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A Mixed Methods Evaluation of the Social Emotional Needs of Middle School Students

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A MIXED METHODS EVALUATION OF THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF

MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

Middle school is a critical transition for all school-aged youth. On a personal level they experience rapid changes across several areas of development. Their environment simultaneously adapts as schools' expectations seem greater and social pressures arise. During this juncture, they are more vulnerable to academic and psychological difficulties. Research findings demonstrate how positive school climates have the ability to moderate the detrimental effects of middle school students' self-criticism on internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001). Historically schools have responded to the social emotional challenges students face at an individual level, however these finding points to the importance of school-wide approaches that synchronously address student perceptions of their environment.

Within the area of social emotional learning, needs assessments can reveal the individual needs of the students enrolled in a school or district, as well as the larger school community. This paper describes a needs assessment conducted at a suburban middle school located in a Midwest City, which served sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. To learn about students' social and emotional strengths and areas of need, the Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (Merrell, 2011) was administered to students (n = 670). This case study concurrently examined the ecology of the middle school by assessing student (n = 804) perceptions of school climate through the School Safety and Climate Survey by Safe and Civil Schools (Northwest Publishing, 2012). Following the surveys, a focus group was conducted with students (n = 7) to

build upon quantitative findings. Through a mixed-methodological lens, these findings were integrated to examine the relationship between social emotional functioning and school climate and inform the development of nonacademic interventions at A Middle School. Implications for school-based measurement of these constructs, as well as future practice and research in these areas, will be provided.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention, thirteen to twenty percent of children living in the United States experience a mental health disorder in a given year (Perou et al., 2013). Mental health disorders are defined as, "serious deviations from expected cognitive, social, and emotional development" and consist of conditions whose diagnostic criteria are reflected in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Perou et al., 2013). These disorders result in challenges for many youth across home and school, particularly within their relationships with peers and adults (Perou et al., 2013).

Children diagnosed with mental health disorders are frequently referred to receive services in schools through traditional models of service delivery. However, population-based school mental health services are designed to meet the social and emotional needs of all students in the school (Doll & Cummings, 2008). Rooted in public health theory, population-based school mental health service delivery aims to simultaneously support students already identified as having mental health challenges and students who may be at risk. Assessment is key to identifying students and helps drives the varying interventions students may receive depending on their needs. In a true population-based approach, even students who are not identified as having mental health difficulties or who are at-risk still receive support in an effort to promote overall school wellness and engage in authentic prevention. School-based social emotional

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learning programs are built upon a population-based approach (Doll & Cummings, 2008). Social emotional learning programs move away from the notion of having multiple fragmented services in a school to create a single coordinated, systemic approach to universal school service delivery that targets students' social emotional competence, academic success, and contributes to an overall positive school climate (Doll & Cummings, 2008).

Middle School

Middle school is a critical transition for all school-aged youth. On a personal level they experience rapid changes across several areas of development such as physical, emotional and interpersonal (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, & Blatt, 2001). Their environment simultaneously adapts as schools' expectations seem greater and social pressures arise. During this critical juncture, they are more vulnerable to academic and psychological difficulties. One theory that may help explain this is the person-environment fit framework (Eccles et al., 1997). This theory is defined as the match between person and environment characteristics (Eccles et al., 1997). Person characteristics can include a student's individual development and the environment can consist of a student's home or school expectations (Eccles et al., 1997). For instance, difficulties during this time period may be the result of a developmental mismatch between the individual student and his or her environment (Kuperminc et al., 2001).

School Climate

There is strong research evidence that "...careful attention needs to be given to the social-emotional environment of middle schools" (Kuperminc et al., 2001, p. 141). Kuperminc et al.'s research findings demonstrate how positive school climates have the ability to moderate the detrimental effects of middle school students' self-criticism on internalizing and externalizing

behaviors. These findings were uncovered though longitudinal and cross-sectional analyses of student ratings across Achenbach's Youth Self Report, the Depressive Experiences Questionnaire for Adolescents, and School Climate Scale. Results specifically reveal how students who belong to a school with a perceived positive school climate are less likely to show expected increases with psychological vulnerabilities. Relatedly, Conderman Walker, Neto, and Kackar-Cam's (2013) research also highlights how it is important to see the school from the student, staff, and parent viewpoints when assessing school climate. Middle school students and teachers may not perceive their relationship in the same way according to their study. In fact, there are significant differences in their perceptions, with teachers rating their interactions with students as more positive. These conclusions were a result of multiple methods of investigation: classroom observations, student focus groups, and student/staff surveys. Historically, schools have fallen victim to treating the social emotional challenges students face at an individual level, however this finding points to the importance of school-wide approaches that concurrently address student perceptions of the environment.

A promising approach to climate improvement is incorporating student voice into school initiatives (Voight, 2014). Through participatory action research, Voight showed how middle school students can provide valuable feedback to their schools. In this study, three teams of students across sixth, seventh, and eighth grades met on a weekly basis to discuss issues of the school environment and brainstorm possible solutions for climate improvement. Observations and pre/post survey findings uncovered positive changes in relationships, classroom order, and student engagement within the school as a result of this intervention (Voight, 2014). In particular, findings showed enhanced student civic engagement attitudes following the

intervention, which directly contribute to their overall social emotional competence. Both students and educators can work to shape school climate positively. Students can provide insights to educators through their lived experiences at an individual level. Educators can then use this information together with their experiences to mold organizational policies and practices.

Student voice is important to consider because there are between-school and between-student differences in perception of school climate (Brand, Felner, Shim, Seitsinger, & Dumas, 2003). Educators cannot assume that positive climate looks the same way across schools that have varying needs. At the same time, educators cannot assume all of their students share the same view of their school's climate. Students have different lived experiences, diverse backgrounds, and varying levels of relationships with other students and staff.

Social Emotional Learning

In fact, a report of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning put out a call for future social and emotional learning research to examine "the differential benefits that various student groups derive from these programs and how these programs can be adapted to meet the needs of these groups" (Payton et al., 2008, p. 17). Although social emotional learning programs continue to be studied empirically, there are many questions related to its effectiveness for different schools and groups of students. For many years there have been differential results across studies related to the efficacy of social emotional learning programs for different groups of students (Bierman et al., 2010; Garner, Mahatmya, Brown, & Vesely, 2014; Roeser, Eccles, Sameroff, 2000). For example, Bierman et al. (2010) examined the PATHS social emotional curriculum and its differential impact based on the characteristics of student

poverty level. Intervention effects were stronger in less disadvantaged schools and as a result school environment was found to be a moderator. On the other hand, other researchers found that program impacts were larger for students who were enrolled in schools with lower initial levels of leadership, accountability, and safety/respect prior to the implementation of the INSIGHTS social emotional program (McCormick, Capella, O'Connor, & McClowry, 2015). This may be attributed to the notion that different students and schools have different needs related to social emotional learning.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, Emotional Learning relatedly also put out a call for future research to also investigate how certain social emotional program characteristics (i.e., program duration) contribute to particular outcomes (Payton et al., 2008). Each program is designed to target different modes of social emotional learning such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. In addition, each program pilots and researches its effects in diverse settings. It is important for educators to know the unique needs of their students and schools to be able to support them. If research can answer these calls to action, access to appropriate social emotional programming across schools may improve for all students.

As Roeser et al. (2000) explain, "social context matters, and schools are a central context affecting adolescent development" (p. 467). Schools can examine their own social contexts as an organization by conducting a needs assessment. Experts have acknowledged needs assessment as an important first step to creating organizational change (Sleezer, Russ-Eft, & Gupta, 2014). Within the area of social emotional learning, needs assessments can reveal the individual needs of the students enrolled in a school or district, as well as the larger school community. The

information collected as part of this process may be further utilized as baseline data in the future to determine if a school's resulting efforts were ultimately effective at achieving the desired outcomes (Sleezer et al., 2014).

Proposed Study

This study sought to examine the social emotional needs of students at A Middle School through a needs assessment. The desired goal of the needs assessment was to enhance the social emotional service delivery at the school. Students had the opportunity to participate to ensure the later plan for implementation was be representative of their voices. As stated previously, school context shapes student development and is linked to their success in school and life (Kuperminc et al., 2001). Brofenbrenner (1979) explains how individuals belong to a variety of systems that also interact in ways that shape a youth's development. Garner et al. (2014) further assert the need for social emotional practices that are socioculturally grounded. For this reason, A Middle School's climate was also measured.

A case study approach was adopted to provide a rich description of A Middle School's environment, including the school climate and current social emotional service delivery. This design allows researchers to obtain an "extensive and in-depth description" of complex phenomena (Yin, 2009, p. 4). It also serves as a particularly good fit to study the unique characteristics of students at A Middle School as a group.

A mixed methodological design simultaneously drove this study. Mixed methods are additionally known to tackle the exploration of complex phenomena like case studies through both quantitative and qualitative data collection (Creswell, 2015). They help explain the "how" and "why" and uncover relevant themes in responses. In particular, an exploratory sequential

mixed methods design begins with quantitative data collection that later qualitative data collection is intended to build upon in order to yield an integration of findings (Creswell, 2015). In this study surveys were administered to all participants, and were subsequently followed with a focus group that investigated the research questions further.

All of these methods were connected through an ecological lens. Bio-ecological theory developed by Brofenbrenner (1979), explains how human development occurs through complex interactions between individuals and their environments. These interactions happen between the individual and a set of nested systems. The microsystem in the life of a child would include a school classroom or family unit. The mesosystem is comprised of relations between two levels and can be a relationship between a child's school and family. The exosystem is made of settings that still influence a student, however they are not a part of such as a school building council or parent's workplace. Final, the outer macrosystem includes educational policies and cultural factors that influence a child's life.

Both the social and cultural factors that influence social-emotional learning were a paramount focus of this study. Garner et al. (2014) introduce "socioculturally competent social emotional practices" in their work. They explain this as an extension of cultural competence as it equally emphasizes student ecology and the way in which various systems impact schools. This case study examined the ecology of one school by assessing perceptions of school climate. It also investigated the social emotional needs of students and practices that exist within the school to support these needs. A goal of this research was to provide valuable information to the school staff about their unique setting to help inform the most appropriate interventions for their own students.

In sum, this study combined a needs assessment approach, case study design, and mixed methodology, through an ecological and socioculturally grounded lens, to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the social emotional strengths of A Middle School students according to students? (2) What are the social emotional needs of A Middle School students according to students? (3) How do students perceive A Middle School's climate?

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Social Emotional Learning

The Collaborative of Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social

emotional learning as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively

apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and

achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive

relationships, and make responsible decisions." There is an established scientific base linking

social emotional competency to school success (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, &

Schellinger, 2011; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007). Some of social emotional

learning's most prevalent research findings come from a well-known meta-analysis, which

examined over 200 school-based universal social and emotional learning programs (Durlak et al.,

2011). In this particular study researchers uncovered that students participating in these programs

demonstrated significant gains in their social-emotional skills, attitudes, and behavior when

compared to students who did not participate in social and emotional learning programs.

Furthermore, researchers found an eleven-percentile gain in academic performance across all

programs (Durlak et al., 2011). Altogether this research supports the notion that social emotional

learning has positive influences across children's holistic growth and development. This meta-

analysis additionally points to the importance of embedding social emotional learning practices

within larger instructional frameworks that are inherently academic in nature. According to Zins

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et al. (2007), "…the promotion of social-emotional learning goals is no longer seen as 'separate' or even parallel to the academic mistakes of schools; rather, it is essential and can be taught and implemented in schools in a number of ways" (p. 199). These authors further state the present challenge for educators is to continue to establish the link between social emotional and academic interventions and "to apply this knowledge more broadly to assist all children" (p. 208).

Federal policy reflects this link through H.R. 850, The Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act. For instance, this act places social emotional learning's value equally with academic skills and amends the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to permit teacher and principal training or professional development to be used for social emotional programming (CASEL, 2016). Other acts such as the Supporting Social Emotional Learning Act under H.R. 497 amends the Education Sciences Reform Act of 2002 to require the National Center for Education Research to conduct social emotional learning research (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2016). The act also requires Teacher Quality Partnership Grants to be used towards preparing prospective educators to use social emotional learning programming (CASEL, 2016). In, there are additionally free standing P-12 standards, with developmental benchmarks for students. Illinois is one of four states that have comprehensive K-12 social emotional learning standards (CASEL, 2016). They build upon the Illinois Social/Emotional Development Standards of the Illinois Early Learning Standards, and are organized into three main goals: (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 (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017).

For example within the first goal, there are three learning standards (identify and manage one's emotions and behavior, recognize personal qualities and external supports, and demonstrate skills related to achieving personal and academic goals). The connecting specific benchmarks for middle school students include: (1) analyze factors that create stress or motivate successful performance (2) apply strategies to manage stress and to motivate successful performance, (3) analyze how personal qualities influence choices and successes, (4) analyze how making use of school and community supports and opportunities can contribute to school and life success, (5) set short-term goal and make a plan for achieving it, and (6) apply strategies to overcome obstacles to goal achievement (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017).

This Illinois legislation has pushed schools to develop policies for incorporating social emotional development into their core educational programming and is responsible for holding schools accountable to support children who have social or emotional needs (Zins & Elias, 2007). In addition it has brought the new challenge of "conducting valid and reliable assessments of social-emotional, academic and health related outcomes, as well as of school climate, based on input from multiple constituencies (e.g. students, parents, teachers and community members)" (p. 250).

In 2008, CASEL published a technical report that summarized the findings from three large scale scientific reviews that examined the impact of social and emotional learning for kindergarten to eighth grade students (Payton et al., 2008). These reviews as a whole included 317 studies and involved 324,303 students. The universal review examined the impact of school-

based social emotional learning interventions that were intended to be used with general student bodies; the indicated review, was narrowed down to include specific interventions that identified or supported students with "early signs of behavioral or emotional problems"; and the after-school review evaluated the impact of social emotional interventions implemented in after-school settings (p. 5). Overall findings indicated that students, as a result of participating in either universal or indicated interventions, "demonstrated statistically significant positive gains in their: social emotional skills; attitudes toward self, school, and others; social behaviors; conduct problems; emotional distress; and academic achievement" (p. 7). Within the universal review, the effect sizes ranged from .23 to .60 at post assessment and the largest mean effect size was observed for social emotional skills (p. 22). The indicated review outcomes had higher overall effect sizes (ES=.43 to .77) and the largest mean effect size was observed for social emotional skills (p. 29). The after school review yielded effect sizes that ranged from .08 to .91, with the highest effect size in the outcome category of emotional distress (p. 32). These findings highlight that social emotional learning interventions are effective both in the school and after school settings, across a variety of student outcomes. However, the most notable gains were observed with respect to social emotional skills such as problem-solving and self-control. An additional noteworthy finding is that the interventions were most effective when delivered by school staff, "suggesting that [social emotional learning] interventions can be incorporated into routine educational practice" (Payton et al., 2008, p. 7).

In CASEL's specific elementary guide there are a total of 19 programs featured. Visual tables organize each program's outcomes into the following categories: "improved academic performance, increased positive social behavior, reduced conduct problems, and reduced

emotional distress" (CASEL, 2016). Different programs result in different outcomes for students according to CASEL. Some programs show evidence of effectiveness in all areas, while some show evidence in only one area. Overall according to Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's findings, 53% percent of programs proved to demonstrate improved academic performance, 74% increased positive social behavior, 74% reduced conduct problems, and 37% reduced emotional distress.

In CASEL's middle school guide there are only six programs that are featured (Expeditionary Learning, Facing History and Ourselves, Lions Quest, Responding In Peaceful and Positive Ways, Second Step, Student Success Skills), significantly fewer than the elementary school guide. Within this guide, program outcomes are delineated into the same categories as the elementary guide and additionally include the categories of "improved SEL skills and attitudes" and "improved teaching practices" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015). Summatively, one third of the programs demonstrated improved academic performance (33%), one program improved positive social behavior (17%), four programs reduced problem behaviors (67%), four programs improved SEL skills and attitudes (67%), while no programs demonstrated reduced emotional distress and improved teaching practices.

Table 1. CASEL Elementary and Middle School Report Findings

Level	Improved Academic Performance	Increased Positive Social Behavior	Reduced Conduct Problems	Reduced Emotional Distress	Improved SEL Skills & Aptitudes	Improved Teaching Practices
Elementary School	53%	74%	74%	37%	N/A	N/A
Middle School	33%	17%	67%	0%	67%	0%

The findings of the above CASEL reports along with the scientific findings of other researchers such as Durlak et al. (2011) suggest that social emotional interventions are successful at improving both the social emotional and academic outcomes of youth. However, the findings concurrently point to the need for additional research, particularly around programs designed for middle school students. With more studies, researchers can further examine what specific features of programs contribute to the varying outcomes. In this way, schools can ensure they are targeting the specific needs of their students in an effective way.

Connection to School Climate

Schools can help launch successful social emotional learning supports when they address the other factors that influence their environments. For example, research shows that school climates impact students' social and emotional competency (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2015). Moreover positive school climates are associated with academic achievement, and lower rates of absenteeism and personal problems (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). The National School Climate Center (2016) defines school climate as "the quality and character of school life." It reflects "norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures" of a school community (National School Climate Center, 2016).

Positive school climates touch teachers as well. They significantly predict teachers' commitment to their profession as educators and their commitment to their individual school (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2011). Relatedly, teacher commitment is predicted by the relationships between students, which are one of many dimensions of school climate. Collie et al. found this by investigating teacher perceptions of commitment, school climate, and social emotional

learning through an online survey. Results depicted through multiple binary logistic regression analyses showed how these different constructs are intertwined. Schools that promote and value social emotional learning alongside academic learning improve teacher commitment and therefore, improve instruction. In sum, supporting a strong social emotional learning culture helps students, teachers, and schools (Collie et al., 2011).

McCormick et al. (2015) report that context matters for social-emotional learning programming. They believe that the previous mixed findings of social emotional research may be attributed to, "how program effects differ across school settings." Program efficacy becomes compromised when there is a lack of understanding of school characteristics. Researchers are finding that different SEL programs are highly effective more so in some schools and less so in others. For example, in a recent study the role of student and school socioeconomic status was examined to see if the social emotional learning program, Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), produced differential effects for students belonging to low income vs. higher income backgrounds (Bierman et al., 2010). Student and school socioeconomic status was measured by the percentage of students who received free or reduced lunch at school. Positive intervention effects on social and cognitive student outcomes were ultimately stronger in schools with a lower percentage of low-income students and as a result school environment was found to be a moderator for most intervention effects (Bierman et al., 2010). Supplementary analysis further revealed that there were no significant differences in the implementation quality of the intervention between schools with low and high socioeconomic backgrounds.

The above findings ultimately mirrored the results of the study conducted by McCormick et al. (2015). These researchers examined the effects of an alternative program, INSIGHTS,

across 22 urban schools that had student populations with a high percentage of low income and ethnic minority children. They found that program impacts were larger for students who were enrolled in schools with lower initial levels of leadership, accountability, and safety/respect prior to the implementation of the social emotional program (McCormick et al., 2015). Results of this particular study help to advance the role of school settings within the study of social emotional learning. Together, these findings additionally highlight how social emotional intervention effects can vary for students belonging to different groups. For example, students belonging to a school with a less positive school climate or fewer resources may demonstrate a stronger need for a social emotional program that aims to build healthy relationships among all over a program that works to improve a specific skill such as self-awareness (McCormick et al., 2015). Social emotional learning is not a one-size fits all approach. Acknowledging these differences is the first step to future exploration of causal explanations, and the development of more equitable supports to address the social and emotional needs of all students.

Differential empirical social-emotional findings can be attributed to particular foci of implemented programs and/or the construct chosen to measure outcomes (Garner et al., 2014). Other findings can be dependent on the different populations of students that the intervention and evaluation targeted. Garner et al. introduces "socioculturally competent social-emotional practices" as both the social and cultural factors that influence social-emotional learning. Sociocultural competence is considered to be an extension of cultural competence as it equally emphasizes student ecology and the way in which various systems impact schools. Socioculturally-grounded social-emotional learning programs are considered to be:

> (1) compatible with, and sensitive to sociocultural characteristics of participants, (2) focus on contexts and relationships beyond the classroom, (3) consider issues of

measurement equivalence, language accessibility, and multiple domains and subdomains of development in choice of outcome measure, (4) consider dosage and timing of the intervention, and incorporate, (5) formal training for teachers in sociocultural competence and its importance for classroom climate. (p. 168)

Sociocultural variables therefore are not only limited to explaining culture through demographic labels such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, and ability.

The school psychology literature portrays how sociocultural factors are addressed within interventions in different ways. A relevant example is Hatzichristou, Lampropoulou, and Lykitsakou's (2006) model of components for multicultural system/community interventions. Their research on the development of a universal social emotional learning program included baseline data and/or needs assessment with three distinct phases that allowed them to gain more information about the group of students they were serving. Phase 1 included a developmental profile of all students, Phase 2 included research on specific target groups (LD, migrant students, single-parent families) and Phase 3 included an "ethnography" of the system and the community. These phases helped to inform a program developed to enhance this group of students' social emotional competence across ten thematic units:

(a) communication skills, (b) identification, expression, and management of emotions, (c) self-concept and self-esteem, (d) coping strategies, (e) conflict resolution, (f) diversity in culture, (g) diversity in individual, family, and social characteristics, (h) learning/study skills, (i) social skills, and (j) crisis management. (Hatzichristou et al., 2006, p. 116)

A concurrent driving force behind this process was multicultural and cross cultural consultation (Behring & Ingraham, 1998). Multicultural consultation is defined as "a culturally sensitive, indirect service in which the consultant adjusts the consultation services to address the needs and cultural values of the consultee, the client, or both" (p. 58). More recently Sander, Hernandez-Finch, and Newell (2016), highlight how multicultural consultation places an

increased emphasis on ensuring students from minority backgrounds are achieving across educational settings. Cross-cultural consultation is "a subset of multicultural consultation and it happens when consultation occurs across cultures (Hatzichristou et al., 2006, p. 107). An example of parallel multicultural and cross-cultural consultation activity that was integral to this project's systemic intervention process were the cultural diversity educator trainings. These trainings emphasized the diversity in cultures and addressed the "cultural factors that influence the psychological and academic adjustment of students" at the participating schools (p. 117). This process, including the intervention phases and consultation as described, showcases cultural diversity as a constant, holistic approach that is designed to respond to the needs of all children. Culture was not an additive element, it was embedded within the initial data collection/needs assessment procedures and carried into the development of the social emotional intervention and ongoing consultation.

Socioculturally based social emotional learning is a right students should have in schools. In this way, all students from diverse groups can access the skills and tools they need to be successful in school and life. Jonathan Cohen (2006), from *The Center for Social and Emotional Education*, expresses "for our country's future, and for social justice, it is essential that all children... have the opportunity to develop the social-emotional competencies and ethical dispositions that provide the foundation for the tests of life, health, relationships, and adult work" (p. 228). He further contends that there is a current "overemphasis on linguistic and mathematical learning" in American schools. As a result of the introduction of No Child Left Behind and Common Core in the American school system, educators are now focused on the implementation of academic standards. With this push, critics fear that social-emotional learning

may be less emphasized in the classroom (Gubi & Bucanegra, 2015). While these initiatives are

well intentioned, they may unknowingly hinder the social and emotional development of

students in this way (Gubi & Bucanegra, 2015).

Social emotional learning that is accessible to all students, celebrates cultural diversity,

and includes the voices of all stakeholders, is reflective of social justice (Desai, Karahalios,

Persuad, & Reker, 2014). According to Desai et al., educators must engage in reflection of their

practices and ask critical questions such as:

> (1) Do school social-emotional curricula align with the diverse needs and lives of
> students? (2) Do social-emotional and behavioral data highlight discrepancies in access
> and success? (3) Is there a group of students who experience bullying or discrimination or
> students who need specific types of support? and (4) Are the interventions respectful of
> the context of each child? (pp. 14-15)

As mentioned above, one of the considerations to providing such social emotional

learning practices in schools today is access. There are numerous options for curricula that

schools are available to adopt and according to the effectiveness rating by What Works

Clearinghouse social-emotional learning programs with *Positive* or *Potentially Positive* effects

range in cost from no-cost to $3,000 per student (Desai et al., 2014). However, the type of

program schools are able to adopt can be dependent on the resources available and there is

presently more limited research on the curricula that are low or no-cost to schools (Desai et al.,

2014). As a result this may leave under resourced schools with more limited guidance on how to

support their students' social and emotional learning needs when compared to more resourced

schools. This is concerning as research shows that students who are from lower socioeconomic

backgrounds have an increased risk of having social and emotional challenges (Garner et al.,

2014).

In addition to cost, the curriculum content can influence how students are able to access social emotional learning. Many programs state that culture and diversity is embedded into their lessons, however it is often unclear how it is done (Desai et al., 2014). On the other hand, certain program developers suggest they do this through implementation and pilot research in diverse racial/ethnic and economic school settings. Specific norming data that includes detailed accounts of research settings can be challenging to find (Desai et al., 2014). Moreover, finding a social emotional learning program that has been validated for one's unique school population can be even more challenging. Desai et al. share however that "limitations in norming groups or research data do not preclude schools from successfully implementing culturally sensitive SEL curricula" (p. 15). School psychologists together with other educators are in a unique position to modify existing interventions to meet the needs of their own students. These adaptations are made with the goal of enhancing student social and emotional supports and making them more accessible to all students (Desai et al., 2014).

Role of School Psychologists

In 2002, *School Psychology Review* published an influential article that initiated a discussion on how social emotional learning can be incorporated into the role of a school psychologist (Ross, Powell, & Elias, 2002). The authors expressed that the "opportunities for psychologists in schools to become involved in promoting psychological competence through social and emotional learning are virtually limitless" (p. 47). School psychologists' training in the study of the developmental, educational, and social-emotional needs of students, coupled with their skills in consultation, needs assessment, program design and evaluation make them key individuals in schools to advance social emotional learning initiatives. School psychologists

are advised to promote student health and reduce youth risk behaviors, support the professional

development activities of schools, and collaborate with other educators. They can fulfill these

multiple roles through the implementation of social emotional learning (Ross et al., 2002). This

call for action has been carried by many other voices in school psychology since the publication

of this article. For example, as Lazarus and Sulkowskil (2011) also described

> ...as professionals with a background in supporting students' mental health and well-
> being, the onus is on school psychologists to assume positions of leadership in helping
> schools implement SEL programs and to illustrate the benefits of these programs to key
> stakeholders. Moreover, school psychologists can work with legislators to develop
> legislative initiatives that mandate districts to incorporate SEL in the schools. (p. 17)

There are rich opportunities for school psychologists to become involved in the

promotion of social emotional learning and to uphold the accountability of social emotional

measurement and intervention in the schools. However, much of the literature concurrently

highlights how additional training in these areas is necessary to ultimately help guide the

promotion of social emotional learning (McKevitt, 2012; Zins & Elias, 2007). In a recent study,

McKevitt (2012) surveyed 331 National Association of School Psychology (NASP) members

practicing in Pre-K through 12th grade schools. Survey results indicated the majority of

practicing school psychologists learn about social-emotional interventions through professional

development opportunities (71%) or past experiences (57.4%). Less than a third of respondents

reported they rely on journal articles, and only one third reported they consult Internet resources.

Participants of the study were also specifically asked which social-emotional learning

interventions they recognized. Of the 16 interventions listed in the survey, the majority of

respondents indicated they were "very familiar" with the following interventions: Second Step

(28.7%), I Can Problem Solve (21.8%), Good Behavior Game (19.9%), Olweus Bully Prevention

Program (18.4%), and Project ACHIEVE (11.8%). Additionally, a total of eight of the sixteen social-emotional interventions listed in the survey were reported as "unknown" by at least 50% of respondents. When asked which factors most influence the school psychologist's decision to use a particular intervention, the majority reported research support (79.8%) and personnel time required to implement the intervention (66.2%) as most important. In sum, this research study shows that although school psychologists are expected to lead the implementation of social emotional interventions, there is a lack of familiarity with the various evidenced-based tools available.

In order for this translation to occur, there must be an awareness of the barriers that hinder implementation such as training, and also the factors that help accelerate these practices. Stoiber (2011) asserts that consultation is one pathway that can help advance social emotional learning in schools. School psychologists engage in consultation with a variety of stakeholders in the school community such as teachers, families, and administrators. Consultation is within one of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) ten domains of practice and is specifically viewed as a practice that permeates all aspects of school psychological service delivery per NASP's Model of Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services (2010). Consultation can be a particularly useful tool when making attempts to disentangle which exact components of social emotional learning interventions are most critical or what services are necessary to reach students (Stoiber, 2011). Due to the fact that there is a broad array of programs available to schools it is important to consider the needs of the staff and students when selecting curricula. Likewise social emotional learning is a complex phenomenon and it may look different at different schools or among various populations of students.

Tools that Drive Social Emotional Learning

Needs Assessment

For decades, needs assessments have been the first step for organizations desiring change outside of the educational field (Sleezer et al., 2014). Needs assessments have also more recently been applied to school settings. The act of systematic data collection for research and evaluation purposes is further reflected in the National Association of School Psychologist's (NASP) Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services. As written in the Model, "school psychologists incorporate various techniques for data collection, measurement, analysis, accountability, and use of technology resources in the evaluation of services at the individual, group, and/or systems levels" (NASP, 2010, p. 8). Part of effective school psychological services includes, "... systematic assessment of the educational and psychological needs of the students and families in the local communities" (p. 9). It is the responsibility of the school to continuously evaluate their practices from both the "... extent of the services provided (process) and the student- or family-focused effects of those services (outcomes)" (p. 9).

Besides this method's unique ability to significantly contribute to an individual school's functioning, needs assessment can also shape the school psychology literature at large by providing an in-depth look at the implementation of school psychological service delivery. It can help uncover the inherent differences of certain communities in order to approach school psychological service delivery in a more individualized and effective way. One example of such a needs assessment was published by *Psychology in the Schools.* The article showcased a needs assessment that was designed to facilitate the prevention of school violence and dropout in a small city district in Georgia (Hunt, Davies, Meyers, Grogg, & Neel, 2002). Through a

participatory action approach the researchers involved the school district in the data collection

procedures. These procedures included surveys, group interviews, and individual interviews for

students, parents, and school staff. Results revealed the factors that most contributed to a positive

school climate and school connectedness were: when a student felt someone cared for him/her,

when the student had an adult at school he/she could go to with a problem, and when a student

had a strong positive relationships with an educator (Hunt et al., 2002). These findings

supported previous research on student engagement and were linked to the interventions

suggested by participants (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Hunt et al., 2002). The interventions for

dropout seen as most effective by participants were the following: mentoring programs, after

school academic help, and role models. While their findings provided readers with detailed

accounts of this school's contributors to school violence and drop out, it simultaneously served

as a model for an approach to conduct a comprehensive needs assessment to support the

implementation of preventive intervention (Hunt et al., 2002). Above all, it helped facilitate

systems change and led to the development of interventions to combat the issues of school

violence and drop out.

　　　According to Sleezer et al. (2014), a need assessment is "a process for figuring out how

to close a learning or performance gap" (p. 17). For example, if a school is not currently

implementing a new educational policy this process can aid them with adopting the new

initiative. Schools, as organizations, are complex systems. Needs assessments help organizations

reach their desired conditions by "defining the problem or problems, understanding the behaviors

and mechanisms that contribute to the current condition, determining if and how specific

behaviors and mechanisms can be changed to produce the desired condition, developing solution strategies, and building support for action" (p. 17).

There are several approaches to needs assessment that are driven by different purposes. A strategic needs assessment can be characterized by the following five phases: (1) the gathering of preliminary information about the current situation, (2) examining the external environment to identify relevant threats and opportunities, (3) examining the internal environment to identify relevant strengths and areas of need, (4) charting the future environment, and lastly (5) developing an improvement plan which includes assessing an organization's readiness for change and selecting interventions (Sleezer et al., p. 177). All of these steps work towards organizational improvement and emphasize the importance of the environment's impact on performance. For this reason, a true strategic needs assessment requires "as many community members as possible to provide input and feedback on the most critical community needs" (p. 179).

Case Study

Case studies as a research method contribute to the knowledge of "individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena" (Yin, 2009, p. 4). Moreover, case studies can shed light on meaningful characteristics of group behavior, organizational processes, neighborhood change, relationships, and school performance (p. 4). This approach differs from experimental methods as it does not require control of behavioral events. Instead, it studies the natural environment while providing a rich account of events. Case studies are however similar to experimental methods as they still are effective at answering forms of research questions that ask the "how?" and "why?" in order to explain large phenomena (Yin, 2009).

Mixed Methods

A parallel methodological approach that helps to further uncover complex phenomena is mixed methods. Mixed methodology is a promising pathway to assess school psychology practice as it combines both "quantitative (close-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data, integrates the two, and then draws interpretations based on the combined strengths of both sets of data to understand research problems" (Creswell, 2015, p. 2).

Powell, Mihalas, Onwuegbuzie, Suldo, and Daley (2008) through their research initiated a critical discussion by illustrating the utility of mixed methods research to the field of school psychology. They revealed that a mixed methods way of thinking is inherent to the practice of school psychology in the way that practitioners integrate quantitative (standardized test scores, rating scales) and qualitative strands (interviews, observations) of data, from multiple sources (parents, teachers) in their evaluation of children (Powell et al., 2008). The aim of their study was to specifically explore whether this integration was also reflected in school psychology research. In an examination of articles published during 2001-2005, within four prominent school psychology journals (*Journal of School Psychology, Psychology in the Schools, School Psychology Quarterly, School Psychology Review)*, the researchers found an overall mixed study prevalence rate of 13.7% (Powell et al., 2008).

Additional areas within these discovered studies were explored in detail, such as the various mixed methods designs that include convergent, sequential, intervention, social justice or transformative, and multistage evaluation (Creswell, 2015). In a convergent design, qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously; both data sets are analyzed respectively, and finally brought together with the aim of comparing results. A sequential design is considered

when the intent is for one method to inform the other (Creswell, 2015). For example, in explanatory sequential design quantitative methods are first used, and then are followed by qualitative methods to gain an in-depth picture of phenomena. The opposite method order is held for exploratory sequential design; qualitative first, followed by quantitative. The initial qualitative method is used to explore phenomena that may be less understood, and the subsequent quantitative method further builds upon these findings. This intervention design is adopted when researchers include both qualitative and quantitative methods in an experimental trial. This is considered to be an advanced design by Creswell, meaning that there are additional elements incorporated with the basic design. For instance, an intervention design could include either a convergent or sequential design within the broader experimental framework. According to Creswell, this unique integration "consists of embedding the qualitative data within an experimental trial" (p. 7). Like the intervention design, the social justice or transformative is an advanced design that can include any of the basic designs such as convergent or sequential. What makes this particular design stand out is the larger social justice framework that surrounds the basic design. The integration, "involves threading the social justice concept throughout the study" (p. 7). Within school psychology journals, the researchers found the sequential (combined exploratory and explanatory) was most common out of all of the designs, as evidenced by the 61.76% prevalence rate among the studies (Powell et al., 2008).

An extended result of this investigation revealed that quantitative aspects were typically emphasized among the mixed methods articles. For example, only two out of the 60 mixed methods studies discovered were primarily qualitative in nature (Powell et al., 2008). This influential review of mixed methods research proved there is room for additional studies that

fuse the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative data to study difficult school psychology topics.

Issues of Measurement

Social Emotional

Parallel to social-emotional learning curricula, are the measures that analyze their impact. Like curricula, many critical questions are also pointed to these measures. Wigelsworth, Humphrey, Kalambouka, and Lendrum (2010) provide a discussion of key issues in the measurement of social and emotional skills in children and adolescents. These include: difficulties with the underlying theory and frameworks for social and emotional skills, inconsistent terminology, the scope and distinctiveness of available measures, psychometric properties, and more practical issues such as the type of respondent, location and purpose of measurement. They assert that social emotional learning without the consideration of the issues that underlie measurement in this area is profoundly problematic. For example the increased use of social emotional screening tools is an incredibly promising way to facilitate student supports in this area. However when these tools are used incorrectly, certain issues may arise as they are intended to only be used as "barometer" for a specific student population. Moreover if the goal is to evaluate the impact of a particular intervention, a broad universal measure that encompasses a single dimension of social emotional learning may be inappropriate and not fully capture student social and emotional skill growth (Wigelsworth et al., 2010).

Indeed, various assessments have been designed to measure social and emotional intelligence among youth and are being widely used in schools today. However, researchers can only point to a limited amount of empirical evidence within the literature that demonstrates

advanced analysis of the psychometric properties of these assessments (Humphrey et al., 2011; Wigelsworth et al., 2010). In Durlak et al.'s (2011) meta-analysis, it was discovered that twenty-four percent of the studies included did not utilize reliable outcome measures and fifty percent did not use valid outcome measures. This finding shows that although their results were not definitive they were promising, and further emphasizes the "need for theory-driven research that not only aids in the accurate assessment of various skills but also identifies how different skills are related" (p. 30).

One way that future research can support high quality social-emotional measures is by adopting methodological approaches that are driven by advanced analyses and rooted in theory, as Terwee et al. (2007) recommended. For example, only certain assessments have been successful at demonstrating the standard techniques of construct validity. In Van Horn, Atkins-Burnett, Karlin, Ramey, and Snyder's (2007) study of the Social Skills Improvement System, confirmatory factor analysis was employed to assess measurement invariance in order to compare parent ratings on social skills items across different ethnic groups. Their findings revealed ethnic non invariance, demonstrating that the assessment did not assess the same social skills construct for all ethnic groups as there was more variation among Latino/a youth's ratings than African American and White youth's ratings (Van Horn et al., 2007). These results highlight a parallel concern related to the development of social-emotional measurement, which is the applicability of assessments to different groups of children (Humphrey et al., 2011). As previously suggested, Hoffman (2009) argues that social-emotional outcome measures do not take into account the different types of learning that could enhance social-emotional intelligence as they are traditionally based on White American perspectives of the construct. Furthermore,

certain items on measures may demonstrate bias against youth of minority groups as a result of lack of exposure to information required by those items (Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002). While previous studies have examined item bias on cognitive intelligence measures for youth, they have not genuinely considered item bias on *emotional* intelligence measures. Moreover, many studies that have previously examined item bias on cognitive intelligence measures have generally failed to find a significant amount of items that demonstrate bias. Skiba et al. acknowledge that this is due to certain studies' failure to adopt more sophisticated analyses that have been known to yield patterns of bias, such as item response theory. This bias perpetuates unequal educational opportunity for these youth as Skiba et al. explain, "if ...overlooked, those scores will become biased estimators of individual potential by misattributing the effects of inadequate educational opportunity to a lack of individual aptitude or ability" (p. 70). Like social emotional programming, with these measures context also does matter. There may also be bias against other groups of students that have not been revealed through previous research. A measure's fit with the population being studied is key. Many educators who use social emotional scales in schools may not be familiar with the underlying issues of measurement.

School Climate

The measurement of school climate is affected by the varying definitions researchers' hold of this construct. Due to the multiple dimensions of school climate, it is difficult to often detangle what specific factors contribute to the social and emotional well-being of students. While different measures of school climate vary in the dimensions they examine, school climate from a conceptual basis can be organized into four distinct categories: (1) safety, (2) community, (3) academic, and (4) institutional environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). Safety includes different

forms such as social-emotional, disciple and order, and physical. Community includes partnerships between members, quality of relationships, connectedness, and respect for diversity. Academic is comprised of school leadership such as supportive administration, professional development, and teaching and learning. Lastly, institutional environment includes environmental factors such as the physical space of a school, structural organization, and availability of resources.

The multiple dimensions of school climate are also rooted in multiple theoretical frameworks (Wang & Degol, 2016). Bio-ecological theory developed by Brofenbrenner (1979), explains how human development occurs through complex interactions between individuals and their environments. These interactions happen between the individual and a set of nested systems. The microsystem in the life of a child would include a school classroom or family unit. The mesosystem is comprised of relations between two levels and can be a relationship between a child's school and family. The exosystem is made of settings that still influence a student, however they are not a part of such as a school building council or parent's workplace. Finally, the outer macrosystem includes educational policies and cultural factors that influence a child's life. Other theories include the risk and resilience perspective, which emphasizes building up protective factors in a child's environment to reduce risk and foster adaptive skills (Wang & Degol, 2016). Attachment theory foundation alternatively explains how positive school climate builds strong relationships and social cognitive theory explains how student behavior is influenced by motivation that is dependent on context (Wang & Degol, 2016).
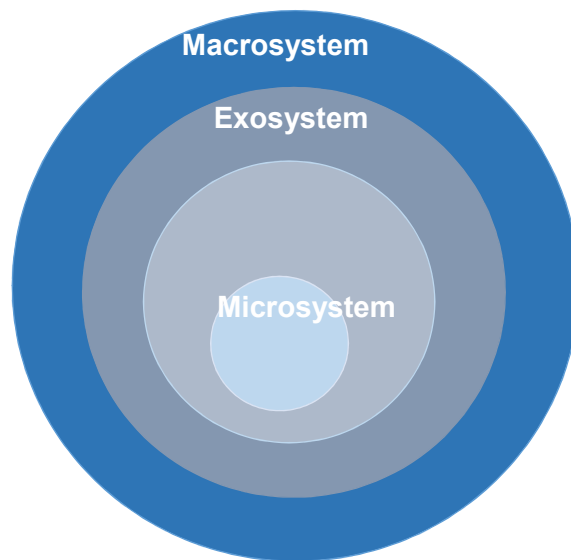
Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner (1979) Bio-Ecological Framework

Approximately 92% of studies that have assessed school climate have done so through the use of self-report surveys (Wang & Degol, 2016). A less prevalent form of data collection has been interviews and focus groups, as only 8% of studies have used these tools. Challenges with these forms include the time necessary to transcribe and code the data collected. However, collecting such data can help uncover the various perspectives on school climate and group differences. What is more, this approach can provide deeper insights to explain members' perceptions of school climate and their suggestions for improvement (Wang & Degol, 2016).

The sources of school climate data are most frequently students, 50% of research focuses on their perspective (Wang & Degol, 2016). Fewer studies have examined the perspectives of teachers or school staff, approximately 23%. There is also limited research on parents' perceptions of school climate despite the numerous contributions this information could bring

(Schueler, Capotosto, Bahena, McIntyre, & Gehlbach, 2014). Scheler et al. developed their own scale to measure parent perceptions of school climate and gathered evidence to show how their ratings were both reliable and valid. Through their scale development process they nationally surveyed close to four hundred parents across three distinct studies. Additional data analyses conducted led to the discovery of similarities between student and parent perceptions of school climate. For example, parents of younger students were found to have more positive views of their child's school climate. In comparison, parents of older students were found to have less favorable views of their child's school climate (Scheler et al., 2014). This is reflected in previous research with students as well (Conderman et al., 2013). Even within a particular school, Conderman et al. found eighth grade students to have a more negative view of their school climate than sixth and seventh grade students. Even when examining student perspectives, it is important to acknowledge how parental beliefs and attitudes toward the school can influence their children's impressions (Schueler et al., 2014). This ecological lens is necessary when viewing school climate. Student school climate perceptions are dependent on parents' views as student engagement is dependent on family involvement. While all of these perspectives contribute to a better understanding of school climate, few studies have looked at student, staff, and parents together, only 17% (Wang & Degol, 2016).

There is an important need for more research in the area of school climate to further validate the psychometric properties of these measures. Critics also assert that there is currently a lack of person-centered approaches within research when compared to variable centered approaches (Wang & Degol, 2016). For example, person-centered approaches seek to reveal differences between certain students and their environments. Such findings have the potential to

contribute substantially to the understanding of the differential effects of school climate on student outcomes. Particular social emotional programs are also focused on improving student outcomes by positively shaping school climate, such as the PATHS curriculum. According to Wang and Degol, more research is needed to answer questions such as, "how does changing one feature of school climate potentially affect other features or domains? How do these features interact to shape development?" (p. 340). Relatedly, "in addition to individual change (student), how does school intervention target and achieve setting-level change (whole school)? (p. 341).

Summary of the Literature

Social emotional learning interventions support all students, not only students who experience social and/or emotional challenges or who are at-risk for developing such difficulties. Middle school is a critical transition for youth. These students can become more vulnerable to both academic and psychological difficulties as school expectations increase and social pressures arise. There is a strong link between social emotional learning and school climate. Schools can positively influence their students' well-being by also intervening to improve their school climate. Positive school climates can strengthen student social and emotional competency and academic achievement (CASEL, 2015). They can also improve teacher commitment and instruction (Collie et al., 2011). Through a needs assessment approach schools can help identify what specific areas of their social emotional service delivery and school climate they can target to expand their care of youth. This study will use case study methodology and a mixed methods design to identify the social emotional strengths and areas of need of A Middle School students while also gathering information about the school's climate, which impacts their development.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Setting

Selection

A Middle School staff expressed their interest to the researcher in investigating their current social emotional practices and the needs of their students. At the time the relationship was forged with the school for this project there was no established, ongoing, school-wide social emotional programming. However, there was interest in developing such programming for the 2016-17 school year. Therefore the selection criteria for this study were that a school had adopted some form of social emotional programming and was interested in its adoption.

Although A Middle School does not currently have ongoing social emotional supports for all students, they do have targeted supports for groups of students who benefit from additional intervention. For example, there are social emotional groups (i.e., social skills groups) led by social workers and psychologists at the school. Individual counseling is also available to students both in general and special education. The school conducts a Signs of Suicide (SOS) presentation to all students once per school year. This program, available to middle school and high schools, is currently listed in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP). SOS includes both a screening and education component as students are screened for depression and suicide risk. Students who have elevated scores on the screener, administered following the presentation, are referred to school mental health professionals to receive professional help as

indicated. The education component is rooted in the ACT technique, students are taught to: "(1) acknowledge that there is a problem, (2) let the person know you care, and (3) tell a trusted adult (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2016). The majority of studies evaluating its impact have been conducted in high school settings. However, more recently, researchers have examined its impact at the middle school level. Schilling, Lawless, Buchanan, and Aseltine (2014) reviewed the prevention program's effectiveness and found participants demonstrated increased knowledge about suicide and suicide prevention. Moreover, they found that "participants with pretest ideation reported fewer suicidal behaviors at posttest than controls with pretest ideation" (p. 653). In addition to this program, A Middle School collaborates with the local community non-profit organization Erika's Lighthouse (2016) to provide a presentation to the eighth grade students every year about teen depression and the stigma associated with mental illness.

Description

A Middle school is located in a suburban county in the Midwest. The city the research site is nested in has an overall population of 47,446 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). According to the school's most recent [State] Report Card, their student enrollment in 2015 was 871. It is part of a larger school district, which includes six elementary schools and two middle schools. The total enrollment for the district in 2015 was 4,887 pupils. The 2013-14 Operation Expenditure per Pupil for the school district was $12,647. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2015) the median family household income in the city A Middle School is located in is $92,304.

A Middle school specifically serves sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students; of those students 16.2% are considered to be low-income, which means that they come from families who

receive public aid, they live in institutions or foster homes, and/or are eligible to receive free or reduced lunch in school. The school has no reported homeless students. English Learners constitute 4.2% of the research site's student population and 9.9% of students have an Individualized Education Plan and receive special education services. The composition of the student body's racial/ethnic background is: 15.4% Asian, 1.4% Black, 12.5% Hispanic, 68.2% White, and 2.5% Multiracial.

Lastly, A Middle School Students' performance on state assessments exceeds the average performance of students at the state level. For example in the 2014-15 school year 55.1% of students met or exceeded expectations on the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), whereas 32.9% of students met or exceeded expectations at the state level.

Table 2. A Middle School 2015 Demographics, Total Enrollment of 871 Students

Category	Percent per Group				
Race/Ethnicity	Asian	Black/African American	Hispanic or Latino	White	Two or More Races
	15.4%	1.4%	12.5%	68.2%	2.5%
Income	Low-Income 16.2%				
Special Education	% With IEP 9.9%				
English Learners	4.2%				
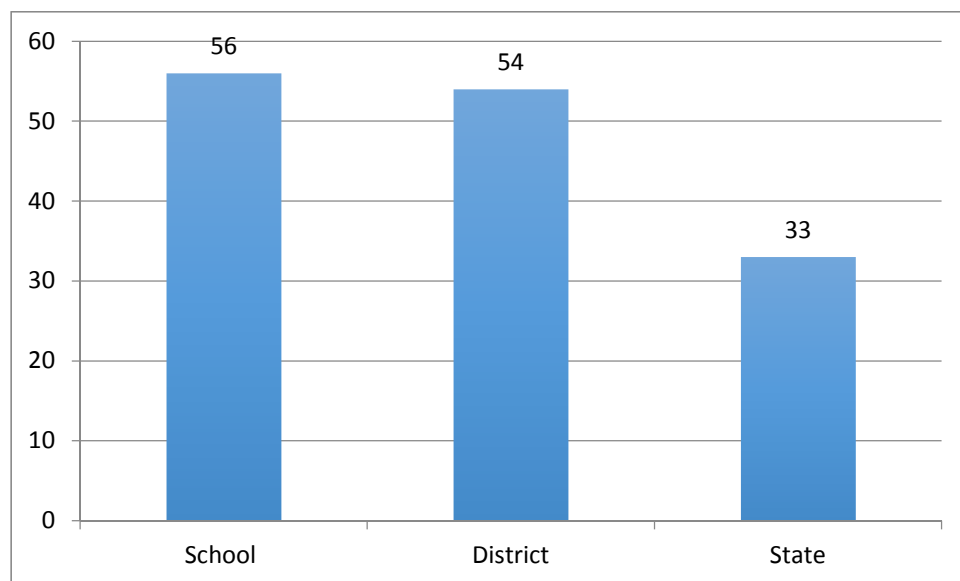
Figure 2. Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding Standards across A Middle School, District and State levels, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) 2015

Participants

All A Middle School students were recruited for survey participation. The school climate measure was administered to all students. In addition, the social-emotional functioning measure was administered to select classrooms. A small group of students were additionally given the opportunity to participate in a focus group. The researcher, along with the school psychology practicum student facilitated the focus groups. A Middle School Staff selected participants for the focus group to ensure the diverse student body is represented. For example, the staff looked at what percentage of students at each grade is within general education and special education. In addition, they looked at the percentage of students belonging to different ethnic groups. Then, they randomly picked students based on these categories so that the number of students participating reflected the overall grade level.

Design

A case study design was used to investigate A Middle School students' particular perceptions of school climate and attitudes and behaviors towards social emotional learning. This design was used to examine the school's current organizational practices and how they currently work to support students. This approach differs from experimental methods, as it does not require control of behavioral events (Yin, 2009). Instead, a case study approach studies the natural environment while providing a rich account of events. Case studies are however similar to experimental methods as they still are effective at answering forms of research questions that ask the "how?" and "why?" in order to explain large phenomena (Yin, 2009).

School climate and social emotional phenomena were explored through mixed methods, which combine both quantitative and qualitative methodology. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design will specifically be used (Creswell, 2015). In this design quantitative methods are first used, and then are followed by qualitative methods to gain an in-depth picture of phenomena (Creswell, 2015).

In addition to these methods, this study is unique for the reason that it is driven through a needs assessment approach. According to experts Sleezer et al. (2014), a need assessment is "a process for figuring out how to close a learning or performance gap" (p. 17). For example, if a school is not currently implementing a new educational policy this process can aid them with adopting the new initiative. Schools, as organizations, are complex systems. Needs assessments help organizations reach their desired conditions by "defining the problem or problems, understanding the behaviors and mechanisms that contribute to the current condition, determining if and how specific behaviors and mechanisms can be changed to produce the

desired condition, developing solution strategies, and building support for action" (p. 17). Like

mixed methods, there are several different types of needs assessments designs. This study will

utilize a strategic needs assessment. A strategic needs assessment can be characterized by the

following five phases: (1) the gathering of preliminary information about the current situation,

(2) examining the external environment to identify relevant threats and opportunities, (3)

examining the internal environment to identify relevant strengths and areas of need, (4) charting

the future environment, and lastly (5) developing an improvement plan which includes assessing

an organization's readiness for change and selecting interventions (p. 177). All of these steps

work towards organizational improvement and emphasize the importance of the environment's

impact on performance. The goal of this study was to gather information about A Middle

School's current learning environment and social emotional practices to identify areas of strength

and needs in order to improve their social emotional service delivery for the future school years.

Measures

The overall data collection plan and measures were developed with A Middle School

student services staff. There was an interest in collecting school climate data, from the student

perspective. The surveys had two goals: (a) to uncover how students perceive their school

climate and (b) to inform what social emotional supports would benefit middle school students'

educational experience. The surveys that were administered to students in February of 2017

were: (1) Climate and Safety Survey and (2) The Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales.

Both surveys are validated in research and are used in schools across the country to measure the

experiences of students in schools (Merrell, 2011; Pacific Northwest Publishing, 2012). The

Climate and Safety Survey that was selected is an option for a district-wide measure that that A

Middle School's social emotional learning committee is considering to adopt for the following 2017-18 school year and were interested in piloting.

Climate and Safety Survey

This survey, by Pacific Northwest Publishing and authored by Dr. Randy Sprick, is part of the Safe and Civil Schools Series. It was developed for students in grades 3-12. For over thirty years this series has worked to provide schools with effective Positive Behavior Support Solutions (Safe and Civil Schools, 2016). Their mission is to "help adults create environments that are emotionally and physically safe and that foster independence, integrity, confidence, self-control, kindness, literacy, and responsibility…" (Safe and Civil Schools, 2016). A Middle School has already adopted this model of Positive Behavior Support and therefore expressed an interest in using this survey for their study to match their existing practices. Randomized control and longitudinal studies that examined Safe and Civil School's Positive Behavior Support have found this model to have positive effects on student behavior as well as school policies (Smolkowski, Stryker, & Ward, 2016; Ward & Gersten, 2013). The Safe and Civil School's middle school student survey has 58 items with an open-ended comment at the end. It takes approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. It assesses the following topics:

> safety in common areas of the school, social/emotional safety, positive interactions between adults and students, teaching and enforcing school rules, attitudes about school work, frequency of major and dangerous discipline problems on campus, and sense of belonging and support for all school members. (Pacific Northwest Publishing, 2016)

Students respond to items by indicating their level of agreement on a five-point scale for the majority of items. For the last 12 items students rate the severity of various school issues from the following options: not a problem, small problem, medium problem, big problem. Students are also permitted to respond that they have 'no opinion' for these items.

The Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS)

This instrument of social and emotional functioning is published by PAR. It seeks to gain strength-based information related to a student's competencies and assets across multiple settings. The relatively brief survey, of 35-items, can be completed in fifteen minutes. Students respond to items by indicating their level of agreement on a four-point scale (never, sometimes, often and always). Two separate versions of the measure were utilized for the purposes of this study. The SEARS-C, developed for children in grades 3 to 6 was administered to A Middle School sixth grade students. This survey produces one total score based on a child's ratings. The SEARS Manual includes t-score and percentile conversions based on their normative sample (Merrell, 2011). With regard to internal consistency, the alpha coefficient based on the national standardization for the SEARS-C is .92. The SEARS-A, created for adolescents in grades 7 to 12 was administered to A Middle School Students in seventh and eighth grades. The internal consistency for this form is also high, as measured by the alpha, $\alpha = .93$. In addition, the SEARS-A has four validated subscales: Self-Regulation ($\alpha = .84$), Social Competence ($\alpha = .85$), Empathy ($\alpha = .85$), and Responsibility ($\alpha = .80$). According to the SEARS professional manual Self-Regulation, "measures an adolescent's assessment of his or her self-awareness, metacognition, intrapersonal insight, self-management, and direction"; Social Competence, "measures an adolescent's assessment of his or her ability to maintain friendships with peers, engage in effective verbal communication, and feel comfortable around a group of peers"; Empathy, "measures an adolescent's assessment of his or her ability to empathize with others' situations and feelings"; and lastly Responsibility, "measures an adolescent's assessment of his

or her ability to accept responsibility, behave conscientiously, and ability to think before acting"

(Merrell, 2011, p. 4).

Focus Groups

A semi-structured focus group was conducted in May of 2017 with group of students

following the survey administration. A focus group is defined as "a carefully planned series of

discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive,

nonthreatening, environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 31). The researcher, along with the

school psychology practicum student at A Middle School facilitated the focus group. The total

number of students in the group (n=7) fell within the recommended participants outline by

Krueger and Casey. The focus group questions (see Appendix A) helped the researcher explain

the findings that are revealed from the surveys. For example, students were asked about their

experiences taking the surveys and will be asked to share their perceptions of their school's

climate and how it contributes to their learning. Other areas that were elaborated on from the

surveys include student misbehavior and bullying. Moreover, the focus groups allowed the

researcher to ask additional questions related to social emotional strengths and areas of need that

were absent from the survey items such as social awareness, self-awareness, and responsible

decision making. Lastly, the focus group also permitted the researcher to learn about how

students perceive they benefit or do not benefit from current social emotional interventions at

their school. From this information, the researcher gained an in-depth and personalized snapshot

of the current social emotional supports provided to students. To incorporate these students'

voices into future school-based social emotional initiatives the researcher specifically asked the

students questions about how they feel staff can best support their needs. All together the focus

groups aided the researcher to further answer study's research questions and uncover A Middle School students' perceptions of school climate and their social emotional strengths and areas of need.

Procedures

Surveys

All A Middle School sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students were administered the school climate survey during their intervention block. Select classrooms of students were also administered the social emotional measure immediately following the school climate measure. At this school site, students regularly participate in a 40-minute intervention block where they receive instruction or enrichment opportunities in addition to classroom instruction. Guardians were notified about the survey administration via the school's existing monthly newsletter sent by the principal. A passive consent procedure was utilized; guardians had the opportunity to withdraw their student's participation if desired. Students were not asked for their names on the survey to preserve anonymity. During this intervention block, the teacher led the survey administration. Students were instructed to use their individual iPads to complete the survey. All students at A Middle School have their own personal iPad that belongs to them for the duration of the school year. A QR code link to complete both surveys was generated online and shared with students in their classrooms.

Focus Groups

A Middle School Staff selected participants for the focus group to ensure their diverse student body is represented. For example, the staff looked at what percentage of students at each grade is within general education and special education. In addition, they looked at the

percentage of students belonging to different ethnic groups. Then, they randomly picked students based on these categories so that the number of students participating reflected the population. Each student selected by A Middle School Staff received a consent form [see Appendices] that was signed by a guardian and returned to the school in order to participate. The consent form included information about the study and ways that student confidentiality was assured. Similar information was also included in the student assent form each participant was required to sign. Due to the fact that some participants elected not to be audio-recorded, the researcher and co-facilitator of the focus group took detailed notes during the session.

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Analysis

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Survey

Following the administration of both surveys, the researcher organized the data together in an SPSS file. Reliability analyses were conducted first with both surveys to determine the consistency of scores. The researcher subsequently looked at subscales to examine strengths and weaknesses. For example, within the SEARS the researcher compared ratings on the items related to the various subscales (i.e., Self-Regulation, Social Competence, Empathy, and Responsibility) through a one-way ANOVA. The research performed these analyses to reveal opportunities for increased future support that can be incorporated into A Middle School's social emotional service delivery. The researcher additionally looked at differences between students' perceptions of school climate by self-reported grade-level. A one-way ANOVA was run to examine these between group differences.

Focus Groups

The researcher and co-facilitator of the focus group took independent notes, and then came together to discuss their findings. If there were any discrepancies, they both discussed their reasoning and came to a mutual agreement or consensus. The nature of focus groups allows for conversations and discussions that are not reflected in individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2014). For example not all statements and expressions made in the focus group by participants may fit into a particular domain or core idea. According to Krueger and Casey, focus groups reflect "a fluid environment not a static presentation" (p. 225). Therefore, a constant comparative method based upon the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used to support qualitative analysis. The constant comparative method is based upon grounded theory, in which researchers make comparisons between data and derived categories in a continuous cycle to arrive at the core ideas expressed by participants. It is based upon an iterative approach. Constant comparative method gives thought to additional areas that are inherent to focus groups such as specificity, intensity, extensiveness, and internal consistency (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Krueger and Casey explain that specificity can be defined as the detail provided by respondents, intensity as the force or passion behind the comments, extensiveness as how many different people referred to the same comment, and internal consistency as how participants remained consistent with their own views.

Mixed-Methods Analysis

To integrate both quantitative and qualitative information collected, the researcher stopped to determine which survey results to explain for the focus group. To ensure these findings were being used to inform the study, the researcher followed the procedural diagram for

Explanatory Sequential Design analysis presented below. In this way, integration of findings was carried through the study at multiple points to create a more comprehensive picture of social emotional functioning and school climate. Figure 3 below depicts the process. The points in blue indicates steps in the study that were driven by quantitative inquiry, the purple indicates qualitative inquiry, and the green indicates points where integration of both methods occurred.

Survey Data Collection and Analysis: School Climate & Safety SEARS	Quantitative (Survey) Results	Determine Survey Results to Explain in Focus Group
Focus Group Data Collection and Analysis	Qualitative (Focus Group) Results	Interpret How Qualitative Results Build Upon Quantitative & Integrate Findings
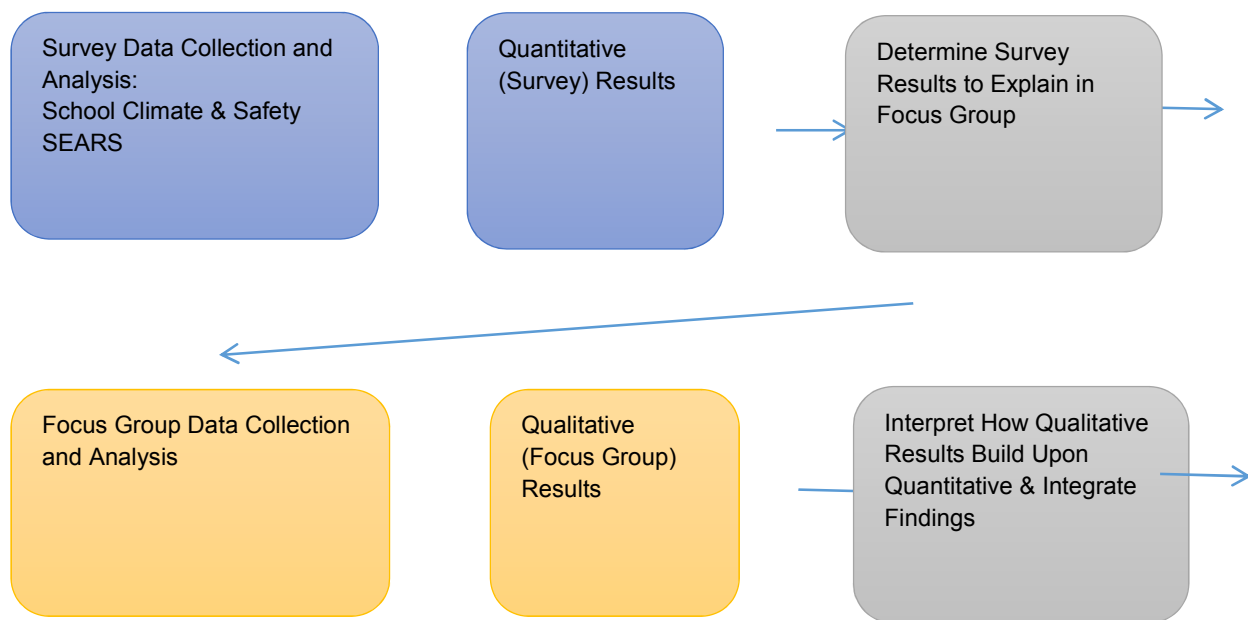
Figure 3. Procedures for Mixed Methods Data Analysis

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Social Emotional Functioning

Research question one asked, "What are the social and emotional strengths of A Middle School Students?" and research question two asked, "What are the social and emotional areas of need of A Middle School Students?" Participant ratings from the Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS) revealed similar patterns of strength across grade levels. In total, the mean social emotional functioning of all students as measured by the SEARS fell within normal limits and ranged from the 50th to 64th percentile. The SEARS offers conversions to T-Scores, which are standard scores with a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10 (Merrell, 2011). A T-Score of 50 is equivalent to a score that falls within the 50th percentile. Overall, results show that in comparison to SEARS norms, A Middle School students' social emotional functioning as a group was considered to be within the average range.

Table 3 illustrates the sixth grade student scores on the SEARS-C. As a group, they earned a mean score T-Score of 49.70 and their social emotional functioning as measured by this instrument, fell at the 50th percentile. The Cronbach's alpha for the 35 SEARS-C items was found to be highly reliable ($\alpha = .96$).

Table 3. Sixth Grade SEARS-C Total Scale Descriptives

	N	Raw Score	T-Score	Percentile
Total SEARS	209	66.91(19.74)	49.70 (12.06)	50.76 (31.84)

Unlike the SEARS-C, the SEARS-A, which is a measure for seventh and eighth grades, allowed for further analysis based on the following subscales: Self-Regulation, Social Competence, Empathy, and Responsibility.

Across all of the four subscales A Middle school students' scores fell at the 53rd percentile or above, meaning that their overall social and emotional functioning in each of the described areas is at least at or above 53% of their same grade-level peers. The strongest student ratings for each of these grades were found within the Self-Regulation subscale. Items within the Self-Regulation subscale included, "I stay calm when there is a problem or an argument and "when life is hard, I don't let things get to me." Seventh grade students' mean responses fell within the 69th percentile and eighth grade students' mean responses fell within the 67th percentile. This finding suggests that compared to their national grade-level peers, A Middle School Students perceived self-regulation a relative area of strength, as part of their social emotional functioning. The Responsibility subscale scores additionally fell at a high percentile for both seventh (65th) and eighth (66th) grades. Items within the Responsibility subscale included, "I make good decisions" and "I am someone you can rely on." Tables 7 and 8 compare that average percentiles of each subscale based on the mean scores for both seventh and eighth grades respectively.

Table 4. Seventh Grade SEARS-A Total Scale and Subscale Descriptives

	N	Raw Score	T-Score	Percentile
Total SEARS	228	75.54 (19.74)	55.22 (12.06)	64.11 (31.84)
Self Regulation	228	16.53 (5.27)	56.63 (11.40)	69.35 (28.57)
Social Competence	228	20.79 (6.87)	52.24 (12.43)	59.23 (32.49)
Empathy	228	24.98 (6.32)	54.08 (10.86)	64.14 (29.99)
Responsibility	228	13.22 (3.60)	54.24 (10.27)	65.94 (28.47)

Table 5. Eighth Grade SEARS-A Total Scale and Subscale Descriptives

	N	Raw Score	T-Score	Percentile
Total SEARS	228	73.59 (17.92)	53.98 (11.48)	60.86 (30.16)
Self Regulation	228	16.03 (5.12)	55.55 (11.07)	67.42 (28.96)
Social Competence	228	19.93 (6.26)	50.69 (11.33)	53.79 (31.67)
Empathy	228	24.36 (5.79)	53.05 (9.98)	60.80 (28.70)
Responsibility	228	13.26 (3.43)	54.36 (9.82)	66.10 (27.57)

Cronbach's alphas for the SEARS-A at the seventh ($\alpha = .96$) and eighth ($\alpha = .95$) grade levels were found to be highly reliable. The subscales of Self Regulation ($\alpha = .89$), Social Competence ($\alpha = .91$), Empathy ($\alpha = .90$), and Responsibility ($\alpha = .84$) also had Cronbach's alphas that were considered to be in an acceptable range.

Additional Subscale Analyses

The weakest overall student ratings at the seventh to eighth grade levels was found within the Social Competence subscale. Seventh grade scores fell at the 59th percentile and eighth grade scores fell at the 53rd percentile. These percentiles are considered to fall within the average range of social emotional functioning according to SEARS norms. However, comparatively, the mean Social Competence percentile (M=56.57, SD=32.18) was significantly lower than the Self Regulation subscale for A Middle School Students (M=68.41, SD=28.75); $t(446)=9.478$, p<.001. Moreover the Social Competence percentile fell significantly below the Empathy (M=62.51, SD=29.38); $t(446)=4.986$, p<.001; and Responsibility (M=66.02, SD=28.01); $t(446)=7.718$, p<.001 percentiles as revealed by paired-sample t-test comparisons. Items within the Social Competence subscale included, "I feel accepted and comfortable at school" and "I am comfortable when I am in a large group of people."

The strongest overall ratings were found within the Self-Regulation subscale. Items within this domain include, "I can stay calm when there is a problem or an argument and "I stay in control when I get angry." Seventh grade scores fell at the 69th percentile and eighth grade scores fell at the 67th percentile. Self Regulation (M=68.41, SD=28.74) was significantly higher than the Empathy subscale (M=62.50, SD=29.38); t(446)=5.051, p<.001; Responsibility (M=66.02, SD=28.01); t(446)=2.348, p<.019; and Social Competence. There were also significant differences observed between Responsibility and Empathy; t(446)=3.594, p<.001.
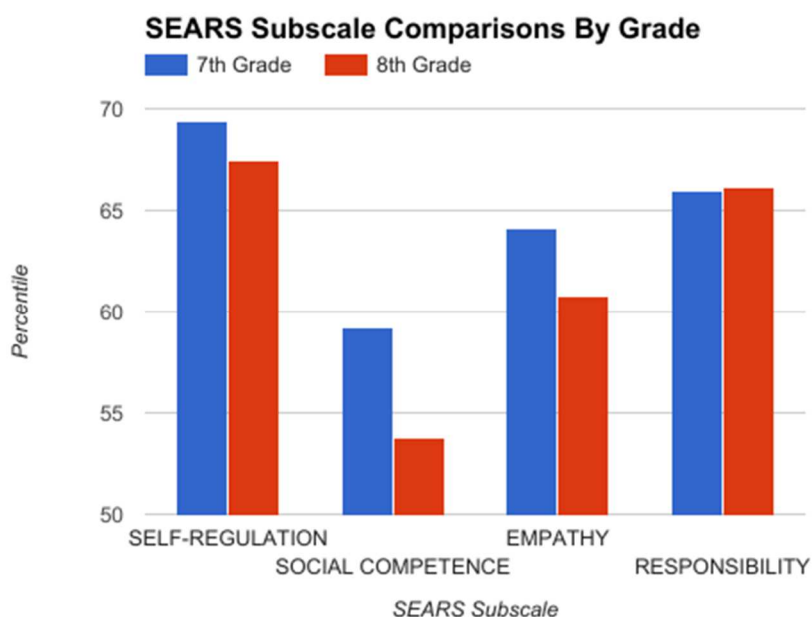
Figure 4. Supplemental SEARS Subscale Analysis

Grade Level Comparisons

To determine if there were statistically significant differences between percentile scores by grade level, additional analyses were run. The sixth grade total mean percentile was 50.56 (SD=31.84), the seventh grade was 64.11 (SD=31.84), and the eighth grade was 60.87(SD=30.16). Findings revealed there was a statistically significant difference between

groups as determined by one-way ANOVA (F (74, 581)=4.390, $p<.001$). This finding suggests

the social and emotional functioning of A Middle School students varies by grade-level, in

comparison to SEARS national norms. Additional Tukey post hoc comparisons revealed six

grade students' ratings to be significantly different (p<.05) from other grade levels, though

seventh and eighth grade score were not significantly different. The sixth grade students' mean

percentiles explained they had the lowest overall social emotional functioning according to the

SEARS.

Table 6. One-way ANOVA Comparison of SEARS Total Percentile by Grade

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between	156.528	74	2.115	4.390	.000
Within	279.922	581	.482		
Total	436.450	655			

MTSS Level Analysis

In addition to percentiles, the SEARS scores also yield information about Multitiered

Systems of Support (MTSS). This analysis determines which tiered level of support the students

would need based on their responses on the measure. Tier 1 supports are considered to be the

universal level of support. Tier 2 supports are targeted supports offered to groups of students

who may benefit from additional intervention beyond the universal level of support within a

small group setting. Lastly, three supports are designed for students who benefit from intensive,

individualized intervention. According to the Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS)

Network (2017), ideally 80-90% of a school population should fall within Tier 1, 5-10% in Tier

2, and 1-5% in Tier 3. Within the SEARS, this risk is determined by examining students'

percentile scores. SEARS scores in the 1st to 5th percentile are indicative that the student may

require Tier 3 services, scores in the 6th to 20th percentile are indicative that the student may

require Tier 2 services, and scores in the 21st to 99th percentile are indicative that the student only

requires Tier 1 services. Both seventh and eighth grade A Middle school student scores fell

within these recommended aggregates based on SEARS scores.

In comparison to seventh and eighth grades, sixth grade had a higher percentage of

students that fell within the score range indicative of requiring Tier 3 SEL supports. This finding

demonstrated that this grade level may have more intensive needs when compared to other grade

levels in the school. To be exact, based on ratings on the SEARS 9% of A Middle School

students in this grade would benefit from intensive Tier 3 interventions. This percentage of

students is higher than the standards set forth by PBIS network, which state the target for this tier

to be between 1-5% of students. Parallel to Tier 3, the SEARS ratings showed a large number of

students who fell at the Tier 2 level as well. 16% of sixth grade students fell in this range, when

the recommended amount according to the PBIS Network is 5-10%. Consequently, the universal

level, Tier 1 also had fewer students then the recommended 80-90%.
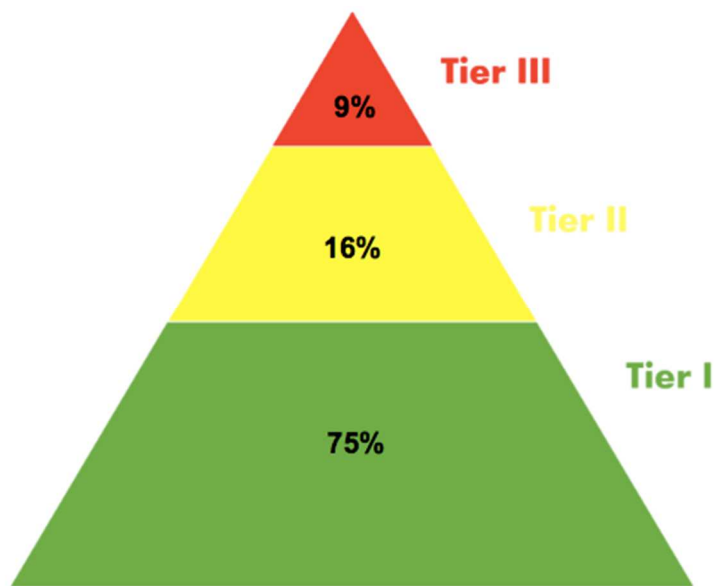
Figure 5. Percentage of Sixth Grade Students at Each Tier According to SEARS
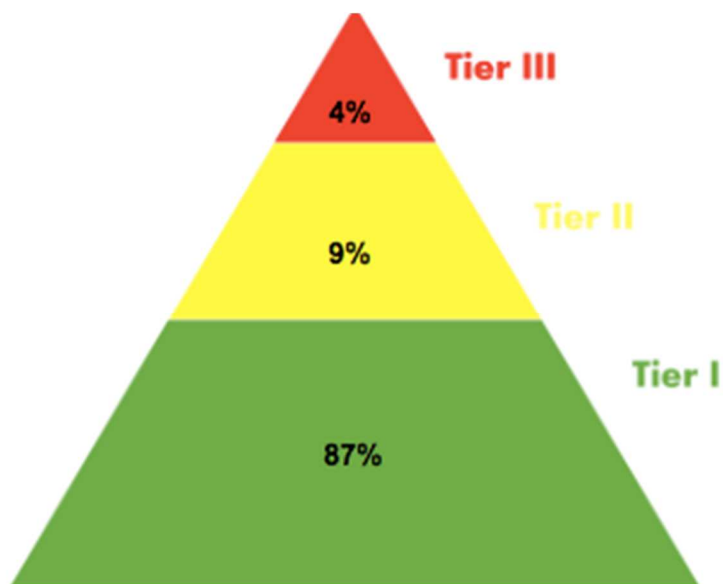
Figure 6. Percentage of Seventh Grade Students at Each Tier According to SEARS
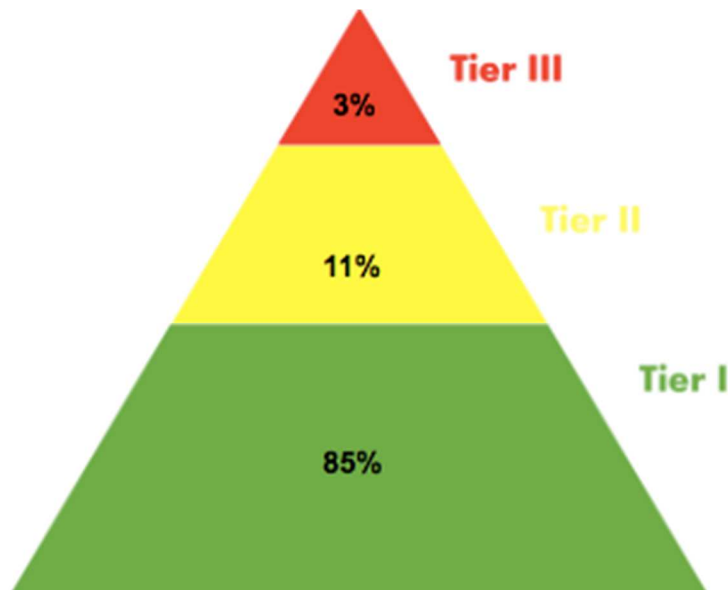
Figure 7. Percentage of Eighth Grade Students at Each Tier According to SEARS

Supplementary Qualitative Analysis

Data on the social emotional functioning of A Middle School students was also collected through the seventh grade focus group. A total of seven participants discussed how A Middle School students exhibit emotional control when asked about their social emotional areas of strength and need. One participant expressed, "[A] Middle School Students are good with emotions, they have control but they use them in the wrong way." Participants described how students "repress their emotions" and "pretend nothing is going on." According to these students, this is done to protect their reputation and avoid losing popularity. For example, one participant cited an event she observed where a female student was crying in the bathroom and when she left the bathroom acted as if nothing had happened. Another participant shared a time when she observed a student who typically exhibited emotional control have a sudden anger outburst following being bullied. These findings supported the results from the SEARS, which showed

self-regulation to be a frequent area of strength. They also highlight how experiences with bullying and negative interactions with peers can hurt their social and emotional state.

Summary

Overall, as measured by the SEARS, A Middle School students' mean scores of social emotional functioning fell within normal limits. When comparing scores across grade levels, sixth grade students were found to have significantly lower levels of social emotional functioning than seventh and eighth grade students. From an MTSS perspective, a larger amount of sixth grade students would qualify for Tier 2 and Tier 3 behavior supports. Among seventh and eighth grade students, Self-Regulation emerged as a relative area of strength and Social Competence emerged as a relative area of need. Qualitative findings from the seventh grade focus group supported that A Middle School students typically have control on their emotions and are most often able to self-regulate. Interactions outside of the individual such as bullying can, however, disrupt their ability to self-regulate and disrupt their social responses.

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School Climate

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Research question three asked, "How do students perceive A Middle School's climate?" The Safe and Civil School Climate and Safety Survey was used to uncover additional strengths and areas of need. The reliability for this measure as a whole was high, as evidenced by the Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = .91$). To further compare the different domains of school climate, item responses in each category of the School Safety and Climate Survey were analyzed: Rules, Expectations, and Procedures ($\alpha = .90$); Student Connectedness to School ($\alpha = .78$); Student Safety ($\alpha = .78$); Student-Student Interactions ($\alpha = .86$) Staff-Student Interactions ($\alpha = .85$).

Comparisons between Grade Levels

To determine if students of different grade levels perceived school climate uniquely, additional comparative analyses were conducted. When comparing the total ratings on the School Safety and Climate Survey, there were no statistically significant differences observed between grade levels. However, when examining by domain several statistically significant differences were found. Within the Student-Student Relationships domain statistically significant differences were found as determined by ANOVA (F (2, 796)=4.543, p=.011). Post hoc comparisons utilizing Tukey procedures were used to determine which pairs of grade-level means differed. The mean score for eighth grade was significantly different from the other grades (p<.05). Students in eighth grade held the lowest ratings of perceived school climate (M=37.31, SD=6.34) and students in sixth (M=38.50, SD=6.22) and seventh grade (M=38.89, SD=6.63) held the highest. These results suggest that eighth grade students do not perceive their relationships with other students as positively as students from other grade levels.

Table 7. One-way ANOVA Comparison of School Safety and Climate Survey Student-Student Relationship Domain by Grade-Level

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between	373.051	2	186.525	4.543	.011
Within	32678.576	796	41.052		
Total	33051.627	798			

Within the Student-Staff Relationships domain statistically significant differences were also found as determined by ANOVA (F (2, 796)=3.339, p=.036). Post hoc comparisons

utilizing Tukey procedures were used to determine which pairs of grade-level means differed in this domain. Similar to Student-Student Relationships, eighth grade students in this domain reported significantly different ratings (p<.05). Eighth grade students had lower ratings in this domain (M=28.93, SD=5.07), when compared to sixth (M=29.47, SD=4.92) and seventh grade (M=29.02, SD=5.49). There were no significant differences between sixth and seventh grade scores. These results suggest that eighth grade students also do not perceive their relationships with staff as positively as students in other grades.

Table 8. One-way ANOVA Comparison of School Safety and Climate Survey Student-Staff Relationship Domain by Grade-Level

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between	170.810	2	85.405	3.339	.036
Within	20362.404	796	25.581		
Total	20533.214	798			

Supplementary Analysis by School Climate Domain

Below, the individual school climate measure domains are further analyzed and include additional descriptive quantitative and qualitative data.

Rules, expectations, and procedures. Students through their survey ratings indicated that rules and expectations for behavior are generally taught in the classrooms. The highest teaching was seen in areas such as the classroom, cafeteria and locker room. For example, 93% of students indicated that expectations were taught in the classroom, 91% in the cafeteria, 90% in the locker room/gym. The lowest teaching was seen in areas outside of the physical school

building such as the bus loading/unloading zone (78%), and in the parking lot (71%). Related to academic expectations, students were less likely to know how they can get help if they fall behind in their classes (80%). The focus group responses added that although students are taught the rules and expectations for behavior in the classroom, misbehavior was still very likely to occur in this location when compared to other school locations.

Student connectedness to school. Overall, a high number of students (94%) reported they had friends at school through their survey responses. However, when asked if they could name at least one adult in the school who knew them well 75% indicated they could. In addition, 66% of students expressed that they are typically glad to come to school most of the time.

Focus group responses further revealed that there were several cliques at A Middle School that were difficult to navigate for some students. One participant disclosed, "A lot of groups are exclusive." Participants said that they see the same students typically being excluded, even in the classroom. Together they discussed the idea of teachers helping these students when there is group work. They thought teachers could refrain from letting students who are close friends from joining a group together and assist more with assigning excluded students to different groups. Overall, social exclusion was a topic that was discussed that students recognized affected school connectedness. One participant described sometimes it is felt by students that it is necessary to, "be someone you are not to fit in."

Student safety. A large majority of students reported that they felt safe in school, especially when in the classrooms (96%), cafeteria (92%), and hallways (91%). Students expressed feeling less safe in the bus loading/unloading areas (83%), parking lot (82%), and restrooms (85%). Another area that was rated lower by students was, "If a student knew that

another student was involved in something dangerous to him/herself or to someone else the student would tell a staff member." Approximately 66% of students agreed with this statement. In the focus group, students reported that they were more likely to tell their parents about general situations that occur at school instead of a staff member. A participant shared students "don't trust" teachers. When asked about this further, students disclosed how they felt teachers did not always follow through with their support after they brought up student issues to them. Additionally, students' qualitative responses highlighted the bathroom as being a key area of concern as bullying is likely to occur in this location.

Student-student interactions. Many students (90%) explained if they saw someone being bullied they would know what to do in response. A lower number of students indicated that they do not feel worried about being bullied or teased at school (70%). Together these quantitative results support that a sizeable amount of students feel concerned about being bullied at A Middle School. However, they would know what to do if they were in the position to stop the bullying of other students.

Qualitative findings also supported bullying as a key issue of concern among students. Focus group participants expressed that it was, "hard to stand up for others" when you felt the need to look out for yourself. A student described this was because "you may be targeted next" by the same bully. The students used the term "upstanders" within their dialogue and showed an understanding of the important role of bystanders to interrupt bullying. One student openly disclosed that she wished to be an "upstander" however; it was difficult for her because of her anxiety. Many students shared they had a one-week unit on bullying in Writing class. One student however, communicated that this was not enough time to be spent on this topic.

Students observed bullying across all grade levels. Passing periods, time between traveling to different classes, were described a common time for bullying to occur. The bullying that occurred in the bathrooms was labeled as talking about other peers and writing "terrible things on the bathroom wall." One focus group participant explained how students from sixth grade were additionally fearful of being bullied by older eighth grade students during cross-grade level activities such as field trips. Moreover, it was reported that students avoid going to the bathrooms that are situated in other grade-level hallways to prevent bullying from occurring.

Bullying was later described as "spreading rumors" and talking ill about others. A related form of relational aggression that was discussed by many of the students was exclusion. The focus group participants described how there are different groups of students, including a "popular group." A student who did not consider herself to be part of the "popular group" described a situation where a member from that group would talk to her in the community and would avoid her at school. Additionally, cyber bullying situations were reported as occurring at home and at school. For example, a student shared how many students will take photos of other students without permission in the classroom and share it through social media.

Staff-student interactions. In their survey responses 88% of students felt that staff encouraged to them to do their best, and 84% of students thought staff were supportive. Students were less likely to think that staff treated them fairly (70%). Qualitative findings from the focus groups revealed that students were mostly likely to tell their parents about issues that arise at school instead of teachers. There was a sense of mistrust of teachers that was communicated by the students. One student said, "I don't think teachers are doing that much, they can do more." Students shared they were less likely to report bullying to teachers because they believed that

they would not do anything to help. Another stated in response to bullying, "Friends can't do anything, and parents can't do as much as teachers. They [teachers] can do more, and can be out in the halls." A participant shared a story about a former student who tried to get help from the staff regarding a bullying issue. According to the participant, the bullying issue was not resolved so the former student transferred to another middle school. When this particular student was joined again with the students who bullied her in her previous middle school, at high school, the bullying continued. A student with an alternate opinion also expressed, "Teachers are doing as much as they can but can't be everywhere at once, kids hide." Students relatedly recognized that their teachers' responses to situations might be influenced by their lack of awareness or information. In response to this idea, a focus group participant said, "kids are smart enough to not say or do something in front of teachers."

When asked what teachers could do to best support students, the focus group participants stated they could increase their awareness of what is happening between students by increasing their supervision. They also reported that they could maintain relationships with students by creating "a positive atmosphere" and giving more positive feedback. The participants agreed that some teachers were already successful with this, however not all teachers were effective at doing so to the same degree. One student reported that it was very helpful to have her teacher of her first block class greet her with a smile each day and warm greeting. When discussing certain teachers, some students reported having a positive relationship with the same teacher and others reported having a negative relationship. This showed that students at A Middle School may have different experiences with the same teachers.

Student perceptions of problems. Students rated a variety of different school issues as being not a problem, a small problem, moderate problem, or big problem. Students rated student misbehavior on buses (28%), inappropriate student language (35%), and misbehavior in classrooms (38%) as moderate to serious problems. Problems associated with students having weapons or students engaging in physically aggressive behavior were not considered to be significant problems at A Middle School by these students.

Bullying, teasing, and student cliques were more greatly emphasized as problems during the focus groups when compared to the surveys. Participants shared that they felt students might have been less likely to report instances of bullying on the surveys they completed. When queried, a participant explained, by saying students "want to go with the group." The participants expressed that students felt uncomfortable reporting bullying situations to even their closest friends.

Summary

Together, students of sixth, seventh, and eighth grades perceived their overall school climate similarly. Students in eighth grade only differed in their perception of their relationships with both peers and staff, viewing these relationships more negatively. Students expressed that they were taught the rules and expectations for areas inside school and reported less teaching of expectations occurring for areas outside of the school, such as the bus loading/unloading zone and parking lot. A location where students felt less safe that was highlighted in both the survey and focus group was the bathroom. Survey results indicated that students saw classroom misbehavior, student language and misbehavior on buses to be the largest problems at their school. However, the focus group revealed bullying to be a larger problem at A Middle School.

Bullying and social exclusion was described as affecting student relationships as well as staff relationships, based on how the students perceived it was handled. When experiencing an issue at school, students reported that they were more likely to talk to their parents about it at home rather than a teacher.

Integration of Findings

The above sections detail the social emotional and school climate findings respectively. Both quantitative and qualitative data helped answer the research questions of this study: (1) "What are the social and emotional strengths of A Middle School Students?" (2) "What are the social and emotional areas of need of A Middle School Students?" and (3) "How do A Middle School students perceive their school climate?"

Mixed methodological studies are challenged to go beyond the analysis of quantitative or qualitative data in response to research questions, in order to fuse the information collected and interpret the integration of findings (Creswell, 2015). This integration can be accomplished by data correlation and comparisons between one form of inquiry to another (Greene, 2007).

In this study, social emotional functioning was defined by the SEARS measure as self-regulation, social competence, empathy, and responsibility. However, these concepts were not only reflected in the results from the SEARS survey. They were present in the focus group discussion as well. Students described how their social emotional functioning was inherently challenged when circumstances outside of their control, such as bullying, occurred. Information related to bullying was also present in the School Climate and Safety survey findings. For example, results from this measure revealed that 20% of students perceive bullying as a moderate or serious problem at A Middle School. Using the Explanatory Sequential Mixed

Methodological Design (Creswell, 2015), the researcher determined quantitative results to explain within the focus group before it was conducted. The researcher specifically sought to explore the students' understanding and definition of bullying. Moreover, the researcher wanted to learn if the students were aware of the difference between bullying and teasing. In the focus group, the students were able to demonstrate their knowledge of these two distinct forms of relational aggression and brought attention to the additional prevalence of exclusion at their school. Alternative to the school climate survey results, during the focus group discussion all of the seven participants agreed that bullying was a serious problem at their school. The qualitative information collected helped explain in part why the students were not likely to share their bullying experiences on the survey. In spite of this, according to Greene (2007), "it is important to acknowledge and respect the value of divergence and dissonance as generative of unanticipated insights and understandings" (p. 152).

The mixed methods findings revealed similarities and differences of needs between grade-levels. SEARS survey data showed how sixth grade students perceive their social emotional functioning below their seventh and eighth grade peers. Moreover, during the focus group participants explained how sixth grade students may at times are fearful of interacting with older students. This vulnerability can be correlated between quantitative and qualitative results.

A pattern matching approach can help portray the mixed inquiry conclusions and inferences graphically (Greene, 2007). Through this approach, empirical data is combined with conceptually expected patterns. The below figure is a representation off the integration of quantitative and qualitative results collected from this study, as well as existing theory related to school climate and social emotional functioning. It is based on Brofrenbrenner's (1979) systems

theory, which explains how the multiple levels of micro and macro systems that surround and shape individuals. This particular case study found that A Middle School students' social emotional functioning was impacted by their school's climate. Moreover, the level of supports they acknowledged that were beneficial to their overall well-being transcended beyond the classroom, to their entire school, home, and community. The Safe and Civil School Climate and Safety Survey defined school climate as the rules, expectations, and procedures set forth by A Middle School, safety, connectedness, student-student relationships, student-staff relationships, and perceptions of school problems. These concepts are situated at a systems level as they involve more than one individual, setting, organization, or group and act as a network. For example, multiple individuals shape relationships and school safety is reliant upon students, staff, and the procedures in place at a school. Students' social emotional functioning is based within an individual level and is also influenced by their environment as illustrated in Figure 8.
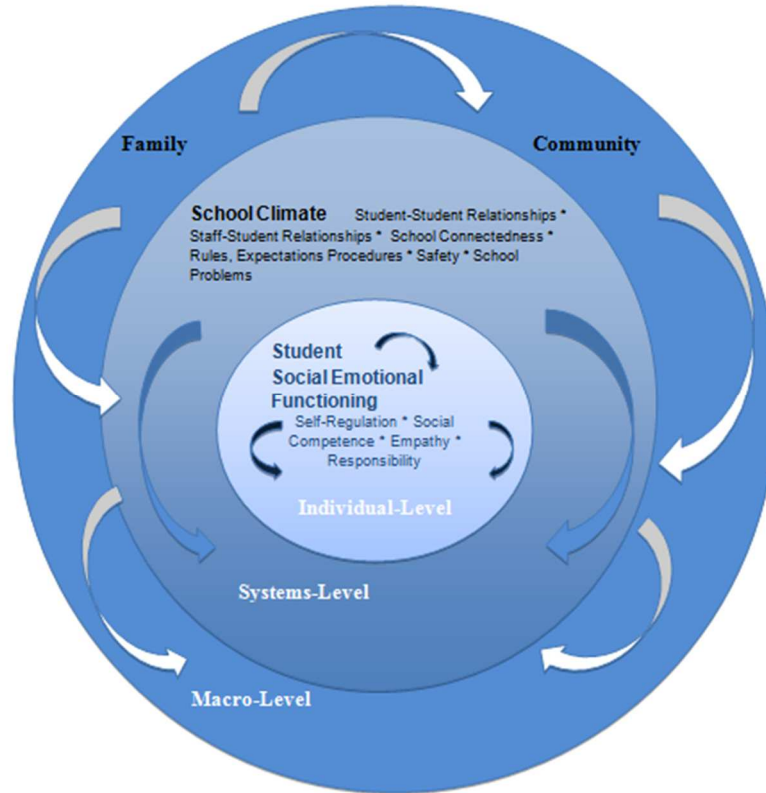
Figure 8. Integrated Model of Mixed Methods Findings Based on Brofenbrenner (1979) Bio-Ecological Framework

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This case study sought to explore the social emotional competence of A Middle School students and their perceptions of school climate. Quantitative analyses revealed the area of self-regulation to be a relative strength and social competence to be a relative area of need. Focus group findings confirmed students' social interactions were a perceived concern of students as they impacted their overall functioning. Moreover, qualitative information collected revealed bullying and exclusion to be challenges that most students at A Middle School experience. Social competence is a skill that is necessary to establish strong relationships and to be successful during adolescence and later on in adulthood. Research has established social competence to be a mediator between adolescents' perceptions of school climate and their behavioral and psychological adjustment (Wang, 2009). In particular, a noteworthy study proved how seventh grade students' positive perceptions of school climate can increase their feelings of social competence and as a result accelerate this adjustment in eighth grade. This connection not only highlights the importance of supporting social skills and positive relationships, it also reinforces the strong link between social emotional functioning and school climate. Middle schools can therefore improve the success of their students by working to enhance their climate. As these early adolescents' perception of the school climate increases, their behavior problems and deviant peer relationships decrease (Wang & Dishion, 2011).

This study also uncovered differences in perceptions of social emotional functioning and school climate by grade-level. Sixth grade students held the lowest self-reported ratings of social emotional skills as measured by the SEARS. Future research should explore whether these differences can be attributed to their stage of development or to their position of entry into middle school. This finding also may imply sixth grade students could benefit from more targeted intervention as they enter their middle school years. In the area of school climate, eighth grade students held lower ratings in the staff-student and student-student relationship domains. Previous school climate research has reported positive school climate perception decreases over the middle school years, while problem behavior engagement increases (Wang, Selman, Dishion, & Stormshak, 2010). This literature specifically explains how students who also perceive higher levels of positive student-teacher relationships have a lower probability of engaging in problem behaviors. As the above conclusions regarding social competence as an area of need already implied, helping middle school students establish positive relationships in school is of critical importance.

Social competence is reflected in CASEL's Core Social Emotional Learning (SEL) framework within the Social Awareness and Relationship skills competencies. However, current research on program effectiveness, as published in the CASEL (2015) SEL Guide, shows only one out of six middle school SEL programs improve positive social behavior. Future SEL programs can improve student outcomes by incorporating lessons focused on improving social competence, especially during the middle school years. This will in turn enhance students' overall social emotional competence as well as the middle school climate from a systemic perspective. Although SEL programs are inherently influenced by systems theory, as they were

first born from public health principle of universal prevention, Meyers and Hickey (2014) argue the outcomes used to assess their influence are more individually focused than contextually focused. Combining traditionally person-focused social emotional measures with school climate measures can create a more accurate picture of growth for schools. Two SEL programs that have successfully produced multilevel growth by altering school environment according to Meyers and Hickey are, Responsive Classroom (http://www.responsiveclassroom.org) and Caring School Community (http://www.devstu.org/caring-school-community). Both programs have demonstrated effectiveness at increasing students' social skills and decreasing internalizing symptoms at an individual level (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004; Brock, Nishida, Chiong, Grimm, Rimm-Kaufman, 2008; Solomon, Battistich, Watson, Schaps, & Lewis, 2000). At a systems level, Responsive Classroom has proven to improve collaboration, teacher-student relationships, and student perceptions of the classroom environment (Brock et al., 2008; Meyers & Hickey, 2014; Rimm-Kaufman & Sawyer, 2004; Sawyer & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007; Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). Moreover, Caring School Community students demonstrated higher ratings of sense of school as community when compared to students in control schools (Solomon et al., 2000). Meyers and Hickey (2014) finally assert, "Research on these programs provides some evidence of multiscale causal dynamics, in which improvement in school climate facilitate children's social and emotional development" (p. 228).

Needs Assessment

An aim of this study was to identify the needs of students and the larger system at A Middle School by exploring social emotional functioning and climate. A needs assessment is a diagnostic process, which draws upon data collection and analysis to help reach a desired

condition (Sleezer et al., 2014). According to Sleezer et al., a strategic needs assessment involves the gathering of preliminary information about a situation, examination of internal and external environment, and development of a plan for improvement. The collection of both individual social emotional functioning and school climate data created a comprehensive picture of A Middle School's learning environment. Following this needs assessment A Middle School staff adopted a plan to implement the research-based social emotional learning intervention, Second Step (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). A goal of this plan of implementation was to enhance the social emotional supports provided to students and in turn, create a more positive climate and system of care within the school. The data from this study will serve as valuable baseline data in future evaluations that will assess the school's success at reaching this goal.

Schools may be interested in conducting needs assessments to learn more about their systems, however, there are some barriers to pursuing this complex process. Aside from time and resources, few professionals working in schools have the training and tools necessary to complete a needs assessment that is driven by evidenced based practices. Knowing where to begin, which forms of data to collect, and how to perform the data analyses are all key issues school districts are currently facing. In the age of increased accountability, schools nevertheless are being pushed to take on this challenge with or without the resources required to conduct appropriate needs assessments. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) asks states to develop their own accountability systems. This legislation requires states to specifically develop an accountability system to provide meaningful data related to not only academics, but school quality or nonacademic skills as well (ESSA, 2015).

The National Association for School Psychologists (NASP) has produced resources related to conducting needs assessments within their practice model. Section II: NASP Practice Model Implementation and Service Delivery provide steps for practitioners to help guide their efforts, which include how to assess school and district-level needs and support improved practice and linking of services in identified areas of need (NASP, 2016). The dissemination of resources such as these, together with results from similar case studies, can provide school districts with increased direction to conduct their own needs assessments and fulfill new ESSA accountability standards.

Collecting data at the local level through needs assessment, allows schools to evaluate growth within their own population. When researching and selecting a social emotional learning curriculum, CASEL recommends asking the following question, "What are the demographics and cultures represented in the student and family population?" (CASEL, 2015). Each school community's culture is unique and may not be reflected in current social emotional curricula and research. Therefore by collecting local data schools can evaluate the specific strengths and areas of needs of their own students, as well as the ways their current programming is working to support them. Well known meta-analyses and controlled research studies with rigorous methodology may prove social emotional programs as effective interventions, however, it is important to consider the context and population in which these studies were conducted. Critical reflection on the match of services to the school population is necessary and can help ensure *all* students receive appropriate access to services.

Lastly, needs assessment can assist schools with refining their service delivery by examining their current resources. CASEL urges school-based professionals to, "consider local

contextual factors to better understand… resources and challenges" (CASEL, 2015). This includes assessing readiness for change and capacity to provide professional development, which supports social emotional learning (CASEL, 2015). Identifying gaps to current programming can bring attention to pressing issues and ultimately help strengthen the school system.

<div align="center">**Recommendations for Practice**</div>

Measurement

The results from this study are broadly consistent with other research that shows student self-report measures to be reliable indicators of social emotional functioning and school climate (Haggerty, Elgin, & Wooley, 2011). For both the SEARS and School Climate & Safety Survey, Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients fell within the acceptable to highly reliable range (.70 to .90) (Nunnally, 1978). Schools may be hesitant to collect this data from youth for fear of its unreliability; however, these findings report students' responses as being consistent.

The SEARS is a unique measure of social emotional competence as it emphasizes the resilience and strengths of students over their deficits. Strength based assessment that has built on positive psychology principles, has grown within the past few decades in the field of school psychology (Jimerson, Sharkey, Nyborg, & Furlong, 2004). This type of assessment is appealing to school psychologists since its basis is rooted in understanding ecological and contextual variables which shape youth and their supports. Focusing on strengths allows school psychologists to emphasize intervention instead of diagnosis alone. The SEARS reflects this emphasis in the way that its normative data yields the MTSS level of support a student would benefit from based on his or her responses to the measure. Moreover, the four distinct subscales of the SEARS-A can further assist school psychologists with determining which interventions to

pursue (i.e., self regulation, social competence, empathy, responsibility). Other strength based social emotional measures Jimerson et al. highlighted are the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (Epstein & Sharma, 1998) and Developmental Assets Profile (Search Institute, 2004). The Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale (BERS-2) has a caregiver and self-report form that examines the following area: interpersonal strengths, affective strengths, family involvement, school functioning, and intrapersonal strengths. The Developmental Assets Profile (DAP) has a self-report form that is designed to assess various asset categories such as support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identify.

The Social Development Research Group, from the University of Washington, commissioned by the Raikes Foundation, conducted an important review of the social emotional learning assessment measures for middle school youth (Haggerty et al., 2011). The BERS and DAP are included in this, as well as eight other measures (Child Behavior Checklist, Communities That Care Survey, The Comprehensive School Climate Inventory, Devereux Student Strengths Assessment, School Social Behaviors Scale 2, Social Skills Improvement System rating Scales, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, and the Washington Healthy Youth Survey). The authors summarize information helpful to practitioners such as availability; rating type; social emotional core competencies measured (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making), and further illustrate the strengths and weaknesses of each instrument.

For the purposes of this research, students completed the SEARS measure anonymously. Schools can benefit from surveying all students to gain a picture of their social emotional

functioning collectively. Social emotional screening, on the other hand, can specifically identify

students who would benefit from additional supports beyond the universal level. The National

Association of School Psychologists (2009) supports implementation of universal screening for

behavior embedded within Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). Certain schools may have

concerns regarding the universal screening process, as mental health resources in these settings

are typically limited. For example, schools can be concerned with identifying more students than

they feel they have the resources to support. One approach is to collaborate with universities and

school psychology preparation programs as this study permitted. Universities can support

schools with their systems data collection and analysis and in turn schools can offer universities

real-world training opportunities that their graduate students need to be successful in their role as

future school psychologists. Another more common approach is for schools to partner with

community-based mental health agencies to expand service delivery. Kutash, Duchnowski, and

Lynn (2006) report that 60% of districts work with community based mental health providers.

The providers can meet with students on an individual basis, facilitate group interventions, offer

referrals for more intensive services, and link families with relevant community resources.

Schools interested in measuring student social emotional competency should expand their

reach to also collect contextual data on key variables, which influence these skills. This can

include school climate data. The Safe and Civil School Climate and Safety Survey is a measure

that can assess multiple stakeholders views on safety in common areas of the school, social

emotional safety, positive interactions between adults and students, teaching and enforcing of

school rules, attitudes about school work, frequency of major and dangerous discipline problems,

and sense of belong and support (Pacific Northwest Publishing, 2012). This survey's online

platform can allow schools to easily assess student, staff, and caregiver perceptions of school climate as it yields automatic reports with numerical and graphical findings. It is also ideal for schools who are using the Safe and Civil School's CHAMPS intervention, which seeks to positively alter the classroom environment by helping teachers clearly establish expectations while guiding them to appropriately respond to student misbehavior (Safe and Civil Schools, 2016). Several other non-federal and federal tools are available through the National Center on Safe and Supportive Learning Environment's School Climate Survey Compendia. Their summary provides information related to the numerous tools including, constructs measured, accessibility, and evidence-base. The summary of reliable and valid school climate surveys is continuously updated online to remain most current: https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/topic-research/school-climate-measurement/school-climate-survey-compendium

Intervention

An additional way schools can contextualize their social emotional data is by collecting information related to implementation fidelity, as well as teachers' efficacy and capacity related to instruction in this area. Research in this area summarizes that students' social emotional learning success is largely influenced by teacher training, consistency in implementation, and openness to the particular program adopted by the school (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). In schools, it is obvious that teachers carry different understandings and experiences with social emotional learning. Triliva and Poulou (2006) interviewed teachers on their views of social emotional learning and their role in the process. Their results concluded teachers viewed social emotional learning as a "complex synthesis of competencies" and that "the narratives of the culture, its norms, values, expectation and practices, figure prominently in the teachers' constructions and

understanding of what constitutes social and emotional learning" (p. 325). These teacher accounts emphasized context and how it shapes students' social emotional development. Similarly, the findings highlight the significant influence of context on teachers and their relationship with social emotional learning.

Secondly, literature in this area explains many teachers do not feel adequately prepared to support student behavior and social emotional health based upon the training they received during their teacher education programs (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). The majority of teacher education programs include only one course related to youth social emotional development and/or behavior management. Many times behavior management courses are more likely to focus on how to respond to negative behavior from students rather than prevention, or teaching positive replacement behaviors. All of this information on educators is relevant to the work this case study aims to advance. Teachers with this background and experience with social emotional learning may be responsible for making key decisions related to screening and service delivery in schools. Moreover, teachers' influence in the classroom affects the way their students access and benefit from social emotional learning interventions. According to the participants from this study's focus group, social emotional learning extends beyond instruction through curricula--it also included creating a positive atmosphere in the classroom. As one participant described, a warm greeting from her teacher in the morning made all the difference in her day. Teachers can teach social emotional skills such as empathy and responsibility through their example. Schonert-Reichl asserts, "warm classroom environments and positive teacher-student relationships promote both academic learning and SEL" (p. 141). Establishing mentoring programs, increasing supervision in the hallways, becoming aware of student issues and

including excluded students are all ways teacher can progress their relationships with middle school students. These ideas are based upon the opinions of the students who participated in this study. Such steps in middle schools, particularly with the upper grades that demonstrated weaker overall relationship ratings, can contribute to stronger trust between teachers and students.

As a student issue bullying was greatly emphasized within the discussion of school climate during this study's focus group, along with exclusion. According to the National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011), 28% of students in grades 6-12 experience bullying, with most bullying occurring during the middle school years. The most common forms of bullying include verbal or social bullying, which is rooted in relational acts that intend to harm reputation or relationships (Gladden, Vivilo-Kanotr, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014). A Middle School students recognized social bullying to be an area of need within their school. They expressed creating more opportunities for "upstanding" or stepping in to aid a victim of bullying, as critical to decreasing this behavior. This notion of targeting bystander behavior is aligned with current bullying literature as being an effective intervention (Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). More recent research has shown schools can boost positive bystander intervention by addressing student attitudes towards aggression (Datta, Cornell, & Huang, 2016). This research explains students sometimes believe relational aggression as a lifeline to "acceptance and popularity among their peers" (p. 813). One way to target this aggression is to alter students' beliefs and norms. The promotion of prosocial behaviors is an integral component to social emotional learning programs. The strong connection between the skills incorporated within social emotional learning and bullying prevention has not gone unrecognized (Smith & Low, 2013). Social emotional learning programs teach a wide range of competencies to improve

the overall wellbeing of students. For example, social emotional learning can target different areas such as social skills, substance use, and bullying under one umbrella (Zins & Elias, 2006). As programming in schools continues to expand, social emotional learning can become the solution to enhance fragmented service delivery and to support students on a more systemic and holistic level.

States can reinforce the implementation of social emotional learning by providing schools with developmental benchmark competencies. The Illinois State Board of Education (2017) has produced exemplary K-12 social emotional learning standards that are in accordance with Section 15(a) of Public Act 93-0495. Under three broad goals, which relate to the core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, interpersonal skills, and decision-making, the Illinois standards list specific performance descriptors for each grade level. At the sixth grade level, for example, under the broad goal of "identify and manage one's emotions and behavior" students are expected to "describe the physical responses common to a range of emotions," "identify factors that cause stress both positive and negative," and "recognize emotions as indicators of situations in need of attention." In seventh grade, there is the additional benchmark to "Identify stress management skills that work best for you" and in eighth grade the expectations grow to "explain the consequences of different forms of communicating one's emotions" (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017). These standards can become a useful starting point to schools interested in implementing social emotional learning to middle school students. Nevertheless, each school system is distinct and is comprised with students who have unique social emotional needs. Schools can use state standards such as these to guide them with their service delivery, while also adapting to best meet the needs of their

diverse learners. Social emotional learning is not a one size fits all approach. It works best when it is personalized to the individual students and context of the school.

Context matters when it comes to social emotional learning. This connection is central to the findings of this case study and other educational research (Garner et al., 2014; McCormick et al., 2015; Roeser et al., 2000). It is also reflected in the Illinois State Board of Education (2017) Learning Standards. If middle school students are expected to "recognize individual and group similarities and differences," so should educators when they are creating social emotional supports for these students. For instance, the standard's performance benchmarks for this overarching goal include, "*explain how a lack of understanding of social and cultural differences can contribute to intolerance*," and "*analyze your perception of cultural variation in light of experiences you have had with members of various cultural groups*" (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017). What is considered an effective social emotional learning for one school community, may not work for another. Schools can look towards state and federal resources to support their universal social emotional systems of care, while also collecting local data to ensure they are appropriately responding to the unique needs of their students.

<center>**Limitations of this Study**</center>

This study sought to identify the social emotional strengths and needs of A Middle school students, while also examining their perceptions of their school climate. As a case study, focusing on one specific school, careful consideration should be taken when generalizing findings. A major premise of this project was to highlight the importance of conducting needs assessments to enhance the service delivery in middle schools, a time when social emotional needs are most high. Therefore, if replicated, different social emotional strengths and needs may

be found as well as different school climate issues. Case studies aim to provide a rich account of events and explain forms of research questions that ask the "how?" and "why?" in order to explain large phenomena (Yin, 2009). Research has already established social emotional learning as an efficacious intervention (Durlak et al., 2011). Eighty percent of educators also believe social emotional learning can further improve school climate (Bridgeland, Bruce, Hariharan, 2013). However, many schools are challenged with the implementation of social emotional learning programs. Case studies, such as this, can help schools to unveil social emotional learning as a process, which requires attention to a vast number of variables including context. The dissemination of more case studies can show how different schools choose to implement social emotional learning and individualize it to their own systems.

The number of focus groups conducted as part of this study was fewer than anticipated due to recruitment issues. Only a small number of parents gave permission for their students to participate in a focus group. Furthermore, some parents elected to not have their child audio recorded during the focus group. As a result, no audio recordings or transcriptions were taken. This did not make advanced qualitative data analysis possible through methods such as Consensual Qualitative Research. If one focus group would have been conducted per grade as planned, it would have allowed for further analysis of areas of strength and need between students.

Suggested Next Steps for Research

In Thapa et al.'s (2013) review of school climate research, they urged researchers to expand the current knowledge base of this complex construct through qualitative analyses. Future studies of school climate and social emotional learning should include additional focus

groups, interviews, and content analyses of relevant policies and programming. Much of the social emotional learning research, like school climate literature, is largely quantitative. Qualitative information can further uncover this multifaceted phenomenon and its influence on students in schools. When combined through a mixed methodological design, quantitative and qualitative data can work together to complement each other and provide a more comprehensive picture of social emotional learning and school climate. To the knowledge of this current study's researcher, this is one of the first attempts to look at these two constructs through mixed methods.

This study found an established link between social emotional learning and school climate, which was grounded in theory. The integration of findings between students' quantitative and qualitative data provided support for this connection. Future research is also needed to explore statistical causal relationships between the two constructs of school climate and social emotional learning. From these results, schools can be confident that they are addressing students' wellbeing at a holistic, systemic, and ecological level.

A recent meta-review led by Taylor, Oberie, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017) supports that social emotional interventions have the ability to positively influence students from diverse backgrounds. When reporting these findings however, the authors cautioned practitioners and researchers to keep in mind that social emotional learning is not a one size fits all approach. Additional research is needed to distinguish "if students from diverse socioeconomic and racial and ethnic groups respond differently to interventions on a variety of different outcomes" (p. 1168). To accomplish this, future studies should provide comprehensive demographic data on social emotional learning participants and report subgroup analyses. Furthermore future studies

should additionally report school characteristics, such as aspects of school climate (i.e., bullying, student-staff relationships) to provide a complete picture of the context in which interventions were implemented, as they simultaneously shape student outcomes.

In another relevant review of classroom-based social emotional learning programs at the middle school level specifically, authors Jagers, Harris, and Skoog (2015) point to the need for future research to explore social emotional competencies (i.e., self-regulation, empathy) as this case study accomplished. Many studies with a focus on middle school students have examined social emotional learning's impact on decreasing particular problem behaviors such as delinquency, violence, and substance abuse. Assessing the growth of social emotional competencies through a strength-based approach is most aligned with the positive youth development theories these programs are built upon. However, there are limited tools that embed the full range of social emotional skills and attitudes. Expanding the depth and breadth of social emotional measures can help unlock which programs are most beneficial for which students and confirm curricula are successful at improving the particular skills they aim to target (Jagers et al., 2015).

In conjunction with exploring social-emotional measurement and program outcomes, future research should seek to find the "active ingredients" of interventions (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitovich, & Gullotta, 2015). This work can assist schools with determining which program aspects they must maintain, need to modify, or adapt to suit their school environment. Prominent scholars in the field of social emotional learning assert that the "features of the environmental context (e.g., the classroom or school climate, teacher practices, the creation of family or community partnerships) and the specific competencies that are targeted for interventions in one

more of the five SEL competence domains" are the most valuable components to consider when reviewing programs (p. 13). For this reason, future research should seek to answer: "what particular environmental conditions, combined with the promotion of which particular skill sets, are responsible for students at different educational levels and from different cultural backgrounds achieving which types of desirable outcomes in both the short and long term?" (p. 24). The consideration of these critical variables and multi-systemic breakdown of social emotional learning is necessary to advance the field and promote positive outcomes for all students.

Conclusion

With current ESSA legislation, schools are expected to collect both academic and non-academic data to remain accountable for the whole wellbeing of students. As social emotional learning is gaining momentum in schools, educators are in need of an approach to measure this growth. The SEARS is a measure of social emotional functioning that can assist schools with surveying and screening their population to identify additional needs, along with students who would benefit more intensive services. The School Safety and Climate Survey is another tool that can assist schools with examining their learning environment. Together, social emotional and school climate surveys such as these can provide schools with a rich account of their performance at multiple system levels. This approach is aligned with the public health model, which promotes universal prevention and intervention to improve outcomes for all students. This case study found individual differences between the relative social emotional strengths and needs of students at A Middle School. Needs assessment such as these can inform the most appropriate interventions for a student population. Overall as group A Middle School students' social

emotional functioning fell within normal limits, as measured by the SEARS. Additional school climate measurement however, revealed systems issues such as bullying that also influenced students' wellbeing. Without this essential complementary assessment, school staff would have missed an important opportunity to intervene. An approach that only examines individual level factors is not integrated, aligned with public health principles of prevention, and reflective of the true social emotional skills of students. Context matters in social emotional learning, and schools who acknowledge this can maximize the positive outcomes for youth while creating stronger, more supportive school systems.

APPENDIX A

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion. In the next 30-40 minutes we will be asking you some questions about your experience as a student at A Middle School and your thoughts about how students can be best supported. The results of these interviews will be shared with the school staff, as well as parents of children who attend A Middle School so they can learn from what you and the other students have to say because your opinion matters. We will not use your name and we ask that you not use any names in your responses to these questions so that we can keep the identity of students private. You do not have to participate in this focus group discussion if you do not wish to and there will be no penalty. If you choose to participate, you also can skip any question that you do not wish to respond to with no penalty. Do you still agree to participate? Are you okay with this discussion being audio recorded?

1. Tell me about your experience completing the two surveys in your X Block period.
   a. Are there any items that stood out to you? If so, which ones?
2. School climate refers to feelings and attitudes we experience from being in a school's environment. It is the degree to which a school feels friendly, inviting, supportive, and safe. It is also based on the relationships between students and the relationships between students and teachers and other school staff. All together, school climate impacts how students do in school, as well as their emotions and behavior. How would you describe your school's climate?
   a. In what ways does your school help create a positive learning environment for you?
   b. In what ways can your school make improvements to their learning environment?
3. How do students treat each other now at this school? Provide some examples.
   a. Is bullying a problem at your school?
   b. Are student cliques a problem at your school?
   c. In what ways can teachers and other school staff help address bullying situations at your school?
4. Is student misbehavior a problem at this school? If so, explain.
   a. In what ways can teachers and other school staff help improve student behavior?
5. Positive school environments support students from all areas: academics, behavior, and emotions. What does your school do support all of these areas?
   a. Are there more supports in one area than the other? Explain.
6. Social and emotional skills include: responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, self-awareness, and self-management. *Responsible decision-making is making good decisions and solving problems. Relationship skills are how students act and communicate towards one another. Social awareness includes respect for others and showing empathy. Self-management includes organizational skills, setting goals, and stress management. Lastly, self-awareness is identifying emotions and showing self-confidence.* What do you think that A Middle School students do well when it comes to social and emotional skills?
   a. What are some areas where A Middle School students can do better when it comes to social and emotional skills?
7. How can teachers and other school staff at A Middle School help students' social and emotional skills?

APPENDIX B

SURVEY RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear A Middle School Families,

As part of our ongoing efforts to support students, we are working towards enhancing our school's social and emotional learning initiatives. On [date] we will be surveying all students across 6th, 7th, and 8th grade during X Block to learn more about their experiences navigating our learning environment and needs. Topics will range from school safety, positive interactions between educators and students, attitudes about schoolwork, school sense of belonging, and engagement. The answers provided will help inform the next steps of our school-wide social and emotional programming to students. For example, the results will reveal areas of growth for education on social emotional topics for students. It is our overall goal to support students on a holistic level, both academically and social-emotionally. Through this effort we believe we can work towards creating the optimal learning environment for students.

Students will not be asked to provide their name on any survey administered; all responses will be kept anonymous. However, if you do not wish for your child to participate, please contact [person] by [date].

Thank you for your continuing support of our school. If you have any questions, you may reach us at [contact].

APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear A Middle School Families,

As part of our ongoing efforts to support students, we are working towards enhancing our school's social and emotional learning initiatives. Your child has been selected to participate in one of three focus groups we will be conducted to learn more about the social and emotional needs of A Middle School students. This focus group will take place on [date] during your child's X Block. Discussion topics will range from school safety, positive interactions between educators and students, attitudes about schoolwork, school sense of belonging, and engagement. The answers provided will help inform the next steps of our school-wide social and emotional programming to students. For example, the results will reveal areas of growth for education on social emotional topics for students. It is our overall goal to support students on a holistic level, both academically and social-emotionally. Through this effort we believe we can work towards creating the optimal learning environment for students.

Should you choose to permit your child to participate, the information provided will be included with the feedback provided by other students who participated towards some recommended next steps. The entire purpose is to obtain targeted information that will help A Middle School move forward in its social-emotional learning programming.

We have partnered with a doctoral student from Loyola University's school psychology department who will assist with the focus groups along with A Middle School support staff. If you wish for your child to participate, please sign the enclosed form and ask your child to return the signed form to [teacher] by [date]. If you have any questions about this study, please contact [name] at [contact information]. Thank you in advance for considering participating in this project, we believe your child's opinions are very important.

APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP PARENT CONSENT FORM

Project Title: A Mixed-Methods Evaluation of the Social Emotional Needs of Middle School Students

Researcher: Vicky Karahalios

Introduction:

Your child is being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Vicky Karahalios, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Loyola University of Chicago, which will be utilized as her dissertation project. Your child is being asked to participate because he/she currently attends school at A Middle School. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether your child should participate in the study.

Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to conduct focus groups with A students to learn more about the social and emotional needs of A Middle School students. The answers provided will help inform the next steps of our school-wide social and emotional programming to students. For example, the results will reveal areas of growth for education on social emotional topics for students.

Procedures:

If you give permission for your child to be in the study, he/she will be asked to participate in a focus group that is expected to last approximately 40 minutes. Interview questions have been designed to investigate perceptions of social emotional safety in school, relationships with school staff and peers, student engagement, and more. With your permission (you and/or your child are free to decline), all focus groups will be audiotaped. Once the interviews have been completed, the findings will be shared with A Middle School staff towards the goal of enhancing school based social-emotional supports.

Risks/Benefits:

There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life. There are no direct benefits to your child from participation, but an indirect benefit is that the data obtained will be used towards making A Middle School efforts stronger.

Confidentiality:

If you and your child give permission to be audiotaped, all audiofiles will be uploaded into a password protected computer that only the researcher and A Middle School support staff will have access to. If you or your child elect not to be audiotaped, the interviewers will make notes that ultimately will be entered into a password protected computer. The individuals leading the focus group will not ask your child his/her name or any other identifying information. At the conclusion of this study, all audiofiles and any other data files generated associated with this study will be deleted.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want your child to be in this study, he/she does not have to participate. Even if he/she decides to participate, he/she is free not to answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this research study, please feel free to contact Vicky Karahalios at vkarahalios@luc.edu or the faculty sponsor for this project, Dr. David Shriberg at dshriberg@luc.edu. If you have questions about your child's rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and give permission for your child to participate in this research study. Your child will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

_____ _____
Parent's Signature   Date

_____ _____
Researcher's Signature   Date

If you have agreed to permit your child to participate in this study, please check the appropriate space regarding your audiotape preferences.

_____I AGREE to allow my child's focus group to be audiotaped for research purposes.
_____I DO NOT AGREE to allow my child's focus group to be audiotaped for research purposes.

APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP STUDENT ASSENT FORM

Thank you for coming. In the next 30-40 minutes we will be asking you some questions about your experience as a student at A Middle School and your thoughts about how students can be best supported. The results of these interviews will be shared with the school staff, as well as parents of children who attend A Middle School so they can learn from what you and the other students have to say because your opinion matters.

We will not use your name when we share information and we ask that you not use any names in your responses to these questions so that we can keep the identity of students private. As a member of this focus group, we ask that you do not repeat what others will say outside of the focus group. While the leader of the group can keep all of the information shared in the focus group confidential, there is not guarantee that other members of the group will not share this information.

You do not have to participate in this focus group discussion if you do not wish to and there will be no penalty. If you choose to participate, you also can skip any question that you do not wish to respond to with no penalty. Your participation in the focus group will not be for a grade and will not impact any of your grades in your classes.

Your signature below says that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this focus group**.**

Student's Signature   **Date**

Researcher's Signature   **Date**

*If you agree to participate in this study, please **check** the spaces below to tell me if you would or would not like to be audiotaped.*

_____I **AGREE** to be audiotaped in this focus group.

_____I **DO NOT AGREE** to be audiotaped in this focus group.

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VITA

Vicky Karahalios is a doctoral student from the School Psychology Program at Loyola University Chicago. Prior to her graduate studies, she attended DePaul University and obtained a Bachelor of Arts in Community Psychology. Vicky has practiced across early childhood, elementary, and secondary school settings. In addition, she has served as a lead researcher on a grant-funded project at an after-school youth program, working to bridge the school and community-based experiences of Chicago Public School students. These experiences all led Vicky to pursue her professional and research interests in the area of data-based decision making, social-emotional intervention, and school-community partnerships. Vicky's commitment to social justice is an element that drives her practice and desire to support children and families as a school psychologist.