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School Psychologists' Recommendations for Tiered Interventions That
Target Social-Emotional Competencies

Brandi Alise Bezzant

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Educational Specialist

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ABSTRACT

School Psychologists' Recommendations for Tiered Interventions That Target Social-Emotional Competencies

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Many schools advocate for addressing the diverse needs of students through a multi-tiered model of prevention and intervention known as the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. This framework often incorporates the use of universal screening to obtain data concerning students' academic and/or social-emotional and behavioral needs. School teams are expected to design and implement tiered strategies in response to data concerning students' social-emotional needs; this can be a challenging facet of MTSS. To aid in this endeavor, this qualitative study elicited school psychologists' recommendations for (a) tiered interventions that target secondary students' social-emotional competency needs and (b) professional learning opportunities that may be helpful in responding to the data from a district-designed social-emotional competency survey.

Participants included 15 school psychologists from a school district in a northwestern state in the United States. Two focus groups were conducted using a video conferencing online platform. Focus group transcripts were used to identify emergent themes that were relevant to the purpose of the research. Four primary themes were identified as being important in designing, implementing, and meeting secondary students' social-emotional competency needs: (a) instruction, practice, and reinforcement in each social-emotional skill; (b) the building of staff-student and student-student relationships; (c) staff efforts being consistent, integrated, simple, and unified; and (d) adaptation of fundamental interventions by tier and social-emotional skill.

To date, it is believed that school psychologists' ideas concerning tiered social-emotional interventions in response to data are not a part of the extant literature. The findings of this study build upon the current literature concerning the importance of collaboration, prioritization, alignment, explicit instruction, and professional learning opportunities in addressing students' social-emotional needs, suggesting that school psychologists are familiar with and apply current, verifiable research to their practice. The results of this study can aid school and district teams in designing, implementing, and meeting secondary students' social-emotional competency needs.

Keywords: multi-tiered systems of support, school psychologists, social-emotional competencies, tiered interventions, professional learning opportunities

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A holistic view of human development purports there are multiple facets of human growth, and in order to blossom into a healthy, functioning individual within one's environment, all areas need attention (Sosinsky et al., 2014). These areas include physical (e.g., motor, genetic, sensory), cognitive (e.g., sensation, perception, language), social (e.g., relationships, communication), and emotional development (e.g., regulation, temperament; Cameron, 2018; Kuh, 2018; Sosinsky et al., 2014). Interpersonal, or social, growth is intricately connected to emotional growth. Thus, they are often considered as one area of development: social-emotional development. Social-emotional growth and maturity is an integral domain of development in becoming a healthy, functioning individual (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-a; Greenberg et al., 2003; Sosinsky et al., 2014).

When one or more of these areas of development does not mature as expected, there can be lasting, unhealthy effects that are difficult, but not necessarily impossible, to alter; Sosinsky and colleagues (2014) stated that, "there are few truly critical periods in human development in which experience or lack thereof will eventuate in a permanent alteration of a typical developmental trajectory," (p. 81). Thus, to minimize effects of latent development in any area, or to alter the developmental path from detrimental to beneficial, there must be a change in the individual and/or the environment (Sosinsky et al., 2014).

Public schools are one context where students' social, emotional, and behavioral development can be enhanced and addressed. If public schools are viewed as interventions or agents of change that alter students' overall development, it is easy to see that positive academic outcomes are not its sole aim; schools are not only interested in academic, or intellectual growth

but also social-emotional growth (Deno, 2002; Durlak et al., 2011; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Merrell et al., 2012).

There are many intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of healthy social-emotional development. These may include empathy, adaptability, positive temperament, emotional self-regulation, prosocial behavior, positive relationships with peers and adults, problem-solving skills, and social skills (CASEL, n.d.; Sosinsky et al., 2014) which positively influence academic and employment outcomes. Alternatively, there are many negative effects of latent social-emotional development. These may include poor mental health, low academic achievement, low self-esteem, difficulty following rules at school and in the workplace, criminal activity, high unemployment, difficulty making new friends and establishing healthy relationships, and many others (Gottshall, 2008; Kamps & Kay, 2002; Snow et al., 1998; Wagner et al., 2005). There is a wide range of social-emotional difficulties that vary from mild to disabling and can be classified as a disorder or educational disability (Banks, 2019; Lewis, 2016).

Multi-Tiered System of Supports

Because of the far-reaching effects of healthy and unhealthy development in social-emotional realms, many public schools advocate for addressing the diverse needs of students through a multi-tiered model of prevention and intervention known as Multi-Tiered System of Supports or MTSS (Freeman et al., 2015; Lane et al., 2012). A multi-tiered system of support can be pictured as a pyramid with three levels of increasing intensity of supports for education. The bottom level, or Tier 1, represents supports that are given to all students in a general education classroom or school. The middle level, or Tier 2, represents supports that are given to small groups of students that are more intensive and targeted than Tier 1 supports. The top level,

or Tier 3, represents supports that are given on an individual level and are more intensive, individualized, and targeted (Kovaleski et al., 2013; Park et al., n.d.).

School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support

School-wide positive behavioral intervention and support (SWPBIS or PBIS) is a multi-tiered system of support used specifically for providing social, emotional, and behavioral help to students (Lane et al., 2012). At the bottom, or Tier 1 of the PBIS pyramid, there are strategies and supports that are given on a school-wide or universal basis, and one of these strategies is universal social-emotional screening. School-wide social-emotional screening helps school teams identify students that are at-risk for developing social-emotional difficulties or disorders that may warrant increasingly intensified instructional strategies that match the needs of the student (Walker et al., 2005). Screening contributes to providing services that are preventive rather than reactive. Implementing screening and using the subsequent data allow school teams to provide supports, targeted instruction, and interventions to students before social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties become entrenched or chronic (Banks, 2019; Chin et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2005).

Although there are benefits to implementing a screening process and introducing social-emotional and behavioral supports in response to students' needs, they may be coupled with difficulties in implementation. Identifying and understanding implementation foundations and steps are crucial in determining the successful or ineffectual implementation of a social-emotional screening process and tiered supports. School psychologists' responsibilities, as set forth by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020), include data-based and collaborative decision-making; an understanding of research design and data collection; designing and implementing social-emotional services; leading school-based initiatives to

support students' social-emotional and behavioral needs; providing tiered social-emotional and behavioral interventions to students; and evaluating the effectiveness of programs in applied settings. These responsibilities allow school psychologists to be involved members and leaders of implementation teams, providing them with unique and valuable perspectives into these processes.

A school district in the northwestern United States has developed a survey that measured school climate, culture, and student connections. The survey was intended to be used as a screening instrument to identify organizational needs and the social-emotional and behavioral needs of their students within four areas (i.e., self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect), which the school district refers to as dispositions, or character dispositions. In the research literature, these character dispositions are likely referred to as social-emotional skills, so these terms are used interchangeably throughout this document. To ensure the confidentiality of the school district, the specific name of the survey is not used in this document; the survey will be referred to as "the social-emotional skills survey" in this paper. Currently, this district is in the exploration stage of implementation, determining how they might respond to the data collected from the administration of this survey. As a result of school psychologists' central role in the implementation process, this study seeks to identify school psychologists' perspectives on the implementation of tiered social-emotional and behavioral supports and strategies, as well as what professional learning opportunities would help their school teams be ready to implement these strategies.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. What tiered supports and strategies would school psychologists recommend when the social-emotional skills survey data shows opportunities for collaboration, growth, and adjusting instruction in any of the following dispositions: self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect?
2. What professional development and peer-to-peer coaching opportunities would be helpful to school psychologists and their school team members who are responding to data from the social-emotional skills survey?

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Development

Social growth, emotional growth, and behavioral growth are intricately connected in the process of overall human development. As a result, these seemingly separate areas of development are often stated as one area of development: social, emotional, and behavioral development or social-emotional development. These two terms are widely used and accepted as referring to a conglomeration of social, emotional, and behavioral growth. Throughout this work, both terms will be used interchangeably, with term selection dependent on the prevalence of the term in the corresponding literature and the term that will provide the most clarity and understanding for those that have perspectives on the subjects presented. In using both terms, individuals who favor or are only familiar with one term will be enabled to converse with individuals that use the other term more favorably. Language is constantly evolving to meet the needs of new information, and the literature must reflect the changes to provide understanding to readers.

Characteristics and Outcomes of Healthy Social-Emotional Development

Social-emotional development is an integral facet of becoming a healthy, functioning individual. Social-emotional development includes the acquisition of skills that foster healthy relationships and functioning such as emotional self-regulation, empathy, competent social behavior, expression of one's thoughts and feelings, deducing others' thoughts and feelings, and socially appropriate behavioral responses (McKown, 2017). CASEL identifies what healthy social-emotional development embodies when defining social-emotional learning (SEL) as the following:

...the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions... Five broad and interrelated areas of competence... [are] self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. (CASEL, n.d., para. 1 and 5)

Social-emotional learning is far-reaching in its effects in the lives of youth and adults; social-emotional characteristics and behaviors are seen by many as crucial to individual and societal success because healthy and timely progress in social-emotional development is correlated with a plethora of positive intrinsic and extrinsic outcomes throughout life (Bozgün & Akin-Kösterelioglu, 2020). Because of the long-lasting and detrimental effects that latent social-emotional development can have on the lives of individuals, it is imperative that social-emotional characteristics and behaviors are taught and developed over time and from a young age (Bozgün & Akin-Kösterelioglu, 2020; Greenberg et al., 2003). Some of the possible outgrowths of social-emotional characteristics and behaviors are positive academic outcomes, life success, social skill competency, positive classroom behaviors, and decreases in risky behaviors (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Greenberg et al., 2017; Payton et al., 2000; Wentzel, 1993).

Healthy social-emotional development has been linked to positive academic outcomes and life success. Wentzel (1993) conducted a study with 423 sixth and seventh grade students that identified prosocial behavior as a predictor of students' grade point average as well as standardized test scores. Thus, Wentzel (1993) indicated that social competence is a predictor of academic achievement. Greenberg et al. (2017) indicated that social-emotional learning

programs in the classroom increase academic outcomes as well as overall successful development. Long-term outcomes of students who are exposed to social-emotional learning interventions may be “high school graduation, college and career readiness, healthy relationships, mental health, reduced criminal behavior, and engaged citizenship,” (Greenberg et al., 2017, p. 17).

Healthy and timely social-emotional development is correlated with an increase in social skills and positive, collaborative classroom behaviors. Ashdown and Bernard (2012) conducted a study in which 99 kindergarten and first grade students were provided lessons three times a week over a 10-week period as a part of a specific social-emotional learning program. Ashdown and Bernard’s (2012) results were statistically significant; students’ social-emotional competence increased, social-emotional well-being increased, internalizing and externalizing behaviors decreased, and reading outcomes increased. Greenberg et al. (2017) stated that social-emotional learning that takes place in the classroom can increase competence and decrease future emotional and behavioral difficulties. More specifically, “social and emotional skills, positive attitudes toward self, others and tasks, positive social behaviors and relationships, fewer conduct problems, and reduced emotional distress” are some of the outcomes of social-emotional learning in schools (Greenberg et al., 2017, p. 17). Rivers et al. (2013) conducted a study in which a portion of 62 schools served as a control group and a portion of 62 schools served as an experimental group where a specific social-emotional learning program was implemented in certain fifth and sixth grade classrooms for one school year. When comparing the data from the control and experimental groups, Rivers et al. (2013) found that the social-emotional learning program increased student autonomy, leadership, positive interactions, and connection with peers and teachers.

Healthy social-emotional development is correlated with decreases in risky behaviors. Payton et al. (2000) posited that “behaviors such as violence, drug use, risky sexual behaviors, or early school withdrawal...share many of the same risk and protective factors...[and] can be addressed by similar strategies” (p. 179); the skills taught in social-emotional learning programs are the protective factors that will help reduce the incidence of these problem behaviors. McWhirter et al. (1994) posited that students who do not have competent communication, coping, and decision-making skills, among others, result in behaviors such as “school dropout, substance abuse, pregnancy, delinquency, and suicide” (p. 188).

There is a plethora of positive short-term and long-term outcomes for students who are involved in social-emotional learning interventions that support the healthy development of social, emotional, and behavioral domains. Conversely, latent or poor social, emotional, and behavioral development may result in the evolution of social, emotional, and behavioral concerns or disorders that are associated with negative life outcomes for students (Banks, 2019; Wagner et al., 2005).

Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties and Disorders

Social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties or disorders occur along a continuum indicating that intensity, frequency, and variety of symptoms can range greatly from student to student (Banks, 2019; Bradley et al., 2008; Lewis, 2016). The behaviors characteristic of social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties and disorders are often grouped into internalizing and externalizing behaviors.

Some students may display less noticeable behaviors indicative of social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties or disorders; these behaviors are referred to as internalizing behaviors. Students with internalizing behaviors may have few friends and often experience withdrawal,

feelings associated with anxiety, depression, and underdeveloped emotional maturity (Heward, 2012; Kamps & Kay, 2002). Because internalizing behaviors may not be readily observed, teachers and other adults may not easily identify these at-risk students (Cunningham & Suldo, 2014). Other students may display more noticeable behaviors that are often referred to as externalizing behaviors. Externalizing behaviors often disrupt the classroom learning environment and can include aggression, violence, yelling, temper tantrums, stealing, lying, vandalism, and insubordination (Heward, 2012; Kamps & Kay, 2002). Because externalizing behaviors are usually visible, teachers and others may more easily refer these students for assessment, supports, and interventions (Splett et al., 2019).

Classifications of Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders

Social-emotional behaviors that meet certain criteria may be classified as an educational disability known as emotional behavioral disability (EBD), qualifying the student for special education services (Utah State Board of Education, 2022). Emotional behavioral disability (EBD), a new educational disability title as of 2023, has historically been titled emotional disturbance (ED; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 2004). In the IDEA, the U.S. Department of Education defined ED as one or more of the following characteristics being present over time or to a great degree that negatively affects educational performance: inability to learn; inability to build or maintain relationships; inappropriate behaviors or emotions; sadness or depression; and physical symptoms or fears (IDEA, 2004). This classification category includes internalizing and externalizing behaviors, but it does not include social maladjustment independent of other emotional-related criteria (Utah State Board of Education, 2020). Particularly significant faults have been found in this definition, many of which criticize the educational disability classification's exclusion of students with social and behavioral difficulties

with underlying, causational emotional difficulties (Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders [CCBD], 2000).

The U.S. Department of Education, in response to criticisms of the definition of ED, proposed replacing ED with “emotional and behavioral disorders,” defined as “behavioral or emotional responses in school programs so different from appropriate age, cultural, or ethnic norms that the responses adversely affect educational performance, including academic, social, vocational or personal skills” that are not temporary in nature, are present in the school setting as well as other life settings, and can occur with other disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 1993, p. 7938). This definition of EBD includes a behavioral aspect as well as a wider range and intensity of symptoms that students can experience; thus, EBD can be seen as more inclusive than ED. In other words, EBD is the overarching umbrella under which ED resides.

The EBD definition supports early discovery of a greater number of at-risk students (CCBD, 2000). ED is the educational disability category that was designed to meet the needs of students that require sufficient supports and strategies that enable them to access the general education curriculum. Not all students with EBD have behaviors that are severe enough to warrant targeted, individualized interventions and supports (Forness & Knitzer, 1992) but instead warrant supports and strategies that are delivered through a framework of MTSS, beginning with school-wide and classroom-wide supports and intensifying supports as needed.

Outcomes of Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Difficulties and Disorders

There are potential severe and lifelong effects for students with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties or disorders when they are not identified and supported with interventions and effective instruction (Hester et al., 2004). The characteristics and behaviors congruent with ED are associated with low academic achievement; low academic achievement, in turn, is

associated with school drop-out rates, criminal activity, unemployment, poverty, and homelessness (Gottshall, 2008; Snow et al., 1998).

Students presenting with depression, an internalizing emotional disorder, may experience learning deficits (IDEA, 2004). Wagner et al. (2015) compiled and synthesized 17 studies comparing the cognitive abilities of about 500 children and adolescents diagnosed with major depressive disorders (MDD) and about 1,400 children and adolescents without MDD. The children and adolescents with MDD performed lower in many of the cognitive domains (Wagner et al., 2015), indicating an association between MDD and cognitive deficits. Similarly, Oladele and Oladele (2016) found that within their sample of students with learning disabilities there were more students with depression and suicidal ideation than not, indicating an association between depression and suicidal ideation and learning disabilities. Hysenbegasi et al. (2005) found an association between depression and low academic performance; undergraduate students with depression had grade point averages that were lower than their peers who did not have depression. Similarly, McEwan and Downie (2019) found that students with depression had lower academic outcomes than students without a mental health difficulty or students with a learning disability. Emotions and behaviors indicative of internalizing behaviors like depression may disrupt the learning environment of the individual student, resulting in a decreased capacity to learn (Heward, 2012).

Negative outcomes may be manifest in the lives of students who experience anxiety (Swan et al., 2013), in terms of “physical, emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal functioning” (Kitzrow, 2003, p. 169). School situations that induce anxiety in students may encourage these students to choose to withdraw and not participate in classes, school activities, or interactions with other students (Swan et al., 2013). Students with certain anxiety disorders may complain of

headaches and stomachaches that can result in school absences (Swan et al., 2013). Other anxiety disorders may have the symptomatology of difficulty separating from adults who the student has a strong attachment with, resulting in less social interaction with same-aged peers (Swan et al., 2013). Other anxiety disorders may result in behaviors that are compulsively engaged in, affecting students' daily functioning and disrupting daily life activities (Swan et al., 2013). Students who experience stress or anxiety may experience mind wandering which affects cognitive functioning (Boals & Banks, 2020). In turn, McEwan and Downie (2019) found that students with anxiety disorders had lower academic outcomes than students without a mental health difficulty or students with a learning disability. Lisnyj and colleagues (2020) administered a survey to 1,053 undergraduate students of whom 60% reported that anxiety had negatively impacted their academic success in the last school year. Students experiencing anxiety may experience a plethora of negative outcomes such as decreased academic performance, few social relationships, decreased cognitive functioning, and physical symptoms.

A possible outcome for students with internalizing mental health disorders is a presence in the juvenile justice system (Ford et al., 2008; Quinn et al., 2005; Taxman et al., 2012). In fact, Shufelt and Coccozza (2006) conducted a study in which they found that 79% of youth in the juvenile justice system could be diagnosed with more than one mental health disorder such as anxiety and depression. More specifically, there are prevalent rates of post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological trauma among youth and adolescents in the juvenile justice system (Ford et al., 2008; Stemmell et al., 2014). There appears to be an association between internalizing mental health disorders and a presence in the juvenile justice system; Nelson (2000, p. 208) stated that this association is such that "when we fail to retain and adequately educate students with EBD in the public schools, we are, in effect, deferring them to the next system on

the road to social failure - the criminal justice system.” Youth involved with the juvenile justice system may have trouble academically, socially, and mentally, which increases involvement with the law and decreases life opportunities (Kumm et al., 2019) such as educational and employment opportunities.

Another possible outcome for students presenting with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties and disorders are difficulties with literacy (Hurry et al., 2018); this is significant because low literacy has far-reaching and long-term effects. In 2007, de Lugt conducted a review of the literature with students with emotional and behavioral disorder (EBD) and literacy and affirmed that there is an association between students with EBD and low literacy skills as well as overall academic outcomes. Hurry and colleagues (2018) conducted a study in which they provided reading interventions to about 250 elementary-age students who were about one year behind in their literacy levels. Of these 250 students, 25-33% presented with emotional and behavioral difficulties or disorders (Hurry et al., 2018). Hurry and colleagues (2018) found that conduct disorder and hyperactivity impeded the literacy progress of the 25-33% of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. This is significant because literacy is the foundation of the public education system; without the ability to read or with low literacy skills, a student is likely to be impacted in all areas of their education (Gottshall, 2008; Moore, 2004). Additionally, literacy is required for the largest proportion of jobs in the job market; with low literacy skills, the number of jobs available are significantly reduced (Gottshall, 2008; Moore, 2004).

It is imperative that students presenting with social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties and disorders receive interventions and supports at an early age to curb or eliminate the potential negative, long-term effects; Hester and colleagues (2004) indicated that “early detection and intervention seems to be the most powerful course of action for ameliorating life-long problems

associated with children at risk for emotional/behavioral disorders” (p. 6). When schools effectively implement MTSS frameworks, students with EBD concerns are likely to have access to these early intervention and prevention supports.

Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)

Because of the far-reaching negative effects of ED and EBD, as well as the increasingly diverse needs of students, some schools, districts, and states have moved from a reactive, segregated approach to addressing academic, behavioral, and social needs to a more proactive, amalgamated approach referred to as Multi-Tiered System of Supports, or MTSS (Park et al., n.d.). The reactive, segregated approach has been referred to as the “wait-to-fail” approach; it follows the model of providing supports and interventions to individual students after negative academic outcomes have occurred and after students display social, emotional, or behavioral deficits (Banks, 2019; Dowdy et al., 2010). Its alternative, MTSS, is used in some schools, districts, and states and is a way to approach meeting a wide range of student needs. MTSS is a focused and united effort from multiple school personnel that develop a range of supports and instructional strategies that match students’ diverse needs (Lane et al., 2013), and it is a proactive rather than a reactive approach to meeting students’ needs (Lane et al., 2012).

MTSS delineates three tiers of services (Kovaleski et al., 2013; Park et al., n.d.). Tier 1 represents supports that are given to all students in a school (Kovaleski et al., 2013; Park et al., n.d.); this could look like a social-emotional skills lesson in each classroom or each teacher explicitly teaching positive behavior expectations. If students with academic, emotional, social, and/or behavioral needs do not reach explicit benchmarks, then Tier 2 supports will be considered (Banks, 2019). Tier 1 strategies should reflect empirically robust instructional strategies that are intended to meet the needs of most students.

Tier 2 represents supports that are given to small groups of students (Kovaleski et al., 2013; Park et al., n.d.); this could look like a group of students given social-emotional skills lessons multiple times a week that address their specific needs and for a short period of time, usually 6-8 weeks. These supports are more intensive, targeted, goal-directed, and require more specialized personnel to administer. If students with academic, emotional, social, and/or behavioral needs do not reach the goals set for them with Tier 2 supports, then Tier 3 supports are considered (Kovaleski et al., 2013).

Tier 3 represents supports that are given on an individual level (Kovaleski et al., 2013; Park et al., n.d.); this could look like a behavior intervention plan (BIP) where a student is given a personalized social story, a token rewards system in class for displaying positive behavior, and/or 30 minutes per week with the school psychologist for counseling. These supports are even more intensive, individualized, and goal-directed than Tier 2 supports and require more specialized personnel to administer.

MTSS is a comprehensive framework that encompasses both academic and social, emotional, and behavioral learning. Historically, Response to Intervention (RTI) is a model that primarily focuses on students' academic needs and is often viewed as a component of MTSS (Park et al., n.d.). Similarly, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) can be another component under the MTSS umbrella that primarily focuses on students' social, emotional, and behavioral needs (Lane et al., 2012).

School-Based Social-Emotional Screening

School-based social-emotional screening is the process of universally administering a brief measure to students, teachers, and/or parents that provides insight into which individual students may need additional support in the form of Tier-2 and Tier-3 interventions and/or the

prominent struggles an entire student body or district faces. Screeners may assess for any number of things: hearing, sight, scoliosis, suicidal thoughts or tendencies, exposure to violence, drug abuse, internalizing behaviors, externalizing behaviors, etc. A social-emotional screener assesses social, emotional, and behavioral tendencies of students, and depending on the design of the measure itself, it can be administered to primary and secondary school students, teachers, and/or parents (Romer, 2012).

Screening Purpose

While an individual student could be referred by an attentive teacher for additional support in the form of interventions for social, emotional, behavioral, or academic difficulties, an effectively implemented screening process is intended to efficiently measure the risk of all students in a school and help school teams determine the strategies and supports that will meet students' needs (Bruhn et al., 2014; Glover & Albers, 2007). A social-emotional screener has the capability of identifying the students that need support before those social, emotional, and behavioral difficulties become more pronounced or more severe (Chin et al., 2013; Walker et al., 2005).

Screening Prevalence

There have been many studies conducted that enlighten the prominence of students not receiving interventions for social-emotional difficulties. Edwards and Fauth (2018) found that only 50% of children and adolescents with a social, emotional, or behavioral disorder in New Hampshire received treatment. A non-governmental organization (NGO) conducted an ADHD screening of about 500 children ages 5-14 in South Africa that teachers referred due to emotional, behavioral, and learning difficulties (Schoeman, 2018). The screener identified that 50% of these children “presented with ADHD, or symptoms that suggested they may have the

disorder” while only “4% had been previously diagnosed with ADHD,” (Schoeman, 2018, p. 2). Walker et al. (2004) found that while about 1% of students received accommodations for emotional disorders, the prevalence of disorders is a striking 2%-20% in these same students. A mental health screener was administered to more than 3,500 elementary-age students, and almost 700 students were identified as at-risk and in need of supports that were not currently receiving supports (Splett et al., 2018). In a similar study, a mental health screener was administered to almost 900 elementary-age students, and 160 students were identified as at-risk with only 61 students being provided supports already (Eklund & Dowdy, 2014).

Students that need interventions and support can be identified with universal screeners, but school teams do not appear to be regularly implementing screening processes. Almost 500 surveys were completed by representatives of schools or school districts, and only 12.6% of these representatives indicated that they conducted emotional and behavioral screening in their schools or school districts (Bruhn et al., 2014). Similarly, a survey study conducted by Banks (2019) indicated that out of 89 school psychologists practicing in Utah schools, only 11 (12.3%) indicated that EBD screening was being conducted in their schools. Similarly, only 2% of schools in the United States implement regular mental health screening (Romer & McIntosh, 2005). The prevalence of students with social, emotional, or behavioral difficulties and the prevalence of treatment for these students does not appear to be aligned in many school settings, but they can become more equal through universal social-emotional screening (Walker et al., 2005).

Post-Screening Procedures

Simply administering a social-emotional screener is not enough to improve student outcomes; the data collected must be followed-up by actions to provide needed supports to

identified at-risk students. Banks (2019) posited that some of the ways that EBD screening data is used include the following: “to decide which interventions and supports should be implemented, to refer students to the school’s problem-solving team, [and] to encourage teachers to be aware of students’ needs and meet those needs in the classroom” (p. 27). In a study conducted by Walker and colleagues (2005), post-screening procedures included assigning at-risk students to the schools established supports (e.g., school counseling, social skills groups). Those at-risk students who did not progress with these supports or who were identified as being more at-risk initially were “referred...for further assessment and more intensive intervention development” (Walker et al., 2005, p. 198). Assigning at-risk students to the appropriate interventions and supports that encourage healthy social, emotional, and behavioral development should be the aim of the implementation of social-emotional screeners (Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2016).

Implementation Science

The social-emotional and behavioral supports provided to students in response to screening data result in positive and preventive outcomes. It seems imperative to implement regular, school-wide screening and provide supports for students in every school. However, regardless of the general effectiveness and favorable outcomes of school-wide screening and the provision of social-emotional, behavioral supports, there are many factors that can serve as barriers to the implementation of these processes. These factors often influence the large number of individuals tasked with implementing an innovation that affects hundreds of people at the school-level: primary implementers such as counselors and social workers; secondary implementers such as teachers; other vested partners such as administrators, parents, and staff; and a change agent that may select the innovation to be used, create the vision, and sustain

communication between all parties (Forman et al., 2014). In order to successfully implement a social-emotional screening program, it is imperative to recognize the foundational components that contribute to effective and sustained implementation and how they interact. According to the National Implementation Research Network (NIRN, n.d.), these essential supportive components are known as implementation drivers and include competency, leadership, and organization drivers; each is focused on the individuals that work together to implement an innovation.

Implementation Foundations

Training, a competency driver, is an essential component of implementing a new social-emotional screening program and subsequent social-emotional and behavioral supports. For teachers, administrators, and staff to know what their roles and responsibilities are, they must be thoroughly briefed and trained in order to meet expectations; it cannot be assumed that these individuals already have the skills needed for participation and follow-through. It is likely that individuals will need to be trained in specific tasks and procedures. Training should provide the underlying evidence-based reasoning behind the new program, engagement for participants, and a place to practice skills (NIRN, n.d.). Fixsen et al. (2014, p. 191) further expanded on the importance of providing “information about history, theory, philosophy, and rationales for intervention components and practices...to impart knowledge and facilitate understanding.” Knowing the reason behind a new program can generate commitment and fidelity that would otherwise be lacking. Thus, training in the form of skill development and understanding is essential to the implementation of a new screener program and social-emotional and behavioral supports.

The leadership and support often provided by the building principal is essential to the implementation success of a social-emotional screening program and social-emotional and

behavioral supports (Bambara et al., 2009; Sugai & Horner, 2002). School principals can offer leadership and support by “mak[ing] decisions, provid[ing] guidance, and support[ing] organization functioning” which is imperative in moving an innovation project forward, especially with numerous individuals involved (NIRN, n.d.). Participants in school PBIS teams identified facilitators to implementation being the building principal making decisions, having a positive attitude, demonstrating overall support, being a part of team meetings, expressing appreciation for the team’s hard work, and providing the resources necessary for the team to carry out their duties (Bambara et al., 2009). Paiyarat (2020, pp. 102-103) extensively interviewed six elementary school principals on the leadership skills they needed for successful implementation of PBIS innovations and found the following to be the most important: “establishing clear systems and procedures, allocating funding, implementation through stakeholder buy-in, and modeling clear expectations as leadership skills.”

Planning and organization, an organization driver, is necessary in implementing an innovation such as a social-emotional screener and social-emotional and behavioral supports. Stages of implementation have been designed to help leadership teams better select, design, plan, and prepare a new program for implementation. Implementation is a step-by-step process, and as such, it is important to know the steps comprising it. The National Implementation Research Network (NIRN; 2020) organized the sequential implementation stages as exploration, installation, initial implementation, and full implementation. However, it is important to note that these stages are not necessarily sequential; it is dependent on the needs of the potential benefactors and the ultimate goals of the implementation team (NIRN, 2020). This is reflected below as the implementation stages for implementing a social-emotional screener and the subsequent social-emotional and behavioral supports and strategies for students are described.

Implementation Steps and the Role of School Psychologists

In the exploration stage of implementation, a school team is considering avenues to meet the needs of their students and the readiness of their school team to implement potential programs (NIRN, 2020). This may include researching different screening tools and determining which is the best fit for their school. This may include brainstorming the ways in which school teams would follow-up the screening with social-emotional and behavioral supports in Tier-1, Tier-2, and Tier-3, depending on the data collected. Because of school psychologists' general focus on social-emotional and behavioral wellness of students, they are important members of an implementation team, particularly in the exploration stage (NASP, 2020; NIRN, 2020).

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) sets forth national standards and guidelines for school psychologists practicing in the United States that the association coined "Best Practices in School Psychology." These best practices reflect what a school psychologists' responsibilities may include, such as data-based and collaborative decision-making; an understanding of research design and data collection; designing and implementing social-emotional services; and leading school-based initiatives to support students' social-emotional and behavioral needs (NASP, 2020). In the exploration stage, the school psychologist may be the individual that initiates the formation of an implementation team, researches screening tools, and researches post-screening interventions and supports.

In the installation stage of implementation, school teams have selected the screening tool and subsequent social-emotional and behavioral strategies for students, and they are making preparations to begin implementation, including preparing all school staff or other vested partners (NIRN, 2020). School psychologists' responsibilities in this stage may include creating a learning environment for school staff for training purposes and communicating with others

clearly. As individuals familiar with implementation science, school psychologists are likely to help ensure driver readiness, such as training, organization, and leadership (NASP, 2020).

School teams are starting to administer a screener in the initial implementation stage and are administering a screener with fidelity in the full implementation stage. It is in this full implementation stage that data are collected, organized, and analyzed; one of school psychologists' responsibilities is to collect and analyze data to inform social-emotional and behavioral supports for students (NASP, 2020). Then, the school team is in the exploration stage again, where they are, again, considering what social-emotional and behavioral supports would best fit their students' needs based on the data gathered. Then, the school team is in the installation stage as they make any needed changes to ensure readiness. The school team is then in the initial implementation stage again, where they are starting to provide social-emotional and behavioral supports to students. NASP's Best Practices for school psychologists indicate that their responsibilities include systems-level services such as providing Tier-1 and Tier-2 social-emotional and behavioral interventions and student-level services such as Tier-3 individual counseling (NASP, 2020). This indicates that school psychologists would be direct implementers in the initial and full implementation stages.

School psychologists' responsibilities also include evaluating the effectiveness of programs in applied settings (NASP, 2020). This means that school psychologists would evaluate if the school team's efforts were effective in meeting their goal; in this case, the effectiveness of the screener to accurately identify students' needs, as well as the effectiveness of the tiered supports and strategies in increasing students' social-emotional and behavioral well-being would be evaluated and communicated to the team, informing future team decisions.

For many school psychology graduate programs based in the United States, the national standards and guidelines set forth by NASP are a focal point of graduate training. Thus, school psychologists were ideal candidates for this research project because their training and job responsibilities may include involvement in all stages of implementation of a social-emotional and behavioral screener as well as the supports and strategies put in place to help students in response.

Implementing the Social-Emotional Skills Survey

A school district in the northwestern United States has developed a survey to assess the social-emotional and behavioral needs of their students and intend to respond to the data collected from the administration of this survey. The social-emotional skills survey is intended to collect data concerning students' development of four character dispositions, as they are referred to by the school district. These character dispositions are likely referred to as social-emotional skills in the research literature; as such, the terms are used interchangeably below. The following are the four character dispositions and their corresponding district-derived definitions: (a) Self-Mastery--I am aware of my emotions and manage them in healthy ways at the moment; (b) Compassion--I have empathy for others and respond with kindness; (c) Resilience--I can recover in a timely manner and persevere in challenging situations; and (d) Respect--I genuinely value our school environment and all people around me and treat them accordingly with appropriate actions. This district is looking to administer this survey to its elementary and secondary students in order to determine where their needs lie within these social-emotional skills. Then, the district intends to follow-up the administration of this survey with social-emotional and behavioral supports and strategies for their students to meet their identified needs.

Because of school psychologists' central role in the implementation of a social-emotional and behavioral screener as well as the subsequent supports and strategies, it is valuable to include them in these processes. The school district requested that the researchers gather the perspectives of the school psychologists in their district concerning the implementation of subsequent supports and strategies in particular, as well as what professional learning opportunities would help their school teams prepare to implement these strategies.

Conclusion

Students have a range of social-emotional and behavioral needs that can be effectively addressed through MTSS (Lane et al., 2012). This 3-tiered model of support is made up of evidence-based practices and interventions that are aimed at supporting at-risk students before struggles become more pronounced; one of these MTSS tools is a social-emotional screening program (Walker et al., 2005). Effectively implemented, a social-emotional screening program identifies students with social-emotional and behavioral needs and provides necessary information for school teams to design and implement supports and strategies to address students' needs. The principles of implementation science must be incorporated for a screening process to be effectively implemented, an essential part of which takes place within the school team taking on the initiative (Bambara et al., 2009). School psychologists are often active participants of these teams, as supported by the Best Practices, or responsibilities, of school psychologists, providing needed expertise, perspective, and leadership in the social-emotional and behavioral realm (NASP, 2020). Currently, school psychologists' ideas on how to respond to the data collected from a social-emotional survey as well as the professional learning opportunities needed for school teams to be ready to implement these strategies and supports for students is not known.

Rationale

The purpose of this research is to gather school psychologists' perspectives regarding tiered strategies that may be used to address student well-being needs in a secondary setting, as well as professional learning opportunities for school teams that may be needed to implement these strategies. This study is meant to add to the current literature on implementation science, but more specifically to add to the literature and research on implementing social-emotional screeners and responding to screener data in schools. In turn, this may support and encourage more schools to implement social-emotional screening programs successfully, allowing more students to be identified and given needed supports.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to answer the following research questions:

1. What tiered supports and strategies would school psychologists recommend when the social-emotional skills survey data shows opportunities for collaboration, growth, and adjusting instruction in any of the following dispositions: self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect?
2. What professional development and peer-to-peer coaching opportunities would be helpful to school psychologists and their school team members who are responding to data from the social-emotional skills survey?

CHAPTER 3

Method

The purpose of this research study is to gather school psychologists' recommendations for tiered strategies that target secondary students' social-emotional competency needs as dictated by survey data, guiding the researcher in selecting a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. This study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). This section focuses on the participants, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and trustworthiness of research.

Participants

Participants consisted of 15 school psychologists who (a) were currently employed in a local school district in a northwestern state in the United States and (b) worked in at least one secondary school. Two focus groups, the first containing eight participants and the second containing seven participants, were conducted by video conference via Zoom software. The number of participants in each focus group was designed to facilitate rich discussion; a larger group is likely to stunt the sharing of personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings, and a smaller group would not have enough individuals to facilitate a discussion. Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend that focus groups contain 5-7 participants each. Due to the time constraints of the participants, only two focus groups were held, with the first containing eight participants and the second containing seven participants.

One important element in recruiting focus group participants is selecting individuals that "have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 2). Thus, the rationale behind selecting 15 secondary school psychologists from the same district increases the likelihood that they have commonalities in job responsibilities. In

addition, each focus group was made up of school psychologists that commonly meet over Zoom software, increasing the potential for commonalities in job responsibilities and rich discussion due to familiarity with one another and the Zoom format.

The primary researcher and research assistant were invited to a district-wide, in-person meeting where all school psychologists were present. The primary researcher and research assistant provided a brief introduction to the study and distributed physical copies of the consent form (see Appendix B) and demographic survey (see Appendix C) to the school psychologists who were interested in participating. Thirty-nine individuals filled out and returned consent forms and demographic surveys. Of these 39 school psychologists, 15 worked in at least one secondary setting and took part in this research study, while 19 worked in at least one elementary setting and took part in the sister study. Due to the interconnectedness of this study and its sister study, the demographic data, as shown in Table 1, is representative of 39 school psychologists from the school district, while a total of 34 participants took part in this study and the sister study. Due to the way in which data were collected and in order to maintain participant confidentiality, the researchers were unable to differentiate between the participants who participated in this study and its sister study.

Table 1*Demographic Data of 39 Participants at School Psychologist District Meeting*

Characteristics	Categories	<i>n</i>
Gender	Male	13
	Female	26
Mean Age (in years)		40
Ethnicity	Asian	2
	Caucasian/White	31
	Hispanic/Latino	2
	Mixed/Multiracial	3
	Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1
School Setting	Elementary Only	19
	Secondary Only	4
	Both	16
Years as a School Psychologist	1-4 years	7
	5-9 years	14
	10-14 years	9
	15-20 years	4
	20+	4
	NA	1
Degree Earned	Master's	8
	Education Specialist (EdS)	30
	Doctorate (PhD)	1
	Two or More Degrees Listed	11
Licensure	School Psychologist Certification	15
	NCSP	11
	Administration	1
	M. Ed.	1
	SPED-EE	3
	JPED-EE	1
	EdS	9
	Educators License	2
	School Counselor Certification	2
	PhD	1
	Master's	1
	NA	2

Data Collection

Data concerning the primary research questions were collected by way of two focus groups which were scheduled with the help of the district's Director of Social-Emotional Well-Being. Krueger and Casey (2009) recommend holding approximately three focus groups in order to reach saturation; saturation is the point at which no new themes are emerging from focus groups. Due to time constraints and limited availability of the participants, only two focus groups were held. However, the ideas and themes that emerged from each focus group were similar to one another, perhaps indicating that saturation was reached. At each focus group, held via Zoom software, a structured interview including an introduction, opening question, introductory question, nine key questions, and an ending question were posed, all of which were predetermined (Appendix B). The duration of each focus group was approximately 60 minutes. Each focus group was recorded on the researcher's laptop via Zoom software. Data from focus groups were collected via transcripts generated by Zoom software. The researcher reviewed each transcript several times, comparing it to the audio recording and making changes to the transcript to ensure accuracy.

A focus group is a method of gathering qualitative data about a topic in a group discussion format, and the participants are collectively asked open-ended questions by the moderator regarding the researcher's topic of interest (Kennedy et al., 2001). The way in which the open-ended questions were delivered in each focus group was structured; they were asked in the same order and with the same wording in each focus group (see Appendix D). This allowed for the data from each group to be compared. In addition to these structured, open-ended questions, the researcher asked some follow-up questions in response to participants' comments that aided in generating discussions with more depth. Focus groups embody non-directive

interviewing in that participants are given the freedom to respond to questions as they will, allowing the participants to express a range of thoughts, opinions, and experiences that are enriched by the small group discussion format (Kennedy et al., 2001; Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Data Analysis

The aim of analyzing qualitative data from the focus groups was to identify emergent themes that were relevant to the purpose of the research (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Specifically, the aim was to answer the question: What themes were apparent across the focus groups? To answer this question, Krueger and Casey (2009) recommended following a classic analysis strategy for each focus group. The researcher based her systematic data analysis process on Krueger's and Casey's (2009) suggestions:

1. The researcher compared Zoom automated transcriptions of the recordings to the recordings and made corrections to ensure accuracy.
2. The researcher labeled the transcriptions via focus group number and the participant speaking. Each participant was assigned a letter which was written next to each comment he/she made to facilitate participant confidentiality.
3. The researchers connected participants' quotes to the relevant focus group interview question. With each participants' comments, the following questions were asked to determine relevancy and direct organization:
 - a. If the participant answered the question that was asked, did the comment say something of importance about the topic? That is, was the comment meaningful in that it may directly or indirectly contribute to the body of research on how to respond to secondary students' social-emotional competency needs or school teams' professional learning needs? If yes, the

quote was placed with the corresponding question. If not, the quote was discarded. If unsure, the quote was placed in an alternate "pile."

- b. If the participant did not answer the question that was asked, did the comment answer a different critical question? If yes, the quote was placed with the corresponding question. If not, the quote was discarded. If unsure, the quote was placed in an alternate pile.
 - c. The alternate pile was reviewed to determine other ideas or these that were evident in the responses. That is, was the comment meaningful in that it may directly or indirectly contribute to the body of research on how to respond to secondary students' social-emotional competency needs or school teams' professional learning needs? If yes, the quotes were integrated into existing themes or a new theme was created. If not, the quotes were discarded.
4. The researchers identified themes from the participants' responses. These themes were drawn from comments made in response to the predesigned introductory question, key questions, and the concluding question, all of which were designed to elicit responses that address the researcher's topic of interest. The introductory question was broad in nature; its purpose was to get the participants thinking about the researcher's topic of interest in a general way. The key questions were more specific and directly correlated to the research questions. The concluding question allowed the participants to share anything that they did not previously get a chance to share.

Themes were identified by carefully reading each quote that was included in step three and creating categories based on responses that are similar in topic. Then,

these categories, or emergent themes, were considered in terms of frequency, specificity, extensiveness, and emotion to help the researchers interpret the data; these descriptions helped the researchers know which themes to look at more closely and/or which themes may require special emphasis (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

In this case, frequency refers to the number of times an idea is recounted (Krueger & Casey, 2009); for example, the number of quotes under a category would determine the frequency number it was assigned. Krueger and Casey (2009) were suggesting that the more often an idea is recounted, the greater the importance of that idea. The greater the importance of that idea, the greater chance that the idea would be included in the emergent themes. For example, participant comments concerning classroom-based lessons and classes totaled 20, which was the highest frequency number for any theme or subtheme. These comments were reflected in the emergent themes.

In this context, specificity refers to comments that include detail (Krueger & Casey, 2009); for this study, the number of quotes that included a personal experience would determine the specificity number assigned. Krueger and Casey (2009) were suggesting that participants' comments that included a personal experience were more important than comments that did not include a personal experience. The greater the importance of that idea, the greater chance that the idea would be included in the emergent themes. For example, a participant made a comment about teachers greeting students in the school hallways that included a personal experience. This comment was reflected in the emergent themes.

In this context, extensiveness refers to how many different people commented on the same theme (Krueger & Casey, 2009); for example, if three participants commented on the same theme, the extensiveness number for that theme would be three. Krueger and Casey (2009) were suggesting that ideas that more participants commented on have greater importance. The greater the importance of that idea, the greater chance that the idea would be included in the emergent themes. For example, six participants made comments about small group counseling. This comment was reflected in the emergent themes.

In addition, quotes that were expressed with intense emotion would have been noted; however, there were no comments that were expressed with intense emotion. Frequency, specificity, and extensiveness helped the researchers know which themes needed careful consideration. Due to the richness of the data, the primary researcher went beyond Krueger's and Casey's (2009) classic data analysis strategy and incorporated some interpretation to reflect the important aspects of the participants' responses. Some comments that would not have been considered important in relation to their frequency, specificity, or extensiveness were used to develop the emerging themes. Similarly, some comments that would have been considered important in relation to their frequency, specificity, or extensiveness were not part of the emergent themes reported. When the primary researcher incorporated interpretation, she asked, "Was the comment meaningful in that it may directly or indirectly contribute to the body of research on how to respond to secondary students' social-emotional competency needs or school teams' professional learning needs, regardless of its frequency, specificity, or extensiveness?" If yes, then that idea was incorporated into

the emergent themes. If no, then that idea was not incorporated into the emergent themes.

5. The primary researcher created a summary of the themes that emerged from the focus groups. The assistant researcher and the peer debriefer reviewed this summary. Between the primary researcher, assistant researcher, and peer debriefer, if at least two of the three individuals agreed that a specific change was warranted to accurately reflect what was shared in the focus groups, then that change was made. Then, this summary was sent via email to each focus group participant, the purpose of which was to gather responses to the questions:
 - a. Does this summary of the themes accurately detail what was shared in the focus groups?
 - b. If not, what needs to be changed or added to this summary to make it accurate?

If any feedback from focus group participants detailed changes or omissions to the focus group summary, the primary researcher, assistant researcher, and peer debriefer reviewed it. If at least two of the three researchers agreed that a specific change was warranted to accurately reflect what was shared in the focus groups, then that change was made. No focus group participants responded with suggested changes.

Trustworthiness of Research

Best practice standards are essential to producing research that is purposeful, meaningful, trustworthy, and credible, especially in (a) the development and implementation of qualitative studies and (b) the interpretation of qualitative data. Brantlinger and colleagues (2005) stated that one of the characteristics of qualitative research studies that hold such studies to higher, more

professional standards is an explicit description of the methods by which credibility and trustworthiness are established. Some of these methods, proposed by Brantlinger and colleagues (2005), are investigator triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks. These methods, how they were applied to this study's data collection and analysis, and how they contribute to the results' credibility and trustworthiness are described below.

Investigator Triangulation and Peer Debriefing

Triangulation is the process of approaching the data analysis from multiple angles and drawing consistent conclusions from those varying viewpoints (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Investigator triangulation, a subtype of triangulation, refers to several researchers involved in the data analysis process (Brantlinger et al., 2005). For this study, an assistant researcher and a peer debriefer were involved in the data analysis process. Peer debriefing involves the use of a colleague familiar with the research project and knowledgeable in the topic of research to provide feedback on the conclusions drawn from the data analysis (Brantlinger et al., 2005). In this case, the colleague was the thesis chair, who had published peer-reviewed research studies of a similar topic and method. The peer debriefer acted as an auditor; she reviewed how the primary researcher moved from raw data to interpretation for all themes. If the peer debriefer believed that the outcomes of and the conclusions drawn from the data analysis were inaccurate, the primary researcher, assistant researcher, and peer debriefer met together to discuss conclusions. If conclusions drawn were inaccurate, this may indicate a flaw in the data analysis process. If at least two of the three individuals agreed to changes being made to the conclusions, then they would be made to ensure accuracy in data interpretation.

Member Checks

Member checks refer to the use of research participants to confirm or disconfirm the themes drawn from the data analysis (Brantlinger et al., 2005). To meet this credibility measure, a summary of the themes that emerged from the focus groups, written by the primary researcher, was emailed to each focus group participant. The participants were asked if the summary accurately reflected what was shared in the focus groups, and if not, what information needed to be removed or added to make the summary accurate. The researcher, assistant researcher, and the peer debriefer then discussed suggested corrections and determined if the changes were warranted, dependent on if at least two of these three individuals agreed that the changes were necessary. It is through the use of the participants' perspectives that the presence of individual biases of the researchers that result in inaccurate interpretations may be recognized. Then, inaccurate interpretations and conclusions can be corrected.

CHAPTER 4

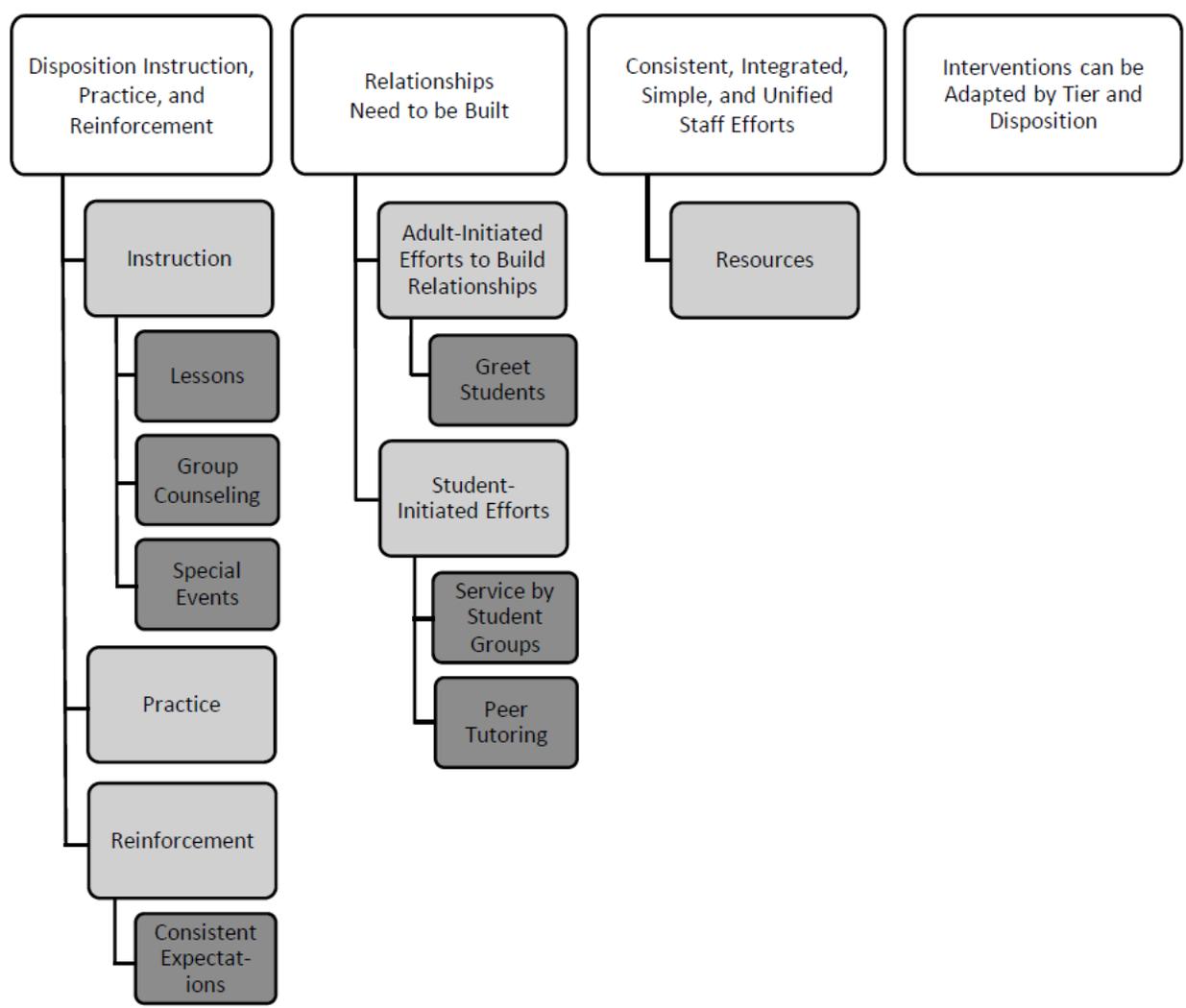
Results

The primary researcher, assistant researcher, and peer debriefer analyzed the focus group transcripts, eliciting four primary themes, six secondary themes, and seven tertiary themes. The names of the participants and other individuals mentioned in the focus groups were changed within participants' quotes to protect confidentiality. "Homeroom" was referred to by many titles, and in order to protect participant confidentiality and to allow for reader clarity, various titles were removed from quotes and replaced with "homeroom." Within participants' quotes filler words such as "um," "uh," "like," "so," "kind of," and "you know" were removed and words or short phrases that were repeated were removed for reader clarity. Some participants' comments, as quoted below, do not begin or end at the points that the original quotes began or ended to increase readability and decrease redundancy.

Figure 1 presents the primary, secondary, and tertiary themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus group transcripts in a hierarchical list. These themes demonstrate the participants' recommendations for tiered supports and strategies for students and professional learning opportunities for school teams in response to students' needs within the social-emotional skill areas of self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect. These social-emotional skills will also be referred to as dispositions, or character dispositions, to reflect both what is in the research literature and the district's survey.

Figure 1

Recommendations for Student Support Strategies and Professional Learning



Theme One: Disposition Instruction, Practice, and Reinforcement

The primary theme that originated from the focus groups is that for students to develop the dispositions, or social-emotional skills, of self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect, they need to be explicitly or directly taught the dispositions, be given opportunities to practice the dispositions, and be given feedback in the form of positive reinforcement when they

demonstrate the dispositions. Instruction on the dispositions in the form of lessons, group counseling, and special events was a central topic of the focus groups.

Instruction

Lessons. Participants indicated that instruction for students is an essential part of addressing students' needs within any of the social-emotional skills. Participants indicated that classroom-based lessons may be taught by teachers, school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, school resource officers, administration, and even students. These lessons were typically described as being delivered by staff, but typically teachers, to a whole classroom or a small group of students within a classroom during homeroom each week or every other week. Provided as a representation of the thoughts of many participants throughout the focus groups, Participant P stated that at her junior high school, her school's PBIS work incorporates teaching 15-minute lessons on the school values during homeroom time.

A video format, developed by students or staff, was also described as being an engaging and convenient way to broadcast the same lesson or message to an entire school during homeroom. Participant D stated:

The video production team classroom produces a video weekly and the teachers are encouraged to show that video ... so we could ask that that class include one of the... [dispositions] in their weekly production ... They're really creative ... They present things in a way that other students relate to ... so I think that may be a way to also reach the majority of the student body.

Another way that lessons and instruction on the dispositions can be provided is through classes that students can register for and add to their schedule. Participant N mentioned, "I would love to see more classes ... in the schedule ... [that are] Tier-2 that ... [students are] referred to

for a quarter, where they can go and work on different skills and different social-emotional needs ...” This is similar to other participants’ ideas that classes like “Guide Studies” or “Study Skills” are opportunities to provide lessons on the dispositions and can be an avenue through which the dispositions can be applied to completing homework and other school-based responsibilities.

Group Counseling. Participants indicated that small group counseling is an important avenue by which instruction concerning the dispositions can be provided to students. Focus group members shared that group counseling is often provided by school psychologists, school counselors, and/or school social workers to small groups of students. Participant F echoed a few participants’ comments when she shared: “I ... know that the counseling department does quite a few different groups just based on what the [students’] needs are ... I could see our counseling department doing some groups based on this [survey data] as a Tier-2 intervention ...” However, after the idea of small group counseling was brought up in the focus groups, many participants also expressed difficulty in successfully running group counseling due to the scheduling challenges that come in secondary settings and how the school elects to use homeroom time.

Participant N stated:

I found that it’s really hard to get kids to do groups in high school because they don’t want to miss class and their parents don’t want them to miss class ... I’ll set up things during ... [homeroom] time and then the kids will have to go work on an academic skill somewhere and they’ll have to miss ... [group counseling] and so it is frustrating.

Participant L indicated that his difficulty in running groups during homeroom time was also due to how the school elected to use homeroom time when he stated:

It all depends on how you use your ... [homeroom] time ... It seems like both of my high schools are all set on “Who’s Got F’s?” and that’s our intervention ... but when I was at

... [name of middle school] we were able to do some groups during our ... [homeroom] time and that ... [was] successful.

Several participants emphasized homeroom time being the most convenient time to run small group counseling; this emphasis was coupled with frustration of inaccessibility to use homeroom time to address students' social-emotional needs as well as their academic needs.

Special Events. Participants indicated that instruction on the dispositions, or social-emotional skills, could be provided through special events. This may involve a targeted day, a week, an assembly, etc. that incorporates speakers, professional mental health therapists and counselors from the community, and/or school-based counselors, school social workers, and school psychologists teaching about the dispositions. Participant G provided an example of this when he shared: "At my previous middle school, the school counselors organized a 'Coping Skills Day' ... We had people from the community ... teaching them different skills that had to do with resilience ... [This] happened one day during the year." Participant A provided another example of this when she shared:

I would think a tier-two strategy for resilience would be to have special speakers come into classes from the community ... [to] share their information. I think that really helps students understand a little more about how people can be resilient in difficult situations.

Participant J provided an alternative perspective to these days and weeks dedicated to disposition focus. Participant J alluded to the idea that a "Coping Skills Day" or "Diversity Week" at a school should be a starting point or a foundation from which to help students develop the dispositions; consistent attention and focus concerning the dispositions should be the primary way in which students learn self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect.

Practice

For students to develop the different character dispositions, participants briefly noted that students need to be given the opportunity to practice them. Participant G stated that following instruction students need to be scaffolded in their attempts to practice a new skill. This may look like identifying coping strategies to be used in difficult situations, identifying how to apply the skill to students' responsibilities, or reflecting on how a skill could have been applied in a situation to help guide future actions.

A few participants mentioned that wellness rooms are a place in which students can be guided in using strategies that will help them reset mentally and emotionally to be ready to return to class. A wellness room is a room in a school that often has a calming atmosphere and quiet activities. These wellness rooms are often headed by a school-based team that includes school counselors, a school social worker, a school nurse, and a school psychologist, with one or more of these adult staff members in the wellness room at any given time to provide support and scaffolding to students in the wellness room to help them get ready to return to class (Moya et al., 2022).

Reinforcement

Reinforcement for students demonstrating character dispositions was mentioned briefly by several participants. Reinforcement was talked about in a way that seemed to have dual meaning; it seemed to be referred to as (a) a reward system for demonstrating social-emotional skills and (b) as opportunities for additional teaching and support to be provided. For example, after Participant P suggested that having teachers organize group contingencies in their classrooms can help increase students' demonstration of the dispositions, Participant Q said:

But also to piggyback off of what Participant P was saying, we use ... Hope Squad and they do a lot of ... reinforcement for X, Y, and Z. But one thing that I found has been super super helpful is they'll turn, like every activity into something in the hallway of the school so you remember.

Participant Q seemed to be indicating that his school's Hope Squad, a student-led organization focused on student outreach and suicide prevention, would provide reinforcement to students when they demonstrated the value they were focusing on, such as rewards and/or special acknowledgement on a school-wide level, as well as provide additional teaching and support opportunities by way of hallway reminders. Reinforcement, in both contexts, may be provided school-wide, by classroom, and/or individually. A couple of participants mentioned this in conjunction with their schools' PBIS system which already has reinforcement strategies in place to encourage their students to demonstrate their schools' values.

Several participants indicated that behavioral expectations and reinforcement strategies need to be consistent among school staff. Participant C stated that staff establishing consistent expectations across an entire school is important to consider before implementing student-focused interventions:

I think my initial thought ... would be to start with ourselves ... and make sure that we all are having a common language ... How do we communicate with students? What kind of strategies? Do we discipline students? What kind of voice tone are we using? All of that sort of stuff ... [We need] to start with us before we ... [look] at intervening with our students.

Participant C indicated that behavioral expectations need to not only be consistent and clear, but be designed in a way that allow students to reset and recover in order to be ready to go back to class when she stated:

I think ... we [can] set up a procedure in which students can recover from making a mistake and get back to class or have the opportunity to make amends ... instead of just jumping straight to suspension ... like setting up a tier-one ... positive behavior support system in the school that allows for students to have those ebb and flows that we all naturally are going to have.

Theme Two: Developing Adult-Student Relationships

Participants indicated that positive, supportive staff-student and student-student relationships are an important way in which students can develop the character dispositions. Participant J shared how relationships have been a focus for professional development, indicating a district-wide emphasis: “This summer, they did a big collaboration training ... where they kind of hit the importance of connecting with students and getting to know them and forming relationships, so I think there's a lot there.” Participant N summarized the importance of relationships in helping students exhibit respect when she stated:

I would just like to say a lot of what I’m hearing sounds like we're talking about building relationships. And so if we're working on building ... relationships ... I think it helps to form more respect, makes it more likely to happen.

Participant J stated, “Kind of piggying-back off of what ... [Participant N] was saying ... That’s a great tier-one, tier-two [intervention] is just [initiating and developing] relationships and showing ... [students] that we have respect for one another.” Several participants emphasized

building positive, supportive relationships between school staff and students, as well as between students being essential to learning the dispositions.

Adult-Initiated Efforts to Build Relationships

Participants described ways in which staff-student relationships can be built, with interactions initiated by student advocates, administrators, teachers, the custodian, and the resource officer. Participant J described how she has been impressed with the relationships and social-emotional support that student advocates, adults who primarily monitor the hallways and help students increase class attendance and complete homework, have provided to students. Participant Q emphasized the importance of student advocates when he stated: “You know what? That's a good point because our advocates at my high school, since they're there in the halls working with students talking to them all the time, they're like our front lines ... That's awesome.”

Some participants briefly mentioned how restorative practices can be designed in a way to develop staff-student relationships. For example, Participant P described that if a student needs to clean up graffiti or another mess, then they can work with the custodian to do it, developing a relationship with the custodian that may aid in decreasing the student's participation in graffiti in the future. Participant M mentioned how a relationship with the school resource officer may motivate students to not participate in disrespectful acts towards the school because it may disappoint the resource officer. Participants emphasized the simple nature of this intervention and how these relationships may be initiated by all adult staff members.

Teachers, administrators, and other school staff greeting students in the hallway during transition periods was a unique idea shared by one participant. Participant A shared how

administrators and teachers can initiate and develop relationships with students during transition periods:

And ... every teacher was in the hallway at their doors greeting students, saying "Hi." I felt more warm fuzzies at that high school than I've ever felt because the teachers wanted to know everyone, administrators were out there, everyone and I thought that was a fabulous way for everyone to feel respected and cared for.

This idea, while only mentioned by one participant, supports many other participants' ideas that interventions do not need to be complex to be effective and that interventions can be simple and still have a large impact.

Staff initiating positive, supportive relationships with students is a skill that needs to be taught and practiced. Participant J shared that she has had teachers talk to her about how they feel uncomfortable developing a social-emotional connection with students, and how she thinks that teachers may benefit from developing that skill through trainings and modeling. Participant N shared that having trainings that include elements such as role plays, seeing other people talk to students, and practicing conversing with students will allow school staff to develop the skills and confidence needed to initiate and develop positive, supportive relationships with students.

Student-Initiated Efforts

Service by Student Groups. Hope Squad and service clubs were mentioned as the primary student-led activity groups that initiate relationships being fostered among students and staff. Hope Squad is a student-led group that works with an adult staff member to organize student-oriented activities and events that, at their core, are designed to create a sense of community and belonging among students in order to prevent suicide. Participant C described Hope Squad as being an avenue by which student-student relationships are built via student

outreach: “I think ... our Hope Squad or ... those sort of activity groups ... [function as] a community outreach to every student ... to make sure students are connected on a one-on-one basis with another student in the building.” Two participants provided examples of service projects implemented by Hope Squad members that help students feel a sense of belonging, such as writing every student a valentine for Valentine’s Day.

Peer Tutoring. Peer tutoring is a way that students can initiate and develop positive, supportive relationships with other students. The students being tutored may be in special education classes, life skills classes, English Language Learner classes, etc. Participant N stated: “I think ... encouraging students to be peer tutors, working with students that are more disadvantaged ... can help teach them more compassion ... it's something that I’ve seen help students ... care more about others.”

Theme Three: Consistent, Integrated, Simple, and Unified Staff Efforts

For tiered strategies and supports to be effective in helping students develop the dispositions, staff efforts need to be consistent, integrated, simple, and unified. Several participants indicated that perhaps specific interventions concerning each disposition are not necessary; instead, these character dispositions need to be consistently and simply integrated into the school by all staff rather than developing a wide range of strategies that have a good deal of overlap.

Participant C: Yeah I think ... there doesn't need to be any specific intervention put in place, but there needs to be attention and focus and discussion about certain items ... it could be as simple as a bulletin board or a discussion or an announcement on the intercom ... it really doesn’t matter who gives them or what it is, it’s just where our attention is.

We all know that if we want any of this to be worth our while we need everyone in every position in every facet of the building talking about it, working on it, reinforcing it, having discussions about it ...

Participant A supported the idea of a school-wide focus on the dispositions by staff when she shared her experience with a PBIS strategy called the “Principal’s 100 Club”: “Usually I saw it more in elementary, but ... everyone would [participate] ... I love that because the more everyone's involved, the more it does become a school-wide focus and the more ... the kids realize the importance.” When expressing her difficulty in communicating intervention ideas with all school staff, Participant D alluded to the idea that in order for students’ needs to be met within the dispositions, or to implement interventions successfully, all staff need to be unified in their efforts: “So part of the difficulty ... [is] how do we share that information, with all the teachers, with all the staff at the schools in order to implement some of these ideas?” Participant L shared the importance of school staff integrating the character dispositions school-wide when he said:

This would take a lot of buy-in ... but ... I really [like] ... creating the culture of ... [the] traits that we want to instill in the students and make sure every period or every subject integrates those traits into their lesson plans.

Consistency in how teachers and other staff model self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect is another way in which they can be integrated into the school environment. A couple of participants shared that providing a model of the dispositions is a way in which students can see the disposition being displayed and use that example to guide their own actions.

Resources

Throughout the focus groups, a few participants mentioned that they and their school teams have been overwhelmed with the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of their students. For professional development to aid them in responding to student needs, Participant E stated that it must be simple. When asked what professional learning opportunities may be needed for school teams to implement strategies encompassing the dispositions, Participant C suggested that time and manpower would aid school teams in responding to student needs:

For me, I think it's less about professional learning opportunities and more about time ... I think a lot of the strategies we already have and they're in our back pockets ... but we don't have the time or manpower to actually follow through with a plan, so I think that is where the gap lies.

In addition to these resources, several participants suggested that subsequent administrations of the social-emotional skills survey would aid school teams in responding to student needs. These additional survey administrations would yield data that would serve to determine resource allocation and further unify staff efforts in selecting and delivering effective interventions to students. Participant P stated, "I'm excited in terms of having something to help gauge a baseline as well as any kind of post-intervention to kind of see ... if it makes a difference." Participant J shared, "But ... I think, particularly at our school, this survey is going to be great to say, 'Is this effort really ... helping?'"

When the focus group moderator asked how it would be helpful for the school psychologists to have the survey data presented, a couple of participants stated that school-wide data from each school in the district would be helpful to determine resource allocation to best meet students' needs within the dispositions. For example, Participant P shared that survey data

can help determine how many schools and which schools are assigned to a school psychologist: “I think ... if you find out from the survey that all three schools [assigned to a school psychologist] are high need then it may not be the best way to group that caseload for a school psych.”

Theme Four: Interventions Can be Adapted by Tier and Disposition

When asked how they would address students’ needs within each disposition, the participants mentioned many of the same interventions throughout the focus groups. Participant G shared, “I looked at these different dispositions and I think that some of the same interventions that might work for one, would work for the others as well.” Participant E stated, “I think most of these things you can teach kids in a lot of the same way ... you can just change the subject basically and teach all these things.”

Building on this idea, a couple of participants talked about how a school’s current PBIS system, which often includes values that are taught, practiced, and reinforced as well as data collection systems, could be adapted to include the character dispositions of self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect.

Summary

The analysis of the focus group transcripts elicited school psychologist participants’ recommendations for secondary student support strategies and professional learning opportunities. School psychologist participants emphasized disposition instruction, practice, and reinforcement; the building of relationships; and staff efforts being consistent, integrated, simple, and unified. Participants indicated that interventions and strategies to support students can be adapted by tier and disposition; this idea highlights the interconnected nature of the themes that emerged from the focus groups. The school psychologists’ recommendations are not isolated

strategies; they are recommendations for school-wide and system-wide change that requires consistent implementation and prioritization.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

Fifteen school psychologists from a school district in western state in the United States took part in two focus groups to elicit ideas concerning what tiered supports and strategies they would recommend when a district-designed social-emotional skills survey showed student needs. The proposed district-developed survey had items that addressed the following social-emotional competencies: self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect. The researchers were also interested in understanding what professional development and peer-to-peer coaching opportunities would be helpful to school psychologists and their school team members who are responding to data from the social-emotional skills survey. School psychologists were ideal candidates for this research project because their training and job responsibilities may include leading the collection of and use of data to respond to the social-emotional and behavioral needs of students in a school setting (NASP, 2020).

The findings of this research illuminate the perceptions that some school psychologists have about how they might effectively meet secondary students' social-emotional needs. These six findings, or themes, refined and clarified what is known from the current research literature. Table 2 presents a summary of how current findings extend the research literature and provide insights about the needs of school psychologists who may be responsible for implementing strategies to support students based on data and within an MTSS framework.

Table 2*Contributions to the Literature*

Review of the literature	Findings of this study
<p>MTSS is a collaborative effort between school, family, and community to integrally address social-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students (Utah State Board of Education, 2015).</p>	<p>School psychologists do not discuss addressing students' social-emotional needs in isolation; they report being part of a team that works together to deliver strategies to address SEL.</p>
<p>The way in which to best prioritize the teaching of social-emotional competencies is dependent on all vested partners (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.-b).</p>	<p>School psychologists seek to prioritize social-emotional learning through allocating time for SEL during the time typically dedicated to academic learning.</p>
<p>Established initiatives within a school district need to be evaluated and aligned in order to lead to social-emotional competence and positive academic outcomes (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Support, 2017).</p>	<p>School psychologists seek to maximize the impact of school teams' current efforts.</p>
<p>Explicit or direct instruction to help students learn and meet academic objectives is common-place; explicit instruction to help students learn and meet behavioral expectations is just as essential (Utah State Board of Education, 2015).</p>	<p>School psychologists are teaching social-emotional competencies in the same way as academic objectives through direct instruction.</p>
<p>Social-emotional learning is made up of competencies that are distinct, yet interconnected (CASEL, n.d.-b).</p>	<p>School psychologists see the varying social-emotional skills as more similar than different.</p>
<p>Training of social-emotional program implementers is essential to consistency and positive outcomes (Forman et al., 2014).</p>	<p>School psychologists see that professional learning opportunities need to be tailored to their and their school teams' needs.</p>

School Psychologists are Not Addressing Students' Social-Emotional Needs in Isolation

School psychologists in these focus groups suggested that effective social-emotional learning involves a systematic, integrated approach by all staff that requires an alignment of priorities. Durlak and DuPre (2008) highlighted that the degree to which a new initiative is implemented is the most important factor in the fruition of desired outcomes. Implementation is composed of several factors, some of which are: (a) the dedicated, competent delivery of the major components of a program in the proper dosage and (b) adaptations to the program are intentional and do not remove “the active ingredients of [the] interventions,” (Durlak, 2016, p. 337). Durlak (2016) suggested that the level of adherence of school staff in delivering a data-driven social-emotional learning program is the most important factor in achieving success. Adhering to an implementation program requires a deliberate, systematic approach to meeting students' needs that involves the commitment of all school staff. This was supported by participants' primary suggestions focusing on a methodical approach to meeting students' needs within the social-emotional skills, such as (a) regular social-emotional skill instruction, (b) providing opportunities to practice, and (c) reinforcing the demonstration of the social-emotional skills. This approach to meeting student needs is one that requires the commitment of all staff to this step-by-step method.

Several participants stated how important it is for students' social-emotional learning to be integrated into all aspects of their school experience through the efforts of all staff members. Participant C summarized this idea well when she stated,

We all know that if we want any of this to be worth our while we need everyone in every position in every facet of the building talking about it, working on it, reinforcing it, having discussions about it ...

This supports the literature that states that MTSS is a collaborative effort between school, family, and community to integrally address social-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students (Utah State Board of Education, 2015). When participants described all staff working together in these efforts, they described school staff working to integrate the social-emotional skills into their schedules and the school environment. Participant Q described how creating a climate of the dispositions or infusing the teaching of the dispositions into educators' everyday lessons and interactions with students, is a way in which staff can meet students' needs.

Participant's' ideas closely reflect the principle of collaboration found in the research literature.

School Psychologists Seek to Prioritize Social-Emotional Learning Through Time

Allocation

This systematic approach to implementing social-emotional learning programs in schools was supported by participants who stated that efforts must be consistent, unified, and involve all school staff to effectively meet students' social-emotional needs. In practice, this means that all school staff are committed to, or prioritize, adherence to an implementation plan that is designed to meet students' needs. In the school setting, this may include establishing school-wide expectations linked to values that are reinforced in the same way in each classroom; teachers providing the same social-emotional competency lessons in their classrooms each week; and the dedication of time to instruction or discussion at the beginning of each day. In a school setting, this may also look like a secondary school electing to use homeroom time for social-emotional instruction, practice, and reinforcement; teachers dedicating time each class period to describe how a social-emotional competency relates to an assignment; and giving students the opportunity to add a social-emotional learning class to their school schedule. School teams would better align

their efforts in meeting students' social-emotional needs with adherence to an implementation plan that incorporates the prioritization of time.

School psychologist participants alluded to the idea that it is not just school staff that need to be working toward a common goal; school policies such as disciplinary procedures and parents need to be working toward the same common goal of meeting students' social-emotional needs, which is consistent with current ideas in the research literature. Durlak (2016) stated that all vested partners such as trainers, consultants, policy-makers, parents, and students are responsible and necessary for an implementation program to yield the desired student outcomes. Stakeholder collaboration is necessary to determine how to best prioritize social-emotional learning in school settings (CASEL, n.d.-b).

School Psychologists Seek to Maximize the Impact of School Teams' Current Efforts

School psychologists in this study suggested that an integration and unification of efforts that are already in place are essential to meeting students' needs within the dispositions. Alignment, while not a theme that originated from the focus groups, is closely related to discussion within the focus groups. A few participants suggested that using systems and practices that are already in place in their schools, such as PBIS models, school social worker classroom presentation times, and Hope Squad practices, rather than implementing a new initiative, would be helpful in meeting students' social-emotional competency needs. Participants may have been suggesting that an alignment of the initiatives, systems, and practices that are already in place would be helpful in meeting students' needs and educators' needs.

The National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (2017) stated that the initiatives that are already in place within a school district need to be evaluated and aligned to lead to social-emotional competence and positive academic

outcomes. Further, “Efforts to improve school ... learning are not separate endeavors and must be designed, funded, and implemented as a comprehensive school-wide approach,” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2013, p. 1). In practice, this may involve a school district determining what the most important social-emotional outcome or goal is for their students, discarding initiatives that do not support this goal, and adjusting already-in-place initiatives to support this goal. This may be a way in which to decrease the overwhelming feeling of teachers and other service providers in schools and promote commitment to the implementation of a school-wide, social-emotional program.

School Psychologists are Teaching Social-Emotional Competencies in the Same Way as Academic Objectives

Most of the discussion within the focus groups concerned the delivery of instruction that focuses on the social-emotional dispositions. Many participants' responses concerning the instruction, practice, and reinforcement of social-emotional competencies support the literature stating that explicit instruction is essential to student academic, social-emotional, and behavioral learning. In the Least Restrictive Behavioral Interventions manual, which contains research-based behavioral guidelines for Utah educators to follow, the Utah State Board of Education describes how explicit or direct instruction in order to help students learn and meet academic objectives is common-place, but that explicit instruction in order to help students learn and meet behavioral expectations is not commonly recognized, but just as essential (Utah State Board of Education, 2015). Explicit instruction is deliberate, clear, and focused instruction (Archer & Hughes, 2011, Chapter 1) and should be an integral part of each MTSS tier (Benner et al., 2013).

School Psychologists See the Dispositions as More Similar Than Different

The focus group questions were designed to elicit participants' suggestions to meet students' needs within each of the areas of self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect. Interestingly, many of the same strategies and interventions (e.g., instruction) were recommended regardless of the disposition that was presented. The specific and distinct character dispositions asked about during the focus groups did not lead to specific and distinct strategies for each disposition. This is supported in the literature that defines distinctive, yet interconnected, social-emotional competencies that must be taught (CASEL, n.d.-b). School psychologists in this study seemed to be suggesting that organizing interventions by their core idea with plans to adapt those interventions according to the disposition of focus may be most effective in meeting student needs.

The school psychologist participants recommended strategies by which all the dispositions could be addressed but did not recommend much by way of specific ways to adapt those interventions to each disposition. This may indicate that these school psychologists are not sufficiently aware of the differences between the social-emotional competencies. Perhaps the working definitions of the dispositions are not yet distinct enough to elicit different support or intervention strategies. Professional learning opportunities for school psychologists and their school teams that emphasize the distinct nature of each disposition may be important in addressing students' needs.

School Psychologists See That Professional Learning Opportunities Need to be Tailored to Their School Team's Needs

The school psychologist participants were asked to share what professional learning opportunities they and their school teams may need to implement interventions encompassing

students' needs within the social-emotional skills of self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect. Participants indicated that their school teams need professional learning opportunities to be simple, incorporate practice, and involve all school team members. In this way, the school psychologist participants were expressing the characteristics of professional learning opportunities that would address the needs of their school teams.

A couple of participants indicated that while training in implementing a social-emotional learning program is needed, it needs to be simple. Participants indicated that time is a limited resource; as a result, necessary training needs to be not time-intensive but simple and direct in that only the most necessary aspects are included. In addition, a couple of participants alluded to the idea that with the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase in absences of school staff, further depleting not only staffs' time but their cognitive and emotional energies as well. In this way, professional learning opportunities need to be simple and only run for as long as absolutely necessary because trainees' cognitive and emotional energy resources are depleted, and long trainings, while informative, are not conducive to staffs' needs at this time.

One of the primary themes that originated from the focus groups was that students need to be provided instruction and be given opportunities to practice each of the social-emotional skills. Similarly, school psychologist participants indicated that professional learning needs to provide ample opportunities for them and their school teams to practice what they are being taught. A participant indicated that some of her team members expressed their difficulties and lack of confidence in implementing what they've learned or been taught in their classroom settings. To increase staff confidence and their ability to take what they've learned and put it into action, staff need to be provided opportunities to see these skills modeled, to practice themselves, and to be given feedback.

Lastly, school psychologist participants indicated that while they have access to professional development opportunities encompassing social-emotional learning, other members of their school teams do not have access to them. In the context of a school-wide initiative, professional learning opportunities would need to be easily accessible to all members of a school team. This would allow consistent, unified, and integrated efforts to meet students' social-emotional needs to become a reality.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study may inform school, district, and community practices in several ways. Systemic change may be necessary to incorporate students' social-emotional competency needs into the academically-focused school day. Entire schools, school districts, and communities need to integrate and align their social-emotional learning efforts. To align social-emotional learning efforts, a group of diverse, vested partners that represents the community that surrounds students, such as school teachers, custodians, resource officers, administration, students, parents, and social-emotional teams; district administration, policy-makers, and social-emotional teams; and community mental health professionals, politicians, service providers, and residents may need to come together to form a community team (NIRN, 2020). The efforts of all vested partners may be required to efficiently and effectively align, adjust, and prune already-in-place initiatives to meet students' social-emotional competency needs (Perales et al., 2017). This may require the team to (a) determine the one or two most important social-emotional goals for their community; (b) list current initiatives and their purposes to allow for comparison; (c) merge, remove, and add initiatives in relation to social-emotional goals; and (d) trim the list of initiatives until only the most essential remain. For example, the team could elect to design school disciplinary policies and legal repercussions to support social-emotional competency

practice, and families, schools, and communities could integrate disposition focus into everyday life through instruction, activities to practice, and reinforcement.

Entire schools, school districts, and communities might need to establish clear lines of communication. Research suggests that communication between all vested partners occurs through deliberate effort (Forman et al., 2014; NIRN, 2020), and that the level of communication will reflect the level of school and community functioning in implementing a new initiative (Forman et al., 2014). Not only this, but that it is within several social systems, such as families, schools, and communities, that implementation of a program takes place, and that it is within these social systems that everyone influences one another; these social communication and influencing circles need to be deliberately established because they will increase the effectiveness of implementation efforts (Forman et al., 2014). In practice, this might look like the community team, as described above, organizing “communication trees” throughout the community that indicate who disseminates new information or training to a certain group of people, who in that group passes on that information, etc., until everyone in the community has been communicated with. For example, a member of the superintendent’s administrative council who is on the primary team might pass information to principals, who passes information to teachers and parents, who pass information to students.

The research findings could be a call to action for vested partners to collaborate on how to prioritize time for social-emotional learning. This collaboration might require leadership or implementation teams to evaluate how they are currently prioritizing SEL by answering a question such as: What time blocks, throughout the weeks and months of the school year, are set aside for SEL? School psychologists and other vested partners have strategies and ideas on how to support students’ social-emotional learning, but the support of vested partners in allocating

time to SEL could be essential to their implementation. For example, (a) homeroom time could be dedicated to disposition instruction, practice, and reinforcement and (b) an elective or required class focused on the instruction of and the application of dispositions could be offered in secondary schools.

The research findings indicate that organizing interventions by their core idea with plans to adapt those interventions according to the disposition of focus may be most effective in meeting student social-emotional competency needs. For example, school and district teams could design, step-by-step, the framework for a classroom-based social-emotional competency lesson. From there, lessons can be delineated for self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect. In addition, school and district teams could design several frameworks by which students can practice the dispositions, with further delineations for each disposition.

The research findings indicate that professional learning concerning the dispositions may need to be provided to vested partners. This could include how to deliver SEL instruction, ways to create opportunities to practice, and reinforcement. Professional learning concerning the dispositions may not only be to inform adults on how to meet secondary students' social-emotional competency needs but how to embody those dispositions themselves, providing models to serve as examples to students.

Finally, the findings of this study may be calling for the participants to identify how the social-emotional competency survey could be administered to serve as post-intervention data. SEL efforts need to be frequently reevaluated with the use of data to determine how to best meet students' social-emotional needs (Center on PBIS, 2022). Participants emphasized how crucial it is for them and their school teams to know if their efforts are successful and/or if they need to redesign or adjust their current efforts.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was that only two focus groups were conducted. Krueger and Casey (2009) indicated that conducting three focus groups is generally the minimum number that is required to reach saturation, or the point at which new themes are not emerging from the focus groups. Due to the limited availability of the participants due to work responsibilities, only two focus groups were able to be conducted. Additionally, Krueger and Casey (2009) suggested that focus groups be composed of five to seven participants, allowing for a rich discussion between a participant group that is not too large or too small. The focus groups consisted of seven and eight participants respectively, and there were a couple of participants in each focus group that only provided a couple of comments. This may indicate that smaller focus groups would have been more effective in eliciting participants' comments and supporting a small-group discussion.

Additionally, Krueger and Casey (2009) recommended that analysis of each focus group take place before the next focus group is held. This continuous analysis allows the researcher to determine when saturation has been reached; saturation is reached after approximately three focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Due to the limited availability of the participants due to work responsibilities, the two focus groups were held one after another, allowing no time for the researcher to conduct an analysis of the first focus group before the second was held. However, the ideas and themes that emerged from each focus group were similar to one another, perhaps indicating that saturation was reached.

Another limitation of this study was that the demographic data reported is reflective of more than just the 15 participants in this study. The primary researcher and research assistant were invited to a district-wide, in-person meeting where all school psychologists were present;

thirty-nine school psychologists filled out consent forms and demographic surveys. Of these 39 school psychologists, 15 participated in this study while 19 participated in its sister study, accounting for 34 school psychologists. Due to the way this data was collected, and to maintain participant confidentiality, the researchers were unable to differentiate between the demographic data of the individuals who participated in this study and its sister study.

Another limitation of this study was that the participants had not previously been involved in implementing screening or using screening data. NASP's "Best Practices in School Psychology" reflect what a school psychologists' responsibilities may include, such as implementing a screening program and using that data to design social-emotional services (NASP, 2020). However, in the case of this study, the participants had not been previously, professionally involved in delivering a screener, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and designing social-emotional and behavioral supports for students. Due to this limitation, the results and findings of this study may not be representative of the ideas of the general school psychologist populace in the United States, or of school psychologists who have been involved in implementing screening and using screening data.

Another limitation of this study was that the participants were employed in one school district in one northwestern state in the United States. The demographic diversity of the participants was limited, and as discussed previously, the demographic data collected does not directly reflect the school psychologist participants in this study. Because of these factors, the results and findings of this research may not be representative of the ideas of the general school psychologist populace in the United States. Furthermore, the results and findings of this study may not be directly applicable to every school team looking to implement social-emotional interventions in secondary schools due to the diverse nature and experiences of every school

team and the communities they serve. As such, the results and findings of this study should be applied to practice with caution and with the consideration of contextual factors.

Future Research

There are numerous ways in which school and district teams may elect to meet students' social-emotional needs, and this study only elicited the perspectives of school psychologists from one district in one northwestern state. PBIS and MTSS are implemented in school districts in different ways. There are many social-emotional learning programs available for schools and districts to choose from. School and district teams are made up of diverse professionals with varying experiences and expertise. Students' social-emotional needs may vary widely from school to school, district to district, and state to state. Future research could be done in a variety of districts and states to increase findings' applicability to practice.

One of the findings of this study concerned the importance of the collaboration of all vested partners in meeting students' social-emotional needs. Future research could conduct focus groups with entire school teams concerning how they might respond to the data from a social-emotional competency survey. Researchers could conduct focus groups with school teams concerning the factors needed for school teams to collaborate effectively and efficiently. Another finding of this study concerned the integration of the dispositions into the school environment by all staff. One of the findings of the sister study concerned the integration of the dispositions into students' home lives. Future research could include focus groups with all vested partners (e.g., school, district, and community vested partners) to elicit ideas concerning how to integrate social-emotional dispositions into all areas of students' lives.

Another finding of this study, and much of the focus group discussions, concerned the importance of prioritizing time to meet students' social-emotional competency needs. Future

research could conduct focus groups with school teams concerning what they think are the most effective and practical ways to prioritize time in secondary settings. Further, all school psychologist participants in this study obtained degrees beyond the undergraduate level. Future research could ask participants, whether they be school principals, school counselors, school psychologists, or school social workers, how their graduate training may have prepared them to respond to data indicating students' social-emotional needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study was conducted to elicit school psychologists' ideas concerning tiered supports and strategies they might use if a district-designed social-emotional competency survey showed secondary students' needs in the following areas: self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect. In addition, this study was conducted to elicit school psychologists' ideas concerning professional learning and peer-to-peer coaching opportunities that would be helpful for them and/or their school teams in responding to the data from a social-emotional competency survey. Focus groups were conducted with school psychologists because they play an important role in the collection of and response to social-emotional and behavioral data in schools.

Results from this study show that school psychologists are knowledgeable about how to respond to social-emotional competency data to meet secondary students' needs. First, school psychologists recommended providing instruction, opportunities to practice, and reinforcement for each of the dispositions. Second, school psychologists emphasized the importance of building supportive staff-student and student-student relationships. Third, school psychologists emphasized staff efforts in meeting students' social-emotional competency needs being consistent, integrated, simple, and unified. Lastly, school psychologists discussed how core intervention ideas can be adapted by tier and disposition.

To date, it is believed that school psychologists' ideas concerning tiered social-emotional interventions in response to data are not a part of the extant literature. The findings of this study build upon the current literature concerning the importance of collaboration, prioritization, alignment, explicit instruction, and professional learning opportunities in addressing students' social-emotional needs, suggesting that school psychologists are familiar with and apply current, verifiable research to their practice. The results of this study can aid school and district teams in meeting secondary students' social-emotional competency needs.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter**Memorandum**

To: Ellie Young
Department: BYU - EDUC - Counseling, Psychology, & Special Education
From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Associate Director
Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator
Date: November 01, 2021
IRB#: IRB2021-309
Title: Perceptions of Implementing Universal Social Emotional Behavioral Screenings in Schools

Brigham Young University's IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as exempt level, Categories 1 and 2. This study does not require an annual continuing review. Each year near the anniversary of the approval date, you will receive an email reminding you of your obligations as a researcher and to check on the status of the study. You will receive this email each year until you close the study.

The study is approved as of 11/01/2021. Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB.

Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement can be found in iRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, report adverse events, can be found on the IRB website, iRIS guide: <https://irb.byu.edu/iris-training-resources>
5. All non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB. Please refer to the [IRB website](#) for more information.

APPENDIX B

Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction

This research study is being conducted by Ellie Young PhD at Brigham Young University to explore perspectives on (1) the implementation of initiatives based on data collected from the district-designed social-emotional competency survey and (2) opportunities for professional learning that will support school psychologists and school staff in implementing these initiatives. You were invited to participate because you are a school psychologist who is involved in responding to the data collected by the district-designed social-emotional competency survey.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will complete a demographic survey after signing this document that will take about 5 minutes to complete.
- You will participate in a small group discussion, or focus group, with 4-10 other participants for approximately 45 minutes about your perspectives on (1) the implementation of initiatives based on data collected from the district-designed social-emotional competency survey and (2) opportunities for professional learning that will support school psychologists and school staff in implementing these initiatives.
- The focus group will take place directly following the professional learning meeting you attended. A Zoom link will be provided to you that will allow you to join the focus group.
- The focus group will be video and audio recorded to ensure accuracy prior to data analysis.
- The researcher will contact you later with a summary of what was said in your focus group. You will be asked to determine if this summary is accurate; if not, you will be asked to detail what needs to be changed or added to make it accurate.
- Total time commitment will be approximately 60 minutes.

Risks/Discomforts

Participating in this research involves minimal risks. There is potential for minimal discomfort when discussing the implementation of complex initiatives in school settings as this may involve the sharing of personal opinions, experiences, and ideas. Participants may stop participating at any point if there is discomfort; participants may choose to not answer any questions if they feel discomfort.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to you. It is hoped, however, that through your participation researchers may contribute to the growing body of research literature that improves the implementation of initiatives in response to survey data collected in schools.

Consent to Use Audio and Video Recording

During the study, researchers will audio and video record you. Your consent below allows BYU to use these recordings for purposes associated with the study. I understand that researchers will take audio and video recordings of me as part of this study. I give permission for BYU to use the media in scientific publications, scientific conferences or meetings, educational presentations, public presentations to non-scientific groups, and other uses related to the study so long as my name is not used. I agree that all media will become the property of BYU, and I waive my right to inspect, approve, or be compensated for BYU's use of the media.

Confidentiality

The focus groups will be audio and video recorded and then transcribed. Transcription will be kept on password protected computers that only the primary researchers have access to. No identifying information will be used in any research summaries or analyses. Due to the nature of focus groups, the researcher cannot ensure that other focus group participants will keep information shared confidential. However, at the beginning of each focus group, the moderator will ask that all information shared be kept confidential. The audio and video recordings will be deleted after 2 years of the completion of the study.

Compensation

Focus group participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card after the completion of the focus group. Compensation will not be prorated.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without affecting your employment or standing in the school district.

Questions about the Research

If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Ellie Young at (801) 422-1592 for further information.

Questions about Your Rights as Research Participants

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant contact IRB Administrator at (801) 422-1461; A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and agree to its terms. I understand my participation in this study is of my own free will and accord.

Name (Printed)

Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

Demographic Survey

- What is your age?
 - _____
- What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other _____
 - Prefer not to answer
- What is your ethnicity?
 - African American/Black
 - Alaska Native
 - American Indian
 - Asian
 - Caucasian/White
 - Hispanic/Latino
 - Mixed/Multiracial
 - Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
 - Other _____
 - Prefer not to answer
- What school setting do you currently work in?
 - Elementary School
 - Secondary School
 - Other _____
- Cumulatively, how long have you been a school psychologist?
 - _____
- What is your highest degree earned?
 - Bachelor's Degree
 - Master's Degree
 - Education Specialist Degree
 - Doctorate Degree
 - Other _____
- What licensures do you have?
 - _____

APPENDIX D

Focus Group Questions for School Psychologists

Introduction

Welcome! Thank you for being willing to take part in this research study. My name is Brandi Bezzant and I will be the moderator for this focus group. I am a second-year graduate student in the School Psychology Ed.S. program at Brigham Young University. This focus group is a part of my master's thesis. This is Ellie Young, my thesis chair who will be assisting me in collecting and analyzing the data. Please make yourself comfortable and feel free to ask any questions along the way.

I would like to establish some ground rules before we begin. I want you all to feel comfortable sharing your ideas and points of view even if those views differ from other participants' comments. Please contribute your honest opinions. There are no right or wrong answers, only personal experiences or perspectives that can add to a rich discussion. I want to remind you all that I am recording this session for the purpose of data collection and analysis. Your name will remain confidential. We ask that the ideas that are shared here are kept confidential; please do not discuss ideas shared here with people outside of this focus group.

We ask that you keep yourself muted until you are ready to share your opinion. Please keep the discussion related to the topic and don't get sidetracked. Please let others finish what they are saying before you speak. We ask that you do not leave the Zoom meeting until it is over. We estimate it will not last any longer than 45 minutes.

You may be aware that [name of district] has created a survey to identify student needs in the following character dispositions that contribute to student well-being: self-mastery, compassion, resilience, and respect. The purpose of this focus group is to explore school psychologists' perspectives regarding tiered strategies that may be used to address student well-being needs, as well as professional learning opportunities that may be needed to implement these strategies.

Opening Question

1. Tell us who you are, your job title, where you work, and what you most enjoy doing when you are not working.

Introductory Question

2. As a school psychologist, what comes to mind when you think about using the data from the [district-designed social-emotional competency] survey?

Key Questions

Self-Mastery: I am aware of my emotions and manage them in healthy ways at the moment.

3. What universal, school-wide tier-1 interventions would you use to address students' self-mastery needs in secondary schools?
4. What are some tier-2 or small group interventions that you might use to address self-mastery needs in a secondary setting?

Compassion: I have empathy for others and respond with kindness.

5. What universal, school-wide tier-1 interventions would you use to address students' compassion needs in secondary schools?
6. What are some tier-2 or small group interventions that you might use to address compassion needs in a secondary setting?

Resilience: I can recover in a timely manner and persevere in challenging situations.

7. What universal, school-wide tier-1 interventions would you use to address students' resilience needs in secondary schools?
8. What are some tier-2 or small group interventions that you might use to address resilience needs in a secondary setting?

Respect: I genuinely value our school environment and all people around me and treat them accordingly with appropriate actions.

9. What universal, school-wide tier-1 interventions would you use to address students' respect needs in secondary schools?
10. What are some tier-2 or small group interventions that you might use to address respect needs in a secondary setting?

Professional Learning Opportunities

11. What professional learning opportunities might you and your school team need in order to implement interventions encompassing these needs?

Ending Question

12. In closing, we just want to remind you that the purpose of this focus group is to explore school psychologists' perspectives regarding tiered strategies that may be used to address student well-being needs, as well as professional learning opportunities that may be needed to implement these strategies. With that in mind is there anything that you would like to say that you did not get a chance to say? We have some time now if anyone would like to share.