(s) working with an SEL curriculum, how have you been most effective?" All eight participants (8 = 100%) responded in ways that fall into the category of use of self in collaborative relationships

with all stakeholders in the system - students, teachers, administrators, other staff and parents.

Participant 1

Bringing my knowledge to it. I mean, I have a Masters in social work. I have my undergrad in psych and social work so I've had many years experience learning about the benefits of having pro-social skills and role models. So bringing that knowledge base to the team I would say.

Participant 2

So as a social worker I felt like I was helping shift the paradigm ... Because I would start off with these kids and as they went through school they would always remember "oh there's second step..." and if the teacher would actually do a lesson they would say, "Oh yeah I remember that," or, "I remember this." As I worked with the children or worked with the teachers I could say well we... we could use the problem-solving skills we could brainstorm you can have them pick a solution... And then I think in terms of the children, I think they enjoyed the lessons. They really loved it. I don't know if it was necessarily the particular curriculum or if it was just my connection with them...

Participant 3

Well I think just in exposing the kids to the different ways to handle things.... And to have them practice it. I really think the practice is important. And again even though I'm done with a certain classroom, I might see them the next month for some other reason or in a class and I can say "wait a minute where should your eyes be if you're talking to somebody?" And it's just a reminder and they know automatically what I'm talking about. So it's kind of nice.

Participant 4

I'm effective on a macro level just school wide, then on the next mezzo level just in the classroom, and then on the micro level just in my individual work with students. Especially following the curriculum and then doing any crisis intervention or scheduled counseling with students and then just reinforcing those concepts. You know problem-solving, communication. Any of those identified as "soft skills" to increase their time on learning and decrease their time out of the classroom due to conflict.... It's integrated into the school. It's integrated into the health curriculum... if I augment the lessons anyway, like if I augment the lessons with additional lessons on peace or harmony, then I can incorporate that into the social studies curriculum and following their standards.

Participant 5

I think it becomes a team approach looking at the teachers too who are saying "what's going on in their classrooms?" and "has anything changed based on the curriculum or individual kids have they changed?". ... I know the teacher last year said, "you know you do this stuff in class (and) the kids, when you leave they

keep working [on it], they talk about it - they do it ... so like okay that's a good sign.

Participant 6

I think so the kids know who I am... I think that's half of it... so they understand that I'm a person that they can go to if they have an issue and I want the kids to know that as the school social worker I'm there I'm not the one that's going to you know... go to the principal... so they really get the understanding of why social and emotional learning is so important as well.... If the teachers want assistance I'm the person that they can go to and that they can come to me as well.... they enjoy it. It's a nice break from math or science or reading and I'm very well aware that is very entertaining for them... because of the stress of the school day, it can lend to a little more relaxation...

Participant 8

I honestly feel that I have been most effective in collaborating with the teachers establishing a good rapport there, working with the kids around the conflicts. I have a clear message to them all of the time. "No one is in trouble here right now as we gather... So I do think that's where the greatest impact happens in these one-to-one things or the repetition of it all.... Really consistent messages.

The fifth question was "Are there roles that you've been asked to play in implementing the SEL curriculum that have not been successful?" Seven of eight participants (87.5%) essentially responded no to this question. Only one participant (12.5%) responded in the affirmative. That role was as a mole for the principle when asked to implement a SEL program where there was not buy in from other stakeholders in the school.

Participant 2

I think implementing a curriculum where I'm a new social worker, I'm training the teachers. I'm then trying to get them on board and build morale and motivation and I'm almost like a mole by (having to) reporting back to the principle of their not doing it. So there is kind of like trying to be the implementer and the person that's holding them accountable and then really having no - didn't really have any leverage.

The sixth question was "What changes have there been in your social work role(s) in relation to the SEL curriculum?" Five participants (5 = 62. 5) spoke of positive ways their roles had changed. One participant (12.5%) spoke of change that was not for the

better. The other two participants (2 = 25%) explained that their roles had not significantly changed.

Participant 2

Yeah trainer, implementer... direct instructor, consultant.... over time I wasn't a trainer anymore so that changed... they didn't tell me know that I wasn't a trainer but it just kind disappeared.... Evaporated, poof... like as a lot of curriculums do when there is not... Principle's come in and they're like "oh were gonna do this" and if there is no buy-in it, doesn't become part of the milieu or become part of the culture and so I think that happened a lot with Second Step. It wasn't part of the culture. So it just evaporated. So I wasn't a trainer. I wasn't a consultant. I ended up doing it in kindergarten over time because the teacher liked it.... I would do behavioral plans... I was just doing different things... but it wasn't particularly geared around SEL programs.... it [the implementation of SEL] kind of fizzled...

Participant 3

I don't get as much pulled for crises that could probably be prevented. I think our reputation in the building is more solid.... [teachers are] looking for not just a quick fix. It's more of a kind of working relationship. Like if there's a behavioral issue that we have to address, going back and forth and well "let's try this for a week" and "I'll check back with you" and I think they're pretty sure that I am going to check back with them or that they can check with me. There is less of "what is that counselor doing?"

Participant 4

Initially we weren't doing anything like this. With funding and just in awareness of curriculum availability then just going through the training. And having the curriculum kits for our staff... and like this [SEL curriculum] that came out of a workshop that I had attended and just creating something with the phys ed/health teacher. So it really has dramatically evolved since when I first started here. Yes.

Participant 5

In relation to the curriculum I guess meeting the families because then it gives me more of an understanding of a whole child and the history and if their kid who has more difficulty socially engaging with kids or has more conflicts, then I spent time at home. The kid trusts me more and also the family trust me more.... Another thing that's been added on is that they want us to do a safety curriculum.... It's about sexual abuse and helping kids be safe. So the first several lessons are about walking and traffic safety, bus safety, car safety, whatever. And then it goes on to what you do when your uncle touch... molests you or something. That's been what I'm supposed to do because that's the district mandate. So that's something I've changed already because I just felt like at this age we can talk about assertiveness and so I have added more reading books around assertiveness and also both. "who do you talk to that you trust?" and talk

about... and I feel for certain kids that [molestation] happened to them and that the kids would be totally scared after that, so I worked hard to make it about assertiveness.

Participant 7

I used to do more of the family piece, the family component. There was one year where we did a whole class, series. I think it was a five-week series. We used to do... there was a two-hour family workshop but because there hasn't been as much support administratively for it and it hasn't been as much of a focus and not all the teachers are doing it, it sort of felt like it would be misleading to talk to parents about how this is this curriculum we have when not everyone is doing it... And there's a whole family curriculum, parenting curriculum... it's a series of videos... you can do it in six sessions... basically it's teaching parents how to use the skills and reinforce it at home.

Participant 8

There was a period of time where teachers were implementing it [the SEL curriculum] or they weren't comfortable with it. Some of them were teachers who had been working for many, many years. They saw teaching English and math as their main priority. They didn't think it was their job to deal with any of the social/emotional issues at all staring at them in the classroom.... So that is a change. A lot of our older teachers have retired and we have a much younger, newly trained group of teachers who really have embraced Responsive Classroom, they've embraced a lot of that and they see the need to develop community. They work at that. They're trained at that and that has taken that need out of my hands to deal with a lot of the things that the older teachers would not deal with at all.... There is an ownership on the part of [newer] classroom teachers that really was not there before.

The seventh question was "Ideally, what do you think the role of social work should be in a SEL program?" All participants (8 = 100%) seemed to feel that working with or supporting the teachers in the classroom and five participants (4 = 50%) noted the role of school social worker as collaborator with other stakeholders in the school.

Participant 2

Ideally it would be great to have an outside consultant come in and the school social worker would just be part of the training of all the teachers and then and maybe be the conduit to the actual trainer so they could be a support person. So they would have knowledge based of their role as a social worker and they could help support it and then look at how to implement it more into the milieu so while it's implemented into the classrooms, how is it fostered in other settings in the school? Like playground, cafeteria you know hallways. How does the social worker then help use that if the persons meeting individually with children or with

groups of kids or observing in the classroom... I think that's ideally... I don't think kids learn it in isolation.

Participant 3

It would be great if we can do more of it, it would be great if it wasn't limited to a six-week curriculum. More time would always be great but we would need one counselor per grade level... I mean I can't spend all of my time teaching the curriculum and the teachers can't give up all their time for... because they are taking time out of their social studies curriculum too... but the way it is now it's kind of workable. It's workable and I think everybody is giving a little bit and getting a lot.

Participant 4

Ideally it's either implementing the program or advising teachers on how to implement the program. So you're taking on two roles there. It's really just about changing the concept for teachers in a school setting... And that comes from my role as a facilitator in the building. That also comes from my role as just being a counselor in the building and raising the awareness. Whether it's at a staff meeting and they're talking about math scores... whether it's me personally just speaking up and saying "well wait a second we also need to look at the whole child" and that's just a shift in this thinking. I think that is becoming more pervasive across the district in [The city] because people are making that correlation... definitely the connection.

Participant 5

Because of the training we have, I think there's more of a perception of what will be helpful for a kid. Can somebody else can do Second Step curriculum? Anyone... the teachers... and a lot of schools I know social workers in [the city] who the teachers do the Second Step program and I think it's useful for the teachers to try to continue with the idea.

Participant 6

Consultative... sometimes teaching... but consultative.... I'd like to get to be able to consult more than anything because these programs are designed for teachers to implement... It's just the time they're required to do... and they have to pencil out time everyday either and/or just coordinated it with the social studies lesson. There are ways that they can implement and there have been different committees formed within our district to help that happen so maybe it's during a reading time that they work on a particular focus or something that's really social and emotional learning that's happening... so they can be sure that those social emotional learning standards are working. Though those same standards are the standards that as social workers are our goals.

Participant 7

I think ideally it would be more in a supportive role. I think it should be the classroom teachers and that I would be more reinforcing it and maybe during

training and maybe during the family piece but that the classroom teachers... I think it's much more effective when it comes from the classroom teacher and that's part of what they do everyday.

Participant 8

Ideally I think it will be wonderful to be in those classrooms on a regular weekly basis doing whatever the curriculum is with a classroom teacher and being able to carry that forward to the next year because one of the unique things about being the counselor in the building is that you see these kids from kindergarten through fifth-grade.

The eighth question was "Is there anything else you would like to say about the role of social work in SEL programs?" All of the participants that answered this question (8 = 100%) stressed the importance and benefits of the program although reasons varied.

Participant 1

I see it opening up conversations between students and teachers that would have never happened otherwise. I think there's kind of this light now that has clicked for both teachers and students and there's a connection now.... I think this is the best thing to happen to social work. I'm so grateful that it's finally acknowledged. I feel like it's made a difference for me. It's made me feel like we're finally acknowledged and that we do have a purpose.

Participant 3

It's valuable in the end and not just for teaching the actual curriculum but for establishing that relationship with the kids [by being in the classroom teaching SEL curricula]. I think that is invaluable. Those kids are going to see my face. They are going to know me as somebody they can come to whether it's a bullying situation or they're having problems making friends.... I'd say even with parents it's helped. If they've called me because of a problem their child has in the classroom, I'll have a lot more familiarity with their student in the classroom. It gives a bigger context to be able to talk about their student and to show "I know your kid" and I think they really appreciate that.

Participant 4

It's critical. It's important. It's a key portion to the learning for students. I don't think it's something that schools can do without... It's all about creating that caring community within the school and then also within the classroom... You'll hear kids say now "I'm really frustrated. I can't do this math work," instead of saying "I'm angry" or "I'm mad." Or they'll say, "I'm feeling jealous because you are sitting with her on the bench and you're not sitting with me." So kids are learning the terminology, which is just fabulous for them to identify what the feeling is.

Participant 5

I think it's important for a social worker to be doing that [SEL] curriculum because you're in the classroom and you see the kid in action. I think it's really important because the kid feels like you know them, which builds more of a sense of trust.

Participant 6

I think it's a good thing; I think it's effective.... This child will definitely have some conflicts and some issues in the future but will they be quicker to resolve them? Yes. Will they spend less time [involved in conflicts] if they have the information? Possibly. They'll have more time with more success in academics for sure. So, I'm encouraged by them [the curricula] and I think the kids like them. It creates a really good learning climate for the kids. They know they can express themselves and that part is a very valuable thing.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the role of elementary school social workers that work in schools that have social and emotional learning programs (SEL). Social and emotional learning programs address children's social and emotional development in a school's curriculum. SEL programs have proliferated in the United States over the last decade. Currently Illinois has mandated school SEL programs and New York promotes SEL though it is not mandated. Other communities have implemented these programs on both a district wide and per-school basis.

In the literature about SEL programs, most often the role of teachers and administrators have been addressed, though it has also been made clear that other school personnel are invited to participate. Surprisingly there is little in the literature that addresses the role for social workers in schools that have SEL programs. This paper is designed to try to begin to fill this gap. This study involved six face-to-face interviews, one phone interview and one Skype interview.

Major findings of this study are that school social workers agree that their role in implementing a SEL curriculum in an elementary school is to help teachers succeed in implementing the curriculum (8 = 100%), either by co-teaching the curriculum directly in the classroom and/or by training teachers outside of the classroom. All participants (8 = 100%) support the broad based, school wide implementation of SEL programs. All participants (8 = 100%) said that they were most effective in implementing SEL curricula by their use of self, in relationships with all of the stakeholders of the school community, the teachers, students, administrators, other school personnel and

parents. All of the participants who actually participated in the implementation of the SEL curricula (6 = %100) felt free to augment or adapt the curriculum from other programs or from materials they created, to meet the particular needs of a student or group of students. Seven of eight participants essentially responded "no" to the question, "Are there roles that you've been asked to play in implementing the SEL curriculum that you feel have not been successful? These participants essentially said that if something did not work, they either modified that aspect of the curriculum or abandoned it in order to find something that would be more successful. All of the participants (8 = 100%), in various ways, said that they believe that implementing an SEL curriculum is an important part of elementary school.

While pre-school has long had elements of it's curricula that address social and emotional development, this research points to the direction that elementary school social workers believe that addressing these concerns is also important for the children in their schools. These social workers also appear committed to the implementation of SEL curricula because they believe SEL programs can have benefits for all of the stakeholders at the school. Half (4 = 50%) of the participants spoke about how being involved in implementing the SEL curriculum benefited the profession of social work in the school by raising the profile of social work within the school, something which has perpetually been a problem for the profession. This points to the possibility that when social workers are allowed to occupy positions of influence, by being able to interact with a wide range of stakeholders in the school, that social workers can help transform a school into a more calm, caring and knowing environment that can help all of the stakeholders, and especially the students, to thrive.

Limitations

This was a small exploratory study intended to identify themes from narrative data. Though the small sample size revealed rich data from these participants. Validity and application to a wider population is not possible. Future research would benefit from a more diverse sample.

Future Research

These results point in the direction that more research in this area must be done, for the sake of schools and for the sake of the students and for social workers. Because we live in a country so torn by economic and cultural divisions, SEL programs have the possibility of helping disenfranchised students to avoid the problems that are so entrenched in our culture fueled by racism and classism. This is the promise of SEL programs. They are only in their beginning stages, with a long way to go but this research indicates that finally there is something in schools that tries to help students develop their person, not simply that schools expect that either students will pull themselves up by their own bootstraps or fail on their own lack of inner strength.

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APPENDIX A - INFORMED CONSENT FORM

January 1, 2010

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is David Gross. I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study to explore what we can learn from the practice wisdom of school social workers in elementary schools that have adopted a Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum (SEL). There has been very little articulation about how social workers most effectively participate or what role(s) they would like to play in such programs.

This research is being done as a thesis of the Master's Social Work Degree and also for potential future presentation and publication on this topic.

Participants in this study must be social workers with a BSW or MSW degree and also have worked in an elementary school that has adopted a SEL curriculum for at least one year. You have been identified as meeting these criteria. If you agree to participate in this project, you will meet with me in a face-to-face interview that will last no more than one hour.

We would meet at a mutually agreed upon time and place. The interview itself will consist of a brief set of structured demographic questions, followed by a series of semi-structured and more open-ended questions designed to encourage your reflection on your role as a social worker in SEL programs.

At the time of the meeting you will have the opportunity to ask any additional questions you might have about the study process. You will then be asked to sign two copies of the Informed Consent form and be given one for your own records before the formal interview begins. The interview will be digitally recorded and I may take notes during the interview. I will transcribe the recordings.

Every precaution will be taken to protect your confidentiality. All participants' identifying information will be removed from the recordings and transcripts and a numeric code will be developed to identify materials. Only my thesis advisor and I will have access to this material. Data collected will be reported in aggregate form only and any quotations included in reports of this study and future presentations will be sufficiently disguised to prevent identification of participants. All research materials will be secured in a zip drive specifically related to this study and that will remain at my home in a secure location during the research and for a period of three years thereafter in keeping with federal regulations. After that time, these materials will continue to be secured until they are no longer needed and then will be destroyed.

There are few anticipated risks to participating in this study. Participants have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) and can withdraw participation anytime up to April 28, 2010 when the results will be written up. However, in any experience of self-reflection, it is always possible that strong feelings may emerge that a participant may want to process further with professional colleagues and/or school administration.

Participation in this study is voluntary and there will be no financial benefit. It is my hope that you will benefit from knowing that you are contributing to our professional knowledge base about the efficacy of social work in implementing SEL curriculum in elementary schools; as well as having this opportunity to reflect on your experience with these programs. Should you have any questions about this research, please contact me at (617) xxx-8006. Should you have any concerns about this research, please call the chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) xxx-7974.

YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS, AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Participant's Printed Name and Signature

Date

Researcher David Gross, MSW Intern

Date

Thank you again for your participation in this study.

Questions regarding any aspect of participation in the study should be directed to:

David Gross, MSW Intern
Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, MA 001060
(617)XXX-8006 or gdavidgross@XXX.com

Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

APPENDIX B - PARTICIPANT ADVERTISING EMAIL

To: _____
From: David Gross

Re: Opportunity to participate in Research Study on the Role of Social Work in SEL Programs in Elementary Schools

Hi _____,

My name is David Gross. I am a graduate student at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study to explore what we can learn from the practice wisdom of school social workers in elementary schools that have adopted a Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum (SEL).

Your name was give to me by _____, who indicated that you might be interested in participating in this research. To participate in the study, participants must have a BSW or MSW and have worked at least one year at an elementary school that has adopted a SEL program.

I have attached a copy of the Informed Consent that goes into more detail about the study and what your participation would involve.

If you are interested and would be willing to share your experience working as a social worker in an elementary school that has adopted an SEL curriculum, please contact me at (617) xxx-8006 or email me at gdauidgross@xxxxxxx.com

I look forward to hearing from you and hope you will consider participating.
Thanking you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

David Gross

APPENDIX C - INTERVIEW GUIDE

Part I: Demographic Information

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. How do you identify yourself in terms of Race? _____
Ethnicity? _____ and Gender? _____
4. What is your highest level of education?
Date of graduation?
5. What is your highest level of professional certification?
Date of certification?
6. How many years have you worked in elementary schools with SEL curricula?

Part II: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the SEL program at your school. (Listen for: what it consists of, amount of time per week, who participates; how curriculum is organized across grades)
2. What have been your roles(s) as a social worker in this context (give examples)?
3. How was it decided that this would be your role?
4. In your social work role(s) working with an SEL curriculum, how have you been most effective?
5. Has there been a role(s) you have been asked to play in implementing a SEL curriculum where you have not been successful?
6. What changes have there been in your social work role(s) over time, in relation to the SEL curriculum?
7. Ideally, what do you think the role of social work should be in a SEL program?
8. Is there anything else that you would like to say about the role of social work in SEL programs?

APPENDIX D- HUMAN SUBJECTS REVIEW APPROVAL LETTER



SMITH COLLEGE
School for
Social Work

Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950
F (413) 585-7994

March 19, 2010

David Gross

Dear David,

Your amended materials have been reviewed. They are fine and we are happy to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your interesting project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marsha Pruett" followed by a flourish.

Marsha Pruett, Ph.D., M.S.L.
Vice Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Mary Hall, Research Advisor