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School-Based Social Work and Socioemotional Learning Interventions in Alternative Education Programs

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Walden University
2019

Abstract

School-Based Social Work and Socioemotional Learning Interventions

in Alternative Education Programs

by

Heather Oosterhoff

MSW, Loyola University Chicago, 1992

BS, Loyola University Chicago, 1990

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Work

Walden University

May 2019

Abstract

Active school social workers are tasked with teaching social-emotional learning to students, including high need youth placed in alternative education settings. Multitiered systems of support provide a framework utilized by school systems to identify and address all student needs. However, a gap in research exists for evidenced-based social-emotional learning practices for students falling within Tier 3 of the multitiered systems of support framework, particularly those separated from the mainstream population and educated in alternative programs. This study explored how school social workers address the social-emotional learning needs of students in alternative education settings within the state of Illinois. The qualitative case-study design used a purposive sample of school social workers. Data sources included individual semistructured and focus group interviews of school social workers, and program curricula materials. Data analysis followed the constructivist perspective that multiple explanations of reality exist and, therefore, knowledge is constructed and emerges through the social practices and interpretations of people. Results indicated that school social workers in Illinois struggle to find existing evidence-based interventions to meet the social-emotional learning needs of high-school students in alternative education due to limited resources. Social work services maintain a student-driven focus and are strengthened by school-wide systemic structures for social-emotional learning that include cohesive efforts among staff and time for individual student processing of behaviors. This research has potential for social change through expanding knowledge available for school social work practitioners to meet the social-emotional learning needs of students in alternative education.

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Dedication

To those who are the roots of the journey: Glen, Erica, John, and Rachel. This was impossible without your support. I reached the end of Chapter 5 before hearing the first complaint that the dissertation was taking too much time. Your constant encouragement truly is the mojo that keeps me going. I praise God each day for your love and support, therefore, I dedicate this dissertation to you.

Acknowledgments

From the extensive months of researching the work of minds much greater than my own, the words of Aristotle summarize this journey best: "The roots of education are bitter; but the fruits are sweet." However, my now expanded mind for research delves deeper and has discovered there is questionable evidence that Aristotle connected these words together. There are many to thank for helping me build this fuller capacity for understanding knowledge and critical thinking.

This journey started with a close friend and colleague planting a seed. Yes, plant analogies are overused to conceptualize growth, but will be throughout these acknowledgements. Those who know me best, recognize there is no better description than a seed eventually blossoming into a flower that represents the foundation of my life. Dr. Dawn Broers, thank you for planting this seed and unquestionably smiling and understanding my cliché plant growth reference.

I knew early in the process that my focus, and blossom, would be increasing knowledge of SEL with hard to reach students. The best decision I made along the way was asking a professor whose work I admired to chair my dissertation committee. Thank you, Dr. Sean Hogan, for accepting my request. You are the stem that supported this project growth. I appreciated all your guidance and patience bringing this to fruition.

I also acknowledge and thank the many professors at Walden University for the strong instruction and feedback provided. Specifically, I acknowledge Dr. George, Dr. Yick, Dr. Anderson-Egeler, and Dr. Harris for making significant impacts on my learning and direction for this study.

Never lastly, I acknowledge God for the blessings of this life and stamina to persevere. Without faith, all is lost.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Nonacademic, character-building interventions are becoming more comprehensive across schools, districts, and states attempting to systemically focus and coordinate social-emotional learning (SEL) programming to foster student competencies and impact risk-prevention (Cohen, 2006). Specifically, within Illinois schools, the school code states that school social workers are to implement SEL education programs and comprehensive interventions that enhance student adjustment to the school setting (Illinois Association of School Social Workers, 2018). School social workers are to utilize evidence-based interventions to promote SEL for all students, but the resources for high need students at the high school level are lacking (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2015; Slaten, Irby, Tate, & Rivera, 2015). Though limited in available evidence-based practices (EBP), school social workers plan for and implement services to meet identified student needs.

Recent reforms in education have introduced models with multitiered support levels to ensure all students are being monitored and provided appropriate interventions. School social workers integrate these models into direct practice, including SEL education. Franklin and Kelly (2009) found that traditional interventions were not as effective for students falling in the Tier 3, or highest need, group. The researchers called for further studies to help social workers meet the specific needs of the most at-risk students (Franklin & Kelly, 2009). In efforts to improve the current knowledge base and understanding of SEL services with at-risk students, this study focused on direct social

work practice with students separated from their mainstream peers for higher levels of educational support provided within alternative education settings.

In this chapter, I describe the phenomenon leading to the research topic and present the research problem. I align the purposes of the study with the problem statement and the theoretical framework that guides the research design to answer the research questions. I define key concepts and potential assumptions I had that may have influenced the research. To enhance transparency throughout the study, I address the scope, limitations and delimitations. Lastly, I identify the outlook for positive social change related to this study.

Background

Several studies on SEL interventions with high-need students support the problem statement. Wanless and Domitrovich (2015) asserted that, though research on SEL is growing, not all programs have positive student outcomes. Key factors to successful SEL implementation are systematic district and school wide approaches, having strong school leaders, and preservice training for teachers. Slaten, Irby, Tate, and Rivera (2015) offered data indicating the importance for SEL interventions in alternative education to be critically culturally conscious. Further, Wasburn-Moses (2011) found that SEL services for students in alternative education are virtually unexplored. Additional high-risk groups identified with unmet needs were students with disabilities or criminal behaviors (Wasburn-Moses, 2011). Henry, Knight, and Thornberry (2012) described the need for intervention programs with students to prevent disengagement and other problematic

behaviors. These researchers described the SEL needs for at-risk students as a growing societal concern.

To provide a fuller understanding of SEL in education, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) completed a meta-analysis of existing research on SEL. The researchers found that school wide SEL interventions positively impacted pro-social behavior. Indicators of potential positive impacts of SEL in education warrant a focus on how to ensure quality SEL interventions. Payton et al. (2000) provided a framework for selecting quality SEL programs and identified challenges to finding programs that meet all student needs. Ewen and Topping (2012) conducted a mixed methods study on the effectiveness of a specific SEL intervention for personalized learning with students separated from mainstream education due to behavioral difficulties. The researchers reported a gap in knowledge for interventions supporting at-risk students in alternative programs (Ewen & Topping, 2012).

The role of school social workers in implementing SEL interventions was found in some scholarly work. Franklin and Kelly (2009) presented how evidence-based programs are being used by school social workers across three tiers of service needs for students, with Tier 3 being the highest need. The research of Phillippo and Kelly (2014) offered a qualitative exploration of how social workers and teachers meet the mental health needs of students identified at risk. The authors pointed out that there are unclear guidelines for services. The experiences of school social workers in implementing SEL are not clarified through this existing research.

An exhaustive search of current research yielded few studies that specifically focus on SEL for students in alternative education programs, or the practice of school social workers implementing SEL interventions with these students. Given that the need for evidence-based SEL interventions for students in alternative education programs is well documented and resources are limited, what is not known is how social workers select interventions to address the needs. Thus, gaining an understanding of the relationship between research-based SEL interventions and direct social work practice for students in alternative education programs addresses an existing gap in knowledge for school social work services.

Problem Statement

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) in 2004 introduced a new model for providing educational services to students (Berkeley, Bender, Gregg Peaster, & Sunders, 2009). The model, commonly referred to as multitiered systems of support (MTSS) or response to intervention (RtI), divides student service needs into three tiers for academic and SEL (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Students identified with Tier 3 SEL needs are considered the highest risk for behavioral and emotional issues and, in some cases, are placed in an alternative education program (Slaten et al. 2015). School professionals, including school social workers, are often tasked with meeting the social-emotional needs of students in alternative education and preventing any adverse impact on their education and life functioning (Slaten et al., 2015).

Recent studies suggest that students in alternative education demonstrate the highest needs for SEL, but typically have less available resources (Slaten et al., 2015). According to Wasburn-Moses (2011), the services the students receive in alternative education are virtually unexplored. The effective characteristics of alternative education programs lack consistent evidence (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Therefore, Powell (2003) recommended that future researchers evaluate alternative education programs in accordance with current educational standards and evidence-based practices in the field. Evidence for the effectiveness of Tier 3 group interventions is limited (CASEL, 2015; Slaten et al., 2015), yet school social workers provide and are evaluated on implementing interventions for SEL.

The need for evidence-based SEL interventions for students in alternative education programs is well documented. In a fiscal environment of limited resources, it is important to understand how school social workers select appropriate interventions for students with SEL needs. Gaining an understanding of the relationship between research-based SEL interventions and direct social work practice with students in alternative education programs will help address the existing knowledge gap in this area of school-based social work. The findings can provide valuable information for social workers planning interventions for students in alternative education programs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions for high school students in alternative education programs in Illinois. To

address the gap of evidence-based practices available for Tier 3, high-need students, I sought real-life experiences from school social workers serving students in alternative education. I used a review of intervention records, program curricula, and individual semistructured interviews with school social workers to develop greater understanding of how SEL occurs with high-need students in alternative education programs. This research fits with a constructivist world view that there is no one truth but meaning can be identified by understanding experiences (Ponterotto, 2005).

Research Questions

The research questions for the proposed qualitative case study to explore the experiences of school social workers planning evidence-based Tier 3 interventions for SEL in alternative high-school education programs in the state of Illinois were:

1. What are the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions in Illinois alternative education programs?

2. What factors contribute to the clinical decision-making process of school social workers providing interventions for SEL with high school students in alternative education programs?

3. What evidence-based practices are school social workers finding effectively increase social-emotional competencies to positively impact academic performance among students in alternative education?

Theoretical Framework

I used constructivist perspectives to explore how individual school social workers process information and make decisions related to practice. Multiple explanations of reality exist and, therefore, knowledge is constructed and emerges through the social practices and interpretations of people (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Case studies are empirical inquiries to investigate "how" questions related to a phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2018). An identifiable process of consolidating, reducing, and interpreting data brings forth meaning in a constructivist analytic process (Yazan, 2015). By interacting with interpretations of meaning across multiple cases, I used a constructed interpretation to answer the qualitative research question, "What are the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions in Illinois alternative education programs?" Therefore, I integrated the theoretical framework with the case-study design for rigor and quality to answer the research questions.

The services provided by social workers will be described within an MTSS framework. MTSS aims to establish standards for instruction that improve student outcomes in educational settings (Hayes & Lillenstein, 2015). The system of common core standards is intended to prepare students for maximum success in career or educational pursuits following high school (Hayes & Lillenstein, 2015). The three fluid and flexible tiers of the MTSS framework call for culturally responsive and evidence-based curriculums to meet student needs (Bianco, 2010). Research supports the use of MTSS for students with emotional and behavior disorders (McCurdy et al., 2016).

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study is an exploratory qualitative inquiry using case study methods. The rationale for a qualitative case-study design is that I seek to answer research questions for greater understanding of a situation that not much is known about. This approach aligns with the need to gain a deeper understanding of what social workers are currently using for SEL with high school students in alternative education. There is one element (school social workers) that can provide the necessary information-rich data on real life practices of SEL. Therefore, purposeful sampling for a case-study was appropriate. Additionally, because the inquiry sought to explore the real-life experiences of school social workers in a close, personal way, the inquiry aligned with a qualitative approach.

Definitions

Alternative programs: An educational program located within a regular school but inclusive to meet targeted need criteria of students (Foley & Pang, 2006). For the purposes of this study, alternative program and Alternative school may be used interchangeably but represent students being separated from mainstream peers due to identified high need risk factors.

Alternative schools: An educational program located in a separate facility or building from the general student body and requiring students meet designated need criteria for placement (Hoge, Liaupsin, Umbreit, & Ferro, 2014).

Case study: An investigation of one or multiple cases representing units of analysis within a bounded system to more fully understand a phenomenon occurring within that system (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014).

Implementation: Program strategies delivered with specific intent in direct practice to students that may look different in reality than in theory (Durlak, 2016).

Evidence-based practice: A process utilizing clinical assessment skills to integrate culturally sensitive strategies supported by published empirical evidence to make practice decisions and meet client needs (Franklin & Kelly, 2009). The act of re-integrating accumulated experiences of practitioners to benefit clients (Weller, Huang, & Cherubin, 2015).

Multitiered systems of support (MTSS): A framework for providing services to students across identified levels of need (Eber, Hyde, & Suter, 2011).

Response to intervention (RTI): Measuring growth following targeted interventions with students to plan for further student interventions (Berkeley et al., 2009).

School social worker: A mental-health professional holding specialized certification with the board of education in a state to practice social work within a school setting (Maras, Thompson, Lewis, Thornburg, & Hawks, 2015).

Social-emotional learning (SEL): Lessons targeting skills for competence interacting socially with others and in society (Cohen, 2006; Domitrovich, Durlak, Staley, & Weissberg, 2017).

Tier 3: The highest level of need for intervention with students. Students that fall within Tier 3 require individualized, targeted interventions and represent approximately five percent or less of all students (Hawken, Vincent, & Schumann, 2008). For the purposes of this study, students separated from the general population and placed in alternative education programs are considered high need and falling within Tier 3 of an MTSS or RTI model.

Assumptions

I acknowledge the existence of paradigm assumptions related to this qualitative case-study. I assumed that the participants hold a level of knowledge for school social work and SEL based on their certification with the Illinois state board of education. I assumed the participants answered all questions truthfully related to their professional credentials and experiences. Triangulating the multiple sources of data, including semistructured interviews, program materials, and a focus group, I assumed trustworthy patterns of meaning from data. Further, I assumed that member checking interpretations of data with participants supported the credibility of findings. The final paradigm assumption represents the acceptance of a constructivist theoretical viewpoint for the creation of meaning. Reality is constructed by people and, therefore, socially and culturally constructed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Scope and Delimitations

School professionals, including school social workers, are often tasked with meeting the social-emotional needs of students in alternative education and preventing any adverse impact on their education and life functioning (Slaten et al., 2015). For these

professionals to facilitate the best outcomes with students, there must be knowledge on how to implement SEL for all students and levels of needs. The widely accepted MTSS framework indicates all students should be supported, including those educated in more restrictive alternative programs. I chose to focus on the experiences of school social workers engaged in SEL with students in alternative education because more needs to be known about what is happening currently in direct practice. Several studies support the need for further exploration in the field of SEL in alternative education (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Farkas et al., 2012; Jolivette, McDaniel, Sprague, Swain-Bradway, & Ennis, 2012).

The populations I included in the proposed study were certified school social workers with the Illinois state board of education who specifically work with high school students in alternative education programs. The boundaries of alternative education programs include any program that separates students from the mainstream population of high school students for their academic learning. Variations exist among school district programs regarding how a student qualifies for alternative education, but any program which addresses behavioral concerns of academic failing, poor attendance, violence, aggression, or mental health needs will be considered an appropriate alternative education setting for the purposes of this study. A program that provides alternative education for young mothers would not be considered an alternative education program appropriate for this study. Theories and frameworks related to the study that I did not investigate were those specifically related to the juvenile justice system.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), rigors for credibility, reliability, and trustworthiness can be met for qualitative studies through careful application of methods throughout the research design. Because reliability is the extent that research findings can be replicated, I engaged in reflexive memo writing to create an audit trail for transparency of procedures throughout the process. Transferability in a qualitative case study design is congruent with external validity and represents the extent that results can be generalized outside the participant population. In this study, I focused on the experiences of school social workers implementing SEL in alternative education in the state Illinois. Therefore, generalizations become weaker when extending results to other student groups or social workers practicing in other states. However, methodological choices such as providing rich descriptions and member checking enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I address potential transferability issues through transparent descriptions of the research methodology and design.

Limitations

There are certain limitations inherent to case-study research that I acknowledge for the proposed study. First, the participants may have lacked the necessary knowledge of the MTSS/RtI standards put forth by the State Board of Education related to identifying and providing student services. Given that the qualitative multiple case study approach focuses on school social workers instead of students and the design does not provide quantifiable, explanatory forms of data, a limitation exists for this study to provide inferential analyses reflecting student growth from SEL interventions. Because I

used case studies to explore the behaviors and experiences of smaller groups of participants, the study sample may not be representative of larger groups. Therefore, a potential limitation is that the cases explored may not reach saturation to fully and accurately represent the phenomenon. I acknowledge that my personal experiences as a school social worker may have led to unknown biases that interfered with the interpretations of data provided by participants.

To address limitations and biases, I remained clear about criteria for participation in the study and wrote in a journal throughout the data collection and analysis reflecting on potential biases.

<div align="center">**Significance**</div>

This research filled a gap in understanding by exploring the strategies and interventions that school social workers are currently using in direct practice with high school students in alternative education programs. This project was unique because it addressed an under-researched area of SEL and student support services. Schools often fail to address the varying needs of students in alternative education who have higher exposures to trauma at home and school (Slaten et al., 2015). The results of this study provided much needed insight into the processes by which school social workers select, implement, and assess SEL interventions for high-need students among the current evidence-based practices. Insights from this study begin to fill the gap in knowledge by expanding the limited resource base of Tier 3 SEL interventions. This research can positively impact social change by identifying what is currently being done in the field of school social work for Tier 3 interventions to encourage consistency in practice with

interventions that promote student growth. Further, SEL has the potential for long-term positive impacts on life functioning for students transitioning into employment and independent living (Henry, et al., 2012). School policies are emerging that require SEL for all students (Jones & Doolittle, 2017), This study is relevant because I included practitioners working with those separated from the mainstream and placed in alternative education. The findings have potential to shape social work service delivery by expanding information on Tier 3 SEL supports for students.

Summary

Students present with a wide range of needs and educational reforms attempt to meet those needs within frameworks such as MTSS. The students considered behaviorally challenging or high risk for school failure typically fall under a Tier 3 identified level of need. Those placed in alternative education programs are separated from their mainstream peers for more concentrated interventions. SEL standards exist to promote the growth of social competencies for all students, including those in alternative education programs. As certified mental health professionals within the school system, school social workers are often leaders in SEL programming for students.

The purpose of the proposed study was to explore the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions for high school students in alternative education programs in Illinois. The research filled a gap in knowledge of how school social workers currently meet the SEL needs of students in high school alternative education programs. Increasing knowledge to support school

social workers providing SEL with students in alternative education promotes positive

social change by identifying best practices for student growth.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The mental health, social learning, and behavioral needs of students continue to grow and be a service area for social workers employed in school systems. Research supports that evidence-based SEL programs that are implemented successfully yield positive behavioral and academic outcomes for all student age groups. However, the knowledge base of interventions specifically targeting high school students in alternative education programs offers less EBP than for other student populations. In this study, I explored how school social workers select and implement evidence-based interventions to promote SEL for students in high-school alternative education programs in the state of Illinois. Despite studies that reflect positive outcomes related to SEL, the optimal approaches for meeting SEL needs among diverse students in alternative education remain unknown.

In this chapter, I address the current state of SEL through a review of the literature. I used literature to support frameworks and strategies for meeting student needs, as well as needs specific to students who are separated from the mainstream educational setting and educated in alternative placements. The potential impact for positive social change working with high need students was revealed, as well as insights for future of school social practice.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted most of the literature search using the Thoreau multiple database available through the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. I accessed

resources from several university libraries that I am connected to, including Walden University, Indiana Wesleyan University, and Indiana University. Search terms included, *SEL, social-emotional learning, MTSS, multitiered systems of support, alternative education, Tier 3, school social work interventions, evidence-based practices,* and *qualitative case study methods*. I located additional articles using links for similar citations or reference listings provided by researchers. When little research was available on a topic, I searched for similar words using Google Scholar and used the Ulrich's Periodicals Directory to verify if the research was from a peer reviewed journal. The contents of this review are within the scope of knowledge that pertains to school social work practice for high school students in alternative education and the broader field of SEL.

Theoretical Foundation

I used a multiple case study approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of the bounded group of school social workers in planning and implementing SEL for students in alternative education. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), researchers commonly use qualitative case studies to discover the understanding of experiences shared by participants who construct reality through interactions with the social world. A foundational premise of the constructivist theory is that multiple interpretations of truth exist, and a researcher takes on the role of gathering data to interpret meaning. Knowledge is not absolute but a compilation of human imposed meaning.

Early theories of constructivism are connected to the work of Piaget and Vygotsky. Jean Piaget focused on the psychological development of children and

described learning as constructed through continual stages of discovery and rediscovery (Amineh & Asl, 2015). The later work of Lev Vygotsky produced a basis for the constructivist theory that researchers use today. Vygotsky determined that the process of acquiring knowledge is directly impacted by other people, community, and culture (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Human understanding of the world is created by interacting with others and forming interpretations from those personal experiences. The use of constructivism as a theoretical foundation for modern case study research has emerged through the work of Creswell and colleagues (Hyett et al., 2014).

Case study research typically is based on a postpositivist or social constructivist theoretical base. Robert Yin (2018) provided systematic procedures to follow when conducting case study research because he is of the postpositivist theoretical view that there is a discoverable truth if a researcher maintains procedures of rigor throughout qualitative case studies. Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell (2015) presented steps for case study research that are more traditionally aligned with social constructivism and the work of Stake and Kerr (1995). Two basic assumptions of constructivism are that reality is constructed by human beings and social and cultural interactions contribute to the construction of knowledge (Amineh & Asl, 2015). For this study, I assumed the proposition that school social workers have varied experiences related to planning and implementing SEL for students in alternative education and that the data analysis from this study is yet another interpretation of meaning from the experiences. I integrated the theoretical tenants of both Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) throughout the

case study design. Combining the approaches of Yin and Merriam for case-study research is supported in other studies (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yazan, 2015).

The literature base for qualitative case-study research from a constructivist perspective supports representing methodological suggestions of key theorists such Yin, Stake, or Merriam (Boblin, Ireland, Kirkland, & Robertson, 2013). Hyett et al. (2014) noted a diversity that exists among theorists for case study research, but commonality to discuss a case, or multiple cases, for an identified reason of discovering what will enhance knowledge. By starting from existing literature, data eventually emerges as individual puzzle pieces that ultimately form a greater understanding of the phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Phillippo and Kelly (2014) used Yin's multisite approach for case study research with the flexibility of individual participants generating meaning from responses. I used the integrated theories of Yin and Merriam as presented by Yazan (2015) as the framework for this study. Yin's concepts of a proposition derived from literature and maintaining criteria of rigor for case study research can be integrated with the flexibility proposed by Merriam for case study approaches (Yazan, 2015). By combining the procedural strengths of constructivist theories, I developed the qualitative design reflecting a consistent goal of quality throughout this study.

Review of Literature

School social workers are expected to implement evidence-based interventions to support student needs in MTSS that align with learning standards reflected in state and educational policies. The intended population for services includes students identified with high needs and categorized as Tier 3 in the MTSS framework. The following

literature review provides insight into how social workers select interventions for students in alternative educative high school settings.

Social-Emotional Learning in Education

The emergence of SEL in the American education system is relatively new. It was a collaborative meeting in 1994 between educators, researchers, and child advocates at the Fetzer Institute that led to goals being identified for enhancing SEL among children (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). The start of the CASEL organization is also attributed to the Fetzer Institute meeting (Weissberg et al., 2015). Thus, the field of research specific to SEL spans the last 20 years and has produced over 500 evaluations of SEL programs (Weissberg et al., 2015).

There are consistencies in defining SEL. The general understanding of social-emotional competence reflects an individual's ability to regulate emotions through the application of knowledge and skills to establish successful interpersonal relationships and demonstrate productive citizenship by making responsible choices (Cohen, 2006; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). Receiving instruction in social, emotional, ethical, and academic areas should be viewed as basic human rights for all students because they are the necessary components of a productive adult life (Cohen, 2006). Further, social-emotional competence, which is acquired through SEL, protects students against risk factors in an increasingly complex world (Weissberg et al., 2015). The skills learned help students interact in respectful ways towards families, peers, teachers, and members of the community.

Because students today are more multicultural with economically diverse backgrounds, Durlak et al. (2011) asserted that the educational system plays a vital role in developing SEL so that youth can reach appropriate levels of social-emotional competence. Improvements in well-being and increased school performance are outcomes identified in developmental research that focuses on mastering social-emotional competencies (Durlak et al., 2011). There are two primary ways to bring about the behavior change process necessary within school systems. According to Durlak et al. (2011), SEL is taught, modeled, practiced, and applied, or social-emotional competence is developed, through a systemic school climate that is consistently safe, caring, and supportive.

The most recognized organization for identifying evidence-based SEL programs is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The five domains CASEL utilizes to measure programs are: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Weissberg et al., 2015). CASEL produced a guide for practitioners with easy to follow ratings on the various domains. By synthesizing the available SEL research on interventions for preschool through high school aged students, the guide is a useful tool for school social workers planning services within school systems. However, a close look at the CASEL guide (CASEL, 2015) makes it apparent that there are fewer programs targeting secondary students.

The state of Illinois has earned the reputation of being the forerunner for structurally integrating SEL into educational policies. Illinois was the first state to create

learning standards specific to social-emotional competence and require each district to produce policy to integrate SEL into educational programming (Cohen, 2006; Weissberg et al., 2015). The initiatives for SEL brought forth by the Illinois State Board of Education led to all 50 states currently having standards for SEL (Weissberg et al., 2015). The three main goals of the model put forth in Illinois are:

1. Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.

2. Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.

3. Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

Along with the work of CASEL and policies emerging at the state level, research continues to grow in the field of SEL and be distinguished through meta-analytical reviews. Weissberg et al. (2015) reported the body of correlational and longitudinal research supports positive effects to overall youth adjustment from SEL and increased negative problems inflicting youth without SEL support. These are the dual benefits of SEL reported by Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017), because providing SEL brings positive growth, and not providing the support becomes an indicator of negative behaviors. Taylor et al. (2017) reviewed 82 SEL interventions that were universally implemented across schools. The findings indicated that students receiving SEL demonstrated improved self-control, interpersonal skills, problem solving, quality of peer and adult relationships, commitment to school and academic achievement over a period

of 6 months or more (Taylor et al., 2017). Domitrovich et al. (2017) reported an economic advantage of an $11 return for every $1 spent by school districts who implement successful SEL programs. Further, an 11% gain in achievement was reported for students receiving SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2017).

Several studies on SEL share commonalities on what the programs should be and inherent problems to address. Findings support the effectiveness of universal SEL programs but recommend approaches that are both classroom and school system based (Duncan et al., 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). In classrooms, specific SEL skills can be modeled, practiced, and applied across differentiated circumstances. For optimal success, school level policies and structures can embed SEL into other curriculums and provide an overall climate to reflect a positive SEL environment. MTSS is a component of school-wide SEL that integrates the roles of other support professionals such as psychologists and social workers to provide more intensive interventions when needed (Weissberg et al., 2015). Programs are beginning to emerge with evidence of effectively promoting positive youth development. However, many schools lack the structure and necessary resources for quality implementation of school-wide evidence-based programs, leading to reductions in the impact (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Prevalent challenges that face school systems are to synthesize available research in ways that address all student levels and needs to produce positive growth outcomes, including students in alternative education.

Multitiered Systems of Support

In 2004, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act introduced RtI as an alternate method for determining students with

learning disabilities (Berkeley et al., 2009). The three-tiered model of RtI was adopted

across disabilities to provide frameworks for services including behavioral supports to

intervene and decrease problem behaviors (Hawken et al., 2008). School wide positive

behavior support, or positive behavioral supports and interventions emerged to address

the social behavioral needs of students within the similar three-tiered framework (Cook et

al., 2015; Freeman, Miller, & Newcomer, 2015). The RtI and school wide positive

behavior support approaches both seek to improve social and academic student outcomes

using scientifically based interventions that increase in intensity relative to the individual

needs of students (Berkeley et al., 2009; Cook et al., 2015). These two approaches have

merged over time into a term accepted by professionals as MTSS. MTSS is the

"integration of several tiered implementation models into one coherent, combined system

meant to address the layered domains of education including literacy and social

competence" (Freeman et al., 2015, p. 60). Juvenile justice systems are integrating MTSS

frameworks, similar to those being used in educational settings, to meet the social and

emotional skill needs of youth (Parks Ennis & Gonsoulin, 2015). Therefore, a wide

acceptance exists for addressing the needs of youth with the MTSS framework.

Because schools are where children spend significant amounts of time, the

professionals address mental health problems in that setting. MTSS is grounded in public

health models to promote wellness and prevent or reduce mental health problems (Cook

et al., 2015). The tiers of MTSS are generally understood as a continuum of targeted,

supportive interventions based on data-driven decisions (Cook et al, 2015; Freeman et al.,

2015). The first tier represents a foundation of universal, whole school instruction and

screening for approximately 80% of students (Berkeley et al., 2009). The service delivery

model assumes approximately 15% of students will require more targeted support than

Tier 1. Tier 2 is considered secondary intervention for those at-risk of poor outcomes and

requiring more intensive research-based interventions (Berkeley et al., 2009). The tertiary

tier, referred to as Tier 3, for the purposes of this study, targets the students identified

with the greatest need for intervention. Tier 3 represents the approximate 5% of students

that schools consider special education or in need of highly intensified individual

instruction with frequent progress monitoring (Berkeley et al., 2009). While the

guidelines from moving from Tier 2 to Tier 3 vary among schools using MTSS models,

the students identified as Tier 3 typically undergo a functional behavioral analysis (FBA)

that informs the development of an individualized behavioral support plan (Hawken et

al., 2008). Students identified as emotionally and behaviorally disordered and meeting

criteria for alternative education settings typically fall into Tier 3 intense levels of support

(Eber et al., 2011).

Examples of interventions across the tiers of supports vary but are intended to be

based on EBP. Forman and Crystal (2015) reported that the complexity of the data driven

process of MTSS can lead to practice issues that can be reduced by providing school staff

consistent professional development on building comprehensive MTSS. Wraparound

services are an example of a Tier 3 intervention that requires the training of multiple

professionals. Wraparound is a collaborative and coordinated effort to meet an individual

student's needs through a process that brings together the family with school and

community service providers to design a unique intervention plan (Eber et al., 2011).

Research on wraparound services in Illinois conducted by Eber et al. (2011) found that intensive wraparound services following an FBA were effective in supporting students for significant gains in educational and behavioral functioning. The importance of conducting an FBA in the data collection process for Tier 3 students was supported by other researchers (Katsiyannis, Balluch, & Losinski, 2016) for effective intervention planning. School social workers are specially trained professionals to facilitate the processes necessary for successful execution of SEL service delivery to Tier 3 students in a framework of MTSS (Maras et al., 2015).

Evidence-Based Practices for Socioemotional Learning

With targeted learning standards and policies mandating the use of EBP in schools, school social workers seek interventions that align with EBP. Aside from the professions of social work and education, researched interventions have evolved from the disciplines of psychology, child psychiatry, and public health (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015). Several meta-analyses provide overviews of programs that meet standards of rigor for positive impacts on behavioral and academic outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteijn, 2012; Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015). However, moving from empirical research and evidence-based interventions to direct work with students requires effective implementation.

In real-world direct practice, the impact of an intervention depends on successful implementation, which can be influenced by multiple factors. A meta-analytic review of more than 200 schools representing all grade levels, preschool through high school, indicated that academic grains are much greater when programs are implemented well,

compared to programs that struggle with implementation (Domitrovich et al., 2008).

When practice fails to successfully integrate research, the mental health of students is put

at risk (Maras, Splett, Reinke, Stormont, & Herman, 2014). Durlak (2016) attributed

weaknesses in implementation to improper training of staff, significant alterations being

made to programs during service delivery, and conflicting systemic demands related to

finances or curriculums. When assessing implementation, the intervention itself must be

considered in terms of frequency, duration, and timing of the delivery, as well as the

supports surrounding that intervention (Domitrovich et al., 2008). The resources

necessary for effective implementation include funds, knowledge, skills, time, training,

leadership, positive school climate, and culture (Domitrovich et al., 2008). Durlak (2016)

specified eight critical components for effective program implementation: fidelity,

dosage, competent delivery, minimal adaptation, participant engagement, controlling

conditions, and reaching intended population. Garner, Mahatmya, Brown, and Vesely

(2014) attributed implementation failures to a limit in scope, uniform delivery and lack of

sociocultural competence. These multi-faceted components reflect how weaknesses can

develop during implementation.

The lives of children are more complex than can be seen in a classroom during an

intervention. Social-emotional growth is impacted outside of school by families, peers,

and the community the child lives in where values and behaviors are reflected. The

ethical standards stipulated for cultural competence by the National Association of Social

Workers (2018) applies when planning and assessing EBP for SEL. Effective

implementation of SEL programs cannot occur without being grounded in the

sociocultural aspects of participants that consider ethnicity, language equivalences, gender, developmental disabilities, and income and geographic variances (Garner et al., 2014). Program components should focus on relationships outside the classroom, as well as inside. Maras et al. (2014) recommended a capacity-building approach to implementing evidence-based interventions whereby school personnel receive supports from community-centered models of SEL, providing a broad system of capacity building across a wide range of student needs. Despite the growing knowledge base on approaches for effective and sociocultural implementation of interventions, research reflected that school social workers rely predominantly on workshops and consultation with colleagues to select interventions (Franklin & Kelly, 2009).

The observable disconnect between what research supports and what school personnel choose to implement is further discussed in the literature. Franklin and Kelly (2009) reported that while practitioners understand the three-tiered process of service delivery in an MTSS model, they often do not know where to start or end searches for evidence-based interventions. School social workers are at the forefront of planning, implementing, and evaluating interventions in schools because they receive training specific to the behavioral therapeutic techniques often found in empirically supported interventions (Franklin & Kelly, 2009). Additionally, studies show that warm relationships between the students and professional implementing the interventions contributes to increased social-emotional development (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). However, social workers become hesitant to incorporate EBP if approaches appear inflexible to unique needs or measuring for quantifiable variables detracts from core

issues (Weller et al., 2015). To support practitioners in integrating scholarly knowledge into practice, Franklin and Kelly (2009) recommended a guide of first identifying the problem, consulting the evidence, evaluating the quality of the evidence, transferring the evidence to culturally relevant language, and evaluating the intervention post-implementation. When school personnel lack the necessary commitment to implement quality, evidence-based interventions, the resources for that program are wasted and motivation to implement real quality programs diminishes (Durlak, 2016).

For SEL to continue to advance, research identifying the interventions with positive outcomes needs to expand further and practitioners need to become competent at using the knowledge base. The responsibility for high-quality implementation must be shared by policymakers, administrators, trainers, staff directly implementing to students, students, and parents (Durlak, 2016). The best results emerge from whole-school, sociocultural approaches that generally adhere to components of the intervention (Sancassiani et al., 2015). The struggle to implement EBP is strongest with Tier 3 students. According to results of a social work survey by Franklin and Kelly (2009), interventions for Tier 3 students pose the most complications for school social workers, who find the interventions sparse and difficult to learn and implement. School districts face far greater questions than answers regarding how to sustain quality implementation of SEL over time (Domitrovich et al., 2008). Therefore, further research is warranted.

Alternative Education

Students who struggle to meet the expectations of traditional educational systems present challenges but have a right to free and appropriate public education protected by

the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Determining the appropriate educational environment for a student can become a complicated issue that requires consideration of the educational needs of the individual student, as well as the impact of his or her behavior on the learning environment of others (Hoge et al., 2014). Therefore, school districts have established an array or continuum of services to support students.

Alternative schools and programs emerged as a preemptive approach to addressing the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of the students exhibiting risk factors that would prevent successful educational achievements (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Smith & Thomson, 2014). Forty-three states specify a definition of alternative education, but the broad interpretation encompasses educating outside of the mainstream educational environment and include a target population, setting, services, and structure (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014). There are differentiated meanings between the terms alternative school and alternative program. Alternative school typically refers to a setting that is separated and removed from the regular school (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Alternative program is indicative of a classroom or environment housed within the regular school. For the purposes of this study, these terms will be used interchangeably along with alternative education to represent targeted education that occurs separate from the mainstream population of students due to diverse at-risk factors that create a barrier to success in the traditional educational system. The backgrounds of students served in alternative education range from behavioral difficulties, histories of suspensions and expulsions, pregnancy, academic failure related to attendance or failing

grades, or an emotional behavior disorder identified for special education services and an individualized education program (Foley & Pang, 2006). Research has revealed that school districts have unlimited discretion for referring students to alternative education (Tajalli & Garba, 2014), with the most predominant factor leading to alternative placement being aggression (Hoge et al., 2014).

The 2010 report of the National Center for Education Statistics (Carver & Lewis, 2010) indicated that 64% of school districts have some form of alternative education option for at-risk students. The data suggested a growing need for services for at-risk students because 33% of the school districts reported an inability to enroll students in need due to staffing and space limitations (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Studies have suggested a positive correlation between increasing numbers of disenfranchised youth and the development of increased alternative education options (Kim & Taylor, 2008). Though states are adopting legislation and policies specifying students eligible for alternative education, a stigma remains that they are dumping grounds, or last-chance placements, for students exhibiting behavioral difficulties, or that they are used to warehouse juvenile delinquents (Kim & Taylor, 2008; Wasburn-Moses, 2011). Regardless of the negative stigma, Henderson and Barnes (2016) supported the need for alternative placements because continued out of school suspensions contribute to the school to prison pipeline. Alternative education services in the state of Illinois are offered through local school districts, special education cooperatives, or programs connected to Regional Offices of Education (Foley & Pang, 2006). Local area networks were also

created to support the well-being of at-risk students through wraparound services (Foley & Pang, 2006).

To meet the unique needs of students who lack the resilience and skills for success in regular school environments, alternative education programs and schools are becoming carefully designed intervention programs with innovative curricula (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016). Multiple studies have identified that a supportive environment and creating a sense of membership so that students build trusting relationships are constructs for increasing positive student outcomes (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Alternative education programs attempt to create these environments for at-risk students by offering lower student to teacher ratios, flexible curriculum delivery, and a student-centered focus on post-secondary transitions. This gives alternative education an important role in American society because failing to graduate high school lowers one's earnings over a lifetime, leads to higher unemployment, and increased reliance on public welfare programs (Henry et al., 2012; Zolkoski et al., 2016). While alternative education programs vary from state to state and school district to school district, they attempt to meet the educational needs of students presenting with the most complex needs and greatest risk of academic failure.

Social-Emotional Learning in Alternative Education

Meeting the social-emotional competencies of all students through three tiers of intervention includes those served in alternative education programs. However, empirical research informing the use of three-tiered interventions within alternative education

programs is close to non-existent (McDaniel, Jolivette, & Ennis, 2014). Historically, studies suggested student behavior is negatively impacted by placement in alternative education (Simonsen, Britton, & Young, 2010). Thus, the need for interventions that lead to positive youth outcomes in alternative education settings gains importance. Simonsen et al. (2010) found that approaches for supporting schoolwide SEL approaches are predominant for regular education and lacking in alternative education schools (Simonsen et al., 2010). The lack of scientific research on tiered behavioral strategies for alternative education is described by Farkas et al. (2012) as a great concern. During the review of literature for this study, I discovered the search revealed a minimal knowledge base for research focusing on SEL in alternative education settings, but studies were emerging.

Flower, McDaniel, and Jolivette (2011) conducted a literature review on behavior interventions in alternative education settings from 1970-2010. The researchers found that effective practices for students in alternative education include a low student to teacher ratio, a highly structured class environment, positive reinforcement methods, adult mentors, social skill instruction, academic instruction, and parent involvement. The alignment of these practices was deemed lacking by the researchers for all programs reviewed (Flower et al., 2011). The overwhelmingly sparse research available led to warnings that significant work must occur to improve educational outcomes of students placed in alternative education programs.

The decision-making process that school staff use to integrate the three-tiered support framework and positive behavioral interventions into an alternative education setting was studied by Jolivette et al., (2012). Flexible service delivery and fluid process

were recommended for students in alternative education because there must be continuous opportunities for staff to reflect on data identifying the current needs of a transient population of students. The complex problems of this student population call for the use of evidence-based practices to avoid failure with these high-need students (Jolivette et al., 2012). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and What Works Clearinghouse provide features of effective interventions for students in alternative education, but Jolivette et al. (2012) asserted that there are no established evidence-based SEL practices for students in alternative education at this time.

The economic cost of students failing to graduate is a relevant reason to build the research base for SEL with students in alternative education. Slaten et al. (2015) reported that the cost of failing to connect students lacking a high school diploma to the job market is approximately 97.3 billion dollars per year. Alternative education was created to help bridge this gap for many students, yet a potential for marginalizing students further exists due to simplified curricula and a societal view of alternative education schools as dumping grounds for problematic youth. In the state of Illinois, most students in alternative education are white, but disproportions of impoverished groups are reflected for ethnicity, family problems, and mental health issues (Slaten et al., 2015). The researchers recommended planning SEL interventions in alternative education that engage students through culturally relevant activities and allowing them to discuss emotional needs (Slaten et al., 2015). Marginalized youth require innovative strategies to engage in SEL interventions.

Students receiving services in alternative education have multidimensional needs that require multidimensional approaches for learning. Cultural transferability and consistent implementation continue to be areas researchers seek to strengthen SEL interventions for the most difficult to reach students (Evans, Murphy, & Scourfield, 2015; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). Evans et al. (2015) warned of potential ongoing barriers to implementation because school officials have a "tendency to treat interventions as inoculations rather than long-term prevention plans" (p. 755). What we know is that empirical research supports positive student outcomes, but that inconsistent efforts diminishes results (Greenberg et al., 2003). Therefore, we can turn our investigations of SEL away from determining whether implementation works to discerning the key aspects of successful implementation for all students (Low, Smolkowski, & Cook, 2016). Students in alternative education are being separated from their peer group related to some form of negative outcome criteria and it is the responsibility of educators to develop the SEL necessary for long-term health, well-being, and vocational success (Oberle, Schonert-Reichl, Hertzman, & Zumbo, 2014). Implementation barriers for this notably complex group of students must be overcome by increasing evidence-based practices for SEL in alternative education.

Role of School Social Workers

School social workers serve a wide variety of functions within educational systems to support students, faculty, and families. School social workers are specially trained and certified mental health professionals attempting to meet the multi-faceted challenges of students. The child-centered focus and ecological models of multiple

system level training prevalent in graduate level social work programs align with the tiered support needs for SEL in MTSS frameworks (McManama O'Brien et al., 2011). With growing societal needs, teachers increasingly refer to school-based mental health professionals, including school social workers, to provide psychosocial supports and meet direct counseling needs (Phillippo & Kelly, 2014). Throughout literature, there is evidence of supportive roles between teachers and school social workers when the task of implementing SEL to students is typically assigned to these professionals (McManama O'Brien et al., 2011; Myers, Tobin, Huber, Conway, & Shelvin, 2013). Therefore, school systems utilized the collaborative efforts of teachers and school social workers for SEL.

The profession of school social work prepares practitioners for life-long learning of evidence-based and culturally responsive practices. Lifelong learning reflects continued intention and dedication to providing services for emerging social problems and rapidly changing needs in communities (Jivanjee, Pendell, Nissen, & Goodluck, 2015). Even though school policies and professional organizations set standards for ongoing learning and the use of evidence-based practices for SEL, a reluctance continues to exist among school social workers to turn to the existing research base (Weller et al., 2015). A review of the Illinois School Code specific to school social work describes a primary professional duty to develop, implement, and evaluate school-based prevention programs (Illinois Association of School Social Workers, 2018). According to Franklin and Kelly (2009), school social workers should embrace the standards in educational policies and set expectations of the MTSS framework to plan and measure interventions with students.

Given that school social workers play a pivotal role in SEL within educational systems and are expected to utilize EBP, they must become more comfortable integrating existing research into practice. McManama O'Brien et al. (2011) reported that consistent practice guidelines and a greater body of research must first exist to advance EBP in school social work. Brekke (2012) found that social workers do not produce the extent of scientific knowledge of other mental health professionals. These struggles led Weller et al. (2015) to recommend a four-cornerstone approach that social workers can use to remain flexible while integrating research into direct practice. The researchers studied SEL in an alternative school through stages of selection, implementation, and evaluation, and demonstrated that EBP does not have to be rigid or strictly adhere to specified programs. Social workers can interweave evidence and theory from research with their own client experiences and personal views as practitioners to implement EBP in more natural ways (Weller et al. 2015). The final cornerstone component assesses the student's perspectives of the intervention to determine if real-world changes occurred. School social workers can use strategies to improve their integration of EBP for SEL in direct service to students.

Summary and Conclusions

I found that studies reflecting positive outcomes were associated with quality implementation of SEL for all students and educational policies and practices were being adjusted to facilitate these learning outcomes. School social workers play a vital role in the process and are trained to integrate EBP with educational initiatives that benefit students. I address a gap in research for SEL with students in alternative education

settings by developing this qualitative case study design that sought the experiences of school social workers implementing SEL with students in alternative education. Hoge et al. (2014) referred to the need for greater understanding with students in alternative education as "critical." Flower et al. (2011, p. 503) stated the research is "overwhelmingly sparse" for students in alternative education. I sought to fill this gap that was further described by Slate et al. (2015) as a need to understand how SEL occurs in alternative education settings. School social workers were in the professional position to provide the data necessary for the inquiry.

Understanding interventions that support the complex needs of students at-risk for school failure promotes positive social change by improving the overall decision-making skills of youth for successful integration into adult society (Jolivette et al., 2012). This knowledge supports the standards put forth by the National Association of Social Workers (2018) for competent and culturally sensitive social work practice. I integrated constructivist theoretical frameworks of Merriam and Tisdell (2015) along with design recommendations of Yin (2018) to ensure trustworthiness and rigor throughout the qualitative case-study approach.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of the proposed qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions for high school students in alternative education programs in Illinois. To address the gap of EBP available for high-need students, I used a qualitative case study approach and sought real-life experiences from school social workers serving students in alternative education. I used a review of program curricula, individual semistructured interviews, and focus groups with school social workers to develop greater understanding of how SEL occurred with high-need students in alternative education programs. This research fits with a constructivist world view that there is no one truth but meaning can be identified by understanding experiences.

In this chapter, I describe the qualitative research design, my rationale for the study, and my role as the researcher. I detail the methodological steps of participant recruitment and selection, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and dissemination of findings. Additionally, I provide the plan for upholding ethical procedures throughout the research inquiry and ensuring a rigorous degree of trustworthiness in findings.

Research Design and Rationale

The phenomenon of interest for exploration I held for this study was the process that school social workers use for SEL with students in alternative education. Multiple researchers indicated that EBPs for high school students in alternative education were

limited (CASEL, 2015; Weller et al., 2015). The rationale for a qualitative case-study

design was that I sought to answer research questions for a better understanding of a

situation that not much is known about, how school social workers select interventions.

Case study methods are an effective way to focus studies that are an initial exploratory

investigation to gather information on the real-life experiences of a specific group

(Flyvbjerg, 2006). The bounded group for my study was school social workers working

with at-risk youth in alternative education. To gain the deeper understanding I sought,

school social workers were the unit of analysis that provided the information-rich data.

Therefore, purposeful sampling for a case study was appropriate to explore the real-life

experiences of school social workers in a close, personal way through a qualitative

approach. The research questions I aimed to answer with this inquiry were:

    1. What are the experiences of school social workers in selecting and

implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions in Illinois alternative education

programs?

    2. What factors contribute to the clinical decision-making process of school

social workers providing interventions for SEL with high school students in alternative

education programs?

    3. What evidence-based practices are school social workers finding effectively

increase social-emotional competencies to positively impact academic performance

among students in alternative education?

    In this study, I focused on the central concepts of school social workers, students,

alternative education, SEL, EBP, MTSS, and student growth. I used the organizational

policies of the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) when referencing state mandates

of educational policies, because this provided some degree of consistency within the

bounded system of cases selected for the study. For example, school social workers

certified by the ISBE meet specific credential standards that qualify them as professionals

and they follow the same educational mandates regulated by that state. Students were not

direct participants because they are the receiver of a service. All student references were

representative of high school Grades 9–12, and placed in an alternative education

program, separated from their mainstream peers. SEL was a critical concept because it

represents a process of interventions to build competencies for successful functioning and

interacting with others. Given that students are placed in alternative settings for some

identified need, the concept of alternative education represented specialized programming

of more intensive services than students in the standard grade level program. EBP

represented research supported interventions and strategies to support students elevating

skill levels, known as student growth. As previously described, MTSS is a framework for

identifying and planning supports for students with the highest need students representing

approximately five percent of the student population and referred to as Tier 3.

Determining how to reach the depth of experiences for implementing SEL in alternative

education at the high school level guided the multiple case study approach, data

collection, and analysis.

  As explained by Creswell (2014), the qualitative research tradition seeks intuitive,

tacit knowledge that emerges as the researcher makes sense of multiple participant

perceptions and presented realities. A qualitative case study approach best fit the research

questions because the phenomenon occurs within a specific organization of professionals, school social workers, that were positioned to describe how SEL occurred with high school students in alternative education settings, therefore, addressing a current gap in knowledge. Cresswell (2014) described supporting the rationale for qualitative traditions through criteria such as exploring events and processes. School social workers actively functioning in roles of planning and implementing SEL were the chosen population to provide greater understanding towards the current gap in knowledge of how the SEL needs are currently being met for high need students in alternative education. Further, qualitative research is based on assumptions (Creswell, 2014). Throughout this study and development of the research design, I integrated assumptions associated with a constructivist theoretical lens that reality is constructed by human beings.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is typically the primary instrument for collecting data in qualitative inquiries and innately brings biases into the study (Creswell, 2014). It is the perceptions of the participants related to the phenomenon that must be upheld, not the personal views of the researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In considering how I, as a researcher, was situated in all aspects of this study, there was an awareness that, as a practicing school social worker, I have my own views and experiences related to the phenomenon of study. I conducted the research within a constructivist theoretical framework whereby remaining completely neutral was not possible. Researchers must acknowledge how personal worldviews affect what was learned (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Visibly acknowledging the subjectivity of both the researcher and participants' views fits

the constructivist paradigm (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, I engaged in reflexive journaling and memo writing throughout the data collection process and analysis to reflect on the impact of assumptions and biases on the data. Reflexivity is an important aspect of qualitative research because it allows researchers to foster transparency by monitoring roles and researcher influence on the process (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In the constructivist framework, the researcher makes clear any potential personal influence on the interpretations of data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, I continually reassessed positionality to manage biases.

The roles I played in this research study included graduate/doctoral student, qualitative interviewer, and professional colleague. Examining reflexive notes was critical to remaining ethical, identifying biases, and meeting standards of criticality, rigor, reflexivity, and collaboration (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). If there was any personal connection between me and a potential participant, such as friendship or relationship outside of professional boundaries, I disqualified the participant. Within professional boundaries, if I knew the participant in a capacity indicative of a power differential, such as a teacher or supervisory role, I excluded the participant from the participant pool.

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), in order for researchers to uphold the highest level of ethical standards, they must give a full analysis of power relations. Thus, I excluded from this study any social workers employed by the same school district or affiliated with universities in common with me. I used an incentive to encourage the participation of Illinois school social workers not closely affiliated to me, and to thank the professionals for their time. Semistructured interviews and focus group interviews

occurred outside of each participants' school setting to reduce risk of harm related to exposing minor students to the research process. No data specifically identifying students, participants, or school districts were involved in this process. Because the professionals who met the participant criteria dedicated time to share their professional experiences, each received a $50 Amazon gift card for participation in individual semistructured interviews or the focus group interviews. Offering a manageable incentive to encourage participation in qualitative studies is becoming common practice among researchers (Head, 2009). Providing some form of compensation helps to equalize the power relationship (Head, 2009) and cover transportation costs incurred by participants. The gift card amount remained consistent among participants, with no suggestion of influence toward the data provided by the participants.

Research Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The population for this study was school social workers in the state of Illinois who are currently providing SEL to high school students in alternative education. Because I sought the experiences of school social workers within a case-study design, I used a non-probability, purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling is the most common type of non-probability sampling for qualitative studies and assumes that there are individuals who hold a unique perspective on the phenomenon being addressed (Robinson, 2014). Marshall (1996) referred to purposive sampling as judgement sampling because the researcher seeks the most productive sample to answer the research questions. There is one unit (school social workers) that can provide the necessary

information-rich data on the real-life practices of implementing SEL necessary to answer the research questions for the study.

I sought and received approval from the governing board of the IASSW to request participants via a mass email to all school social workers with membership in the organization. Focusing on one state ensured the professionals follow the same policies defined by a state board of education. A total of 11 participants were interviewed for the study. There were no participants who refused or discontinued participation during the study. The selected participants met inclusion criteria, were willing to participate, and agreed with consent procedures. Participants received informed consent procedures within their initial invitation email message. Because the intended estimate of more than 15 respondents meeting the research participant inclusion criteria was not met, I did not utilize purposeful random sampling strategies. According to Patton (2015), adding randomization techniques to narrow down participants adds credibility to the study and reduces researcher bias. The sample size for the proposed study was determined by saturation of the data collected in individual semistructured and focus group interviews.

I screened potential participants who responded to the mass email for a participant pool to determine if they met the necessary criteria. A profile questionnaire was included in the initial email invitation to participate in the study. Inclusionary criteria included being a certified school social worker with the ISBE, actively employed in the role of school social worker implementing SEL interventions with high school students in an alternative education program for a minimum duration of 1 year within the state of Illinois, and meeting the informed consent procedures. School social workers within

Illinois follow the same state learning standards and policies and were more easily accessible. Full informed consent methods that were approved through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University were used. The study was completed in accordance to the design submitted to, and approved by, the IRB. I allowed participants to opt out of the study at any point in the process.

Exclusionary criteria included social workers who do not have a master's degree, certification through ISBE, or are not functioning as the lead implementer for SEL with students in alternative education. I excluded from the study teachers and individuals otherwise not meeting the inclusionary criterion. If the social worker served in an assisting capacity for SEL learning, then I excluded the professional. Only lead SEL implementers with one year or greater duration of performing these professional duties had the experience necessary to provide data towards the research questions. Further, I excluded from the participant pool any potential participants that I was personally acquainted with.

I determined the number of respondents, or sample size, for the qualitative case study by data saturation. Mason (2012) defined saturation as a concept often misunderstood by researchers but reached when new data no longer significantly adds to the process. General recommendations are three to five individual participants in a case study exploration and up to 10 for phenomenological studies (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). According to Marshall (1996), the number of participants reflects how many are necessary to answer the research question through the data saturation process of new categories, themes, and explanations no longer emerging. Yin (2016) specified that a

multiple case study seeks replication to strengthen propositions that were introduced by the researcher and can be accomplished between six and ten cases. For focus groups, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) recommended using six to ten participants who are knowledgeable about the topic. Therefore, I selected the focus group participants with the same criteria as the individual semistructured interview participants. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that theoretical saturation typically occurred when no additional data was necessary because similar patterns repeated in categories. The iterative nature of qualitative research allows for the number to remain flexible until saturation is reached. The participant pool yielded enough fully informed and consenting participants contributing data from individual semistructured interviews for saturation to be determined. Data saturation guides the final sample size when categories and themes reflect diminishing returns (Mason, 2012). Thus, I invited any qualifying participants that were not individually interviewed due to data saturation being met to participate in a focus group. This approach is supported from constructivist theory suggesting the sample size be adjusted and remain tentative as meaning emerges throughout the investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Instrumentation

Instrumentation represents the means for collecting rich and thick data to reach saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). The specific types of data collection methods that I integrated into this research design were semistructured individual interviews, reviews of social work intervention program materials, and focus group interviews. Using three sources of data for triangulation improves the trustworthiness and validity of findings

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Using my three sources of data, I compared what participants reported in interviews between the case-study databases and to program documents relevant to the research topic. For example, if participants stated a program or intervention was evidence-based, then I searched the Internet for the existing evidence of the identified program or intervention using Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and the Thoreau multi-database search engine available to me through the Walden University library. Further, I made potential biases I hold transparent through a reflexive journal and memo process. Identifying potential biases adds to the trustworthiness of findings (Cope, 2014). Researchers use journaling and critical self-reflection methods to support meaning from the data (Ortlipp, 2008). The reflexive notes I kept in a journal became a useful tool in the analytic process toward the creation of meaning from a constructivist perspective. Additionally, I used member checking, or respondent validation, as an additional technique to support the construction of meaning. Member checking minimizes biases by seeking feedback on emergent findings to verify the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

While we can never fully know a person, interviewing allows researchers a method for capturing how individuals attach meaning to their experiences (Seidman, 2012). Interviewing was one form of instrumentation within the qualitative case-study design. Quality interviews allow participants to describe experiences in their own words, promote a relationship of communication between researcher and participant, and adhere to standards for ethical conduct (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Interviewing is a primary source of data collection over observing social workers during practice because, as stated by

Patton (2015), interviews have the potential to bring forth useful information of the participant's lived experiences of the phenomenon. Interviews can trigger the interviewee to process meaning towards their experiences in new and insightful ways. When working with school social workers, I interviewed the key informants separate from their workplace to further protect the vulnerable population of youth by not directly involving them in exposure to the research. I used pre-determined, open-ended questions from an interview guide during semistructured and focus group interviews as recommended by Patton (2015) to increase comparability of results, yet allow for additional probing for information. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) described adding layers of depth to data by using semistructured and focus group interviews as separate sources of data. In this study, I used multiple sources of data to answer the research questions by comparing data from individual perspectives of professionals in the field of school social work. For example, in focus groups, participants responded to peer comments, which added an alternate layer of depth to data from the individual interviews I conducted. However, both forms of interview allowed a direct opportunity to share the relevant experiences. Focus groups and semistructured individual interviews fit the constructivist perspective which views meaning as socially constructed through interactions with others (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

A third source of data for triangulation was reviews of social work intervention program materials. I noted any SEL curricula documents provided by participants related to interventions or mention of a specific published program during the individual semistructured or focus group interviews for further investigation. Access to these

documents and materials did not require any special permissions because the investigation targeted program information that was readily available through public searches. I conducted the public searches via Internet by inserting the program name provided by participants into the Google search engine, Thoreau multi-database search engine, and Google Scholar database search engine. Specific key terms and program names I used for searches were Conscious Discipline, Psychoeducation, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Acceptance Commitment Therapy, Mindfulness, Solution-Focused Therapy, Positive Action, Crisis Prevention Institute, Strategies for Success, Why Try, Zones of Regulation, Love is Not Abuse, Adolescent Depression Awareness Program, Calm Classroom, Strong Teens, Positive Action, RULER, Soul Pancake, and Second Step. I explored the source materials for references pertinent to the research topic, such as EBP, student growth, Tier 3, high school students, or how the interventions supported students in alternative education. I coded the program materials systematically with similar methods to the semistructured and focus group interviews, using MAXQDA software for coding segments.

Researcher developed instrument. Researchers engage in qualitative interviews to understand the lived experiences of other people and make meaning from those experiences (Seidman, 2012). I developed an interview guide utilized for collecting data directly from participants. Patton (2015) recommended the interview guide approach for qualitative case studies because preparing an outline of questions in advance provides a systematic checklist for the interview, yet allows for the necessary conversational style and flexibility to explore the subject further. Myers and Neuman (2007) described

semistructured interviews where the researchers prepared some questions beforehand but can improvise for clarification. Warnings were given regarding ambiguous language and over preparing the script because the social interaction will diminish and possibly bore the participant (Myers & Neuman, 2007). Turner (2010) recommended asking one question at a time and remaining flexible in follow-up questions because respondents may not answer a question until later in the interview. I integrated these suggestions from authors into the responsive interviewing model of Rubin and Rubin (2012) that guided the presented interview protocol, which I designed to be adaptive and build a relationship between the participant and myself. The interview guide is presented in appendix A.

In considering the appropriateness of the instrument, or content validity, the interview guide must adequately reflect the participants' perspectives toward the research topic (Brod, Tesler, & Christensen, 2009). The questions that I used in the semistructured interviews stemmed from prior knowledge following a literature review. Using knowledge from a review of literature to develop interview questions toward answering research questions was described by Brod et al. (2009). Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggested the interviews follow the developed protocol with any conversational or probing questions remaining as unbiased as possible. Thus, I developed and used an interview guide that contained a few open-ended questions intended to allow me to listen to what the interviewee shared in efforts to collect meaningful data.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

For the research design of this dissertation, I interviewed school social workers in the state of Illinois that met the participant criteria and provided full, informed consent. I

did not conduct any interviews at the site of the participants' employment. I interviewed

participants in locations separate from their school district and place of employment.

Interviews occurred in a pre-arranged hotel meeting space approved by the participant or

via technology, so that there was no risk of involving minor students and no need to get

approval from school district administration. I recruited through a mass e-mail of school

social workers within the IASSW organization, which I had preliminarily discussed with

the Executive Director of IASSW. In additional efforts for recruitment, I utilized Internet

searches to locate social workers in alternative education programs in Illinois with public

email addresses for extending an invitation. I conducted the Internet searches for

additional participants using the Google search engine and the key terms Illinois

alternative school or program. Any resulting school web pages I explored to identify

school social workers among the staff. If public emails were listed, I extended an

invitation to participate to the social worker. I allowed any interested and consenting

participants to withdraw from the study at any time. No participants withdrew and there

was no need to pursue further recruitment once data saturation was evident.

I individually met participants at the neutral location agreed upon by myself and

the participants outside the location of their school employment, either in person or via

web conferencing. I designated a time window of 90 minutes for interviews with

participants, but flexibly determined duration by the length of conversation necessary to

collect the data. If duration had extended past 90 minutes, I would have given participants

an option to end the interview or re-convene at a time convenient to them. All

participants received a $50 Amazon gift card to thank them for their time contribution to the study.

During the semistructured interviews, I recorded data via two audio recording devices and handwritten note taking. These data collection devices were made known to the participants. Following the interview, I conducted member-checking and de-briefing activities. I requested and completed a follow-up phone conversation with each participant for the purposes of verifying understanding of the data collected during semistructured interviews and reviews of records or program materials. Using phone interviews for strategies such as member-checking was recommended by Novick (2008) who found that participants speak more freely and relaxed through phone interviews.

During the follow-up phone contacts, I encouraged de-briefing opportunities. De-briefing strengthens the credibility of the study because the researcher becomes open to alternative interpretations of the data (Morse, 2015). For this study, I allowed participants opportunities to view coding throughout the data analysis process and reports of the study upon completion upon request. Additionally, I reflected on any participant provided feedback related to answering the research questions in the reflexive memo writing process. I allowed participants opportunities to exit the study at any time throughout the process up to the time the dissertation was published. Contact information was provided to each participant to use if they elected to opt out of participation in the research. I also made participants aware of potential future dissemination of the research through conferences or professional workshops.

Data Analysis

Yin (2018) described analysis as the strategies for managing and interpreting data to defend your findings and conclusions. The key elements I used during data analysis for this study were to follow the constructivist theoretical orientations for case-study analysis and explanation building techniques presented by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Yin (2018). Similar steps were provided by Smith and Firth (2011), where there is an interconnected back and forth process through the data. Patton (2015) advised to start with creating a case record that is an individualized holistic entity before comparing and contrasting it to other cases. Bringing all information about the case together for examination in a systematic, organized way begins each case record (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). According to Yin (2018), the researcher makes a tentative explanatory proposition, compares the data from the first case against the proposition, then each subsequent case in the multiple case study provides a new set of data for comparison. This iterative analysis was part deductive and part inductive (Yin, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) concurred that multiple case studies begin with within-case analysis procedures and move toward cross-case analysis.

In efforts to remain transparent throughout the iterative analysis of data, I kept a reflexive journal and memos of jottings or statements of thoughts and decision-making. Examples of reflections that lead to raw data include the feelings and initial interpretations of a researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Yin (2018) described the usefulness of memo writing to the research process, stating that themes or ideas reflected in the researcher's notes often provide initial steps to analyzing the data. I used these

analytic techniques to remain consistent with constructivist theory. Researchers need to be transparent regarding how their understandings affected the research process (Morrow, 2005). According to Kleinsasser (2000), reflexivity produces a substantial set of data. Thus, I provided deeper meaning toward answering the research questions by bringing my thinking to light. Rigor and credibility are enhanced through reflexivity (Hiller & Vears, 2016). I made my interpretations visible to reduce biases. As school social workers shared their perceptions and experiences related to SEL with high school students in alternative education, I made interpretations of that meaning and revealed the interpretations for richer depth in answering the research questions.

To answer the research questions, I used data analysis procedures that included initial descriptive open coding for patterns from transcribed interview data, and program curricula materials. I purchased a reputable software program for organizing and coding qualitative data for subsequent coding of categories and themes. I selected MAXQDA data software because of the reported ease of use. According to Saillard (2011), open coding and memo tools allow users to interact with data. I found that the analysis procedures aligned with the inductive approach of qualitative research and provided a process for answering the research questions for this exploratory case study on the perceptions of school social workers providing SEL with high school students in alternative education.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) defined coding as identifying the concepts and themes present in the data to generate theories to answer the research question. I began my process by preparing word for word transcripts of my interviews and analytical notes

using tools such as audio recorders and a transcribing service called Transcription Puppy. I checked the transcriptions for accuracy by listening to the audio and making any necessary changes in a Google Doc or directly into the MAXQDA system. I used Google Docs over Microsoft word because data automatically saves and can be accessed from any device. Once I determined the transcripts were accurate in accordance to the audio recordings, I imported the data into MAXQDA software. I also imported all reflective journaling and memos, along with the data sources, into MAXQDA to incorporate the audit trail, integrate all sources of data, and search for emerging categories and themes.

Using MAXQDA, I coded each case as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Yin (2018): first descriptive in vivo codes, followed by coding to reflect preliminary thoughts, moving toward initial categories, and potentially reaching themes. The computer assisted qualitative data analysis software allowed me to organize and make relationships between the data, but I remained the primary instrument for coding and analyzing data. After initial and interpretive coding, I made cross case comparisons using tools available with MAXQDA software. Thus, my intended method of coding for the dissertation became a more comprehensive version of me first marking relevant concepts from all data sources, then moving iteratively towards categories and themes while comparing data across the multiple cases. The ultimate intent of a multiple case-study analysis is to build an overall explanation of a phenomenon representative of each individual case (Yin, 2018). Thus, I supported explanations emerging from the data in my study to answer the research questions.

I identified coded segments and compared segments from all three data sources using the MAXQDA software for coding and organizing. Specifically, I compared interview and focus group data with codes from data of reflexive journaling taken during reviews of program materials to answer research question three, "What evidence-based practices are school social workers finding effectively increase social-emotional competencies to positively impact academic performance among students in alternative education?" Interventions identified by participants resulted in coded segments and data collected from publicly available information and research of the SEL interventions via internet searches resulted in coded segments. I compared the coded segments from all three data sources to analyze the strength of the evidence base for the SEL intervention or program. For example, I identified through coded segments if participants viewed a program or intervention as weak or strong in building SEL skills among the youth. I compared these codes to the codes from data collected from the program and intervention materials that indicated if the research or evidence presented appeared weak or strong. Thus, through the emerging findings, I found that there were SEL programs and interventions coded with strong evidence from reviewing materials and as reported by participants in either a focus group or individual interview.

I used headings representative of a coding matrix when coding for within-case analysis such as: Descriptive In-vivo codes, Interpretive codes, Categories, and Thematic Review. Developing a coding matrix as a natural form of coding was described by Saldaña (2016). The process of cross-case analysis begins by pattern matching each subsequent case (Yin, 2018). I used this pattern matching process to identify saturation

and categories and themes that emerged during coding and analytical procedures. Subsequently, I visually and narratively justified the process of coding data in the report of this study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

To follow the recommendations of Tracy (2010), the criteria to meet for trustworthiness of a qualitative design are flexibility between having a worthy topic, rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution to the field, ethical conduct, and meaningful connections from data to analysis. By following these standards, I produced a quality study that enhances knowledge and can impact social change. The four main areas of trustworthiness in qualitative studies that became a standard set by Lincoln and Guba in 1985 are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Both Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) used the terms validity and reliability for determining the rigor and overall trustworthiness of a qualitative design, even though these terms are generally associated with quantitative inquiries. Following the constructivist theoretical framework, I addressed trustworthiness for this case-study research using the standards described by Yin (2018) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015).

Internal validity, otherwise referred to as credibility, represents the degree to which findings reflect reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Credibility is important because the judgment dependent nature of qualitative inquiries leads to skepticism within scientific fields (Patton, 2015). Yin (2018) stated that internal validity can be a challenge in case-study research because the researcher makes inferences to establish meaning.

Strategies to strengthen internal validity that will be used for this study are pattern matching, refuting alternative theories, and explanation building during the data analysis phase (Yin, 2018). Triangulation of the data and member checks additionally support internal validity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Tracy (2010) stated that thick descriptions with abundant detail and triangulating data sources are necessary components for credibility. I used three sources of data throughout coding and analyses, as well as an audit trail to make my decisions transparent. With these multiple sources, along with member-checking, I ensured that the experiences shared by participants were being accurately represented.

External validity is often referred to as transferability because it is the degree to which findings can be generalized outside of the study sample. Using member checks, maximum variation, and thick, rich descriptions were strategies for building external validity in the presented case study research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). I used a multiple case-study approach. The findings of a multiple case-study approach should be applicable to similar cases, or others in similar situations (Toma, 2011). I sought maximum variation of cases by reaching out to a wide network of school social workers in the state of Illinois and then randomly narrowing down the pool if more than 15 potential participants met the study criteria. Along with using rich, thick descriptions, a holistic approach for transferability includes a statement specifying how the findings connect to other settings (Toma, 2011). I focused my study on Illinois school social workers but there was a possibility that readers outside of this geographic area would deem the research useful to their professional practice. From the constructivist lens, it is

the readers of the research that determine the generalizability based upon their own situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

When considering the generalizability of findings, Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) warned of two potential key informant biases that occur if the participants fail to represent participants who were not selected for the study, and samples of words fail to represent the voices of participants. Strategies to avoid these biases and issues with generalizing are to randomly select from the purposive group of participants that meet the criteria guidelines and ensure the words and data reflect the experiences being shared by the participants. I conducted member-checks and engaged in reflexive note taking throughout the research process to strengthen efforts to truly capture the voices of participants and best represent any generalizations to larger groups of school social workers implementing SEL in alternative education programs.

According to Creswell (2014), reliability in a qualitative study emerges through the consistency of the researcher's approach and techniques. For example, I extensively documented the procedural steps of this case study including consistencies in coding. By documenting procedures, the more reliable the research becomes (Creswell, 2014). I kept an audit trail throughout the coding through reflexive journal and memo writing that improved reliability.

The assumptions of constructivist theory impact the understanding of reliability in case study research. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), because human experiences and behaviors vary, one person's account of an observation is no more reliable than another person's account. However, the strategies I used of triangulation,

and reflexive journaling with an audit trail, were strategies for enhancing reliability because they provided information on the steps taken throughout data collection and analysis. Yin (2018) suggested researchers record their procedures explicitly as though being directly monitored so that the steps could be repeated. I remained consistent in meeting this goal throughout the audit trail.

A researcher's objectivity and biases are at the heart of confirmability in qualitative studies. Leaving a sound audit trail and identifying the predispositions of the researcher are critical to confirmability (Shenton, 2004). As a practicing school social worker, I assessed and reflected on any personal predispositions impacting the research design and findings. I reflected the voices and experiences of the participants in the findings, not my own. I created diagrams using MAXQDA that depicted the audit trail and data analysis so readers could more fully understand my strategies for confirmability, as well as the other criteria for trustworthiness. I consistently sought to produce a holistic study that met the highest rigor possible for a case-study dissertation.

Ethical Protection

Ethical considerations are important when developing interview questions and conducting interviews to protect the research participants and to receive approval from the IRB to proceed with the research. According to Patton (2015), a researcher must know the ethical standards, be transparent, maintain confidentially, and do no harm. For example, I could not ask questions that put the participant at risk of identifying minor students or the specific school district they work for during the interview because that would require additional consents be obtained. I used an informed consent form that

clearly stated the purposes of the research, identifying potential risks and benefits to the participant, ensuring protection of confidentiality to the greatest extent possible, and allowing participants to drop out of the study at any time.

While an official letter of cooperation was not necessary with the IASSW because their only involvement in the study was to distribute research invitations through email, I followed a process for approval with the board of directors of IASSW. I initiated and was granted an agreement to gain access to the participants through email to the Executive Director of IASSW, after approval of the IRB.

I upheld the ethical protection of participants throughout the entirety of the research process. I took measures to ensure participants were fully informed and provided appropriate consent to participate. I audio recorded interviews with two separate digital audio recorders and conducted interviews in locations mutually agreed upon with the interviewee. I pre-reserved private hotel conference rooms for face to face interviews. The transportation convenience of participants was a high consideration, and I distributed a thank-you incentive of a $50 Amazon gift card to those who participated. I protected participant privacy by making sure personal names and school district names were not recognizable. As participants discussed their professional roles, I omitted any references that could distinguish their identity in any reports.

To protect human participants, I commenced procedures as approved by the IRB. I coded participant names and stored the names separately from those codes, only accessible to myself. To manage any unforeseen adverse events, I consulted with the dissertation committee.

For the proposed study, the risk of harm was minimal as professional practice is not considered a sensitive subject matter and asking professionals questions related to their capacity to perform assigned job duties involved minimal risk. Due to the lower risk factors, I sought and was granted an expedited review by the institutional review board. However, there is always some risk of harm (Patton, 2015). Had participants requested withdrawal or refused to participate, I would have allowed immediate non-participation and opportunities to de-brief if requested. I will potentially disseminate the completed research through conference workshops or by request of participants. All data will be destroyed within five years of the study completion.

Summary

I aligned the methods for this qualitative study with the research questions to discover meaning within a constructivist theoretical framework. I used individual interviews, focus groups, and examinations of program materials as data sources for the phenomenon of interest. I integrated strategies to enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of findings, such as triangulation of data, reflexive journaling, and member checking, as components of the research design. I met standards for ethical conduct in compliance with the IRB to protect all participants. I used purposeful sampling for the qualitative case study seeking to understand the processes school social workers use to select SEL interventions for high school students in alternative education settings. In chapter four, I present the detailed results of the data collected and interpreted.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this qualitative case study, I explored the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions for high school students in alternative education programs in Illinois. The purpose of the study was to address the existing gap of EBP available for Tier 3, high-need students by seeking the real-life experiences of school social workers serving students in alternative education.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions in Illinois alternative education programs?

2. What factors contribute to the clinical decision-making process of school social workers providing interventions for SEL with high school students in alternative education programs?

3. What EBPs are school social workers finding effectively increase social-emotional competencies to positively impact academic performance among students in alternative education?

In this chapter, I present details describing the execution of the study, including data collection procedures, demographics of participants, and analysis of the data. Further, I provide evidence regarding the trustworthiness of the research results and overall findings.

Setting

In assessing potential influences on participants at the time of the study, I acknowledge that the holiday season may have impacted the number of participants available. I sought participants using a mass email invitation from the Illinois Association of School Social Workers that went out December 2, 2018. Christmas activities or the traditional end of educational semester time constraints may have deterred some social workers from participating. All but one participant preferred an online interview, however I did not observe any impact on the variation of data between the settings of online or in-person interviews. Both settings yielded information rich data to answer the research questions.

Demographics

Demographics relevant to the study were that participants ranged in age from 30–57 years, with an average age of 37 years. The range of professional experiences was 7–32 years, with an average of 12 years of professional experience. Of the eleven total participants, one was male and ten were female. Geographically, all practiced in schools with alternative education programs and services at the high school level in the state of Illinois. One participant identified her ethnicity as Black/African-American, one as bi-racial, and the other nine identified themselves as White/Caucasian.

Data Collection

I conducted semistructured individual interviews with six participants. Data saturation was achieved as evidenced by pattern-matching across cases, as described by Yin (2018). Coding the second case study database resulted in 17 new codes, which were

different from the first case study database. All other codes pattern-matched the in vivo and interpretive coding from the first data set. I pattern-matched the third data set to two prior case study databases, and the process continued in this manner. I similarly coded the third set of data resulting in 16 new codes, with 13 new codes from the fourth case study database, eight from the fifth, and four new codes from the sixth database, which was the last participant individually interviewed. This process of analyzing patterns until relatively minimal new information comes forth supports that saturation was achieved (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Of the six participants I individually interviewed, I conducted three virtually via Internet meetings set up through Zoom or Google Hangouts. I conducted two via telephone due to issues connecting via Internet, and conducted one in person. The in-person interview was conducted in a neutral, private location of a reserved hotel meeting room agreed upon by the participant. The length of the interviews ranged from 16 minutes to 46 minutes, with an average length of approximately 31 minutes. All semistructured individual interviews were conducted in December 2018. I conducted two focus groups, one on January 6th, 2019 followed be a second focus group on January 31st, 2019.

Because there was evidence of data saturation after six individual interviews and the January 6th focus group yielded only two participants in attendance, I scheduled a second focus group with the remaining three participants. I held the second focus group on Jan. 31st, 2019 with all three participants attending and providing data. I conducted the focus group interviews via Internet, using Zoom conferencing technology.

I audio recorded data for each interview and focus group with the use of two separate hand-held voice recorders. All participants were knowledgeable of the audio recordings and consented to this form of data collection. As I detailed in the plan presented in Chapter 3, I used a professional transcription company with a nondisclosure agreement to transcribe the data and checked all transcriptions for accuracy. The only variations in data collection from what was presented in Chapter 3 was the use of technology to conduct some of the interviews. This change was a result of working with the Institutional Review Board to ensure participants had a choice of setting for privacy. One participant chose to be interviewed in person as specifically detailed in Chapter 3, while the remaining participants chose online interviews through technology. I found that unusual circumstances occurring during data collection included one participant struggling to connect online and opting to complete the interview via telephone, and one participant having no option for a video chat; therefore, the interview was conducted via telephone.

Data Analysis

I started the coding process with descriptive, in vivo coding of participant transcripts that were uploaded to MAXQDA software. Descriptive coding methods for first cycle coding aligns with theories of building knowledge (Saldaña, 2016). As a second cycle of coding, I followed interpretive coding of the participant transcripts. For example, the first phase of coding participant C frequently yielded an in vivo code of "battle." I used the interpretive coding phase to identify segments of the dialogue as "SEL builds with administration" because the participant was discussing personal

recognition that, without the leadership of administration to cohesively bring all staff together in SEL efforts, there would be no progress. Yin (2018) termed initial participant transcripts as "case study databases" and I conducted initial coding phases for each case study data base created from my interviews.

Once I completed the initial descriptive and interpretive coding phases of the first two participants, I compared the data for cross case analysis and pattern-matching, followed by similar comparisons with each additional case study database. This process enables researchers to begin developing explanations and generalizations that fit each case, though specific details vary (Yin, 2018). This is an inductive approach of pattern-matching and cross-case synthesis that aligns with constructivist perspectives that knowledge emerges through the interpretations of meaning provided by people experiencing the phenomenon. Within-case analysis transitions to multiple-case synthesis in this constructivist approach to theory building.

The inductive process of moving from coded units to categories and themes was consistent with the qualitative analysis procedures described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015) and Yin (2018). I used the MAXQDA software to organize the codes, categories, and subcategories emerging from the constant comparative method of the case study databases. For example, participants spoke of students having various learning issues in addition to their behavioral issues. I initially categorized these units of data from multiple cases to academic needs, which I later transitioned to a category of student needs that represented a larger category consistent among all participant sets of data. Reviewing my analytical notes, I found that the categories naturally formed to represent the larger units

of data. According to Merriam (1998), the interpreted meaning from categories are organized in response to the research questions. Therefore, I organized the categories and subcodes under headings representing the three research questions in the MAXQDA system, and moved inductively toward generalizations of the knowledge. These methods of examining multiple cases to understand knowledge are common among constructivist theorists (Hyett et al., 2014)

While there were no completely discrepant cases, one participant stated she does not use any evidenced-based materials and her scope of connection to social-emotional learning occurred when writing individualized education plan (IEP) goals that fit the standards built into the paperwork system. This minimized focus on evidenced-based materials for SEL with alternative students varied significantly from other cases. However, the participant was similar to others in describing how she meets student needs with individualized counseling allowing processing. Therefore, the case offered data to help answer the research questions. For example, the participant stated,

> Well, what I try to do with each of them is talk about strategies so that they have the best outcome with their responses. So, if they get angry about something, we talk about different ways to respond that'll give the best outcome.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I contacted each participant in an effort to member check understanding of the data and the credibility of assigned codes. I completed member-checking with each participant. While participants agreed to interpretations of the coding, some clarifications were made. For example, one participant clarified that although, originally, she stated

there was no connection to the MTSS framework, she meant that the connection was built into their program because students in alternative education receive the highest levels of support. These methods of member checking ensure the participants' voices are being reflected in the constructed meaning.

According to Yin (2018), credibility is enhanced when the researcher begins with a proposition related to the phenomenon and considers alternate theories. The proposition I formed following the review of literature was that school social workers have varied experiences meeting the SEL needs because of limited resources, strategies, and EBP to support high school students in alternative education. From the individuals interviewed, there were references made by all participants related to a difference in tools and materials available for high school students compared to elementary and middle school students. For example, one participant stated,

> We define the problems but there's nothing simple you can use that we can pull out and say, 'Okay, this is what we need to address.' At the younger levels there's the Second Step program, things like that are pretty good, but at the older levels it's really difficult.

These forms of pattern-matching responses among participants add to the credibility of findings because it reveals findings similar to earlier research along with experiences of success in meeting the SEL needs of high school students in alternative education. However, two participants discussed successes with currently available programs and structures in place for their students, suggesting that alternate theories to

the proposition are emerging as the research base for evidence-based programs for SEL with high school students in alternative education increases.

Random selection from a participant pool was not possible due to the limited response among Illinois school social workers. While there were more responses to participate than included in the study, several school social workers were disqualified due to not fully meeting the study criteria. For example, two potential participants had not practiced in an alternative setting for the minimum duration of 1 year. Another potential participant I deemed too closely associated with myself and excluded from the study. The willing participants who met the study criteria and consent procedures participated in either a focus group or individual interview. The lack of opportunity for a maximum variation sampling strategy to be initiated from the pool of participants somewhat limits transferability. However, as described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), multiple participants meeting criteria were available for the comparative case study. The school social workers who participated were from different parts of the state of Illinois, with some reporting alternative education programs physically connected to mainstream schools and others reporting alternative education settings isolated from the other school district buildings.

The transferability of this qualitative multiple case study is strengthened by the comparative case methods used in analysis. I pattern-matched and compared each new case study database to the previous. In doing so, the frequencies of initial descriptive codes reduced with each new data set. This suggests I met data saturation and

strengthened the transferability of findings to other school social workers, with stronger generalizations to school social workers within the state of Illinois.

Examples of variations reported relating to how SEL is executed within alternative education settings in Illinois ranged from minimal connection of built in SEL standards to comprehensive system wide efforts. Yet, the rich descriptions provided also yielded consistencies among participants suggesting generalizability outside the participant group. For example, all participants described experiences of feeling SEL predominantly occurs with individual counseling sessions that allow student processing of behaviors. As reflected by a participant, "The biggest thing is to get students to just really process." In connecting these findings to other settings, it is generalized that each school system is on a continuum of structuring SEL supports and integrating MTSS frameworks, but that school social workers recognize the importance of the 1:1 counseling relationship. To improve the overall understanding and trustworthiness of the data analysis, these generalizations were member checked with each participant, who verified the explanation building. Because similar data came out of the focus groups, there is additional support for external validity.

I utilized reflexive journaling to establish an audit trail throughout the study and I uploaded the journaling as a document to the MAXQDA system file. These notes reflect my thoughts when coding or making changes to previous codes, jottings of thoughts while reading transcripts, and inductively moving towards categories and themes. Additionally, I inserted brief memos within transcripts using the memo options offered by MAXQDA to create individual memos within the software. I used memos to clarify

meanings, such as when one participant used sarcasm making the transcript words appear to have positive meaning, though the intent reflected was negative. These extensively documented audit trail procedures can be followed to closely replicate coding and data analysis, including how the data was triangulated (Creswell, 2014).

For this study, I analyzed programs identified by participants for publicly accessible data related to the research base. Further, I compared the individual interview case study databases to data from two focus group interviews. During the focus groups, participants built off each other's contributions through dynamic, reciprocated conversations. Being able to pattern-match data from two focus groups further enhanced triangulation of the data from individual interviews. The small sized focus groups allowed participants to engage in a more comprehensive manner, without any time constraints associated with larger focus groups. However, the constructivist lens of this research holds that the interpreted meaning of one observer is no more reliable than another (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, I detailed descriptions of coding and data analysis in my reflexive journaling and memo writing record to optimize dependability for the qualitative research design.

The predispositions I have as a researcher are transparently stated throughout the audit trail and research report. A tentative proposition of the phenomenon was presented based on information from the literature review, but also personal experiences as a school social worker working with various student groups. During interviews, I was careful to not share my own thoughts related to any forms of SEL in schools. The focus remained on the participants and their experiences throughout the interviews. There were two

social workers who asked me about my interest in the topic at the conclusion of the interview. I briefly shared where the interest originated and some findings from the literature review. I often assessed during the coding process whether the code truly reflected the participant's voice. The care I made to not guide participant's responses outside the interview guide questions strengthened my ability to reflect just the participant voice in the coding. Further, I contacted each participant within a few weeks of the interview to member check codes and my understanding of meaning from the data.

Results

During the analysis of data process, I moved from initial coding across the multiple cases to the development of categories and themes. Codes contribute to interpretations and constructions of meaning (Saldaña, 2016). I then analyzed categories relative to the research questions. In the following sections, I detail the process of coding patterns for each question. In efforts to remain transparent, I provide examples of how the more abundant and detailed coding segments inductively led to categories and themes of meaning.

Experiences Selecting and Implementing Interventions

I collected and analyzed data to answer the research question, "What are the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions in Illinois alternative education programs?" Vast experiences were shared by the multiple participants. During the analytic process, codes that did not connect with the research questions were re-read, but not included in the building of meaning. For example, the code "geographical description" was not used because the

responses were irrelevant to the specific research questions and would minimize the protections of confidentiality for participants.

Process of Adapting

During the interviews, each participant communicated a general description of their process in selecting and implementing interventions for their high school students in alternative education, with more specific data emerging throughout the interview. I often attributed coding for "adapting" to these responses, either through in vivo or interpretive coding methods. The following responses reflect the initial descriptions each participant provided. Participant A,

> So, in my class, my Strategies class, I have developed the curriculum. It didn't come with a curriculum when I started. They've like, allowed me a lot of freedom in that to kind of modify my curriculum the way I want to. So also, I try to use as many modes as possible so, like we'll do, sometimes we do PowerPoint, sometimes we do a hands-on activity, sometimes we do worksheets. So, I try to meet the needs of all my kids because they all learn differently and they're all at different levels. I had to adapt things. So, I just have to, I think of evidence-based practices from younger grades, but I have to try to adapt them to our things. I create stuff probably usually enough to extend my lesson planning but sometimes it gets a little more like, "What are we going to do today?"

Participant B,

> I could try to mold some stuff into what I need for this population. I can't, you know, usually it takes me two sessions to get through one lesson because of the

other things going on with them and I like Second Step for that younger age and

like Stepping Up, and then I can kind of take it where I need it go.

Participant C, "This is how we ended up doing these half hour groups in the mornings

once a week. So, the assistant principal came to us and said, 'Hey, we want some SEL for

the school.'" Participant D,

> I don't really have any experiences to share. I've gone to trainings, but I've not
>
> really used those, the information that I gained. I think for me, I just kind of hand
>
> picked out what I've learned over the years and just pull out what will fit for the
>
> student.

Participant E,

> So, the small group, I don't use a curriculum, but we have identified areas of
>
> social skills that we want to work on, and we can talk about that. I may as well
>
> just create my own lessons. Based on the topic, that's how I feel like it's going to
>
> go. That even if we go through this curriculum and we decide you know what, we
>
> don't want to use this, we need to hang on to those (RULER) anchors. It's
>
> changed over the years. There's a topic that I want to go over or skill that I want
>
> them to learn. Yes, I use a lot of Soul Pancake. I love Soul Pancake.

Participant F,

> Well, the biggest need really isn't an educational issue, but in our school, it's
>
> substance abuse. So, we really aim for that to be addressed. I really just feel it's
>
> that one on one connection. Honestly, I think that most of what social work
>
> therapy is more than a curriculum that you're using, just building rapport and

having that relationship with them. I really have pieced together a lot of different

things that I like. I'm actually just pulling out different resources from different

things and making my own which isn't terribly well, you know, you don't know

the effectiveness at that point.

The first focus groups consisted of participants G and H. The second focus group

consisted of participants I, J, and K. Participant G stated, "It's tailored to each student.

Yes, and the basics of it is laid out in their behavior plan, but I know, and we all know

social workers, like, you kind of adjust things and add things you needed."

Participant H,

Yes, I mean with the population of kids who have to be in an alternative setting,

you can't do the same thing very long, you got to constantly be changing it and

what works for 5 of them isn't going to work for the 6th kid. So, it's a constant

struggle, a challenge to be learning new things, finding new things. So, being able

to take curriculum and make it so that it's not dry and boring yet still helps them

and gets them to learn the concepts that's the biggest struggle I find. And always

validate make them feel like they are important. Finding there is nothing we won't

try to work out.

Participant I,

I adapt things from theory to create my own curriculum. And then I tried to adapt

for the boys, except that I can't-- I don't even think the curriculum for boys exists.

I've looked and I can't find anything. Of course, I Pinterest, Instagram, follow

other social workers and counselors, see what they are doing.

Participant J stated, "Yeah, what I use is pretty much of a mix-up between my own stuff that I've kind of just developed over the years."

Participant J stated, "we have to keep things organized and have that structure but knowing that situations do come up and we have to be flexible and work with the student."

Participant K,

I definitely want it to be interactive and don't want to just pass out a worksheet. If you do find a curriculum, I feel like that is most what it is. Like, have them answer this question on a piece of paper, and I don't want that. So, I have used a couple of things from Why Try as she said. Other than that, it is just trying to find a topic and just trying to find a fun activity to kind of make it work.

Sources of Interventions

Multiple participants provided data on where they find materials to support students. Sources obtained from attending special trainings or conferences was described by Participants A, B, and E. "And then I've also used like other things, resources that I've learned about at conferences and things like Erika's Lighthouse for depression awareness." Searching for programs and materials on the internet was described by Participants A and B. "also bought some things off Teachers Pay Teachers (Participant A)." Books were coded as sources from the transcripts of Participants A, C, and F. "Everything that I use, I mean it comes from published books that I bought and things that I got at conferences and different things like that so they're as evidenced based as I can get (Participant A)." "If I were in my office right now, I could turn around and read

you the books that we've used (Participant C)." The experiences of creating a collection and sharing sources was described by Participants A and F. "So, I'm sharing out a lot of materials that's provided by the school (Participant F)." "I have a lot of curriculum or activities that I pulled from out of the years. I have old power points, I have things that I created for the years. (Participant A)." Participant J reported, "I do Ted Talks sometimes too. There are some good mental health ones out there too." Participant J continued describing sources of interventions:

> And something else that I do a lot of is YouTube videos. That is like introductory, and then we do the discussion based on the YouTube video, which is somehow related to some random piece that I've pulled from some random curriculum that might work for them that day.

Challenges

The most significantly reported challenge among participants was problems getting appropriate materials to use for SEL with their high school students in alternative education. There was a total of 16 separate participant responses coded as "difficult/struggle." Other than one participant who stated she did not have experiences with EBP to share, all participants in the study made references to struggles finding materials. Many specifically referred to greater hardships finding interventions for high school students than elementary students. For example, Participant F stated,

> It's a bit of a struggle, I have accumulated a lot of resources but there's not really any good curriculum I can use in the school. At the younger levels there's, like, the Second Step program, things, like, that that are pretty good, but at the older

levels it's really difficult. Yes, if it's the high school age, that's really difficult to find anything. Everything is, we are supposed to be using all these evidenced based resources, but stuff I find out there just isn't good, or it's expensive or we just don't know about it.

Participant A shared, "but the high school age group is the hardest to find evidence-based curriculum for. So, I'd say that's the hardest." Participant B stated,

It's pretty difficult because these students are not your neurotypical, they're not neurotypical for their age. Some of the curriculums don't work because they're not an at-risk population, they're above that. It's really hard to find things that are relevant, and they will find interesting. I struggle. And I spent a lot of time surfing the web. I struggle extremely with high school because there isn't a lot of stuff that they're going to buy into. And I just cannot find anything for high school that I think really, really impresses them. Yes, I think a lot of people are out there, swimming the best they can. It's just real sad.

Data from the focus group was consistent with these expressions of struggling to find evidence-based interventions and supported triangulation of the data. For example, Participant H stated, "But it's hard to make sure to find things that are evidence-based and things that are met correctly. Take a great curriculum and if you implement it incorrectly, it makes or breaks it." I asked a probing question about materials at the high school level and Participant H replied,

No. [laughs] Not at the high school level. That's the struggle. I can find tons of stuff for elementary but when you have, high school kids especially in an alternative setting, they don't want to do the crafty coloring activity.

Participant G shared, "Our district started Second Step this year, but it doesn't have a high school curriculum. And so just, like, trying to dig around and find curriculum for high school that was like relatable and affordable was like nearly impossible." Participant J summarized these challenges well:

I think it's a common theme across all of us then. Because at least at my district, that's been a source of issue for all of the social workers in our district at the secondary level. It's just there's not a lot out there. And the stuff that is out there doesn't seem like the most well received or the quality isn't quite there.

While difficulty finding evidence-based materials was the most predominant experience voiced by participants, there were other challenges noted. For example, participants A, C, E, and F discussed student motivation as a challenge when implementing interventions. "some of them are not going to be very motivated to get up and do this activity (Participant E)." The transient nature of students in alternative education was discussed by participants A and F. "The hard part is our building is so transitive, but we have kids that come in and then leave or get enrolled, then they get expelled, through the semester (Participant A). "And there's so many days they are dropped from the program. So, I think the issue with using an actual curriculum is that it builds on each other and these kids are not always there (Participant F). Participant C

described challenges of working with staff who do not share the same ethical standards as social workers and demonstrate boundary issues with students,

> So, I decided to just say it for what it was, and I said, "Well, I do find it inappropriate when a staff member exchanges phone numbers with a student. And that's something that I find that I have to report."

A final common code of challenges when selecting and implementing interventions with high school students in alternative education was "students are misunderstood." Nine responses shared this code. Participant D stated,

> Yes, I just really think they need, you presume they're not going to need a lot by the time they get this age, but they need so much. They really do. They really need a lot because somehow, they just kind of slipped through and things haven't been addressed.

Participant A reflected,

> Every student that I am aware of has had some kind of abuse history but informally, when I talk to people about my kids, I think it's there they were like I wonder how this kid ended up having behavior issues?

Participant C provided examples,

> And like there's one girl that, well, the staff hate. They absolutely hate her. She walks in to our room and they cringe because she can be tough. Like, if I told them her story about all the times that she was abused and how her mom tried to run her over with a car and all these things. Well, maybe they might understand why this girl acts out like she does.

Multiple Roles

When sharing experiences, many participants described the multiple roles they have when providing services. Consulting on behavioral interventions was described by Participant E, "what I do, working with the teachers and plan for our student. So, I sort of take the lead with that. I know my bosses sent people to me to help write their behavior plans." and Participant G, "But I think now I'm definitely more, like you said consultative, and then you know creating the resources and training the staff on how to use those resources so when I'm not there they can still be used." Others described roles of being the front-line during crises. "Basically, my role is to diffuse the kids when an incident happens. They just come hang out with me before they make things worse (Participant F)." Participant E stated, "So I'm now on a triaging role with new referrals." Participant H stated, "I'm their first kind of go-to. And being that one constant and we talk a lot about that when we do talk about our issues, being that stable person that one person who unconditionally is there for them."

Team Helps or Hinders

The experiences of being part of a team attempting to provide SEL with students in high school alternative education programs was discussed in both beneficial and detrimental ways by the participants. Examples of data for positive experiences include Participant E, "Yes, I'm on the team: myself, and our director, and one person from our discipline office, and all the teachers that work in our program." Participant A stated, "I and the other two counselors work with me, we have a class that we try to teach." Participant H shared the most positive reflections about being part of a team,

It is amazing. So, with the three of us, it's really awesome because it's like a fluid

team of if one is not available then the other just kind of picks up. So, there's no

role, "Well, that was her job or that's his job role in our school". It's everyone

together kind of working. It's involving everyone as a team 'cause otherwise it's

going to fall apart the minute they leave my office.

In contrast, Participant C shared negative experiences being part of the team,

It can be difficult in our program to really implement SEL because I feel like, to

implement SEL, you really always need to be positive. And our staff isn't very

positive and we're very negative, very punishing. And so, I think like that's our

biggest challenge and our biggest struggle in implementing.

These more negative systemic experiences led to a larger category that emerged from the

data related to the impact of administration on implementing effective SEL practices.

Multitiered Systems of Support and Social-Emotional Learning Build with

Administration

I reflected in my analytic notes the joining of various codes under this category,

There were 25 codes for SEL builds with administration, so this is important

among participants. But in going through codes again, it's really both MTSS and

SEL intertwined that they are talking about building with administration. It is also

apparent that those with stronger administration for SEL more easily identify

supports and services with their alternative education program and speak more

positively about SEL in general, particularly feeling part of a team effort.

I present the data related to this inductive process of constructing meaning here.

Connection. Participants A, E, G, and H described cohesive efforts towards SEL services and supports within the MTSS framework, including regular team meetings. Participant A explained,

Yes, district wide that's a huge initiative right now and I just was at that this past week, at a district wide meeting with all the social workers and our special education supervisors about that MTSS framework. We have a new MTSS coordinator for our district this year. So, she's very big on Why Try as an intervention. We document it for another two weeks or four weeks or something like that, because we don't do the exact same thing in our building. I think our system is kind of young, like our school, the program is kind of evolved very recently. This is the first year we have a full-time administrator at our building even.

Participant E first stated, "We don't have at our school, we don't have tiered social-emotional supports yet." However, the participant went on to state, "And so, some of the years our teachers have used some curriculum before we started using what we use for the whole school. And now, it's RULER." I probed, asking if that was the school's Tier 1? Participant E responded, "Yes, it is." After further discussion, I stated, "So, sounds like you're actually involved in discussions for all three tiers." Participant E clarified, "I am, but I'm not a part of the development of what those tier supports will look like." Participant E continued to describe how tiered supports are developing,

And then wrestling with like creating those new tiered supports. So, I don't know what the conversations are. I know they want to do groups with the gen. ed. social

workers, and they have not. I think they're doing a needs assessment at this point."

Participant G described MTSS with "so we are in the first year of a 3-year kick-off for MTSS and that's why we just started Second Step, but I've done PBIS tiers one and two in some previous schools of mine. So, I work pretty closely with the regular ed. social worker to get that MTSS, some of those tiers kick started this year.

Participant H shared,

And that's where on my end I consider myself very lucky because my administration is just as hands-on in searching for those techniques and those evidence-based practices too, that we could all put our heads together and it's not always just falling on my shoulders. You know I have them as well, too, to bounce things off of.

I specifically asked Participant H, "How much do you guys use those frameworks?" Participant H replied,

A lot. We have team meetings every Monday with the whole school. We are a strong PBIS school. Everything we do is based around that and then we meet as a staff and team. Mondays, then we have our whole staff meeting with parents, everything on Wednesdays to get everybody on the same page, but we're constantly like teaming together and working to discuss how we get more positive relationships with the kids. And one of the things about my school I love, like in our administrator, our assessment is the driving force behind a lot of this creativity in interventions.

Lacks connection. When asked about the MTSS framework, Participants B, C, D, F, and K replied they do not use it, or minimally use it because there is an awareness that alternative education services are for students identified with Tier 3 levels of need. This understanding of meaning was validated by Participant D during a member check who stated, "the framework is built in." Participant B clarified,

> Well, we're not really PBIS. We went to training, all of us went. It was awful. I think at our level, PBIS, I don't know. It wouldn't be really easy to implement this, and I felt like collecting all this data, data, data which is great and then just moving the data all around a hundred different ways. Like, you'd say the same thing three times or, whatever. And I just, we're going to kind of move away from it. Even though we never really started it. I just didn't see how that framework really lends itself to being helpful.

Participant C provided further data related to weaknesses in implementing SEL that resulted in five codes of "battle" because that was a word the participant repeatedly used. In line 44, Participant C stated,

> This is a battle that I feel like, in our program that we've, the social workers have really been battling for a few years now. You know our school is essentially run by PAs. We only have seven teachers, four social workers and like 30 program assistants.

Participant C went on to describe an administrator asking for SEL and then the later result being,

And so, we spent weeks over the summer, researching different programs and we came up with a list of like five or six for them. And gave them all the info about it, cost, everything like that. And we were told, "No". And we were told that instead we were just going to be doing, like 30-minute groups in the classroom. He wanted that to look like team building things, like building marshmallow towers or building a little water craft and seeing how many pennies they can hold, that kind of thing.

Other obstacles to providing SEL described by participant C were,

And on multiple occasions of like some of my heavy hitter behavior kids where it's like, you know, we're banging our heads against the wall. It's like, "Hey, let's try to use this." I can literally have my assistant principal tell me, "No, that doesn't work."

An additional example provided was,

I mean like when you go on and you do research and things like that, the program sounds great but when it comes down to two things, cost and then like the implementation of it. And, I feel like the cost really hasn't ever been it, like we've never been denied because of cost issues. We've been denied because like, basically, like "We don't want anybody else in the building doing SEL except the social workers."

Triangulation of the data related to the role of administration in SEL was supported. Participant I stated, "There are difficulties with the administration. One of the administrators in the building definitely plays favorites with the students. So, certain

students are much more fluid up and down the level system. Other ones, they can't climb

up." Participant K shared,

> I was going to say we still have some kinks to work out, I think. I started there last
>
> year. There's a principal who's brand new. We have three new teachers. We have
>
> so many new people at this building. And so, I feel like everyone's just trying to
>
> figure it out. And we're all just learning along the way about what works best and
>
> what we should try, what's the new thing we need to do. The principal, I feel like
>
> she is very supportive. We think very much alike. She is extremely concerned
>
> with social-emotional learning, that's her main focus.

Views students beyond tier 3. When participants B, C, and D described reasons

for having minimal connection to MTSS for SEL, the high level of need of students

became a focus. Participant F clarified the reasons for not using the framework, "Because

the situation is all of our kids are the top tier." Participant C similarly stated,

> I'm not sure if we don't talk about it because we already see the kids as like,
>
> they're in our program and they all have IEPs, so they're all within the Tier 3 but
>
> then like, within like building. We don't necessarily discuss like Tier 1, Tier 2 and
>
> Tier 3.

 However, these thoughts expressing higher need than the tiers were reflected by more

participants than just those with weak connections to MTSS. For example, Participant E

was noted to laugh when stating, "So, it's like a Tier 3.5." Participant H stated, "A lot of

our Tier 1 is another school's Tier 3." The comments of Participant G reflected that

alternative education "students have already gone through the tiers. More typically have

gone through pretty significant amount of intervention before they get to alternative setting."

These contrasting views of MTSS, along with participant descriptions of administrative supports for SEL, elicited extensive time reviewing coded segments. I further clarified in my analytic notes the thematic process I used during pattern-matching of these cases. I reflected,

> The participants not connecting to MTSS suggest that their students' levels of
> need are already beyond the tiered support levels. But the differences apparent to
> me are that the social workers recognizing existing or emerging types of services
> through MTSS appear to have stronger and more consistent school-wide systems
> of SEL support for alternative education students.

Feelings

Using the MAXQDA coding software, I used emoji symbols to code feelings expressed by participants during interviews. I used codes of amazement and disappointment for research question one because the codes were consistent with some of the varying data provided by participants related to implementing SEL. However, hope was a feeling I pattern- matched among several cases, leading to feelings becoming a separate category of experiences in selecting and implementing interventions. The hopes expressed included Participant A, "I would like to see us getting more curriculum." Additionally, Participant G spoke of dreams,

> Male mentors is something that I feel would be really beneficial. I have a few
> other big dreams for my alternative school. One of them would be that they would

have some sort of like karate class brought to the school for those kids. And

another one is for them to be able to go to a field trip, to go swimming and things

that would help them with their sensory.

Participant H spoke of a dream for an in-house medical clinic to do routine well checks

"because some of them haven't seen a doctor in forever." Other expressions of hope

among participants was present in codes reflected as "seeks consistency." I pattern-

matched this code among Participants A, C, E, and F. An example from Participant E

expressed, "I just want to, like, I just didn't want to keep juggling all these new referrals

all the time. I just wanted a little bit more consistency." Participant A spoke of wanting

consistency in identifying and understanding student needs, "Yes, so just try to make it

clear to see if it's the learning disability that's driving frustration towards behavior or if

the behavior is separate from the disability."

The coding and analytic process I used for exploring research question one is

depicted in Figure 1. The experiences shared by school social workers led to categories

such as adaptability, facing challenges implementing SEL, and the impact of systemic

structures and leadership that brought forth overall themes of meaning to answer research

question one.

Factors Contributing to Clinical Decision Making

The second research question was "What factors contribute to the clinical

decision-making process of school social workers providing interventions for SEL with

high school students in alternative education programs?" Although I initially categorized

vast amounts of codes towards this research question, I individually reviewed and prioritized each. In my reflexive journaling, I commented,

> When processing codes for RQ2, there were so many student needs identified, but when I focused more specifically and addressed clinical decision-making, the meaning became clearer. For example, the individual codes shout out that SW's are using backgrounds and current info to make clinical decisions on treatment.

These iterative and inductive strategies gave clarity to the predominant factors social works use in the clinical decision-making process.

Professional Experience of What Works

As demonstrated through the data answering the first research question, school social work practitioners working with high school students in alternative education programs build an extensive knowledge base of experience. The emerging categories of experience that I pattern-matched among participants and moved toward answering research question two were: creativity, parent involvement, modeling SEL, system-wide SEL, and engaging students.

Creativity. The impact of creativity for clinicians was demonstrated by Participant G, "We literally walk laps in the gym when we work because of his ADHD and . . . farther with him this year that I have in like the two years previous." Participant H commented,

> There is nothing we won't try. It might work for the day and that's fine. We got through the day, that's great. And I will try something new the next day, so

always being creative and thinking that, okay, so just because I might sound crazy and it hasn't been tried before doesn't mean that it's not going to work.

Parent involvement. Participant D spoke extensively about the importance of considering parent involvement and these codes were supported by the focus group. For example, Participant D commented,

I think that sometimes we don't think that the parent is equipped or willing to help. I just don't think that's true at all. I think that's really false because that's really the first thing that I think of doing. I haven't run into any parent that was not willing to do anything. So, sometimes I think that people presumed that parents have too much to do and they don't want to do anything else but that's not what I found at all.

Triangulation of the data was supported by Participant H discussing involving parents, "we have our whole staff meeting with parents, everything on Wednesday, to get everybody on the same page but we're constantly like teaming together and working and to discuss how we get both more positive relationships with the kids."

Modeling SEL. The importance of considering models for SEL were discussed by five participants who differentiated between student and staff modeling. References to student modeling were reflected by Participant E, "I've luckily had a really good leader in that group who's been in social language groups his whole life. And so, he's been very helpful, and he gives good feedback." Participant D stated, "What has been successful really is the peer interactions because sometimes someone has a skill that another doesn't

and then when they discuss each other's strategies, I've seen that work. They almost listen to each other more." Staff being models for SEL was discussed by Participant C,

> I've sent out a lot of emails just saying that like until our staff starts to model SEL, like our kids aren't really going to fall in learning. Whatever you're asking me to do is going to go to the wayside. We know that like, that the social workers are modeling SEL. The teachers are somewhat modeling SEL. But like if we can get the teacher and PA's to be doing, to be implementing these lessons that almost forces them to display SEL which hopefully forces them to be decent looking role models for the kids.

Participant H spoke of the benefits of modeling and supported triangulation of data with, "And being that one constant and we talk a lot about that when we do talk about our issues, being that stable person, that one person who unconditionally is there for them." Participant K stated,

> As I said, there definitely has to be a good relationship and then practice modeling whenever possible. I'm going back to some of the staff. We're telling them they have to be kind to each other and not antagonize and instigate, when they're (the staff) doing the exact thing. The staff is doing it.

System-wide social-emotional learning. Participant C stated, "we're trying to explain that like SEL, for it to like fully work, we need to be building wide. We need everybody to be onboard. It can't be just me." As discussed with the first research question, school-wide administrative support builds SEL and therefore, is also a factor in

the clinical decision-making of practitioners. The benefits of system-wide SEL is supported by Participant H of the focus group,

> Our program, one of the things I love that's unique with ours, is the very first period of every day is what we call "empowerment skills". And empowerment skills, like I said, it's school-wide for all, from kindergarten up towards 12th graders and it focuses on those social skills. We talk about anger management, friendship, healthy relationships, basic social skills, and that is just school-wide SEL time.

Engaging students. All but two participants discussed student engagement as a factor in clinical decision-making. The struggles with engaging students were reflected by many, but both Participant A and E discussed positive reinforcement level systems built into their alternative education program. Yet, Participant A recognized, "it's really challenging to find something that works for everybody." Participant B similarly stated, "And I just cannot find anything for high school that I think really, really impresses." Participant C shared possible reasons for disengagement, "So now, do the six kids in the room really want to focus on me or would they rather focus on McDonald's because it's one of those days they probably haven't eaten. Maybe there's a good chance they didn't eat dinner the night before either." Participant C continued with concerns relative to engagement when discussing evidence-based programs,

> I don't feel like when they bring in that, when I try to bring in that stuff and it looked like I'm speaking trash. It's like, they're not engaged. Like, they already don't want to be there. They're so uninterested.

To foster student engagement, participants shared preferred strategies. For example, media is utilized by Participant A, "we've got a few movies" and Participant E, "So, I use a lot of media. I try to like, videos. I usually will, like just discussion doesn't usually happen. So, I have to have something more hands on." Participant E went on to discuss movement for engagement,

I'm always looking for things that will get them up out of their chair, get them moving around. These are students who, a lot of them, are in the same classroom all day. You know, it's good for them to be able to do that.

Movement as a technique for engagement was supported in the Focus Group by Participant H stating, "And being able to go down to that weight room has been something that we didn't really have before and has been amazing." Participant C discussed both music and sports,

Yes. I would say incorporate things that they're interested in, like any reference to music that I can make or any connection to music that I can make, or you know my boys like anything that I can connect to sports or things like that.

Background

Participants spoke of familiarizing themselves with the historical needs of the students, behavior plans, and IEP goals.

IEP goals and minutes. The students discussed by participants were primarily special education students and, therefore, have IEP's accessible to the social workers. For example, Participant E stated, "And so for the alternative ed. program at our school, I'm

well, I have minutes. They're all IEP students. And so, I do have weekly minutes that I have to meet." Participant B stated,

> I mean, to me, if I have to live right by my social work minutes to our specific group, I'd better feel like it's so important to get evidence-based learning or otherwise I'm just pulling it out of what I believe or how I feel. To me, that's not okay.

These codes supporting the connection of IEP goals and minutes to clinical decision-making are supported by participant G, "there is that identification that each student needs individualized intervention. That's why, you know, every student that I work with at the alternative school has to be in an intervention plan that is for them."

Student needs. Understanding the background of student needs was expressed by all participants in some manner. Becoming aware of legal issues was discussed by participant A, "So, we've had a lot of issues this year, mostly with those girls, with destruction of property and police involvements and those kinds of things, like battery with our staff, things like that." Participant B commented on the complexity of student needs, "I've got you know kids in rehab, kids in hospitalizations, IOPs, juvenile detention centers. They may end up in the department of corrections." The importance of understanding the complex student needs was reflected by Participant C,

> I find a lot of times when the kids comment, that's like the surface level stuff. But then really, we're dealing more with home stuff, or mental health issues, or getting them medicated, or getting them motivated to actually seek some help, that kind of a thing.

Participant A recognized that students have "a lot of trauma, low-income trauma. Yes, there's a lot going on with my kids." Participant E reflected an understanding that "my students are all behavioral, emotional needs." Participant F commented about the transient nature of the students, "it's not continuously the same student. Our students are always rotating."

All but one participant referred to understanding the mental health needs of the students. Participant E stated, "I have a lot of students like my anxiety, more anxiety-based room." Participant F stated, "Well, the biggest need really isn't an educational issue but in our school it's substance abuse." The importance of clinicians understanding the mental health needs of students was supported by participant G, "Especially with like the high rise of anxiety and depression that we've been seeing with our students." Participant H similarly recognized mental health needs,

> The specific mental health needs, I have kids who are bipolar who had depression, who had ADHD and when all they're going to do is see the psychiatrist once a month or once every three months to get their medicine filled.

Current Needs

A focus on understanding the current or upcoming needs of students was an additional factor in clinical decision-making expressed by multiple social workers. The subcategories leading to these constructions of meaning were SEL goals, student needs, remaining student driven, and social workers demonstrating dedication.

The social-emotional learning goals. Participant A reflected on a need to connect student SEL learning with core curriculums, "So we're trying to connect what

they're doing in their classes with what we're doing and so that's been kind of interesting." Participant A discussed focusing interventions to the specific SEL needs of students, "I have students with all three of the types of SEL goals like the social awareness and coping skills goal, the social skills goals, and that the responsible decision-making goals." Participant E similarly discussed connecting SEL to student goals and SEL standards, "I have specific goals written for them, so we are working on skill building so it always sort of relates back."

Student needs. When considering the current needs of students, many practitioners identified crisis intervention as a clinical need. Participant A shared, "I usually see my kids well over their minutes because my kids are in crisis really frequently." In a probing question, I asked Participant D about crisis and she stated, "Oh yes, yes. There's a lot more of that than I had thought it would be." Participant B reflected, "I'm just going to say just on a more day to day, we put out a lot of fires. There's crises that just like come up." This data was supported by Participant H, "They're used to chaos, most of our kids. Where a lot of my time is spent more not just the social skills but crisis intervention."

Participant D spoke extensively about considering the practical needs of students in clinical decision-making. For example, Participant D reported,

I've met students who are married already and working full-time jobs, so when they are coming to school, they are exhausted. All they can do is barely see. They're just trying to stay awake because they worked all night. So, they really need, a lot of them they just end up needing just very practical help like, "Okay, I

need to go to Public Aid. I need to be on the phone." We just make this call and so you're on the phone for like 2 hours trying to get through to Public Aid. But they need that so they can get their health care. They can get health care for their child. They got to make sure they have food.

A final area of student needs addressed by multiple participants and emerging in the coding process was understanding academic needs. As stated by Participant B, "some of them have gaps in learning. So, they don't understand certain language. There are certain words that I use and it's just hard because they're not neurotypical so, they have gaps in learning." Participant E shared the impact of academic needs on clinical decision-making,

> I have to be very planned about, if I'm going to break them into groups or partners. Like I have to have that pre-planned, ahead of time not only with like who's going to get along, but you know, if the student, because I do all have IEP students, some of them do have learning deficits. And you know, maybe it's not their strength for writing.

Participant A stated,

> So, I try to meet the needs of all my kids because they all learn differently and they're all at different levels. Actually, my students all have lower reading levels than at their grade level, and since I have some eighth graders all the way through 11th graders right now, it's really challenging to find something that works for everybody. Yes, so just try to make it clear to see if it's the learning disability driving frustration towards behavior or if the behavior is separate from

the disability. So that's kind of one of the biggest struggles that we still haven't quite kind of teased out completely.

Student Driven

One of the coding segments consistent among most participants was "individual student behaviors drive the social work response." In reflecting on the overall emergence of themes, these segments continued to appear integral to clinical decision-making. MAXQDA allows for certain codes to be given weights of importance. While I did not use this feature when coding, these coded segments would have been given more heavily weighted codes for explaining clinical-decision making. Examples of excerpts from Participant C include,

> Yes. So, you know my first step is, I sit down with the kid and kind of get to know them. I read whatever they came over with because whatever they came over with, I should be getting an FBA and a BIP and some goals. So, I should have some kind of an idea of what we're working on or what in theory we should be working on. So, I guess it kind of starts with reading their background and then, I like to sit down that first time in and see. How can I help you because here you are, you're here, right? Like what can we do for you because here you are, you're here. Most of the time, the kids aren't happy to be in our program.

From Participant B, "You just kind of see that their choices kind of leads you to where you are." Participant D stated, "You just kind of see where the youngster fits."

Progress monitoring was organized as a sub-section code within this category. Participant B discussed monitoring program outcomes, "I would make them take the pre-

test. I proposed it. I deliver the program and then later, I deliver the post-test." Participant A described progress-monitoring with,

> So quarterly they get progress on their goals. I document their progress all the
> time, but they get progress reports every quarter. That helps us with their IEP's
> later, to see what progress they've made. We try an intervention, we document it
> for another two weeks or four weeks or something like that because we don't do
> the exact same thing in our building.

Participant H reflected on student growth with, "I always say the small victories are so big with these kids. So, when they can self-monitor or be able to self-reflect back on something and make progress or make appropriate change and they could see that in themselves."

Dedication

After pattern-matching and moving toward themes, I moved the sub-code of "Dedication" from the category of "Feelings" to answering research question 2. As I reflected in analytical memo writing, "After stepping away awhile, it hit me that components I coded as "dedication" truly fit with answering this research question, because it is not only the professional clinical experiences, but also the clinician's dedication that drive the remaining clinical decision-making. Examples of participant responses coded as "Dedication" are Participant B's decisions to write grants and receive additional clinical training.

> I had to write a grant because there was no way my school was going to give me
> 1,000 dollars. I went back and got my CADC because I had a couple of kids die

of heroin overdose. And I really needed to understand, because I had no idea of these things, so I went back to community college and took the classes and did an internship over summer with heroin addicts and the health department and I'm glad I did because now I am not just pulling it out of my ass. We need that level of credibility.

From Participant C,

My supervisor and I actually, over the summer because our assistant principal was asking us to, come up with some kind of like SEL program for the school. And so, we were really interested in researching some SEL programs, especially ones that like the teachers could implement in the classrooms.

An example of narrative coded as "Dedication" from Participant E is,

They gave me the choice when they got approval to hire more social workers, if I wanted to be gen. ed. or special ed., and I did not want to go through, I just want to like, I just didn't want to keep juggling all these new referrals all the time. I just wanted a little bit more consistency.

Further, "Dedication" pattern-matched for triangulation with Participant H,

But that nothing that they're going to say or do and no matter how many names they call us, how much they push us away, how much they refuse to do their work. That's not going to change how I'd feel about them.

The overall theme I constructed from data to answer research question two and identify factors that contribute to the clinical decision-making process of school social workers providing SEL interventions with high school students in alternative education

programs is depicted in Figure 2. This illustration varies from the coding maps depicting the process of construction of meaning for research questions one and three because clinical decision making was viewed as a fluid process. Therefore, the illustration in Figure 2 of interconnected systems better represents meaning emerging to answer research question two.

Evidence Based Practices

The final research question was "What EBPs are school social workers finding effectively increase social-emotional competencies to positively impact academic performance among students in alternative education?" The major categories emerging to answer this research question included cultural relevance, specific programs named, theoretical approaches identified by clinicians, and individual counseling for processing.

Cultural Competence

The category of cultural relevance contained two significant areas of meaning described by participants: understanding the students' worlds and building culture in the classroom. Cultural competency is an integral component of evidence-based therapeutic practices (Whaley & Davis, 2007). The first and most predominantly coded meaning from the data on cultural competence represented connecting to what is going on in the student's community. For example, participant A stated, "I structure individual sessions obviously to what is going on in their lives in that moment, but then to what their SEL specific goal is." Participant C stated,

I like to talk about some of the things that are going on or some of the issues that

are going on. Yes, it could be things that are going on in the community, it could

be things going on in the classroom, kind of like problem-solving skills.

Participant E expressed the second meaning of cultural relevance related to understanding

the classroom culture, "And then, it's more also the culture of it. You know, it's about the

culture in these groups, to make it work." These references to the importance of

remaining culturally relevant and building classroom culture were consistent among

focus group participants, with participant H adding, "And they're building it in the

classroom and that helps our kids with safety, rules, feeling connected and feeling like

they belong somewhere and traditions. That is huge with our kids. It creates a culture of

like family."

Published Programs

The specific programs identified by participants as evidence-based interventions,

programs, or curricula were categorized together. In efforts to triangulate data, publicly

accessible information on these materials was examined related to supporting evidence.

Nine programs were discussed in meaningful ways to answer the research question.

Those lacking empirical research studies identifiable through database searches or

research that did not directly focus on high school students were coded as "weak" or

"questionable." Published programs with empirical studies showing positive outcomes

for high school students were coded as "strong."

Programs coded as weak or questionable evidence. Participant A stated that

Strategies for Success is implemented as "part of their daily schedules like an elective

they get credit for." Information about this program was available from the website www.strategiesforsuccessprogram.wordpress.com, indicating it is a semester long intervention with topics that foster a positive team-building environment. Codes from my review of the materials indicated "weak evidence." As reflected in analytic notes, "There are three articles (not research), some references to awards, and testimonials attached to website but no evidence or research supporting the program was found." Further searches of scholarly databases with the key words "Strategies for Success," resulted in no research-based articles found. However, participant A spoke positively of using these materials with students throughout the school.

Another program discussed by three participants was called Why Try. Participant A stated,

> I have students with all three types of SEL goals like the social awareness and coping skills goal, the social skills goals and the responsible decision-making goals. I used Why Try curriculum which is one of the bigger ones. Why Try which is evidence-based for sure that's probably our biggest.

I coded the evidence for this program as "questionable" because though research is available through the Why Try website, www.whytry.org, it appeared stronger for elementary students than high school students. I found no studies on the Why Try program during my search of scholarly databases. The participant spoke highly of the materials for teaching SEL skills to high school students receiving alternative education services and evidence exists for younger aged students.

Four participants spoke of Zones of Regulation. From my research notes taken when reviewing the website, www.zonesofregulation.com, "two research studies are provided, one for pre-school level and one for kindergarten level." My search of scholarly databases yielded no results. Participant A simply stated she has used the materials, "we've done zones of regulation" without positive or negative reflections. Participant H stated, "right now we're focusing on Zones of Regulation, so school-wide we're learning the exact same thing during that time and applying it in different ways. So, it's a really unique opportunity to get everyone on board."

Participant B spoke of using Love is Not Abuse. These materials were found by the participant "googling teen dating violence" to meet specific student needs that she explained with "I have some of them who are in pretty bad relationships." In my review of the website, www.breakthecycle.org/loveisnotabuse, I noted "some research on teen dating violence, but nothing specific to their program." Similar to other programs, the participant spoke highly of the materials, but my search of scholarly databases yielded no results.

Programs coded as strong evidence. Participant B spoke of the Adolescence Depression Awareness Program (ADAP), which I coded with "strong evidence." The preference for this program as reported by Participant B is because it "has a pre and post-test" and "it's psychoeducational regarding what is depression? What does it look like? It is a lot you know, how many kids have it? All of that kind of stuff. Where can I go for help?" In reviewing publicly accessible information about the program, I noted it "has a published article that appears to be valid evidence supporting effectiveness."

Strong Teens is a program that Participant A stated was "the biggest scripted kind of" program used in her school setting. When reviewing the materials from the website, www.strongkids.uoregon.edu/strongteens.html, I noted, "most of the evidence is for younger students but one study reflected good evidence for positive outcomes with high school students in alt ed." Further, there were additional research studies available on the Strong Teens program through my search of scholarly databases.

Participant E spoke of two research-based programs that the mainstream public education system the alternative program is connected to has used school-wide: RULER and Positive Action. According to the website http://ei.yale.edu/ruler/, RULER is the acronym for recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions. I coded both of these programs as "strong evidence" because multiple studies are available in database searches. I found the website www.positiveaction.net to be "user friendly for finding evidenced-based research supporting program. There are tabs to access the various studies, outcome areas, and more." My research notes after reviewing the website for RULER reflected, "Evidence appears strong, extensive, and easy to access from their website." Participant E stated, "Some of the years our teachers have used some curriculum before we started using what we use for the whole school. Positive Action was the name of one that we did, and now it's RULER." When discussing RULER, the participant personally reflected,

> The RULER curriculum is great for the first year. As a part of a package, they've now completed year two, three and four. I'm less impressed with those, because I feel like they rushed through it. Like, they were just starting on year two when I

went to their training at the beginning of last year. And then they said that they

were going to, every semester kind of put out one. Well by the end of the year

they had two, three, and four done. So, it felt rushed. And so, the first year they,

Yale, had said that they had a screening with students of all the lessons and got

their input. And I feel like that didn't happen for years two, three, and four,

because it's much more kid friendly the first year.

During the focus group, Participant H expressed overall satisfaction with

Conscious Discipline because it is a "fabulous resource. It creates a culture of like

family." Participant H expanded thoughts on the program by adding there is a focus on,

neurological development and effects on kids and not just discipline. It talks

about, you know, the brain and different states of the brain so you can help the

kids understand like when they're acting in a certain way, how that's connected to

their brain affecting it, fostering safety and connection with the kids.

I indicated in my research notes from reviewing materials available at

www.consciousdiscipline.com that "Conscious Discipline is described as a non-curricular

approach and has evidence of effectiveness in multiple studies; experimental and non-

experimental." Similar to other programs, I coded Conscious Discipline as "strong

evidence" because empirical studies supporting positive outcomes were located in

searches of scholarly databases.

Forty percent of the total participants interviewed mentioned Second Step as an

effective research-based SEL program. However, as indicated in most comments, this

program targets grades Pre-K through eighth only. Participant A stated that for her

students in alternative education, "younger grades all do Second Step . . . but the high school age group is the hardest to find evidence-based curriculum for." Participant B also spoke of using Second Step for younger students in alternative education. Similar pattern-matching occurred with participant F, "At the younger levels there's like the Second Step program, things that that are pretty good, but at the older levels it's really difficult." Participant G supported these patterns, "Our district started Second Step this year, but it doesn't have a high school curriculum." The meaning I interpreted here is that Second Step is commonly viewed among school social work practitioners as a strong research-based SEL program, for elementary students only. There was no specific program at the high school level described as widely accepted and used by the total participants.

Theoretical Approaches

Participants mentioned six theoretical approaches that yielded identifiable research of published empirical studies when I searched scholarly databases: Solution-focused therapy, dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), acceptance commitment therapy (ACT), mindfulness, and psychoeducation.

Participants A and C described using combinations of theoretical approaches, which was additionally supported by the focus group participants. For example, Participant C stated, "I am very, like, solution-focused with a little CBT." Participant E reflected, "And other versions of CBT is what I primarily use. And honestly do a lot of Psychoeducation." Participant F commented, "Mostly CBT is kind of what I prefer." Participant A stated,

I mean it comes from published books that I bought and things that I got at

conferences and different things like that so, they're as evidenced based as I can

get, and I use only therapeutic techniques like cognitive behavioral therapy or

dialectical behavior therapy or acceptance commitment therapy, straight

from those kind of techniques that seem to work.

The triangulation of data is supported by the focus group. Participant G commented, "I know in my school, that there's been like a really big push, especially from administration, to use more CBT strategies . . . and I noticed myself looking more and more into materials with DBT."

A movement toward integrating mindfulness approaches emerged from the data and was supported by the focus group. For example, Participant A from the individual, semistructured interviews commented, "Just got through a mindfulness session where we did a couple weeks with mindfulness activities and so they get a lot of it." Participant C spoke of using specific mindfulness techniques, "We use Calm Classroom a lot at our school." Participant H from the focus group stated, "mindfulness which is a direction we're going to." Participant G from the focus group stated, "there's been a really big push for doing more mindfulness."

Throughout the coding process, I pattern-matched the theoretical approaches commonly described by participants. Participant B stated, "Yes, that's why my group studies when people ask, they are psychoeducational." Participant E similarly referred to, "a lot of psychoeducation."

Student Processing

Two codes that I pattern-matched among every participant, whether individually interviewed or participating in the focus group, were "individual sessions" and "processing student issues." When examining the data, I was able to inductively build meaning that the school social workers identify a significant component of SEL for high school students in alternative education to be opportunities to process their behaviors during individual counseling sessions.

Examples of the multitude of related codes among participants can be followed in this constructivist analytic process. Participant A stated,

> Sometimes I pull them out like two at a time if there's an issue going on or if
> you're able to do a mediation thing but usually, I try to get them each to have
> it individual. I structure individual sessions.

Participant B commented, "They need to self-regulate. They need to look at their behavior, own their behavior, and own the consequences of that behavior." The reflections of Participant C substantiated meaning, "It essentially looks like when the kids come to my office, and they get that 30 minutes, or whatever, of social work. That's essentially, in our school, what SEL looks like." Participant D stated,

> Well, what I tried to do with each of them is talk about strategies so that they have
> the best outcome with their responses. So, if they get angry about something, we
> talk about different ways to respond that'll give them the best outcome.

Participant E commented,

The biggest thing is, I try to get students to just really process, like solution-

focused processing. Try to get them to that place, recognizing their role in things,

and what are they in control of, what are they not in control of, and trying to

empower them to make choices that are going to help themselves or not.

When I probed to describe SEL, Participant E responded, "I'd say, it's more counseling.

It's just counseling one on one. And I think you know, sometimes that's just, needing a

place to vent once a week." Participant F commented, "Basically, my role is to diffuse the

kids when an incident happens. They just come hang out with me before they make

things worse." Later, Participant F reflected,

No, I really just feel it's that one on one connection. Honestly, I think that most of

what social work and therapy is more than a curriculum that you're using, just

building that rapport and having that relationship with them. So, I don't feel like

there's any one tool that's more effective.

This meaning was supported by Participant G stating, "when you're having a difficulty in

class at the moment like you would call a class meeting and address the issue in the

moment." Further, Participant H expanded on this need for processing by suggesting

other solutions,

One of the things that I brought into this school a couple years ago that I

encourage every school to try and do that has been amazing for our kids is we

have school-based counseling now. So, our local agency comes into our building.

Triangulation of data was further supported by Participant K,

I feel like if they don't have a good relationship and they don't trust you, they're

not going to listen and they're just going to blow it off. As I said, there definitely

has to be a good relationship and then practice modeling whenever possible.

As reflected by Participant J, "And just having that consistent person there, who can be

there every day, and that person needs to stop by and do a check-in, it makes such a huge

difference."

The meaning of the final themes emerged from the constructivist analytic process

of integrating all codes, and pattern-matching to move toward categories and themes.

Figure 3 depicts the process of moving from broader categories to themes of meaning for

research question 3.

I noted a potential discrepant case related to materials for SEL. When Participant

D was asked if she used any specific materials for SEL, the response was, "No. The only

time I think I've really done something like that is when I'm trying to figure out if

someone is going to need hospitalization. I don't use really anything really other than

myself." For clarity, I provided a follow up probe question, "Alright, but just to make

sure, you guys don't have any specific program then right now?" Participant D responded,

"Not that I know of." I interpreted Participant D's meaning to be that she views allowing

students opportunities to process their behaviors as an effective practice intervention,

without a need for using any specific evidence-based materials. This was member-

checked with the participant who substantiated the meaning.

Summary

The final themes emerging from the data to answer research questions provided an overall picture of how school social workers are meeting student needs. School social workers struggle to find evidence-based interventions that their students engage with and meet their students' needs but recognize that allowing students time to process their behaviors brings growth. Systemic structures throughout the school, including support of administration and co-workers, builds stronger SEL. The EBPs currently being used by social workers are a combination of cultural competence, using scientifically supported theoretical approaches, and available published program materials. Although some current program materials may not have a strong evidence-base, they are viewed by practitioners as positively impacting SEL among students. Though limited resources and struggles were described by participants, programs are emerging for which school social workers give positive feedback.

I pattern-matched and indicated consistencies that supported data saturation and the triangulation of data from the data provided by participants in both individual semistructured interviews and focus groups. Using the constructivist theoretical framework of developing meaning, I found that data supports recommendations that benefit school social workers implementing SEL interventions with high school students in alternative education programs.

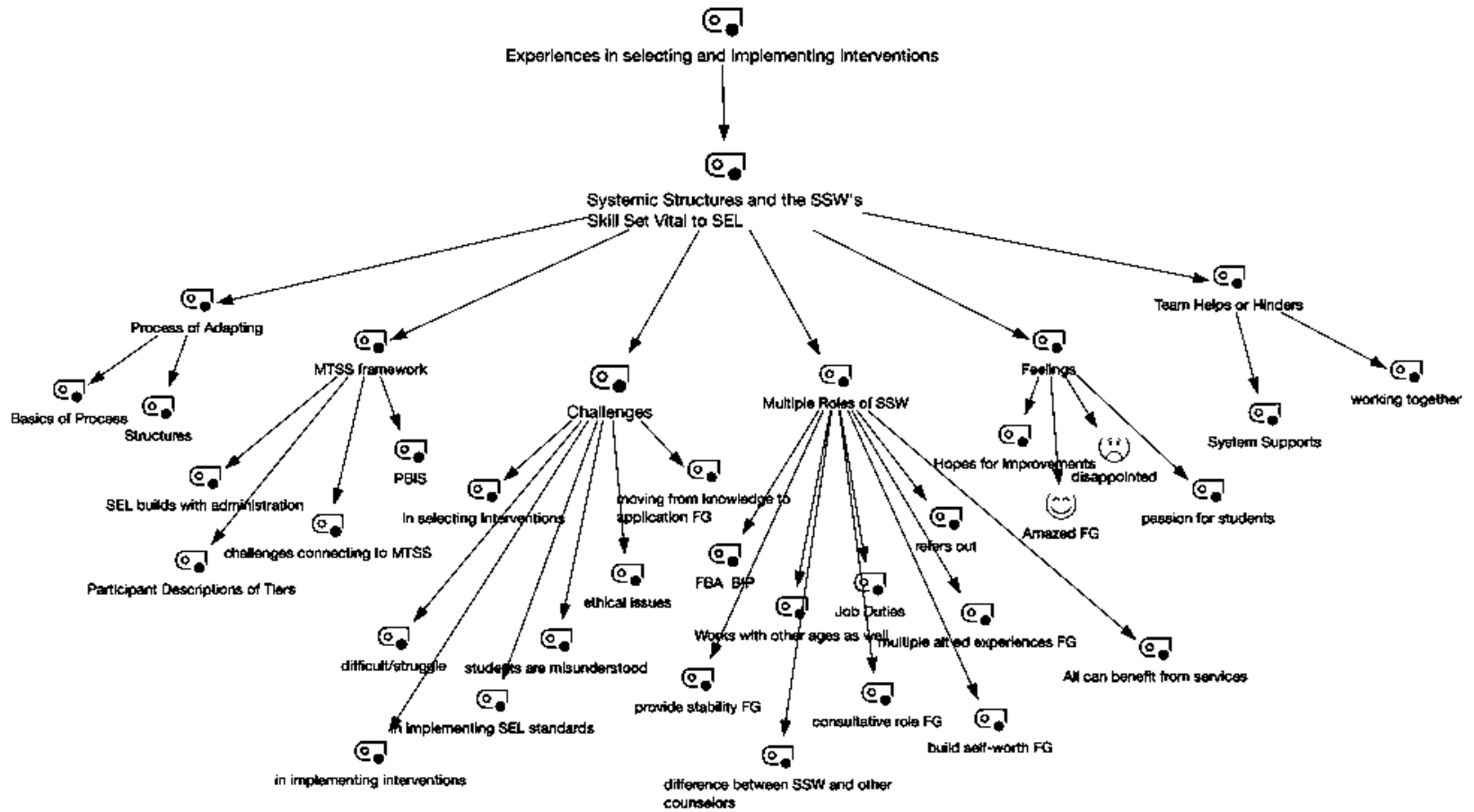# Research Question 1

Figure 1. MAXQDA code map of experiences in selecting and implementing interventions.
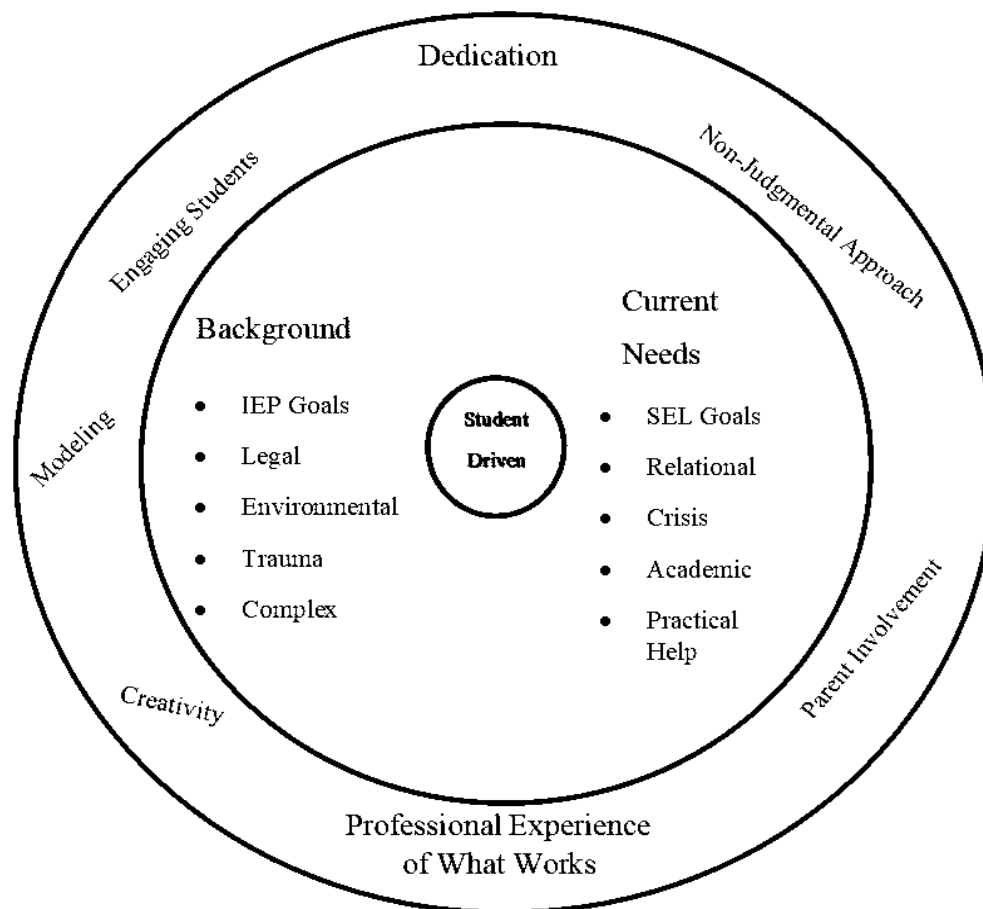
Figure 2. Fluid process of factors contributing to clinical decision-making.
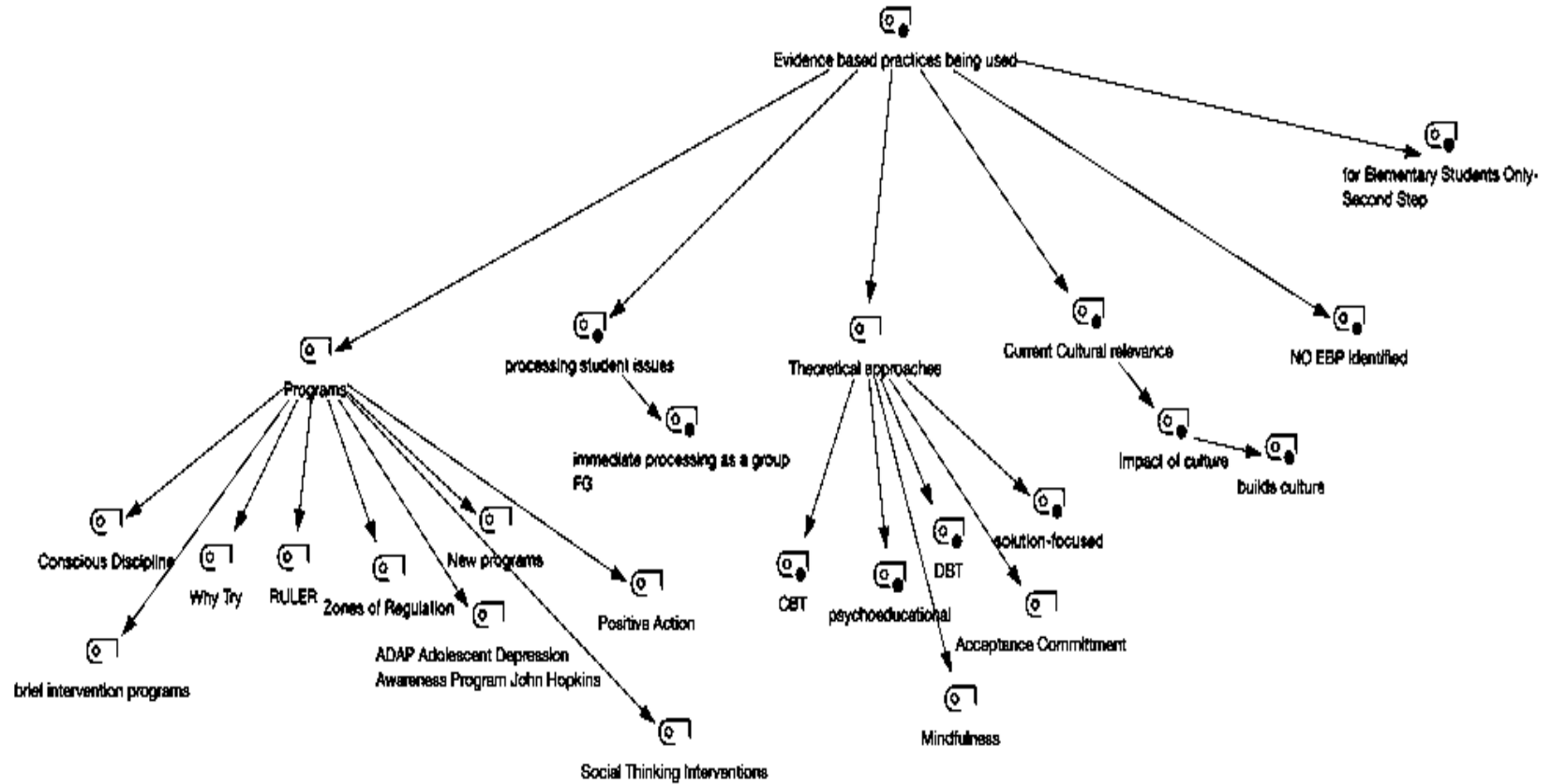
Figure 3. MAXQDA code map of evidenced based practices used.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

I conducted this study to gain a more complete understanding of how school social workers in Illinois meet the SEL needs of high school students in alternative education programs. The data provided by the multiple case-study participants and focus group participants gives meaning to direct practitioner experiences, factors influencing clinical decision-making, and the evidence-based practices currently being used for SEL in alternative education programs.

Constructed Meaning

I integrated a constructivist theoretical framework to build meaning from participant data. I analyzed the multiple explanations provided by school social workers in individual and focus group interviews related to SEL with high school students receiving alternative education services to construct answers for the posed research questions. Case-study methods for data collection and analysis were consistent with the constructivist frameworks and standards for rigor in qualitative studies presented by Merriam and Tisdell (2015), Yin (2018), and Yazan (2015). I detailed the analytical processes for the construction of meaning with the constructivist perspective for each research question, along with conclusions and recommendations for future studies.

Research Question 1

The coding to answer Research Question 1 was the most extensive. As categories began to emerge, so did larger understanding of the experiences shared by participants. Participants experience struggles finding evidence-based programs and interventions at

the high school level that meet the high needs of their students but adapt resources available to them. These data were consistent among participants and supported by data from the focus groups. School social workers want relatable and affordable materials and curriculums for SEL that meet the varied needs and engage students in high school alternative education programs. Through my analysis, the overall theme to answer the research question was that current SEL services in Illinois high school alternative education programs reflect a continuum of levels implementing evidence-based practices and integrating MTSS frameworks. Both systemic structures and the social worker's skill set emerged as integral components to optimize SEL with high school students in alternative education. Administration and co-workers supporting efforts towards building SEL throughout the school, along with the social worker's ability to adapt programs and materials, or create their own interventions, brings about stronger and more cohesive SEL for Tier 3 students. Several participants described their student population with needs greater than can be represented by the standard MTSS tiered levels of supports. In Figure 1 (p. 116), I depicted the inductive process of creating meaning for research question one.

Data supported my initial proposition emerging from the review of literature that school social workers struggle to find evidence-based interventions to support high school students in alternative education, with the specific words "struggle" and "difficult" frequently being spoken by participants. The overall theme I constructed through data analysis to answer research question one on what the experiences of school social workers are in selecting and implementing Tier 3 SEL interventions for high school students in alternative education was that systemic structures and the skill set of the

practitioner influence effectiveness. MTSS frameworks were developing and in place for approximately half of the participants. I found that these participants spoke more thoroughly and positively about SEL within their program or school than the case study participants who identified minimal connection to MTSS beyond acceptance that they educate the highest need students. The main categories describing the experiences of social workers included adapting materials and resources, having multiple roles, facing challenges to meet student needs, professional teams that help or hinder the SEL process, that MTSS and SEL build with administration, and school social workers have hopes for future interventions to support students.

Research Question 2

To reach constructed meaning to answer Research Question 2, I reflected for a period of time on the categories that emerged from the data. In my reflexive journaling, I described the process as,

> Had to draw out a visual of how I see the meaning building- the connections of all these codes to move from broad categories to overall theme/meaning. I had no idea when I started the drawing how it would look. The connections really did come together in their own way visually.

This is consistent with the constructivist framework. Meaning comes together similar to puzzle pieces to form greater understanding of the phenomenon being explored (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

The overall theme I constructed from data to answer Research Question 2 and identify factors that contribute to the clinical decision-making process of school social

workers providing SEL interventions with high school students in alternative education programs is depicted in Figure 2 (p. 117). At the center of the fluid process I visually depicted, clinical decision-making focuses on the specific student needs and, therefore, was found to remain student driven. The second systemic layer included understanding the background and current needs of the student. The final layer surrounding all the needs of the student in clinical decision-making was the dedication of the practitioner and professional experience of what works.

I supported Research Question 2 with data specific to identifying factors that contribute to the clinical decision-making process of school social workers providing SEL interventions with high school students in alternative education programs. The clinical decision-making of the school social workers remains student driven at the center of the process, integrating the student's background and current needs with the professional experiences of what works. Further, the significant dedication of trained professionals and their experience of what works surrounds the clinical-decision making process.

Research Question 3

To answer the third research question, I found the primary areas of understanding emerging from the categories to include:

1. Social workers demonstrate cultural competence by looking at what is going on in the student's world and what the existing classroom culture is.

2. Specific research-based programs are difficult to find, but some are currently being used to meet the SEL needs of high school students in alternative education.

3. Second Step is a commonly accepted and used EBP for SEL with students eighth grade or younger.

4. Multiple theoretical approaches are being used with a focus of psychoeducation and increase in mindfulness interventions.

5. Individual counseling sessions with social workers allow the necessary student processing to effectively support student growth.

I triangulated data from individual interviews, focus groups, and analytical notes of evidence for program materials to answer the third research question of EBPs that school social workers find meet the SEL needs of high school students in alternative education. Through the procedures of my research, I constructed meaning that revealed cultural competence, multiple theoretical approaches, and allowing students opportunities to process behaviors during individual counseling sessions supports increased SEL. Though research-based programs are not numerous for this population of students, there are programs with strong bases of empirical evidence being used such as ADAP, Strong Teens, Positive Action, RULER, and Conscious Discipline. For younger students, Second Step was frequently identified by participants.

Interpretations of the Findings

I confirmed with the findings of this study that knowledge found throughout the literature review was similar to the manner described by Baxter and Jack (2008), where meanings come together like puzzle pieces from the research and literature review. The important role that administration and systemic structures hold in successful implementation of SEL for high school students in alternative education was evident

from the participant data. Durlak et al. (2011) identified the vital role that the educational

system holds in developing SEL. Programs should be classroom and school system based

(Duncan et al, 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). These issues were discussed extensively by

Participant C who described the issues with co-workers and administration as a "battle."

Triangulating data with the focus groups similarly reflected the important role that

administration and other program staff have in developing strong SEL. Participant K

stated,

> It's actually the buy-in from a lot of the staff. But that's actually a problem. And
>
> it's hard because they're the ones who are working with these kids minute to
>
> minute. It's kind of problematic. Within the building, we have support, but then
>
> even the higher-ups, the administrators higher up, aren't quite as supportive with
>
> the principal. So, it's like we've got the people at the very, very top, that is hard,
>
> and the people at the bottom. That is hard. So, there's a lot of factors.

Further, the complexity of the data driven process of MTSS leading to practice issues was

identified in the literature review (Forman & Crystal, 2015). Domitrovich et al. (2017)

found that many schools lack the structures and resources to promote high impact SEL.

Participants B, C, and D referred to issues integrating MTSS frameworks and as stated by

Participant B, "collecting all this data, data, data . . . and then just moving data all around

a hundred different ways . . . we're going to kind of move away from it." While

Participants A, E, and H described more cohesive efforts using MTSS frameworks, the

data revealed that integrating the structures are burdensome for others.

Many factors I identified in the literature review that supported SEL were consistent with the findings of this research. For example, Garner et al. (2014) found that effective implementation of SEL must be grounded in sociocultural aspects. Themes emerging to answer Research Question 3 about EBP being used included cultural competency as an integral component of EBP when working with high school students in alternative education. Schonert-Reichl (2017) found that the relationship between student and social workers contributed to SEL. This was evident by each participant in the study referring to a positive impact on SEL from individual counseling that allows the student time to process their behaviors.

Throughout the study, participants described "struggles" and "difficulty" finding appropriate interventions to meet the needs of their high school students in alternative education. Franklin and Kelly (2009) found that interventions for Tier 3 students pose the most complications for school social workers who find the interventions sparse. The data from this study and literature review support the need to expand research-based interventions for this population of students, high school students in alternative education. As reflected by Participant K,

> That part always stresses me out too because I always try to plan ahead but a lot of times it doesn't work out. It's like, "Okay. For that day, what am I going to do for the group?" And it is because there's no curriculum, I found books and tried to pull things out but there's definitely not one set curriculum that I have found that's like, let's just do this for the year. I've discussed this a lot with different

social workers as well. Like, what are you guys doing right now? Because I feel

like I have nothing.

Lastly, there is a connection between the research of Jolivette et al. (2012) and the

findings of this study. Jolivette et al. (2012) described clinical decision making for

interventions with alternative education students as a "fluid process." This is supported

by the visual representation used to construct meaning for research question two related

to the clinical-decision making process. The data from this study suggested a fluid system

that maintains the student needs at the center. In triangulating the data with focus groups,

this theme of remaining student centered was supported. Participant I stated,

> In our building, it is definitely unconditional love. Because they will curse you
>
> out and they will call you every name I the book and they will call your family
>
> every name in the book. They will threaten you. They will even try to become
>
> physically aggressive with you, like flinch at you and things like that. But we just
>
> go with the, "Hey this happened, but I'm still going to treat you with respect. So,
>
> I'm still going to have your best interest in mind." I think that's probably the
>
> biggest contributing factor.

Farkas et al. (2012) found the lack of scientific research available for tiered

supports with alternative education students to be a concern. In contradiction, I supported

with data from the current study that this is not true for all alternative education

programs. Five participants spoke knowledgeably of existing or developing tiered

supports and successful outcomes with the approaches. This suggests progress since the

2012 study by Farkas et al. Further, several programs identified by participants were

coded with strong evidence of a research base. However, the process of interpreting results within the constructivist framework indicates that all participants interviewed continually seek and hope for increased evidence-based interventions to support SEL for high school students receiving alternative education services.

Limitations of the Study

In consideration of limitations to trustworthiness that arose from execution of the study, I acknowledge that triangulation of the data would have been stronger given more focus group participants in one session. Because I yielded only two participants in my first attempt to conduct a focus group, I made a second attempt to conduct a focus group. Three participants attended the second focus group. During analysis, I constructed meaning using data from both focus groups and the individual interviews. The intent of triangulating data is to corroborate the findings across multiple sources of data (Yin, 2018). I identified throughout the data analysis report frequent examples of coding from the focus groups that pattern-matched the case study databases of individual interviews. I recognize that the trustworthiness of these findings would be stronger had more participants attended the first focus group, instead of using two small focus groups for triangulation of data.

As a researcher, I must also acknowledge a potential limitation that the cases explored may not accurately represent the phenomenon or that my personal experiences as a school social worker may lead to unknown biases. To counter these limitations, I kept a detailed reflexive and analytic journal throughout the research process. Initial use of in vivo coding and member checking with participants helped to enhance accurate

reflections participant views, rather than my own. Further, data saturation was evident across the multiple case study databases. Using analytic strategies recommended by Yin (2018), I began with the first case study database, then cross synthesized data for each subsequent case study database, pattern-matching to build a general explanation that fits each case. Even though specific details varied, the coding patterns supported saturation. In the initial coding process, there were 17 new codes created for participant B. From Participant C, 16 new codes were created. I developed thirteen new codes when coding the transcript for Participant D, followed by eight new codes for participant E. The last participant interviewed was Participant F, resulting in four new codes. Using this data, I found that data saturation was achieved among the six participants individually interviewed. Following evidence to support saturation of data, I conducted two focus groups and completed reviews of program materials that supported triangulation of the data. While some limitations for generalizability always exist for qualitative studies, the descriptive, context rich statements present in the data supports rigor for transferability (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Recommendations

In the findings of this study, I provide information about strengths and weaknesses in current real-life practices implementing SEL within high school alternative education programs in Illinois. Participant feedback reflected that administrative led cohesive staff teams modeling and planning interventions within system-wide supportive frameworks, along with the professional skill set of school social workers to adapt materials and process behaviors with students are integral to building SEL with high

school students in alternative education settings. Using the themes and categories emerging from the case study data, I supported the original proposition of varied experiences among school social workers providing SEL to high school students in alternative education and recommendations for further research. While the student-natured focus of clinical decision-making will likely not be new information to most school social workers in the field, other findings increase the professional knowledge base. For example, because struggles and challenges were described by many participants to locate existing evidence-based interventions that engage the student population and benefits of cohesive teams leading MTSS for SEL, I suggest more research is needed in these areas. Given the high frequency of the case study participants who readily identified one specific program that enhances SEL for younger students in alternative education, it is time that equally effective programs consistently support high school level students in alternative education. I constructed meaning of a continuum to describe the variations in the current descriptions of EBP among participants resulted partly from the lack of consistency in social workers describing programs using the same research-based interventions at the high school level. Why Try and Zones of Regulation were the most frequently mentioned programs currently being used at the high school level to promote SEL among high school students in alternative education. Based on the consistent descriptions of hardships in locating materials to support these high need students, I call for expanding the empirical research base of quality, evidence-based interventions that target SEL for Tier 3 high school students receiving alternative education services.

Through the literature review, I supported this need for additional research on SEL with high school students in alternative education. For example, Jolivette et al. (2012) described the lack of EBP for alternative education settings. Similarly, the lack of research-based interventions for students in alternative education settings were reported by Flower et al. (2011). Domitrovich et al. (2008) stated that there are many questions remaining related to how to implement high-quality programs in schools that will sustain over time. With this study, I aimed to increase the knowledge base of current social work practices, as described by Slaten et al. (2015), to improve understanding of how SEL occurs in high school alternative education settings, and Durlak et al. (2011), to increase research on the impact of current SEL programming in Illinois.

Implications

The implications of this research for positive social change can be viewed across various system levels. At the macro level, educational policies can move beyond the development of SEL standards to mandating the leadership teams necessary to build system wide supports. The representation of staff working with students in alternative education is vital to meeting all student SEL needs. The state of Illinois has been a leader in educational policies for SEL (Durlak, 2011), yet as indicated by the cases in this study, some experiences of inconsistent SEL supports occur in alternative education programs. At the mezzo level, administrators, teachers, social workers, and other school staff can benefit from increased knowledge on current practices for SEL with high need students. As suggested by Durlak et al. (2011), the steps to improve SEL are encouraging widespread use of EBP and disseminating information about existing programs. Several

participants in this study identified programs with accessible research to meet SEL needs of high school students in alternative education. Though small in number, research-based programs are currently being implemented by some, and programs continue to emerge. Additionally, social workers were able to identify other clinical strategies to meet SEL needs including cultural competence and evidence-based theoretical approaches.

Using multiple case study data, I reflected through a constructive process of building meaning the information on real life practices implementing SEL in alternative education. This knowledge can positively impact each individual student receiving alternative education services by contributing to the development of informed and skillful school social work professionals who select and implement SEL interventions to meet student needs at a micro level. As expressed by Participant B, "If I can't get the tools to make sure they can get through a day of school for five hours, they're never going to make it in the world."

Conclusion

I sought through this qualitative, case-study research to explore the real-world experiences of school social workers selecting and implementing SEL interventions for high school students in alternative education programs. I identified from my review of scholarly literature that resources for SEL are sparse for high need students receiving high school alternative education services, compared to other student groups. Though the cases studied were bound to the state of Illinois, I described meaning that emerged from the constructivist theoretical perspective that can benefit social workers and other educational professionals working with any at-risk high school student population.

Consistent among participants was the knowledge that using social work skills to allow students time to process behaviors and learn new approaches to managing social, academic, and life problems is an integral component to SEL overall. Programs with team meetings and school-wide cohesive efforts lead to more comprehensive levels of SEL implementation. Administrators function in a leading role for establishing the cohesive team efforts towards building and maintaining the systemic, school-wide modeling, interventions, and practices necessary for student growth in SEL. "We need everybody to be onboard (Participant C)." During member-checking, Participant E reflected that within her school system, "Right now we are re-structuring student support services to help staff develop their own SEL." Therefore, hope exists for these school-wide structural supports of SEL.

I found that clinical decision making of school social workers working with high school students in alternative education is a fluid process that remains student-focused with an understanding of the student's background and current needs. The social worker's dedication and professional experience of what works provide a foundation for the clinical decision-making process. Many examples emerged in the data of competent school social workers demonstrating unique ways to meet student needs. During member-checking, Participant H provided an update that she was able to accomplish the free well-checks she dreamed of for holistic care for her students. Because of her efforts, students now have access to immunizations and dental screenings.

School social workers find resources sparse and difficult to find to meet the complex needs of high school students in alternative education programs. However, most

participants identified preferred strategies, whether supported by empirical evidence or not. Several research-based program approaches were identified such as RULER, ADAP, Positive Action, Strong Teens, and Conscious Discipline. For elementary level students, Second Step was frequently identified as an effective intervention program for SEL. School social workers additionally recognized the value of approaches to SEL that are grounded in theories such as CBT, DBT, and mindfulness.

The meaning I constructed through this research process reflected a continuum of experiences among school social workers providing SEL services to high school students in education, with a consistent student focus. Perhaps most importantly, I supported through the data the emerging meaning that interventions be culturally competent by helping students make connections in their own lives and community while building a positive school, classroom and peer culture among themselves. This client-centered focus is a foundation of social work practice and I found that research-based interventions are emerging for SEL at the high school level. Increasing the availability of evidenced-based interventions can prevent future school social workers from experiencing the current struggles to meet the SEL needs of this at-risk population and will more adequately equip students with skills to successfully function in life.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview. The study I am preparing explores the experiences of school social workers in selecting and implementing evidence-based Tier 3 SEL interventions in alternative education programs. The purpose is to develop greater understanding of social work practice with students in alternative education. Remember that you can ask me questions at any time, stop, and withdraw from the study at any time.

(Continue only if consent criteria are met)

Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your role related to SEL with students in alternative education?

2. How would you summarize the needs of your students in alternative education?

3. What does SEL look like for your students in alternative education?

4. Tell me about your process for selecting SEL interventions when working with high school students in alternative education.

5. What strategies or interventions are you currently implementing with high school students in alternative education?

6. How would you describe the connection of the MTSS framework to SEL with your students in alternative education?

7. How would you describe the use of evidence-based Tier 3 practices in your current SEL interventions with high school students in alternative education?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about MTSS, Tier 3 SEL, or meeting the needs of students currently placed in alternative education?

Potential Follow-Up Probes

Can you give me an example of that?

How did that experience guide your practice?

Tell me more about that intervention, student, program, etc.

Closing Statement

I want to thank you for taking the time to talk with me today and help me in this process of understanding SEL with high school students in alternative education. May I contact you later to check my understanding of what we discussed here today? Also, please do not hesitate to contact me if you have other questions.

Appendix B: Qualitative Codebook

Code System

1 Evidence based practices being used	1
1.1 processing student issues	21
1.1.1 immediate processing as a group FG	1
1.2 Current Cultural relevance	3
1.2.1 Impact of culture	2
1.2.1.1 builds culture	2
1.3 Programs	0
1.3.1 PBIS (FG)	3
1.3.2 Social Thinking Interventions	1
1.3.3 Conscious Discipline	3
1.3.3.1 neurological component FG	1
1.3.4 strategies for success	1
1.3.5 Why Try	4
1.3.6 Zones of Regulation	2
1.3.7 New programs	2
1.3.8 brief intervention programs	2
1.3.9 Love is Not Abuse	1
1.3.10 ADAP Adolescent Depression Awareness Program John Hopkins	3
1.3.11 Sunburst videos on drug use	1
1.3.12 Calm Classroom	1
1.3.13 Strong Teens	1
1.3.14 positive action	2
1.3.14.1 RULER	2
1.3.14.1.1 Impression	2
1.3.15 Soul Pancake	1

1.4 second step	7
1.5 NO EBP identified	3
1.6 Theoretical approaches	6
1.6.1 solution-focused	1
1.6.2 DBT	2
1.6.3 CBT	5
1.6.4 Acceptance Commitment	2
1.6.5 Mindfulness	4
1.6.6 psychoeducational	3
1.7 Levels of Evidence	0
1.7.1 Strong evidence	6
1.7.2 Weak evidence	6
1.7.3 Questionable evidence	1
2 Factors contributing to clinical decision making	2
2.1 Components of Professional Experience and Dedication	0
2.1.1 non-judgmental approach FG	2
2.1.2 Modeling SEL	8
2.1.2.1 modeling skills FG	2
2.1.2.2 peer support	4
2.1.3 involve the parent	5
2.1.4 Creativity	0
2.1.5 Engaging students	18
2.1.5.1 food FG	3
2.1.5.2 competition	1
2.1.5.3 Connecting to Regular Coursework	1
2.1.5.4 holidays	2
2.1.5.5 movement	8
2.1.5.6 movies	2
2.1.5.7 music	4

2.1.5.8 Sports	2
2.2 Dedication	5
2.3 Professional Experience/What Works	4
2.3.1 Understanding Background	0
2.3.1.1 Environment	0
2.3.1.1.1 already facing adult life	2
2.3.1.1.1.1 already parents	2
2.3.1.1.1.2 married	1
2.3.1.1.2 transitive	2
2.3.1.1.3 behavioral program	5
2.3.1.1.4 low income	3
2.3.1.1.5 gang	1
2.3.1.1.6 Group homes	0
2.3.1.1.6.1 students reside in group home	1
2.3.1.1.6.2 highest need	1
2.3.1.1.6.2.1 residential -some have greater needs than they can meet	1
2.3.1.1.6.2.2 girls from group home are highest need	1
2.3.1.2 Complex needs	8
2.3.1.3 trauma	3
2.3.1.3.1 crisis	5
2.3.1.3.2 abuse history	2
2.3.1.3.3 DCFS wards	2
2.3.1.4 treatment needs	0
2.3.1.4.1 acting out behaviors	1
2.3.1.4.1.1 destruction of property	1
2.3.1.4.1.2 battery with our staff	1
2.3.1.4.1.3 police involvements	2
2.3.1.4.2 mental health needs	12

2.3.1.4.3 drug use	3
2.3.2 Considering Current Needs	0
2.3.2.1 Skill building	0
2.3.2.1.1 group by skill need	1
2.3.2.1.2 building system wide SEL	2
2.3.2.1.3 SEL goals	4
2.3.2.1.3.1 Connect to other core curriculum	1
2.3.2.1.3.1.1 write IEP Goal based on SEL standard	1
2.3.2.1.3.2 responsible decision-making goals.	2
2.3.2.1.3.3 social skills goals	2
2.3.2.1.3.4 social awareness	2
2.3.2.1.3.5 coping skills	2
2.3.2.1.4 poor interpersonal relationship skills	1
2.3.2.1.5 problem solving skills.	3
2.3.2.1.6 executive functioning skills	1
2.3.2.1.7 Bi-lingual needs	2
2.3.2.1.8 self-regulate	2
2.3.2.2 Emotional Needs	0
2.3.2.2.1 exhausted students	1
2.3.2.2.2 bad relationships	2
2.3.2.3 academic needs	8
2.3.2.3.1 drop out of high school	1
2.3.2.3.2 Attendance Issues	3
2.3.2.3.3 lacking confidence	1
2.3.2.3.4 lower reading levels	1
2.4 STUDENT DRIVEN	0
2.4.1 individual student behaviors drive SW response	10
2.4.1.1 IEP Goals	12
2.4.1.1.1 unique to student FG	1

2.4.1.1.2 progress monitoring	8
2.4.1.1.2.1 students recognizing growth FG	4
2.4.1.1.2.2 positive growth FG	1
3 Experiences in selecting and implementing interventions	1
3.1 Systemic Structures and the SSW's Skill Set Vital to SEL	0
3.1.1 MTSS framework	14
3.1.1.1 SEL builds with administration	25
3.1.1.1.1 Yes connecting to MTSS	7
3.1.1.1.1.1 explains tiered framework and services well	3
3.1.1.1.1.2 Staff MTSS meetings	3
3.1.1.1.2 No Connection to MTSS framework	5
3.1.1.1.2.1 View of MTSS as not important	1
3.1.1.1.3 Supportive Admin	7
3.1.1.1.4 Non-Supportive Admin	11
3.1.1.1.5 Differences between states	1
3.1.1.1.6 assessment	1
3.1.1.2 PBIS	3
3.1.1.3 Participant Descriptions of Tiers	2
3.1.1.3.1 Tier 3	11
3.1.1.3.2 Tier 2 Forms of intervention	1
3.1.1.3.3 Tier 1 School Wide Interventions	6
3.1.1.3.3.1 built in Tier 1 for all FG	2
3.1.1.4 challenges connecting to MTSS	7
3.1.2 Feelings	0
3.1.2.1 Hopes for Improvements	0
3.1.2.1.1 dreams FG	5
3.1.2.1.2 mentor FG	2
3.1.2.1.3 need more SSWs	1
3.1.2.1.4 need for more services than school can provide	3

3.1.2.1.5 Seeks new materials	1
3.1.2.1.6 Seeks consistency	6
3.1.2.2 Amazed FG 😊	7
3.1.2.3 disappointed 🙁	4
3.1.2.4 passion for students	1
3.1.3 Multiple Roles of SSW	16
3.1.3.1 build self-worth FG	1
3.1.3.2 provide stability FG	2
3.1.3.2.1 consistency FG	2
3.1.3.3 consultative role FG	2
3.1.3.4 multiple alt ed experiences FG	1
3.1.3.5 difference between SSW and other counselors	3
3.1.3.5.1 behavior specialist	1
3.1.3.6 refers out	1
3.1.3.7 FBA BIP	6
3.1.3.8 Works with Jr High as well	4
3.1.3.9 Job Duties	2
3.1.3.10 All can benefit from services	1
3.1.4 Team Helps or Hinders	0
3.1.4.1 System Supports	0
3.1.4.1.1 more counseling built in FG	1
3.1.4.1.1.1 support from outside agencies FG	1
3.1.4.1.1.2 make it easier for parents FG	2
3.1.4.1.2 Co-Workers	1
3.1.4.1.2.1 Non Supportive Co-Workers	2
3.1.4.1.2.2 Supportive Co-workers	8
3.1.4.1.3 Special trainings	3
3.1.4.1.3.1 further training to meet specific needs	4
3.1.4.2 working together	1

3.1.4.2.1 students have to work together	1
3.1.4.2.2 supportive administrators	3
3.1.4.2.3 team efforts FG	3
3.1.5 Challenges	0
3.1.5.1 moving from knowledge to application FG	1
3.1.5.1.1 Learned language doesn't transfer FG	1
3.1.5.2 students are misunderstood	9
3.1.5.3 ethical issues	5
3.1.5.4 difficult/struggle	16
3.1.5.5 Challenges implementing SEL standards	7
3.1.5.5.1 staffing issues	4
3.1.5.5.2 battle	5
3.1.5.6 challenges implementing interventions	14
3.1.5.6.1 must be well implemented FG	1
3.1.5.6.2 motivation	5
3.1.5.6.3 buy in	8
3.1.5.6.4 Vast needs within groups	1
3.1.5.7 Challenges in selecting Interventions	11
3.1.5.7.1 Always looking for materials FG	1
3.1.5.7.2 changes in student needs	1
3.1.5.7.3 lack knowledge of EBP	1
3.1.5.7.4 Impact of Cost	9
3.1.5.7.4.1 grant	3
3.1.5.7.5 Hard to find EBP	6
3.1.5.7.6 EBPrograms don't engage students enough	1
3.1.6 Process of Adapting	0
3.1.6.1 Basics of Process	8
3.1.6.1.1 Characteristics of Programs and Services	0
3.1.6.1.1.1 Descriptions of Caseload and Direct Services	12

3.1.6.1.1.1.1 mediation FG	1
3.1.6.1.1.1.2 individualized coping plans FG	3
3.1.6.1.1.1.3 Process for referral to SW	1
3.1.6.1.1.1.4 special education	8
3.1.6.1.1.1.5 individual sessions	20
3.1.6.1.1.1.6 group work	16
3.1.6.1.1.1.6.1 class	2
3.1.6.1.1.1.7 teaches SEL class daily	1
3.1.6.1.1.1.8 daily contact	1
3.1.6.1.1.1.9 Exceeds IEP minutes	2
3.1.6.1.1.1.10 mandated	2
3.1.6.1.1.2 Description of Program	12
3.1.6.1.1.2.1 offers calming space FG	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.2 Type of setting	0
3.1.6.1.1.2.2.1 diverse	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.2.2 restrictive setting	5
3.1.6.1.1.2.2.3 school within the regular school district	3
3.1.6.1.1.2.3 flex week	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.3.1 free up time for paperwork	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.4 point level system	4
3.1.6.1.1.2.4.1 point sheet	0
3.1.6.1.1.2.5 Earn credit for SEL	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.6 positive reinforcers	6
3.1.6.1.1.2.7 system for transitioning back	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.7.1 transition back	8
3.1.6.1.1.2.7.1.1 transitions issues FG	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.8 weekly interventions.	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.9 bell ringer	1
3.1.6.1.1.2.10 check-in	1

3.1.6.1.1.2.11 Geographical descriptions	4
3.1.6.1.1.2.12 example of lesson	3
3.1.6.1.2 Tools	0
3.1.6.1.2.1 uses multiple strategies and tools FG	2
3.1.6.1.2.2 resources from conferences	2
3.1.6.1.2.3 Internet Resources	4
3.1.6.1.2.4 things that I've taken from other social workers	1
3.1.6.1.2.5 books	7
3.1.6.1.2.6 collection of materials	3
3.1.6.1.2.7 things I've used over the years	3
3.1.6.1.2.8 You Tube Videos	1
3.1.6.1.3 Types of Adapting	14
3.1.6.1.3.1 flexibility FG	2
3.1.6.1.3.2 Creativity from others	1
3.1.6.1.3.3 Create my own interventions	8
3.1.6.1.3.3.1 team-building	1
3.1.6.1.3.3.2 piecing things together	5
3.1.6.1.3.4 developed a curriculum	2
3.1.6.1.3.5 Program changes	15
3.1.6.2 Structures	0
3.1.6.2.1 Has consistency FG	1
3.1.6.2.2 Team Meetings for MTSS	2
3.1.6.2.3 no set program when started	1
3.1.6.2.4 Connection to SEL goals is pre-written in IEP software	1
3.1.6.2.5 foundations of SEL skills	3
3.1.6.2.6 structured programs and roles	10
3.1.6.2.7 structured tiers but no formal tiered level interventions	1