

Spring 4-16-2020

Guiding the Socio-emotional Learning of African American Middle School Girls Through the Perspective of School Counselors

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Guiding the Socio-emotional Learning of African American Middle School Girls Through the
Perspective of School Counselors

Towana L. M. Hunter
Concordia University–Portland
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in
Higher Education

James A. Therrell, Ph.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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2020

Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the perspective of school counselors and how they support African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. School counselors play a key role in the development of socio-emotional learning (SEL) for all students. SEL supports academic achievement, behaviors, and positive relationship development. Despite success with SEL, socio-emotional gaps remain in the areas of age, gender, and race. In response to addressing these gaps, this study focused on SEL challenges that impact African American middle school girls and how school counselors support them through these challenges. Data for this study was collected through individual interviews and a focus group discussion with school counselors from traditional middle schools in the state of Virginia. The researcher used purposeful sampling to select 6–8 school counselors that worked directly with African American middle school girls. The findings generated three major themes: (a) develop strong rapport, (b) understand SEL challenges, and (c) effective methods of delivery. These findings support how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. This study provided results that could be utilized to further research on SEL.

Keywords: African American girls, barriers, challenges, middle school, school counselor, SEL

Dedication

First, I would like to give honor to God, who gave me the strength to get through this journey. I dedicate this dissertation to my family near and far, thanking each and every one of them for their continuous support through this process. A special thank you to my husband Allen and son Carter Allen for being understanding and supportive when my studies and writing came first. To all of my family and friends that constantly encouraged me and checked in when I needed it the most, Thank You.

Acknowledgements

I am forever grateful for my faculty chairperson, Dr. James Therrell. He taught me so much through this process. His dedication, patience, and support was phenomenal. He had the ability to bring ease during times of uncertainty. Dr. Therrell is full of knowledge and I am eternally grateful that I was blessed to be one of his scholars. Dr. Therrell, Thank you.

I also would like to thank Dr. Gniewek and Dr. Francis, who served as committee members, for all of their time and support through my journey. Through all of the changes, Dr. Gniewek and Dr. Francis continued to support me and understand my study. They were always available when needed and provided a wealth of knowledge. I thank each member of my committee for all of their time and dedication, ensuring I made it to the end.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my family, friends, and colleagues who encouraged me, pushed me, and supported me when I needed it the most. To my fellow school counselors that shared their perspective and insight on this research topic, Thank you. Because of your support, time, and wealth of knowledge, I am able to contribute to the body of knowledge as it pertains to socio-emotional learning.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the 1960s, knowledge about adolescent education was moving forward as educators investigated the student transition between childhood and becoming a teenager (Lutz, 2005). During this time, the development of the middle school movement was formed (Schaefer et al., 2016). This movement addressed the differences in “junior high” and “middle school,” including the benefits of the middle school model for students transitioning from elementary school. The middle school model was designed to provide continuous transitional support through teacher-student relationship building, smaller learning communities, and interdisciplinary curricula (Sands, 2011). Individual identity appears to emerge rapidly during the middle school years due to gains in social cognitive development (Sands, 2011).

One resource with promise for addressing the needs of middle school students is SEL. SEL is comprised of five components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These components are designed to support emotions, impulse control, communication, relationship building, problem solving, and empathy (Gordon & Crowder, 2019). SEL has been identified as an essential tool for addressing academic, behavioral, and socio-emotional needs of adolescents (West et al., 2018).

The middle school years are often identified as a difficult time for adolescents, especially due to an increase in early puberty (Weir, 2016), which is associated with problems related to behavior and emotions (Chen et al., 2017). Early puberty is mostly linked to girls, with the onset of puberty decreasing from an average age of 16 to 13 over the last century, resulting in contemporary girls becoming more at-risk for developing social, emotional, academic, and behavioral challenges (Weir, 2016). Because the issues and challenges associated with early puberty are so prevalent, school personnel must adequately prepare to address them.

School counselors are one of the key personnel who help young teens. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), identifies school counselors as the first point of contact for addressing the social and emotional needs of students (ASCA, 2017). The role of the school counselor is to support the academic, career, and socio-emotional needs of students. They have been trained to teach, support, and improve SEL, as well as provide SEL support to middle school students through individual counseling, small groups, and classroom guidance lessons, providing, for example, interventions and coping strategies. However, these strategies and interventions have not been as effective for African American middle school girls (Zakrzewski, 2016).

Background and Context

Over the last several decades, school districts have been utilizing socio-emotional learning as an intervention to address socio-emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of middle school students (Slaten et al., 2015). School districts nationwide have noticed the benefits of SEL to support academics, improve behaviors and attitudes (Hanover Research, 2017). By modeling appropriate behaviors, implementing school-wide strategies and collaborating with stakeholders (educators, communities, and families) SEL supports academic achievement, positive relationship building, and improved behavior (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Effective SEL strategies resulted in sixth grade students improving their problem-solving, communication, and how they dealt with stress by at least 88% (Weissberg, 2011). Despite success with SEL, socio-emotional gaps remain related to age, gender, and race/ethnicity (Flannery et al., 2017; Hamlat et al., 2015; West et al., 2018). A longitudinal study that examined age and gender differences as it pertained to coping strategies found significant gender differences during middle adolescence (13–15 years old) for social and emotional support (Flannery et al., 2017). A SEL survey

conducted to review gender, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity differences found that many girls struggle with intrapersonal behaviors along with lower levels of social awareness and self-management (West et al., 2018). As a result of these findings, research suggests that studies should review how SEL is viewed and used differently for gender and race/ethnicity.

Statement of Problem

A process and resource that may be effective for addressing the needs of middle school students is SEL. However, the effects of SEL appear to differ by gender and race/ethnicity. Middle school students from low-income families benefit greatly from SEL supports provided through the school (West et al., 2018). A SEL survey was conducted in California during the 2015–2016 school year, with nearly 400,000 fourth grade through 12th grade students, with 184,649 participants identified as middle school students in grades 6–8 and 9.5% identified as African American. After a review of the data received from the survey, African American students reported lower levels of SEL, resulting in more difficulties with exhibiting the behaviors asked of them (West et al., 2018). The survey also revealed that difficulties with SEL during the middle school years often worsen over time for girls. Previous research found that SEL studies need to be expanded to address gaps related to ethnicity and gender (Bailey et al., 2015; Hamlat et al., 2015; Teston, 2017; West et al, 2018). Thus, the main problem this study will address is how to overcome the socio-emotional learning challenges that confront African American middle school girls.

SEL is an effective intervention for addressing academic and behavior concerns and school counselors are the main sources for teaching SEL strategies and coping skills (Slaten et al., 2015). School counselors support the academic, career, and socio-emotional needs of students and are responsive to the demographic changes and academic development of students

(Washington, 2010). Unfortunately, SEL has often been identified as being effective for some students. Past research found that SEL studies must be expanded to address gaps related to gender and race/ethnicity (Bailey et al., 2015; Hamlat et al., 2015; Teston, 2017; West et al, 2018). This research will allow for an exploration of how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

Purpose of Study and Research Question

Pursuant to the main problem, the purpose of this qualitative case study approach will be to explore how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. SEL is designed to address behavior, teach coping skills, and help improve the school climate. SEL is also one of the three components school counselors focus on. However, ensuring SEL for all students could be a challenging task for school counselors, resulting in a need for rethinking and strategizing better ways to implement and facilitate SEL (Van Velsler, 2009). It was found that African American children are less socially and emotionally competent and are at higher risk than their peers of other ethnic groups to internalize and externalize problems (Garner et al., 2014). It appears that SEL may be impacted by individual, systemic, and institutional barriers (Simmons et al., 2018). It is necessary to understand how school counselors are helping to guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. Stemming from the problem and purpose above, the following research question will guide this study: “How do school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges?”

Rationale and Significance of Study

The rationale for conducting this qualitative case study is to gain more insight from school counselors regarding their current practices for addressing the SEL challenges that impact

African American middle school girls. This study is relevant because previous research mostly reflects the benefits, strategies, interventions and coping skills for all students. Such studies provide limited information about supporting gender and/or race/ethnicity differences in SEL, and point to extending the research to address such differences (Flannery et al., 2017; Hamlat et al., 2015; West et al., 2018).

Educators should understand any challenges that may impact a student's ability to follow through with SEL strategies. This study is significant because it has the opportunity to extend current SEL practices and close the identified SEL gap (West, et al, 2018), which has the potential to increase SEL strategies and interventions. Currently, the research reports the benefits of SEL interventions and strategies for all students but also identify the need for more diverse SEL interventions and strategies for African American girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015; West et al, 2018; Zakrzewski, 2016). Identifying the challenges that impact socio-emotional learning may increase the effectiveness of the SEL strategies and interventions (King-White & Kurt, 2019). For example, making the connections between SEL challenges and African American girls could help school counselors support them more effectively. Addressing SEL challenges of African American girls could also influence educator awareness of any behavioral or academic gaps, such as suspension and drop-out rates (Annamma et al., 2019).

Definitions of Terms

Middle school. Middle school, which includes grades 6–8, is designed to provide continuous transitional support through teacher/student relationship building, smaller learning communities, and interdisciplinary approaches (Sands, 2011).

Social-emotional learning (SEL). Social-emotional learning is described as a process that adults and children use to manage emotions, set goals, make responsible decisions and build

positive relationships (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). This process also includes promoting self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2017).

School counselor. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) defines school counselor as a certified/licensed educator who improves student success for all students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program that addresses academics, careers, and social-emotional development (ASCA, 2017).

Guidance. Guidance is described as the process of helping individuals, through their own efforts, to develop their potential for personal and social happiness and growth (Parankimalil, 2015). It typically includes practices such as being more preventative, developmental, and operable at the intellectual level (Parankimalil, 2015).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is based on two theoretical models: Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, including his bridging of how to understand behaviorist theories to support his theory and the ASCA national model for school counselors. Bandura's theory will help guide my study and support the importance of SEL. The utilization of his theory will help to interpret SEL and how school counselors guide African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges. School counselors appear to be more effective in presenting SEL interventions, strategies, and coping skills because they are trained in accordance with (ASCA, 2019). In the middle school setting, school counselors utilize classroom guidance lessons, small group, and individual counseling to present socio-emotional strategies and coping skills to students (ASCA, 2017).

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory has, over time, supported how educators frame and implement SEL for students. The social learning theory is defined as how people learn

through observation, modeling, and imitating. Bandura (1977) is often known for bridging the behaviorist learning theories (classical and operant conditioning) with the social learning theory. This collaboration resulted in Bandura (1977) identifying four principles that are important for social learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (McLeod, 2016). Social and emotional concerns related to behavior, academic achievement, and building relationships are hindering students daily and the outcomes are affected differently due to gender, race/ethnicity, and age (Bailey et al., 2015; Hamlat et al., 2015; Teston, 2017; West et al, 2018).

My conceptual framework is based on Bandura's social learning theory as the primary theory and the ASCA national model for school counselors, supporting SEL. Together, they form philosophical lenses, helping to provide an in-depth understanding of the topic supporting SEL, the impact SEL has on students and schools, and how SEL occurs. School counselors are instrumental in the delivery of SEL to all students.

The ASCA National Model, , is the framework that school counselors use to build a comprehensive program that benefits students, parents, teachers, administrators and the community (ASCA, 2019). This framework has helped to guide school counselors in the development of an effective counseling program through the usage of data-informed decision-making, systemic delivery, developing a curriculum that focuses on the mindset and behaviors of all students, supporting closing achievement and opportunity gaps, as well as supporting improved achievement, attendance, and behavior (ASCA, 2019). School counselors utilize this framework as they teach, model, and encourage students in the areas of academics, colleges and careers, and SEL.

Assumptions

Assumptions are made by researchers regarding the methods and participants used in the process of the research (Creswell, 2007). Three assumptions are critical to this study. The first

assumption is that SEL must be differentiated to ensure African American girls are learning and understanding the benefits in accordance with their specific SEL challenges. An example of such differentiation is integrating cultural norms and values into the program and activities (Jagers et al., 2018). A second assumption is that many African American girls experience SEL challenges that impact their ability to relate and understand. Some of these challenges include poverty, discipline, and trauma (Simmons et al., 2018). A final assumption is that school counselors understand the importance of being inclusive when presenting SEL and the impact it will have on African American middle school girls. This assumption is included because school counselors are trained to promote success for all students and to support creating school climates that celebrate diversity (Hughey, 2011).

Delimitations

Delimitations are defined as factors, such as geography, the sample, and so on, over which the researcher exercises some control (Simm, 2011). The focus of this study will be limited to an exploration of how middle school counselors guide SEL for African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges. Participants for this study will be limited to school counselors working in public middle schools in Virginia who work with African American middle school girls.

Researcher-As-Instrument

The researcher is a key instrument in qualitative research when utilizing semi structured or structured interviewing techniques (Pezalla et al., 2012). The researcher, for example, is an active respondent and facilitates the conversational space (Pezalla et al., 2012). Because the researcher designs the study, then collects and analyzes the data, it is important that the researcher is aware of any potential influence or bias he or she may have on the study (Baillie,

2015). One major bias I bring into this study is my desire to utilize SEL as the effective intervention, strategy, and tool it is designed to be while addressing the SEL barriers and challenges that impact some African American middle school girls. Another major bias I bring to this study is my desire to empower other school counselors to explore how SEL challenges impact the ability of some African American middle school girls to be successful in and out of school.

This is my 10th year as a school counselor and sixth year working directly with middle school students. I teach and model the desired behaviors for my students. However, my training and experiences may be different than the school counselors that will participate in this study. As the researcher, it will be important to keep an open mind when it comes to different styles and techniques being used by school counselors working with African American middle school girls. I have also worked within the same school district for several years with many of the potential participants for this study. Although we have never worked in the same building, nor have I been a direct supervisor for them, I would not want them to feel obligated to participate in the study because of our association.

I will use specific techniques to help counterbalance these biases, including member-checking and prolonged engagement. Through member-checking, I will take findings back to the participants for accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2007), also asking what might be missing. Prolonged engagement is described as building trust with participants, learning the culture, and checking for misinformation (Creswell, 2007). I will do this by extending the time spent with the participant as needed to gain trust, comfort, and accuracy. This may mean going to the participant versus the participant coming to me. Utilizing these techniques will help counterbalance my biases, and also increase trustworthiness, mainly credibility.

Summary

This research is important because SEL has been identified as an effective resource to address the needs of students, ensuring positive changes in behavior and academic success. However, some African American students have reported lower levels of social-emotional learning, resulting in challenges that affect their ability to integrate SEL strategies and techniques (West et al., 2018). Also, there is often significant SEL gender difference during the middle adolescent years that may result in an increased need for social and emotional support (Flannery et al., 2017). Girls are more often identified as being more socially and emotionally engaged than boys, resulting in higher levels of behavioral and emotional engagement and lower cognitive engagement (Yang et al., 2017). Therefore, this study will explore how school counselors help guide the SEL challenges that confront African American middle school girls.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A literature review serves several purposes. It is organized to align with the conceptual framework and designed to provide an overview of sources related to the study topic (Fink, 2014). A literature review provides study summaries and a synthesis that contributes to how the research will achieve alignment (Fink, 2014). In this chapter, a review of relevant literature will be discussed to highlight gaps to support this study. The literature will begin with the middle school movement, focusing on the transition to middle school and the impact that the middle school years may have on academics and behaviors. Following the middle school years will be an introduction to African American girls with the focus on the challenges that impact their behaviors and academics. Next will be SEL and the benefits of effective interventions and strategies to increase academic success and decrease inappropriate behaviors. Lastly, the literature will explore the role of the school counselor, covering how school counselors support middle school students through presenting and modeling SEL strategies and interventions. The literature will align with the research question and provide evidence to support school counselors helping African American middle school girls and guiding them through their SEL challenges. At the conclusion of this literature review, the detailed rationale for this study will be identified and justified.

As a part of the conceptual framework, SEL is a common theme that aligns with interventions and coping strategies utilized in middle schools, as well as one of three components taught by school counselors, which are presented throughout this literature review. SEL is defined as a process that children and adults use to manage emotions, set goals, make positive decisions, and building positive relationships (Gunn, 2018; Jones & Doolittle, 2017). SEL increases academic achievement while addressing behavioral and discipline concerns, through

small group lessons, individual counseling, and classroom guidance lessons presented by school counselors (McCormick et al., 2015). In the middle school setting, SEL is about making connections with their peer groups, becoming socially aware of cultural differences, and utilizing coping skills such as deep breathing, counting, etc. (Jimenez, 2016).

The middle school years are considered a time when students experience difficulties with socio-emotional development, behaviors, and academics, requiring continuous transitional support (Sand, 2011; Thomason et al., 2018). Middle school students are taught coping skills, relationship skills, and self-management skills through SEL. Within the last few decades, SEL has been identified as being just as important to the student's development and success as academics (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). School counselors may utilize SEL to support the needs of middle school students and to model desired behaviors.

All educators participate to some degree in the development of SEL in students, while school counselors are typically provided more training. School counselors possess integral skills that allow them to support students and address their academic, social, and emotional needs. School counselors are trained through guided learning (internships and practicums; King-White and Kurt, 2019). School counselors are licensed by state educational agencies and according to American School Counseling Association (ASCA), complements the school's educational goals by addressing students' personal/social, career and academic needs (Edwards, 2019). School counselors implement programs that address whole group and individual needs of the students.

This literature review has been organized based on socio-emotional learning and emerging themes related to SEL. The themes include middle school, African American girls, and school counselors. The literature review will provide connections between these themes as well

as discuss gaps and challenges related to SEL and African American middle school girls, supporting the importance of this study.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework helps to guide and support the research. The conceptual framework is a synthesis of the literature that helps to explain the phenomenon and provides a map to pursuing the investigation (Regoniel, 2015). For this study, the conceptual theory that is most relatable to SEL is the social learning theory. The social learning theory supports the understanding of reciprocal interactions between behaviors and its controlling conditions (Bandura, 1977). Social interactions and relationships influences learning. Social learning supports SEL, which helps middle school students building relationships, self-regulate, and become socially aware.

The social learning theory identifies how people learn through observing, imitating, and modeling (Bandura, 1977). SEL supports developing relationships, self-awareness and management, being responsible, and socially aware. School-based SEL programs utilize SEL to support middle school students academically, behaviorally, emotionally, and socially (West et al., 2018). School counselors have been identified as essential in the social and emotional development of middle school students (ASCA, 2017). School counselors model the desired behavior as well as provide SEL support through classroom lessons, individual counseling, and small group counseling. Through SEL, the social learning theory is perceptible as the framework supported by educators as SEL is implemented for middle school students.

SEL draws on behavioral and cognitive influences linked to social learning. Social learning identifies direct experiences and observations as elements for the development of new behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Direct experiences are impacted by rewards and consequences which

determines the response of the individual (Bandura, 1977). For example, a middle school student that is rewarded for positive behavior may be motivated to continue to display the desired behavior. Responses are typically strengthened by the reward or the consequence. Cognitive skills are also enhanced through these experiences.

SEL is a tool designed to support addressing the academic, behavior, social, and emotional needs of middle school students in an effort to change undesired behaviors. However, SEL is not effective for every student. African American students have reported having difficulties with integrating SEL strategies and techniques (West et al., 2018). The relationship between awareness and behavior reflects on the effectiveness of the reinforcement as well as whether the individual devalues the required behavior or reinforcement (Bandura, 1977).

Social learning encourages modeling as a way to produce learning. To effectively formulate modeling, four modeling processes were identified (attention, retention, motoric reproduction, and reinforcement and motivation). The first modeling process is attention. Attention is described as being present and attentive to the essential features of the modeled behavior (Bandura, 1977). The second process is retention that consist of observational learning. Observational learning consist of imaginal and verbal systems that produces modeling stimuli (Bandura, 1977). The third process is motoric reproduction. This process supports achieving behavioral reproduction that requires the learner to put together responses related to the model patterns (Bandura, 1977). The final process is the reinforcement and motivational process. This process examines the individual's ability or inability to execute the modeled behavior (Bandura, 1977). Social learning and the modeling processes align with SEL and development for middle school students.

SEL is a resource with promise for addressing the needs of middle school students. SEL is the acquiring and applying of skills to support and manage emotions, relationships, and achieving goals. Middle school students from low-income families often benefit greatly from SEL support. However, despite success with SEL, it has not been effective for all students. African American students have been identified as being less socially and emotionally competent and report having difficulties exhibiting the behaviors asked of them (Gardner et al., 2014; West et al., 2018). Oftentimes, this is due to the lack of consideration for cultural and contextual stressors (Johnson, 2019).

Individual, institutional, and systemic barriers often impact the effectiveness of SEL (Simmons et al., 2018). A barrier such as environment can hinder a student's ability to learn and model the desired behavior. Environment was identified as being potentially hazardous for a student, making it difficult to observe, imitate, and model the desired behavior (Bandura, 1977). Students are exposed to a variety of situations within their environment that may not be modeled appropriately, leaving the student to explore and interpret the behavior on their own.

The social learning theory identified modeling as an important process for learning. Modeling SEL strategies and techniques provide students with positive examples for navigating stressors or barriers (CASEL, 2020). Modeling SEL strategies and techniques supports the development of positive relationships and increases the opportunity for a more effective learning environment (CASEL, 2020). However, SEL strategies and techniques have not soon to be success for all students.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

The purpose of this section is to provide a framework for establishing the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2014). The literature search started with Concordia University's

Search@CULibraries-Education engine. Other search engines consisted of ProQuest and Google Scholar databases. Several databases were used to pinpoint valid resources that highlight the benefits and challenges of SEL. Throughout the literature search, several key terms were used to ensure the literature aligned with the research (*middle school, African American girls, SEL, and school counselors*). The methodological part of this literature review will look at the typical ways for how studies are conducted, including quantitative design (experimental and nonexperimental), qualitative design (narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnographies, and case study), and mixed-method design (convergent, explanatory, exploratory, and transformative; Creswell, 2014).

Middle School Years

Middle school is a time for self-discovery and developing friendships. For many students, middle school is like starting school for the first time, with new expectations and practices. Young teenagers are often challenged academically, developmentally, and socially during the middle school years (Goldstein et al., 2015). These challenges affect boys and girls differently, which has a significant impact on their social and academic success, as well as their socio-emotional development during the middle school years. Developmental differences must also be considered when addressing the socio-emotional needs of young teenagers (Lui et al., 2016). Significant gender differences appear during the middle adolescent years related to socio-emotional support and how girls may be more willing to utilize new SEL strategies when experiencing difficulties (Flannery et al., 2017).

Emotional distress may impede academic success for middle school students (Deighton et al., 2017). Challenges such as aggression, internalizing symptoms, externalizing difficulties, and socio-economic disadvantages also contribute to poor academic progress and socio-emotional

difficulties (Deighton et al., 2017). However, SEL interventions are designed to support middle school students experiencing difficulties related to behaviors and academics. School-based SEL interventions appear to foster academic skills by supporting the socio-emotional and behavioral development (McCormick et al., 2015).

Middle school is a transitional phase, comprised of individuals who are trying to find their way through their educational journey. Many middle school students go through physical, emotional, and social challenges that affect their academic, social, and emotional success (Main & O'Neil, 2018). Middle school is a time when young teenagers need support as they navigate the rapid impact of puberty on their intellectual, social, and emotional being (Armstrong, 2006; Goldstein et al., 2015). SEL interventions provide middle school students additional support during this transitional phase. Difficulties academically, emotionally, and socially occurs during the middle school years often resulting in increased anxiety and confusion as they face educational and interpersonal changes on top of the biological changes endured during the stages of early adolescence (Bailey et al., 2015).

Several middle school challenges may be impacted by the onset of puberty. A stage termination model suggests that adolescents who experience early puberty may not have enough cognitive or emotional maturity to understand the psychosocial effects of puberty (Hamlat et al., 2015). Early puberty development may also lead to high levels of depression in girls (Hamlat et al., 2015). Puberty presents differences between gender and race/ethnicity. During a mixed-method study, utilizing the Pubertal Development Scale, one study found that African American girls experience puberty sooner than their female peers of a different race/ethnic background (Seaton & Carter, 2018). For the most part, girls who experience puberty earlier appear to encounter more distress with developing healthy peer relationships (Hamlat et al., 2015). The

lack of healthy relationships and suitable social development often lead to inappropriate behaviors and low academic motivation. In recent years, girls have become more involved in disruptive behaviors and being socially popular has become more important than following the rules (Van der Molen et al., 2015).

For many students, middle school is a time for growth and self-discovery. However, middle schoolers are often more physically mature and less emotionally mature (Morin, 2014). During this time, academic and social challenges may occur, often increasing confusion and anxiety (Bailey et al., 2015). These challenges contribute to an increase in disruptive behavior among middle school girls (Goldstein et al., 2015; van der Molen et al., 2015). Addressing the social and emotional needs of middle school students will help decrease behavioral concerns and increase academic success.

African American Middle School Girls

The middle school years can present many challenges for students in grades 6–8. For African American girls, challenges during middle school may impact their academic success and behavior (Epstein et al., 2017). African American girls are often viewed as being defiant, resulting in an increase in the suspension rate over the last decade (Annamma et al., 2019). African American girls are more likely to be cited for dress code violations, disruptive behavior, aggressive behavior, and disobedience than other girls (Morris & Perry, 2017). They are also perceived as less innocent and adult-like, viewed as needing less nurturing, protection, and support (Epstein et al., 2017). However, African American middle school girls depend on social support to help navigate their academic journey (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018).

African American girls encounter many challenges that may impact their ability to be successful. Two challenges that African American girls face are educational and socialization

barriers, resulting in a need to teach the skills needed for success (Cattenhead, 2017). Other challenges include racial and gender biases, stereotypes (hypersexual, aggressive, loud), and home life (exposure to trauma, violence, abuse; Graves, 2014). For African American girls, these challenges can be wearing and impact their academic success. Stereotypes and biases not only affect African American girls' ability to be successful, but affects their confidence and self-perception (NWLC, 2014). African American girls that are impacted by these challenges bring their experiences and coping mechanisms to school with them (White, 2018). It is important to equip these girls with the tools and resources to support them during difficult times.

A lack of resources to foster the growth of African American girls can have a profound impact on their academic success (NWLC, 2014). Without proper resources and support for African American girls, their needs become invisible (Cattenhead, 2017). Identifying resources and interventions for African American girls is important, however, it is just as important to ensure the resources and interventions are modified to meet their needs. Targeted resources and interventions must be tailored to meet the unique experiences of African American girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015).

Challenges that impact African American girls should be addressed through school-based interventions and school counseling (White, 2018). One school-based intervention with promise to support African American girls is SEL. SEL interventions support academic achievement and improving behaviors while promoting self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2017). However, SEL interventions must be flexible, reciprocal to relationships (school and community), account for cultural context and differences, and account for the impact society has on the student (Zakrewski, 2016).

African American girls depend on social support to help them overcome academic challenges and maintain connectedness (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018). In a linear mixed effect model utilizing longitudinal data, it was discovered that African American middle school girls' benefit academically when they feel supported and connected in the school setting (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018). SEL interventions have been found to encourage connectedness and support academic achievement. However, current SEL practices fail to meet the unique needs of African American girls (Johnson, 2019).

The unique needs of African American girls extend beyond behaviors in the classroom and poor grades. African American girls are being suspended at a much higher rate than their peers (12% more than girls and boys), encounter racial and gender biases, endure sexual harassment, and are more likely to have parenting responsibilities at home, tending to younger siblings (Bezahler et al., 2015). SEL interventions have the potential to support African American girls through their unique needs and challenges. However, the development of a customized approach that will address and support the challenges of African American girls will show more promise for being beneficial to these students.

Socio-Emotional Learning

SEL is a process designed to support young girls through puberty and the middle school transition, supporting them through challenges that occur during this timeframe (Chen et al., 2017; Slaten et al., 2015). SEL is a process that adults and children use to manage emotions, set goals, make responsible decisions and build positive relationships (Gunn, 2018). The framework for SEL also identifies self and social awareness as key components for supporting healthy SEL (CASEL, 2017). As an intervention, SEL promotes social and emotional competencies for all children (Coelho et al., 2014). However, challenges such as trauma, socioeconomic status, and

difficulties within the family dynamics affect healthy SEL (Domitrovich et al., 2017). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory supports the importance of SEL for students, identifying attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation as key principles of the social learning theory. In the 1960s, Karen McCown, a pioneer of SEL, began developing one of the first school programs geared around SEL (Bar-On et al., 2007). Through the support of other educators, she developed a curriculum that supported teacher efforts to go beyond academic learning, to SEL.

SEL appears to be a successful, cost-effective intervention in support of students (Fagan et al., 2015). The effectiveness of SEL is beneficial for lowering stress, increasing good health, and increasing the love of learning as well as decreasing behavioral concerns and increasing school connectedness (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). The development and implementation of SEL increases academic achievement by addressing behavioral and discipline concerns of at-risk students (McCormick et al., 2015). A meta-analysis study revealed that SEL, a combination of social development and emotional development promotes opportunities for students to develop positive, productive relationships (Taylor et al., 2017).

Ensuring successful transitions and academic achievement is supported through SEL. Addressing the socio-emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and physical needs of students is best supported through SEL (Walsh et al, 2014). SEL activities address the nonacademic needs as well as the academic needs to increase academic success. SEL activities are done in the classroom, individually, or in small groups. Utilizing structured SEL activities appear to help students develop learning strategies and social skills. The implementation of SEL contributes to academic success as well as support changes in the classroom climate. School-based preventive interventions that focus on social-cognitive and emotional processes improves social competence and reduces aggressive behavior (Bierman et al., 2010). Through SEL, self-awareness, self-

management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making can be addressed (CASEL, 2017).

SEL supports student engagement and peer interactions. The learning environment and the social environment are crucial to the developmental needs of students. Social environments that are sensitive to adolescents appeared to increase achievement motivations, behaviors, and emotions, whereas environments that are at odds with the developmental needs of young adolescents have been associated with a decline in academic achievement and engagement (Wang & Eccles, 2012). A case study revealed that local, state, and federal levels of the United States and around the world recognized that schools must meet the socio-emotional needs of students in order for effective teaching and learning to occur (Hagelskamp et al., 2013).

SEL is an evidence-based practice used to prevent and reduce internalizing symptoms (Johnson, 2019). SEL helps with balancing positive relationships, goals, and emotions. SEL also supports improving academic achievements and contributes to positive behaviors (Lemberger et al., 2016). Despite several benefits of SEL, socio-emotional gaps remain in the areas of age, race/ethnicity, and gender (Flannery et al., 2017; Hamlat et al., 2015; Johnson, 2019; West et al., 2018).

SEL interventions that consider the gaps (age, gender, and race/ethnicity) may have promise for being more beneficial for all students. Understanding the importance of differentiating SEL approaches and interventions will allow educators to meet the needs of all students and increase the effectiveness of the strategies. SEL interventions and strategies that lack consideration for cultural and contextual stressors endured by African American girls may experience low levels of participation, acceptability, and engagement due to a lack of relevance (Johnson, 2019).

School Counselors

Based on a particular history, school counselors play a key role in providing academic, career, and SEL support for middle school students. The role of the school counselor originated in the early 1900s, with a focus on transitioning students from school to the workforce (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). In the 1930s, vocational guidance was extended to include guidance and counseling theories, comprised of the psychoanalytic and behavioral theory and the trait and factor theory, to support the importance of school counseling (Lambie & Williamson, 2004). Williamson's 1930 trait and factor theory is an approach designed for counselors to use when dealing with the different personality traits of their clients (Kosciulek et al., 2015). Freud's psychoanalytic approach is designed to address human behavior and treat mental illness (McLeod, 2016). Pavlov's behavioral theory teaches that behavior is learned (Elen, 2018). One or more of these theories may be vital to how school counselors approach supporting the students through SEL.

The role of the school counselor has shifted over the years to more transformative practices. Transformative practices allow school counselors to provide academic, career, and socio-emotional support. The rise of mental health concerns among school-age students, has encouraged school counseling programs to put more emphasis on socio-emotional development and learning. Students of color who feel supported tend to develop positive ethnic identities, school engagement, and career development (Perez-Gualdron et al., 2016). Social support and connectedness contribute to the development of coping skills. School counselors build trusting relationships with students by listening to and supporting their needs, using the opportunity to learn about the student's family and the community they live in. Building trusting relationships and having positive role models seems to increase a positive learning environment as well as

provide socio-emotional support (Berman et al., 2018). However, this support may differ by gender and race/ethnicity.

Today, the role of the school counselor is more complex and extends beyond preparing students for a vocational career. School counselors play a vital role in the academic, career, and socio-emotional development of all students (Chandler et al., 2018). School counselors develop relationships with their students in order to better understand how to guide the student. However, school counselors must know, be taught, and understand how to provide support for African American children. School counselors are rarely, if ever, intentionally taught to identify, mobilize, and utilize the strengths and resources of African American students (Williams et al., 2014). Understanding the needs of all students will allow the school counselor to provide better support and foster healthy well-beings (Rumsey et al., 2018). School counselors have the opportunity to utilize resources and strategies to support all students.

The role of the school counselor is designed to support and meet the academic, career, and socio-emotional needs of all students. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2017) refers to school counselors as individuals, vital in identifying and addressing the SEL needs of students in the educational setting. School counselors are also identified as individuals that are responsive to the demographic changes and academic development of students (Washington, 2010). Responding to the needs of students includes ensuring every student has an equal opportunity to succeed. School counselors assist with the middle school transition, providing socio-emotional support.

School counselors are a part of the student support team in the educational setting; however, not all students have access to school counselors. Access to the school counselor varies across states; rural districts are most likely to lack school counselors (Gagnon & Mattingly,

2016). Research found that student support should be grounded in contemporary understandings of child socio-emotional, behavioral, physical, and cognitive development, in order to support the development of the whole child (Walsh et al., 2014). Schools are encouraged to provide and improve socio-emotional services with the collaboration of school counselors. During a 2011 study, it was found that school-based personnel (school counselors) are more effective at improving SEL outcomes than services provided by nonschool personnel (Maras et al., 2015). School counselors are identified as being more effective because of their accessibility to students and their families.

Student support is essential to SEL and school counselors appear to provide the necessary support (CASEL, 2017). School counselors also appear to play a pivotal role in teaching and modeling socio-emotional skills. School counselors advocate for students and are able to show that well-adjusted students are just as important to academic success as test scores, graduation rates, and achievement gaps. In 2012, 211 school counselors from the Mid-Atlantic region participated in a self-determination theory study supporting personal and social development as a way to increase motivation and support academic achievement (Barna & Brott, 2012). Social and personal development appeared to be just as important as academic achievement, and the results may be more favorable when the two are implemented together as an intervention. Research found that school counselor's collaboration efforts suggest programs and services are tailored and systemically delivered to meet the individual needs of all students (Barna & Brott, 2012). School counselors who collaborate with other educators working with students to meet their needs, have more of an impact. Supporting students during this pivotal time is imperative for school counselors. Developing positive adult relationships is an important source of support for many early adolescents, particularly because their relationships with their parents often become

more distant during this time period (Smetana et al., 2015). It is crucial for the school counselor to develop positive relationships with their students in order to help students with the difficulties they may experience in middle school.

The goal of the school counselor is to help all students achieve academic success, develop socio-emotional skills, and career development. School counselors provide middle school students comprehensive counseling services and support to meet the needs of all students (Hanover Research, 2015). They provide preventative and intervention support services, however, school counselors struggle with inequities and providing continuous support for all students (Fulton et al., 2019). School counselors are key resources for achieving equity among students and within the school environment (Fulton et al., 2019).

Demographic changes have increased the need for school counselors to receive additional training in diversity (Hughey, 2011). These changes have demonstrated the importance of school counselors receiving the necessary information, data, strategies, and support to assist a more diverse population (Hughey, 2011). School counselors are in a position to address inequities that may limit students' socio-emotional development (Dameron et al., 2019). They are a vital source for providing guidance, support, and advocacy for equity for all students (Fulton et al., 2019).

Methodological Issues

Methodological issues provide support for the methodological approach used to research the identified problem. This support includes methodological issues in qualitative research that are defined as strengths and weaknesses of the methodological approach (Concordia University, 2019). This includes issues such as the feasibility or specific limitation of the design, ethical protection, and other issues related to the methodological approach (Concordia University, 2019). Methodological issues allow the researcher to become familiar with previous issues that

may have impacted particular research findings. Knowing these issues will help to formulate how I design my study by exploring such issues, including how to conduct research in the context where it occurs (Stojanov & Dobrilovic, 2013). Therefore, my study will align with a qualitative study design with a single case study approach.

There are five approaches that can be considered when conducting qualitative research (narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, & case study). Regardless of the approach, qualitative research follows the same research process (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research often starts with assumptions related to the meaning of a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013). Through qualitative research, the identified problem is addressed through the data collected and the data analysis, establishing patterns. The qualitative research process includes interpreting the participants' meaning of the problem in order to address the research (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is best utilized when there is a need to explore a problem related to a group or population (Creswell, 2013).

Although qualitative research designs are significant methodological research tools, there are many weaknesses and strengths that must be considered when determining the most appropriate and effective research design for the study (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research with a case study approach allows for purposeful sampling, collection of documents and field notes, observations, interviews, and focus groups. Strengths in qualitative research include homogeneous exploration and the ability to utilize open-ended inquiry (Choy, 2014). Some weaknesses include individual interviews (process, time consuming), interpretations are limited and intensive categorizing, coding, chunking process (Choy, 2014). This part of the literature review will evaluate research designs explored in the literature reviewed on SEL, identifying strengths and weaknesses.

A qualitative case study approach supports research exploration that utilizes a variety of data sources, such as semi structured interviews, focus groups, observations and field notes (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study approach is described as an intensive and holistic phenomenon methodology (Yazan, 2015). It is most appropriate to utilize a case study approach when exploring, in-depth a current event in the actual context (Gaya & Smith, 2016). Case study approaches have been criticized for being less rigorous. However, when case studies are utilized in an organized and systematic manner, it helps to eliminate that claim (Yin, 2018).

Many studies focused on school-based practices for all students, where SEL interventions have been common (Bieman et al., 2010; CASEL, 2017; Coelho, 2014; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Merrell et al., 2008; Oberle et al., 2016; Silverthorn et al., 2017). These studies utilized interviews, focus groups, and surveys or questionnaires to collect data, often, relying on self-reported data. These studies identified specific issues of self-reporting, including the assumption that participants understood what they were reading, that they may overestimate their thoughts or feelings, and that self-reporting may affect the validity and fidelity of the study (Lemberger et al., 2016; Silverthorn et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2017) This study intends to fill a gap in the literature by utilizing a qualitative study approach with a case study design.

Researchers have focused on the importance of SEL and the use of this process to decrease behavioral concerns and/or improve academics through quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method designs. The majority of researchers in this review focused on middle school students via quantitative designs (Bailey et al., 2015; Bowser et al., 2015; Mann et al., 2015). Likewise, researchers who focused on African American girls utilized qualitative designs. Many of the studies reviewed related to SEL and school counselors were studied utilizing qualitative research designs (Chandler et al., 2018; Lemberger et al., 2016; Maras et al., 2015; Slaten et al.,

2015; Yang et al., 2017). Such qualitative approaches have produced valid, relevant findings, supporting a productive design approach, namely case study, for exploring how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls experiencing SEL challenges.

A longitudinal study about the effectiveness of school-based social-emotional development was conducted, utilizing 14 low-performing K–8 public schools in Chicago (Bavarian et al., 2017). The researchers utilized matched-pair, cluster randomization to identify schools for this study. The researchers utilized a survey with the students that were selected to participate in the study and relied on self-reporting of information. The researchers shared that self-reporting could be subject to social desirability biases (Bavarian et al., 2017). This longitudinal study brought forth data and evidence that supports the benefits of school-based social-emotional programs. However, the researchers identified a small sample size as a limitation to consider with future research.

A metaanalysis about promoting positive youth development through school-based social and emotional learning interventions was conducted, utilizing a regionally diverse sample both within and outside the United States (Taylor et al., 2017). Researchers relied on self-reporting intentionally for some of the questions, however, suggesting that future research could benefit from the perspective of other measures (Taylor et al., 2017). A quasi-experimental approach in relation to improving academic self-efficacy, school connectedness, and identity in struggling middle school girls was conducted, utilizing participants from two middle schools in California (Mann et al., 2015). Researchers relied on surveys and a focus group to collect data; however, the short timeframe to collect the quantitative data limited the ability to collect data on long-term effects of the program (Mann et al., 2015).

A mixed method designed has also been utilized to evaluate the effectiveness of an SEL program designed for middle school students at-risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (Neth et al., 2020). The researchers collected data through the utilization of individual interviews, a focus group and a Qualtrics survey pretest and posttest. The lack of control groups, maturity of the students and sample size presented limitations for the researchers (Neth et al., 2020). A longitudinal study was utilized to investigate ethnic-racial identity of African American middle school students and the impact it may have on social-emotional development and peer groups (Medina et al., 2019). Data was collected through a survey and self-reporting, which helped with the prediction of the hypotheses. However, the researchers recommended extending the research to include understanding the social climate of the school (Medina et al., 2019).

Synthesis of Research Findings

Synthesizing research allows the researcher to identify commonalities or patterns in the literature. Synthesize is defined as conjoining separate things under common elements through conceptual, ideational, or theoretical elements (Concordia University, 2019). Integrating these elements, the reader is provided a more nuanced picture of key studies. Identifying patterns in the literature will provide relevance to the study and highlight the key points. The patterns I explain below include decreasing behaviors, improving academic achievement, and increasing connectedness through SEL interventions as presented by school counselors.

The research has indicated that SEL contributes to improving behavior, academic achievement, and the overall well-being of students. Through the development and implementation of SEL, middle school students appear to be able to develop and utilize socio-emotional skills effectively. School climate and building positive relationships will enhance the learning environment and increase socio-emotional development. Research indicates that

economic and emotional wellbeing influence children and the development of socio-emotional skills will help students to continue to deal with these issues later in life (Aldridge et al., 2016).

SEL is an effective process for improving the school climate, building relationships, and increasing connectedness. Transitioning from elementary to secondary (middle and high) can affect students socially and emotionally; which at times will affect how successful the student will be in school. It can be an indicator of how well the student will make friends or whether the student will be academically successful. SEL is imperative during this time, as it will help address the whole child. Interventions should be designed to understand and address the whole child including socio-emotional, behavioral, physical, and cognitive development (Walsh et al., 2014).

Studies on SEL support the need for gender-related interventions. In order to support and meet the socio-emotional needs of middle school students, developmental differences must be considered (Liu et al., 2016). Girls tend to have socio-emotional strength; however, they experience more internal distress (Endrulat et al., 2010). Girls are more willing to utilize the SEL strategies provided to them. With the support of school counselors and the implementation of SEL, African American middle school girls' socio-emotional needs can be addressed.

School counselors develop relationships with their students so that they have a better understanding of how to guide students (Beierle, 2011). Understanding the needs of the students allows the school counselor to provide better support. Sometimes, this relationship extends past the student, including the entire family. This connection allows the counselor to understand the family dynamics; increasing the ability to provide responsive services to the student as well as the family (Beierle, 2011). With all of the available support provided by the school counselor, socio-emotional development can occur, which will support addressing the whole child.

School counselors are effective resources for encouraging SEL. Addressing the nonacademic needs of students, appears to increase SEL and improve academic success. School counselors play an important role in meeting the needs of all students, promoting academic success, career development, and SEL.

Critique of Previous Research

Critiquing previous research is important for accuracy and validation of the appropriateness of tools, processes, and data collection (Leung, 2015). The researcher must review, analyze, and critique evidence, claims, and concepts from previous research (Concordia University, 2019). Critiquing previous research involves understanding scientific, logical, and rational evaluation tools, then utilizing such tools (Concordia University, 2019). When critiquing previous research, it is important for the researcher not to misinterpret or incorrectly analyze study methods, results, or findings. The critique of the relevant literature below includes middle school, African American girls, SEL, and school counselors.

Several variables in the relevant literature weaken the claim that SEL is beneficial for all students. Two weaknesses include expectation of SEL (beneficial for all students), and who is implementing SEL (availability of school counselors), discussed in the following paragraphs. The literature often speaks of SEL as an effective school-based practice for all students (Coelho et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Silverthorn et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2017). However, SEL has not been beneficial for all students, resulting in researchers recommending expanding SEL research to include race, ethnicity and gender (Flannery et al., 2017; Hamlat et al., 2015; West et al., 2018). Oftentimes, African American students may report experiencing difficulties exhibiting the desired behavior due to fewer abilities regarding SEL (West et al., 2018).

A school counselor is a certified/licensed educator who improves student success for all students by implementing a comprehensive counseling program that addresses academics, careers, and social-emotional development (ASCA, 2017). School counselors are often key in providing socio-emotional development and learning. They often do this through classroom lessons, small group activities, and individual counseling. However, at times school counselors may not be able to meet the needs of their students, either because of the student-counselor ratio or nonschool counseling duties (Moyer, 2011). According to American School Counselor Association, the student-counselor ratio should be 250:1. During the 2014–2015 school year, only three states met the recommendation, while a fifth of the country exceeded the recommendation by double (ASCA, 2015). Non-counseling duties often include, but are not limited to cafeteria duty, hall duty, bus duty, proctoring exams, and sometimes subbing (Moyer, 2011). These non-counseling tasks prevent the school counselor from being as effective as they could be, limiting the amount of time they have available to meet with students and address their needs, including SEL.

The research included in this review presented several SEL obstacles. One obstacle is the SEL curriculum. The SEL curriculum mostly comes from the perspective of a dominant white, Western, individualistic culture, lacking more contextual factors and diversity. It strongly supported the importance and benefits of SEL however, it does not provide support specifically to African American middle school girls (Bandura, 1977; Bar-On et al., 2007). SEL appears to have many benefits, including but not limited to developing coping skills, decreasing behavior, increasing both academic achievement and school connectedness. Previous research, however, lacked how to address the ways in which school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

The connections between SEL and middle school girls, specifically African American girls, are not outlined clearly, despite multiple studies related to using SEL to improve behavior or academics, especially during the middle school years (Coelho et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Yang et al., 2017). Gaps in SEL appear in relation to gender and race/ethnicity (West, 2018). The connection between SEL, decreased behavior, and increased academic achievement is evident that SEL is an intervention that is beneficial for students. The increased implementation of SEL programs not only benefits the students, but also appears to improve the school climate (Bowers et al., 2015; Lemberger et al., 2016; Wang & Eccles, 2012).

Collaboration between school counselors and other educators helps to meet the needs of the students (Walsh et al., 2014). However, school counselors in many districts are not able to meet the socio-emotional needs of students because of larger caseloads or non-counseling duties (Moyer, 2011). Many states are not complying with the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) recommended student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2016). Only 17.8 percent of school districts are complying with the student-to-counselor ratio provided by ASCA.

The literature revealed an increased need for SEL studies related to more diverse strategies and interventions (Crenshaw et al., 2015; West, 2018; Zakrzewski, 2016). No studies were identified that addressed how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. However, a great deal of research reveal the benefits of SEL for addressing academic success and behaviors. Previous research strengthens the argument that SEL is a successful process for improving behavior, academic achievement, and connectedness. With trusted research, school counselors could use these studies to assist with helping and guiding African American middle school girls.

Summary

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory supports how educators frame and implement SEL. The literature supports the benefits and importance of the implementation of SEL. SEL is designed to improve social-awareness, self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. SEL interventions are designed to support middle school students experiencing difficulties related to behaviors and academics. School-based SEL interventions appear to foster academic skills by supporting the socio-emotional and behavioral development (McCormick et al., 2015).

SEL is an intervention that teaches social skills and coping strategies to support middle school students during their academic journey (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). SEL is best utilized as a school-based intervention (McCormick et al., 2015). SEL interventions have promise for being beneficial for middle school students, supporting them through their transition (Bailey et al., 2015). SEL strategies are best presented by school counselors because of their extensive training in the subject matter (King-White & Kurt, 2019). School counselors present and model SEL through classroom guidance lessons, small group sessions, and individual counseling (McCormick et al., 2015). The utilization of SEL interventions and strategies presented by school counselors has been known to improve the school climate and encourages a sense of connectedness.

The review of current literature found that SEL interventions are beneficial in a school setting and supports increases in academic success and decreases in undesired behaviors (McCormick et al., 2015). However, there was limited evidence to support the benefits of SEL for African American girls. Additionally, the research indicated that SEL studies need to be expanded to explore diversity in SEL strategies, considering the challenges that impact African

American girls, and identify more equitable ways to present SEL strategies and interventions (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Johnson, 2019; White, 2018; Zarewski, 2016). Considering cultural and contextual stressors of African American girls will allow for SEL interventions to be more meaningful and inclusive (Johnson, 2019).

SEL is an important component in and outside of the classroom, especially for middle school students during their transition from elementary to middle. Common theories support the need for SEL to guide middle school students through their transitions (Bailey et al., 2015 & Walsh et al., 2014). Although SEL is one of the three components that school counselors focus on, it takes a collaborative effort to meet the needs of all students. Research on SEL for school programs should inform educators on how to be inclusive when utilizing SEL to reach all students. It is important for all support staff to work together to meet the educational needs as well as socio-emotional needs of the students (Maras et al., 2015). Gender differences as well as race/ethnicity diversities must be factored in when providing socio-emotional support (Flannery et al., 2017; Hamlat et al., 2015; Johnson, 2019; West et al., 2018). Ultimately, research related to SEL should be able to demonstrate how to effectively implement SEL strategies and techniques to empower all students, specifically African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges.

Previous SEL research utilized qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research designs with case study, longitudinal, and meta-analysis approaches. For this study, I will use a qualitative research design with a case study approach. A case study approach is most appropriate for answering the research question because this will focus on one area of concern (i.e. how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges). Case study research is best used when the focus is related to real-life content that

addresses “how” or “why” (Yin, 2017). This study intends to fill a gap in the literature by utilizing a qualitative study design with a case study approach.

The research will be conducted to gain an extensive understanding of how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges (poverty, discipline, trauma). Having a better understanding of how school counselors help African American middle school girls navigate or work through SEL challenges will help determine the type of socio-emotional support, strategies, or interventions (self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making) that may be needed. African American girls desire the support to guide them through their middle school journey, however, the effects of SEL present differently when considering the challenges that impact their lives. SEL is an intervention that could support African American middle school girls, supporting long-term socio-emotional resilience while addressing trauma and other challenges that may impact them. This case study will then explore an area of concern to be addressed in hopes to identify additional strategies and interventions that will support the SEL needs of African American middle school girls.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter explains how the study was conducted, including the research question, purpose and design, sampling and procedures, instruments, data collections, and data analysis. This section also reviews limitations, validations, and expected findings. Ethical issues, including conflict of interest, researcher positions, and ethical issues in the study are also provided followed by the chapter summary.

This section outlined the foundation and methods that were used to support the exploration of how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. The purpose of this research was to identify SEL barriers that impact African American girls as well as identify effective strategies that school counselors have used to support African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. This research was important because SEL is an effective tool used for addressing the academics, behaviors, emotions and social needs of middle school students (Bailey et al., 2015; Flannery et al, 2017; Liu et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2014). Progressively, more schools have seen the importance of social-emotional programs. However, these programs may be structured without adequate knowledge about how SEL may support minority students.

Research Question

Several studies expressed the benefits of SEL for addressing academic achievement, behaviors, emotions, and social needs of middle school students (Bailey et al., 2015; Flannery et al., 2017; Liu et al., 2016; Walsh et al., 2014). However, research was found to be limited in the areas of SEL support for African American middle school girls from the perspective of school counselors as well as identify SEL challenges that impact some African American middle school

girls. Hence, the research question that helped guide this study is: “How do middle school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges?”

Purpose and Design of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the perspective of school counselors and how they guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. A qualitative case study design was used to gather and review the perspective of school counselors in the middle school setting. Consequently, only some students are benefiting from social-emotional learning (West et al., 2018). African American students were identified as having difficulties with developing and applying their SEL (Bailey et al., 2015; Hamlat et al., 2015; Teston, 2017; West, 2018).

A qualitative case study design was most appropriate for answering the research question because it focused on one area of concern: how school counselors are helping to guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges in public schools. A qualitative case study design is best used when the focus is related to real-life content that addresses “how” or “why” (Yin, 2017). This study was selected to gain a more extensive explanation and understanding of barriers that impact SEL for some African American middle school girls and how school counselors help guide them through these challenges.

A single case study was reasonable for this study because it was more manageable and allowed for extensive interviews, a focus group, and time for a thorough review of school counseling and SEL documents. Nearly 70% of all public K–12 schools nationwide are utilizing SEL as an intervention to support student needs and address self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills (DePaoli et al., 2017). In addition, the use of a qualitative case study design was most appropriate for research

that focused on specific issues experienced by individuals or groups (Lewis, 2015). Furthermore, a qualitative case study design helped to develop an extensive understanding of how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges, as well as provide examples of effective strategies that school counselors can use.

Sampling Method and Procedures

Most middle schools in Virginia have traditional middle school models consisting of grades sixth to eighth with at least one school counselor per grade level. One benefit of using school counselors for this research was because SEL is one of the three components upon which school counselors focus on. School counselors are in a more proactive role, which puts them in a position to encourage SEL (Washington, 2010). School counselors have been trained to use SEL to support the needs of middle school students.

The populations for this study was comprised of school counselors and school counseling department chairs from Virginia. Sampling sizes may vary, depending on the research approach. A sampling size of at least 5 to 25 participants is recommended for a qualitative designed with a case study approach (Creswell, 2013). Hence, 4–6 school counselors and school counseling department chairs volunteered to participate in the semi structured interviews. During the focus group discussion, 6–8 school counselors and school counseling department chairs volunteered to participate. Two participants from the individual interviews participated in the focus group discussion.

When identifying this study's sampling selection, the first way was based on criterion sampling which is used to reach a targeted group that meets predetermined criteria (Cohen, 2006). The second way to select a sample was based on purposeful sampling, which is based off

of preselected criteria related to the research question (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). Hence, the following criteria for selecting participants was used:

1. School counselors who use an SEL approach with middle school students.
2. School counselors with at least three years of school counseling experience at the middle school level.
3. School counselors who reside within a middle school where the student population is at least 10% African American girls.

Prior to recruiting school counselors for this study, the researcher had to complete the district's research application. Upon approval from the desired district, the researcher then had to seek approval from the principal's at the identified middle schools. Some principals required the researcher to send information directly to the school counseling department chairs and some principals allowed the researcher to reach out to individual school counselors directly. After approval from each principal, the researcher was able to begin recruiting volunteers for this study.

For the demographic data and selection criteria, a Qualtrics survey (see Appendix A) was distributed via email to school counseling departments at nine public middle schools, which included a total of 31 school counselors (nine school counseling department chairs and 22 traditional school counselors) in the given school district in Virginia. Out of 31 school counselors, 17 completed the survey. After collecting data from the survey, 16 out of the 17 school counselors and school counseling department chairs from five to six middle schools were determined to be eligible and were invited to participate in the individual interviews and/or the focus group discussion. The researcher contacted the volunteers, distributed the district approval letter, letter of consent (see Appendix D), and schedule dates and times to begin individual

interviews. The interviews were conducted with a middle school counseling department chairs as well as grade level school counselors (sixth, seventh, eighth). The chairs were included in this study because in addition to administrative tasks, they often have a caseload, facilitate classroom lessons, as well as small groups.

Instrumentation

One instrument that was used for data collection was a semi structured interview. The interview protocol is located in Appendix B. The majority of the questions were original and generated based on the research question, conceptual framework, and the literature related to SEL. A Qualtrics survey was sent to middle school counselors and school counseling department chairs in the given school district as a way to generate demographic information and help narrow down potential participants (see Appendix A). The questions were original and focused on years of experience working with middle school students and percentage of African American girls in their current building. The individual interview questions were original and focused on SEL and how school counselors help guide SEL in African American middle school girls. The questions started out general and then became more specific to include the targeted group of students (African American middle school girls) yet remain open-ended.

Another instrument that was used for data collection was a focus group discussion. The focus group protocol is located in Appendix C. The questions for the focus group were similar to those of the individual interviews, however, additional questions were generated based off of data collected from the individual interviews. Seven school counselors and school counseling department chairs volunteered to participate in the focus group. Two of the volunteers participated in the individual interviews. One of the volunteers backed out the day of the scheduled focus group meeting, resulting in six participants for the focus group discussion.

The third instrument used in this study to collect data were artifacts (ASCA standards, role of the school counselor, lesson plan template, etc.). This additional instrument helped to ensure triangulation. Triangulation occurs when the researcher uses multiple data sources to support the research (Carter et al., 2014).

Data Collection and Procedures

Data collection for this study included the following three methods: individual semi structured interviews, a focus group, and artifacts (ASCA Model, Role of the school counselor, School counselor curriculum domains). These methods provided information about how school counselors use effective SEL strategies to help guide African American middle schoolgirls. These were appropriate methods because the interviewees are the experts having knowledge that would best help to answer the research question.

I employed semi structured interviews for several reasons. Semi structured interviews are in-depth and utilize open-ended questions (Jamshed, 2014). One reason to utilize semi structured interviews is to obtain as much information as possible, in the event the researcher is not able to meet with the participant again (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Semi structured interviews also allow each participant to express their views freely (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Semi structured interviews can also provide more reliable, comparable data (Jamshed, 2014).

After the interviews were completed, the researcher organized and conducted the focus group discussion. A focus group consists of a group of invited participants being interviewed in a group setting (Jamshed, 2014). One reason to utilize a focus group is to gain data from participants that were purposely selected (Ochieng et al., 2018). Focus groups encourage interactive discussions, which allow participants to speak openly and friendly and also seen as a cost-effective way to gain data (Jamshed, 2014; Ochieng et al., 2018).

Procedures

The individual interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted 30–45 minutes each. The individual interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed within 24 hours. The transcription of the individual interviews were captured utilizing an analytic tool (e.g. MS Word) to ensure the information shared was captured correctly. After transcribing the individual interviews, the researcher emailed the transcripts to the participants, utilizing secured email addresses provided by the participants to ensure accuracy, which helped increase credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

The focus group discussion was conducted utilizing a Zoom video conference and lasted 60 minutes. The focus group discussion was audio recorded and then transcribed within 24 hours. The transcription of the focus group discussion was also captured utilizing an analytic tool (e.g., MS Word) which helped to ensure the information provided by the participants was accurate. The researcher also emailed the transcript to the focus group participants to ensure the information shared was correct, which helped with increasing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Purposeful sampling took place for both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion through a participant eligibility survey that was sent out to middle school counselors in the identified school district. The school counselors in the identified district accessed the participant eligibility survey through a Qualtrics survey link emailed to them. The information obtained from the survey helped determine which counselors most closely fulfill the selection criteria, and who would be eligible for the individual interviews and/or the focus group. The participant eligibility survey contained six questions related to current position, number of years of experience, and school demographic information (see Appendix A). The individual interview

questions contained 12 questions; the first 3 questions are follow-up to the eligibility survey (see Appendix B). The focus group questions contain nine follow-up questions, some of which were adapted in accordance with analyses of the interview data (see Appendix C).

Artifacts were also reviewed in addition to data collected from the individual interviews and the focus group discussion as a way to ensure triangulation. The ASCA documents helped to support the role of the school counselor. The documents also outlined the ASCA standards and curriculum that school counselors refer to as a guide when working to meet the socio-emotional needs of students. However, the school counselors that participated in this study could not provide documents that they specifically use with African American middle school girls.

Data Analysis and Procedures

When analyzing the data from this research, the researcher must determine the best approach. When analyzing data for case studies, the researcher must review and organize the data, in order to establish themes (Creswell, 2007). The researcher utilized direct interpretation to establish a natural generalization as well as tables and narrative in order to present an in-depth case (Creswell, 2007). Data was organized in a format that ensured it is easy to follow and understand; which was specifically done by identifying patterns and providing direct interpretation (Creswell, 2007). The analytic steps utilized in this study included chunking and coding using constant comparison, and emergent analysis.

Interpretation formally started with chunking and coding the first transcript. Chunking is described as breaking down information into smaller portions, which will help with identifying patterns, grouping and organizing the finds (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Coding is described as mapping or identifying relevant data that supports the point of the study (Elliott, 2018). The data was coded utilizing a “data analysis spiral” (Creswell, 2007). This was done through a variety of

steps. While coding data, utilizing the data analysis spiral technique, the researcher described, utilized memos, and visualized the data (Creswell, 2007). This was done through reflecting, organizing, categorizing, and utilizing visuals such as a matrix or tree (Creswell, 2007).

Emergent analysis was a part of this qualitative inquiry. Emergent analysis consists of learning from the data and information collected in order to apply it to future data and analysis (Given, 2008). Emergent themes are aligned with the inductive approaches in qualitative research through the coding process (Given, 2008). This includes new themes that may emerge from data collected through memos and interview transcripts.

Constructing the key findings, or themes, followed specific steps. These findings included identifying word repetitions, keywords in context, or comparing and contrasting (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). This included clues from themes that could be used for coding, help with understanding concepts and how to use them, and identifying differences and similarities (Ryan & Bernard, 2000).

Limitations of the Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. When conducting research, the researcher may encounter limitations that can hinder the richness of the study. Limitations are a weakness within the study. Limitations revealed in this study included sample size and data collection. This study could have improved by conducting more individual interviews, adding a second focus group, and possibly conducting a few observations. Six individual interviews were conducted, who were all females. Having a limited sample size could make it difficult to find significant relationships in the data (Labaree, 2013). Increasing the interviews to eight or even 10 would have increased

the reliability of the data. Increasing the number of interviews could have possibly allowed for a male counselor to participate, which could have provided a different perspective.

One focus group discussion was held with six middle school counselors. If it could have been possible, adding a second focus group with African American middle school girls would have provided another means for validation. Another data collection tool that might have increased the richness of this study is observations. Conducting a few observations would have provided examples of school counselors interacting with African American middle school girls. It is possible that the data collected during the observations would have produced more evidence of SEL challenges and methods that school counselors use to support African American girls impacted by these SEL challenges.

Validation

When utilizing a qualitative methodology, the credibility and dependability of the data and procedures help to confirm the validity and reliability of the data collection and analysis (Shenton, 2003). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is imperative for establishing a valid and reliable study (Golafshani, 2003). Trustworthiness can be achieved by furnishing verification of credibility, dependability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Establishing trustworthiness can be initiated through surveys and interviews, which afford the comparison of different points of view. Validation also includes building credibility, establishing dependability, and providing specifics for the purpose of transferability.

Credibility

Credibility was established by collecting and utilizing data, aligning it with the conceptual framework, and triangulation (Golafshani, 2003). One instrument that was used during this research in a semi structured interview (see Appendix B). Member checking also

helped with increasing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2013) by having participants review (confirm, disconfirm, identify what is missing) major findings and conclusions. Triangulation occurs when the researcher uses multiple data sources to support the research (Carter et al., 2014). For this study, this was done through the participant eligibility survey, individual interviews, a focus group, and school counseling artifacts.

Dependability

A way to ensure dependability was to develop and follow scientifically sound protocols for individual interviews and focus groups. The protocols allowed for consistency and clear expectations. During interviews and focus group discussions, another way that helps to ensure dependability was concentrating on what the participant were saying, listening, and following-up without probing (Seidman, 2013).

Transferability

Transferability is described as the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings (Anney, 2014). This occurs when detailed context is presented, affording the reader a choice as to whether or how a research study is applicable to a given context (Anney, 2014). In this study, this was through detailed descriptions and intimate details. For example, if a school counselor is looking for SEL methods of delivery for middle school students or looking to identify SEL barriers, the information in this study could be transferred.

Expected Findings

Finding from this study have the potential of increasing awareness to SEL barriers and how school counselors support African American middle school girls through these challenges. The school counselors that participated in this study identified strategies that they use when

working with African American girls, identified barriers they have observe impacting their African American girls, and how they guide them through SEL challenges. I assumed that African American middle school girls required special techniques to support them through SEL challenges, however, the school counselors that participated in this study felt the most important element to support African American girls, was developing a trusting relationship with them first.

Throughout this study, the expected findings consisted of SEL barriers that impact SEL development of African American middle school girls and identifying effective strategies middle school counselors can use that meet and support the socio-emotional needs of African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges. Specific findings from this study included developing a rapport, identify and understand SEL barriers, and effective delivery methods were key strategies for school counselors striving to address the SEL barriers that impact some African American middle school girls.

Ethical Issues

Conflict of Interest

One ethical issue that could have occurred with the study was a conflict of interest. In order to reduce this possibility, research was not conducted within the middle school where the researcher currently works. This helped to prevent school counselors from feeling obligated to participate in the study because of any prior personal or professional relationship. However, the researcher knew two of the participants from a previous high school worked in together. The participants were not eliminated from the study because the researcher was neither a supervisor nor friend of the two participants (Seidman, 2006).

Researcher's Position

As the researcher for this study, I strived to protect the identity of the participants, using guidelines related to confidentiality, like not using any actual proper names. Middle school counseling departments were selected based on information gathered from the participant eligibility survey. Middle school counselors at the identified middle schools were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study, with the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any time.

Ethical Issues in the Study

A potential ethical issue in this study was confidentiality. The primary data collection tools were individual interviews and a focus group with middle school counselors and school counseling department chairs in Virginia. With only nine eligible middle schools in the identified district, and participants being narrowed down to three to four middle schools, it could be easy to identify which middle school counselors participated in the study. In an effort to reduce deductive disclosure, the researcher did not include obvious identifiers and provided limited geographic details (Bleckman, 2018). Although it is impossible to ensure confidentiality for a focus group, I worked to minimize the possibility of intrusion (Sanjari et al, 2014). Participants were informed of any potential risk and reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Prior to the start of this study, district and principal approval to conduct research was secured. Concordia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was provided to the district and each principal prior to securing volunteers. School counselors and school counseling department chairs were given the opportunity to volunteer to participate in this study. Upon agreeing to participate in this study, participants were provided the consent form to review and

sign. The researcher signed the consent and provided each participant a copy for their records. Prior to the start of the individual interviews and the focus group, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Data collected and artifacts were stored on a flash drive and stored in a locked file cabinet. These items will remain stored for 3 years and then destroyed per CU IRB requirements.

Summary

This chapter identified the methodology and procedures for my case study. The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors guide SEL in African American middle school girls. Although SEL has been identified as an effective intervention for addressing academics, behaviors, and socio-emotional development of students, the benefits of SEL are not impacting some African American girls (Bailey et al., 2015; Hamlat et al., 2015; Teston, 2017; West, 2018). Data collection and analysis methods were outlined in this chapter, starting with a participant eligibility survey that was emailed to middle school counselors from nine middle schools in the identified school district. This information was used to generate demographic information and ensure purposeful sampling for the study. The analysis of data occurred through organizing and reviewing the data, in order to establish themes (Creswell, 2007). This helped with chunking, identifying patterns, and coding. This chapter also addressed potential ethical issues, limitations, possible findings, and the validity of the study. Throughout development of the study protocol, steps were identified that helped to minimize potential ethical issues, increase trustworthiness, and establish credibility. This case study allowed for an area of concern to be addressed in hopes of identifying additional strategies and techniques that will support the SEL needs of African American middle school girls.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

The purpose of this case study was to explore in-depth how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. The motivation for this study emerged from my experience as a school counselor and my observation of socio-emotional development of African American middle school girls. Some research on SEL has explored the benefits of SEL improving behavior, academic success, and social-emotional development (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016; Slaten et al., 2015; Thomason et al., 2018). However, literature was somewhat limited as it relates to SEL and African American middle school girls from the perspective of school counselors. Therefore, to explore how to help African American middle school girls impacted by SEL barriers as well as contribute to bringing awareness to SEL challenges, the following research question was developed: How do school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges?

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the qualitative research process that was utilized to collect, analyze, and interpret the data in order to answer the research questions. Semi structured individual interviews and a focus group were utilized to gather data from middle school counselors. This chapter also includes the analysis, emergent themes and results of the data collected from the interviews and the focus group. The process for identifying the themes are also included. The goal of this research was to explore SEL for African American middle school girls from the perspective of middle school counselors.

Description of the Sample

The sample population for this study consisted of middle school counselors that work in traditional, grades 6–8, middle schools in Virginia. The school counselors were selected based off of results from the Qualtrics participant eligibility survey (see Appendix A), which was

emailed to the school counselors along with the participant consent. The majority of the survey participants were female, resulting in all the participants that volunteered for the individual interview and/or the focus group, being female. Participants for this study were school counseling department chairs and school counselors with at least three years of experience that currently work in a middle school.

After securing district approval and then principal approval, an email containing the district consent letter, participant consent form (see Appendix D), and the link to the Qualtrics participant eligibility survey was sent to 31 school counselors from nine middle schools. Out of the 31 school counselors, 17 completed the survey (see Table 1). An email was sent to the 17 eligible school counselors who completed the survey, inviting them to participate in either the individual interview, the focus group, or both. Six school counselors volunteered to participate in the individual interview (see Table 2). Two of those six school counselors volunteered to participate in both the individual interview and the focus group. Four additional school counselors volunteered to participate in the focus group (see Table 3).

Table 1

Qualtrics Participant Eligibility Survey Responses

Gender	Position	1–5 yrs. of MS exp.	6–10 yrs. of MS exp.	11–15 yrs. of MS exp.	16–20 yrs. of MS exp.	21–25 yrs. of MS exp.
1-F	SC Dept Chair	X				
2-F	SC Dept Chair				X	
3-F	SC		X			
4-F	SC	X				
5-M	SC		X			
6-M	SC Dept Chair					X
7-F	SC				X	
8-F	SC		X			
9-F	SC	X				
10-F	SC	X				
11-F	SC Dept Chair				X	
12-F	SC	X				
13-M	SC Dept Chair			X		
14-F	SC	X				
15-F	SC Dept Chair	X				
16-F	SC Dept Chair				X	
17-F	SC		X			

Individual Interview Participants

The individual interview participants for this study were majority school counselors with a minimum of three years of experience using SEL with African American girls. Located in Table 2 is the demographic information reported by the participants in the individual interviews, including gender, race/ethnicity, position, and total years of experience.

Table 2

Individual Interview Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	Current Position	1–5 yrs. of MS exp.	6–10 yrs. of MS exp.	11–15 yrs. of MS exp.	16–10 yrs. of MS exp.
A	F	Caucasian	SC	X			
B	F	Hispanic	SC	X			
C	F	Caucasian	SC Dept Chair				X
D	F	Caucasian	SC		X		
E	F	AA	SC		X		
F	F	Caucasian	SC		X		

Focus Group Participants

The majority of focus group participants for this study were school counselors with a minimum of three years of experience using SEL with African American girls. Located in Table 3 is the demographic information reported by the participants, including gender, race/ethnicity, position, and total years of experience.

Table 3

Focus Group Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Race	Current Position	1–5 yrs. of MS exp.	6–10 yrs. of MS exp.	11–15 yrs. of MS exp.	16–20 yrs. of MS exp.
A	F	Caucasian	SC Dept Chair	X			
B	F	Hispanic	School Counselor	X			
C	F	Caucasian	SC Dept Chair				X
D	F	Caucasian	School Counselor				X
E	F	AA	School Counselor	X			
F	F	Caucasian	School Counselor	X			

Research Methodology and Analysis

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges. This section explains how the data analysis supports the research approach. This section provides a summary of the methodology and conceptual framework discussed in previous chapters, including a detailed description of how the data was collected and analyzed. It also discusses the coding process used to analyze and organize the data collected, including a discussion of the specific procedures followed to identify patterns and themes that emerged.

A qualitative case study design was most appropriate for answering the research question because it allowed for the focus to be on one area of concern (Yin, 2017). This study sought to explore the perspective of middle school counselors and gather information related to how they help guide African American middle school girls experiencing SEL challenges. In order to capture the voices of the participants, a single case study was selected. The procedures and protocols utilized to collect data for this study included a Qualtrics participant eligibility survey, semi structured interviews and a focus group (see Appendices A, B, and C). The researcher sought out to secure an additional data source (documents i.e. lesson plans), however, it was determined during the individual interviews and the focus group that none of the school counselors had specific documents that they utilized specifically with African American middle school girls. The school counselors had lesson plans that were utilized for whole group settings, but no adjusted lesson plans specifically for African American girls.

Data was collected through six individual interviews over the phone and a single focus group via Zoom video conference. Procedures and protocols for the interviews and focus group were outlined in Chapter 3. Guided interview questions were utilized with the individual

interviews and the focus group as well as follow-up questions (see Appendices B and C). Each individual interview ranged from 30–45 minutes and the focus group was 60 minutes. At the beginning of each individual interview and the focus group discussion, the researcher reviewed the consent form (see Appendix D), reminding the participants of their rights. A signed copy of the consent form was provided to each participant for their records. The researcher then provided a brief overview and purpose of the study.

Procedures and protocols for collecting data were outlined in Chapter 3. All steps were followed, however additional steps needed to be taken before proceeding with data collection. Along with district approval to conduct research, each building principal had to grant approval for the researcher to make contact with the school counselors. Some of the principals required the researcher to go through the school counseling department chair to recruit volunteers. Some principals allowed the researcher to make direct contact with the school counselors. All of these steps were required prior to sending out the Qualtrics participant eligibility survey (see Appendix A). The link to the survey was then emailed to the school counseling department chair or individual middle school counselors along with the district approval letter and a copy of the participant consent form for the survey (see Appendix D). At the beginning of each individual interview and the focus group discussion, the researcher shared with the participants the purpose of the study, their role in the study, and answered any questions related to the consent form.

Once the school counselors completed the survey, the researcher emailed the school counseling department chairs and individual school counselors that met the research protocol, seeking volunteers. After reviewing the survey information, it was determined that one school counselor was not eligible due to years of experience on the middle school level. Once the school counselors and school counseling department chairs began volunteering to participate in this

study, it was also determined that the researcher knew two of the participants from a high school previously worked in together. However, the researcher was neither a supervisor nor friend of the two participants (Seidman, 2006). Due to the low number of volunteers willing to participate in either the individual interview and/or the focus group, the participants were not eliminated. The participants volunteered and was giving the opportunity to withdraw. The researcher attempted to control biases through member-checking, taking findings back to the participants for accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2007), as well as checking to see if anything was missing.

A sampling size of at least 5 to 25 participants is recommended for a qualitative designed with a case study approach (Creswell, 2013). After the participants were identified (see Table 2 & 3), individual interviews and the focus group discussion were scheduled. Participants for the individual interviews submitted the consent forms and the researcher provided them a signed copy for their records. Individual interviews were conducted over the phone. The interviews ranged from 30–45 minutes and were digitally recorded. Within 24 hours of the individual interviews, the researcher transcribed the interviews and sent them to the participants to review for accuracy. Member checking helps with increasing credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

The researcher utilized the same procedures and protocols when conducting the focus group discussion. Once the participants were identified, the researcher emailed them the link for a Zoom video conference and the participant consent form. Each participant submitted the consent form and the researcher provided them a signed copy for their records. Once all participants were logged into the Zoom video conference, the researcher went over the consent form, the purpose of the study and addressed any questions. The researcher also provided each participant with a number (1–6) to identify themselves when they were speaking. This helped with maintaining confidentiality. The focus group lasted 60 minutes and was digitally recorded.

Within 24 hours of the focus group, the researcher transcribed the discussion and sent it to the focus group to review.

Individual Interviews

After reviewing the Qualtrics participant survey, 16 school counselors met the protocol for this study. All 16 school counselors were invited to participate in the individual interview. Six participants volunteered to take part in the individual interviews. The semi structured individual interviews were conducted with five middle school counselors and a middle school counseling department chair. Prior to the start of each interview, the researcher went over the submitted consent form, the purpose of the study and addressed any questions. The participants were informed of the audio recording of the interview and that the transcript would be sent to them for review. The researcher utilized two digital recording devices to ensure information was not left out in the event one of the devices failed.

The six identified participants were asked the semi structured interview questions with some of the responses resulting in follow-up questions (see Appendix B). The interview questions were original and generated based on the research question, conceptual framework, and the literature presented in Chapter 2. The questions focused on how school counselors utilize SEL to support African American girls. The interview questions were also related to parts of the conceptual framework (a) relationships; (b) social awareness; and (c) self-awareness, which also tied into the SEL approaches and challenges.

Focus Group

The focus group discussion took place approximately two weeks after the completion of the individual interviews. The 16 eligible participants were invited to participate in the focus group discussion. Seven participants volunteered to take part in the focus group discussion, however, one volunteer decline to participate the day of the scheduled focus group meeting. The

six remaining participants consisted of two school counseling department chairs and four school counselors. Two of the school counselors of the focus group, participated in the individual interviews (one school counselor dept. chair and one school counselor). Prior to beginning the focus group discussion, the researcher reviewed the submitted consent forms with the participants, shared the purpose of the study and addressed any questions. The participants were assigned a number (1–6) to identify themselves when speaking, which supported maintaining confidentiality. The participants were also informed of the audio recording and that the transcript would be sent to them to review. The researcher utilized two digital recording devices to ensure information was not left out in the event one of the devices failed.

The questions used during the focus group were the same as the individual interview questions. Utilizing the same questions helped to produce a more balanced, in-depth body of evidence to support findings related to the research question. It allowed for an opportunity to identify, compare and contrast patterns. The focus group was conducted through a Zoom video conference. The participant engaged in a discussion regarding each question, sharing their perspective and personal experiences. The researcher allowed the school counselors to share freely and only interrupted the discussion to get clarity or ask a follow-up question (see Appendix C). Some of the follow-up questions were generated from feedback from the individual interviews as well as responses during the focus group discussion. The focus group discussion lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Analysis

For this qualitative case study, the researcher utilized a Qualtrics participant eligibility survey, semi structured interviews, and a focus group to collect data. By utilizing multiple sources to collect data, the researcher was able to ensure triangulation (Carter et al., 2014). After

completing the transcript for each individual interview and the focus group discussion, the researcher then sent it to the participants to review for accuracy. Once the researcher received feedback from the participants, the researcher reviewed the transcripts for potential patterns and themes (Creswell, 2007). This process included coding and chunking the data. The researcher did this by highlighting, categorizing, and color coding the chunks. The researcher did multiple rounds of this process to ensure the coding and chunking of the items were directly related to the research question.

Coding

After collecting data, transcribing, and member checking the data from the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, the researcher reviewed and organized the data, in order to establish themes (Creswell, 2007). The researcher utilized analytic steps, including chunking, coding, and constant comparison of the data. The researcher also utilized data analysis spiral. This was done through organizing, categorizing, and utilizing visuals such as a matrix or tree (Creswell, 2007). The researcher created a list of codes that related to the research question and was able to identify emergent themes from the data.

Coding was conducted utilizing several steps. Initial codes were generated through in-vivo coding. In-vivo coding places emphasis on actual feedback provided by the participants, which helps with understanding the story or idea being shared (Manning, 2017). Verbatim text from the individual interviews and the focus group were chunked and then utilized to construct codes. Then, pattern coding or lumping took place. Pattern coding is the grouping of themes (Saldana, 2015). Pattern coding helped with organizing codes identified through in-vivo coding. After organizing the codes, code weaving occurred. Code weaving helps with putting the pieces together to develop a broader theme that supports the research question (Saldana, 2015).

Chunking and coding of the data was repeated for each interview and the focus group discussion. The researcher highlighted large chunks of information obtained during the individual interviews and the focus group. After highlighting large chunks of information, the researcher started looking for patterns within the chunks. After identifying patterns, the researcher began to organize the patterns and identify the codes. After completing these steps, the researcher attempted to identify emergent themes from the data. The researcher utilized constant comparison of the data to help identify the themes. After multiple attempts, the researcher identified three very broad themes: (a) SEL approaches; (b) SEL challenges; and (c) SEL strategies/techniques. After several attempts, reviewing the data and re-organizing the codes, the following more meaningful themes were identified: (a) develop strong rapport; (b) clearly understand SEL challenges that affect relationship development and building trust; (c) use effective methods. These themes helped to interpret how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

Summary of the Findings

At the completion of data analysis (individual interviews and a focus group discussion), the perspective of the school counselors produced significant evidence that supports how school counselors guide African American middle school girls. However, more meaningful evidence could have been produced with a larger sampling size, meaningful and significant evidence that supported how school counselors guide African American girls through SEL challenges. The individual interviews and focus group discussion surfaced themes related to (a) building positive relationships; (b) understanding SEL barriers (stereotypes, school issues, environment); and (c) what is currently working. However, after further review of the codes and original themes, the

development of emergent themes that were more closely related to the research question were assembled.

Research Question. How do school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their socio-emotional learning challenges?

Both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion brought forth codes related to the research question resulting in the emergence of three themes.

1. School counselors may need to develop strong rapport with African American girls that are experiencing SEL challenges that impact relationship development.
2. School counselors must clearly understand SEL challenges that affect relationship development and building trust.
3. School counselors must use effective methods of delivery when helping to guide African American girls through SEL challenges.

Overall, school counselors identified developing a relationship as the most important step to help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. Addressing the socio-emotional needs of African American girls requires a connection between the school counselor and the student. Supporting African American middle school girls through SEL challenges require developing rapport, clearly understanding SEL challenges, such as adult's perception, discipline, racism, and stereotypes that impact their SEL (Annamma et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017), that affect relationship development and building trust and utilizing effective methods of delivery.

Presentation of the Data and Results

One research question was utilized for this study: How do school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges? School counselors and

school counseling department chairs participated in either an individual interview and/or a focus group discussing questions related to the research question. The data collected from the six individual interviews and the focus group discussion were coded and analyzed, producing three major themes (see Tables 4, 5, & 9) and subthemes (see Tables 6, 7, & 8). These themes and subthemes include: (1) develop strong rapport; (2) clearly understand SEL challenges that affect relationships development and building trust; (3) use effective methods; (a) understand environmental difference, (b) resist buying into stereotypes, and (c) identify school issues that impact SEL (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).

The three themes identified seem to work together to create opportunities for school counselors to help guide African American middle school girls experiencing SEL challenges. The process begins with school counselors developing rapport with the girls. By developing a relationship with African American middle school girls, school counselors are opening the door for African American girls to develop other positive and trusting relationships. Although developing a rapport might seem like a given, school counselors identified this step as a must when working with African American middle school girls.

Table 4

Theme 1 Develop Strong Rapport

Rapport Building	Description
Being welcoming was an important characteristic to have when developing a relationship with African American girls.	School counselors continuously rapport build making sure to have an open-door policy, not rushing them out of the office and allowing the opportunity to converse.
School counselors were genuine and real with their African American girls.	School counselors found that being genuine allowed African American middle school girls to become comfortable and develop a positive relationship.
School counselors provided a safe and trusting space for their African American girls.	School counselors are approaching African American girls with figurative open arms, making sure that they feel welcome and that they develop trust.

Table 5

Theme 2 Understanding SEL Challenges that Affect Relationship Development and Building Trust

SEL Challenges	Descriptions
Cultural norms and family dynamics impact the effectiveness of SEL.	School counselors found that SEL success depended on their ability to understand the environment their African American girls live in and meeting them where they are at.
School counselors advocate on behalf of African American middle school girls within the school.	School counselors found that African American middle school girls are often targeted for certain behaviors.
African American middle school girls are often perceived as being loud or having an attitude.	School counselors found that stereotypes were huge triggers for their African American middle school girls and impacted SEL success.

Table 6

Subtheme A of Theme 2 (Understanding Environmental Difference)

Subtheme of Theme 2	Description
African American families are often more private about personal issues.	School counselors found the African American middle school girls tend to be quieter and more private when it comes to personal or home related issues.
Disadvantages such as socio-economic status or parental status impact SEL.	School counselors found that death of a parent, having an incarcerated parent, or needing to live with a relative that is not their parent, often impacts SEL success.

Table 7

Subtheme B for Theme 2 (Identifying School Issues)

Subtheme of Theme 2	Description
African American girls are often targeted for behaviors at a higher rate than their peers of a different race/ethnicity.	School counselors found African American girls were more likely to discipline for seeming to have an attitude or disrespect than their peers.
School Policies can become a barrier for African American middle school girls.	School counselors have found that they have to advocate for African American middle school girls more when it comes to certain school policies. For example, wearing larger headbands or head wraps are against the school policies, but impact African American girls the most.

Table 8

Subtheme C for Theme 2 (Resist Buying into Stereotypes)

Subtheme of Theme 2	Description
African American middle school girls are perceived as argumentative and disrespectful.	School counselors found that modeling/teaching the desired behavior helps to change the perception of African American girls.
African American middle school girls are often looked at as being broken.	School counselors found that by empowering African American middle school girls instead of viewing them as broken supported their SEL well-being.

Table 9

Theme 3 Use Effective Methods

Effective Methods	Descriptions
Engaging the parents of African American middle school girls is important.	School counselors have found success with African American girls is when they have reached out to parents. With parental support, African American girls are more willing to receive SEL support.
Effective methods to provide SEL support to African American middle school girls is essential.	School counselors have found that some of the more cookie cutter type lessons may not always work as well. They found success when they strategize with African American middle school girls, identifying what they are comfortable doing.

The following narrative provides more details related to the data results.

Theme 1: Develop Strong Rapport

One component of SEL is relationship skills. Building a rapport with the girls teaches them that they have the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships (CASEL, 2017).

The data collected from both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion produced

evidence that was significant to school counselors developing a rapport with African American middle school girls. The school counselors shared that developing a rapport with the girls allowed them to gain trust, develop a relationship and later help guide the girls through their SEL challenges. The school counselors from both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion shared that being genuine, available, and accepting contributed to their ability to connect with African American girls and develop a rapport.

Genuine. Genuine is defined as sincerely and honestly felt or experienced (Merriam-Webster, (n.d.)). Participants in this study identified being genuine as a key component to developing rapport with African American middle school girls. School counselors shared that they do this by showing an interest in their African American girls. During the individual interview school counselor #3 shared “I try to get to know each girl and let them get comfortable with me. I try to be really real with them.” The school counselors shared that they show their African American girls that they care about them and support them.

Available. Available was another key component identified for developing rapport. Available is defined as present or ready for immediate use (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Participants in this study shared that having an open-door policy and ensuring that their African American middle school girls felt welcomed, increased their ability to develop a relationship with their African American girls. During the individual interview school counselor #6 shared “I have an open-door policy and I do feel like that’s why the African American girls prefer to come and talk to me.” The school counselors in this study felt being available helped with developing rapport with their African American girls.

Accepting. Accepting was also identified as a key component for developing rapport. Accepting is defined as able or willing to accept something or someone (Merriam-Webster,

(n.d.). The school counselors that participated in this study shared that it was important to accept the students as they are. During the focus group discussion school counselor #2 shared “I try to meet my African American girls where they are at opposed to using a philosophy that I use with all my kids.” The school counselors that participated in this study felt that being nonjudgmental and not making assumptions encouraged their African American girls to remain open-minded during discussions. The school counselors felt they had the most success with developing rapport with their African American girls when the girls knew the school counselor was available to them, when they felt the school counselor genuinely cared about them, and when they felt welcomed.

Building positive and trusting relationships with African American middle school girls was a significant step to guiding the girls through their SEL challenges. This was a consistent theme for both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion. The development of these relationships often lead to lifelong connections. During the focus group discussion, participant #6 shared “As an African American woman, the most important thing I’ve heard everyone say is build a relationship. It has been almost 20 years and I’m still connected to my middle school counselor.” School counselors found that these relationships had more of an impact on the SEL wellness of African American middle school girls than any philosophy, program or strategy.

School counselors have multiple ways to develop rapport with African American middle school girls. School counselors that participated in this study identified being real, welcoming, and providing a safe space as effective ways to develop rapport with these young ladies. During an individual interview with school counselor #2, she shared “I get to know each of my African American girls and let them get comfortable with me.” During another individual interview,

school counselor #3 shared “I make sure they feel welcome, allowing them to develop trust.”

Throughout the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, the school counselors felt these approaches (being genuine, being available, and being accepting) to developing a strong rapport were most effective when working with African American middle school girls.

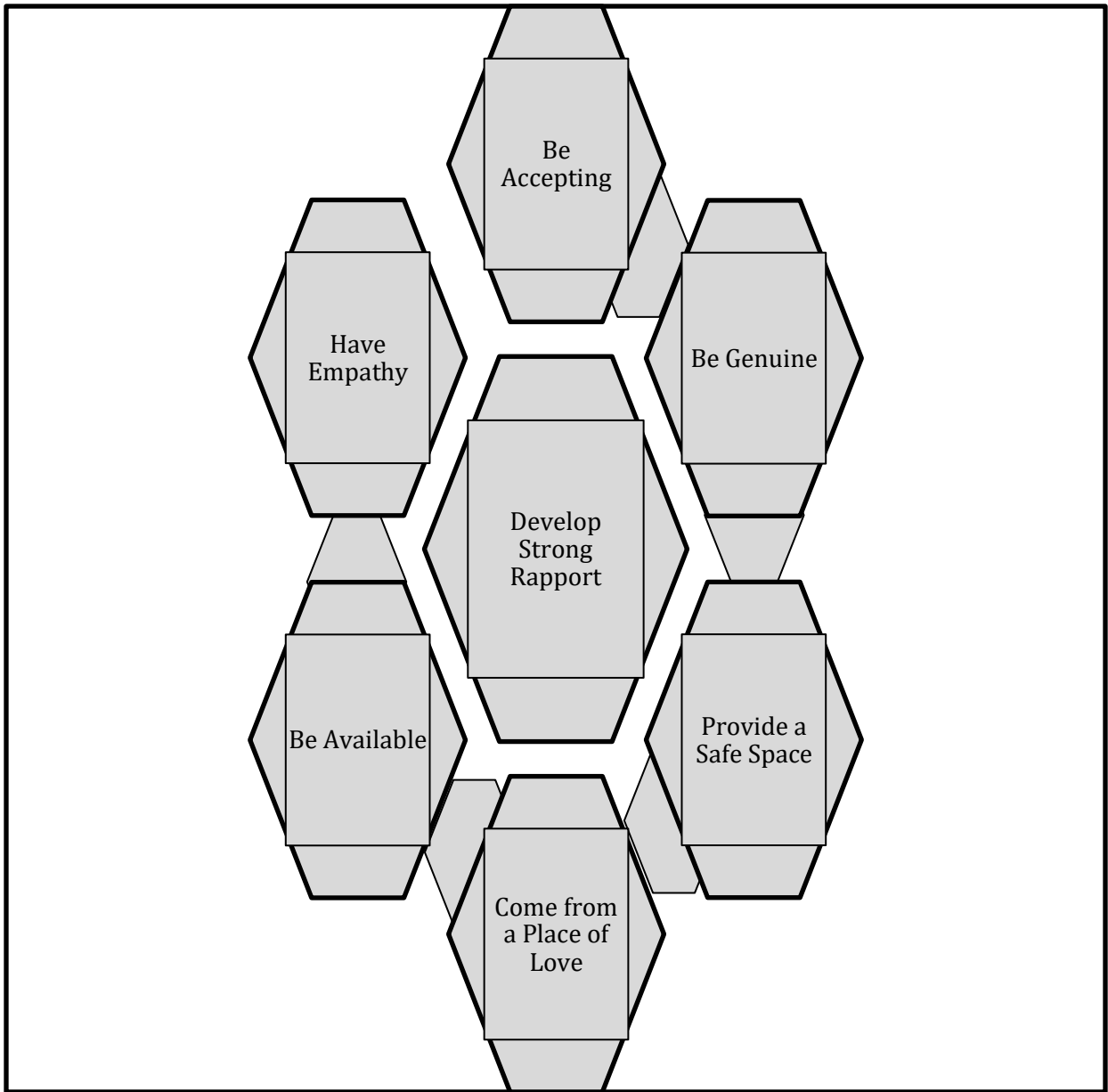


Figure 1. Theme 1: Develop strong rapport

Note. This figure represents key elements for developing strong rapport identified by school counselors that participated in this study.

Theme 2: Clearly Understand SEL Challenges That Affect Relationship Development and Building Trust

In addition to developing rapport and using effective methods, understanding SEL challenges emerged from the data collected during the individual interviews and the focus group discussion. The participants identified environment, school issues, and stereotypes as major barriers that impact the effectiveness of SEL for African American middle school girls.

Subtheme A: Environment. During the individual interviews and focus group discussion, school counselors identified the environment as a barrier that impacts African American middle school girls. The school counselors shared that the home environment or family dynamics sometimes made it difficult to support the girls. During one of the individual interviews, school counselor #1 shared “In my experience working with African American girls, there is always a lack of openness to discuss more personal issues.” The school counselors felt that parental involvement/support contributed to whether their African American girls were quieter and more resistant to support at school.

The school counselors that participated in this study felt that these challenges often impact SEL and made it difficult for them to successfully support their African American middle school girls. During the individual interview, school counselor #5 shared “I think one challenge would be the home environment, like African American females coming from a one parent home, no father figure. And a lot of the times we see that kind of play out when they have male teachers.” Understanding how the environment of African American middle school girls can impact the SEL is crucial for effectively guiding them through their SEL challenges

Subtheme B: School issues. During the individual interviews and focus group discussion, school counselors identified school (school issues in particular) as a barrier that often

impacts African American girls. School counselors identified racism, school policies and the rate that African American girls were being referred to the principal's office as major issues that impact SEL. School counselor #4 shared during the individual interview "One barrier is racism, the little inequities that take place that they don't even realize it's racist. These little inequities impact my African American girls' self-esteem and they start to feel like "I'm different, which means I'm wrong. I'm not good." School counselors from both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion felt these inequities were often tied to school policies and discipline.

School counselors that participated in this study shared that oftentimes, more than any other population, African American girls were targeted for their attire, mostly for hair bands or hair wraps, which are against school policies. During the individual interview, school counselor #2 shared "I think these situations can become almost traumatic for some of my African American females, resulting in them very upset and crying." Many times, these situations result in African American girls being referred more to the principal's office for these violations.

Subtheme C: Stereotypes. During the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, school counselors also identified stereotyping as a barrier that impacts SEL for African American girls. School counselors shared that oftentimes, African American middle school girls are described as being loud, having attitudes, and are more argumentative than their peers. During an individual interview, school counselor #2 shared that, referring to her African American girls as having an attitude, was a trigger for them. She shared "this is a major barrier, especially if a teacher refers to them as having an attitude because they didn't respond the way the teacher wanted them to respond." The school counselors that participated in this study felt that at times, this perception leads to African American middle school girls also being seen as more disruptive, disrespectful, and aggressive than their peers.

These stereotypes were also identified contributors to African American middle school girls getting sent to the principal's office more frequently. During the focus group discussion, participant #6 shared "as an African American woman, I'm very transparent when it comes to speaking to my African American girls about stereotypes and how society views us as an "angry black woman" or the "ghetto girls." Participant #6 also shared with the group the importance of empowering African American middle school girls and utilizing SEL to teach relationship skills and conversation skills. The school counselors from both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion shared the benefits of SEL to support African American girls through these types of SEL challenges as well as advocating for them when these challenges present themselves.

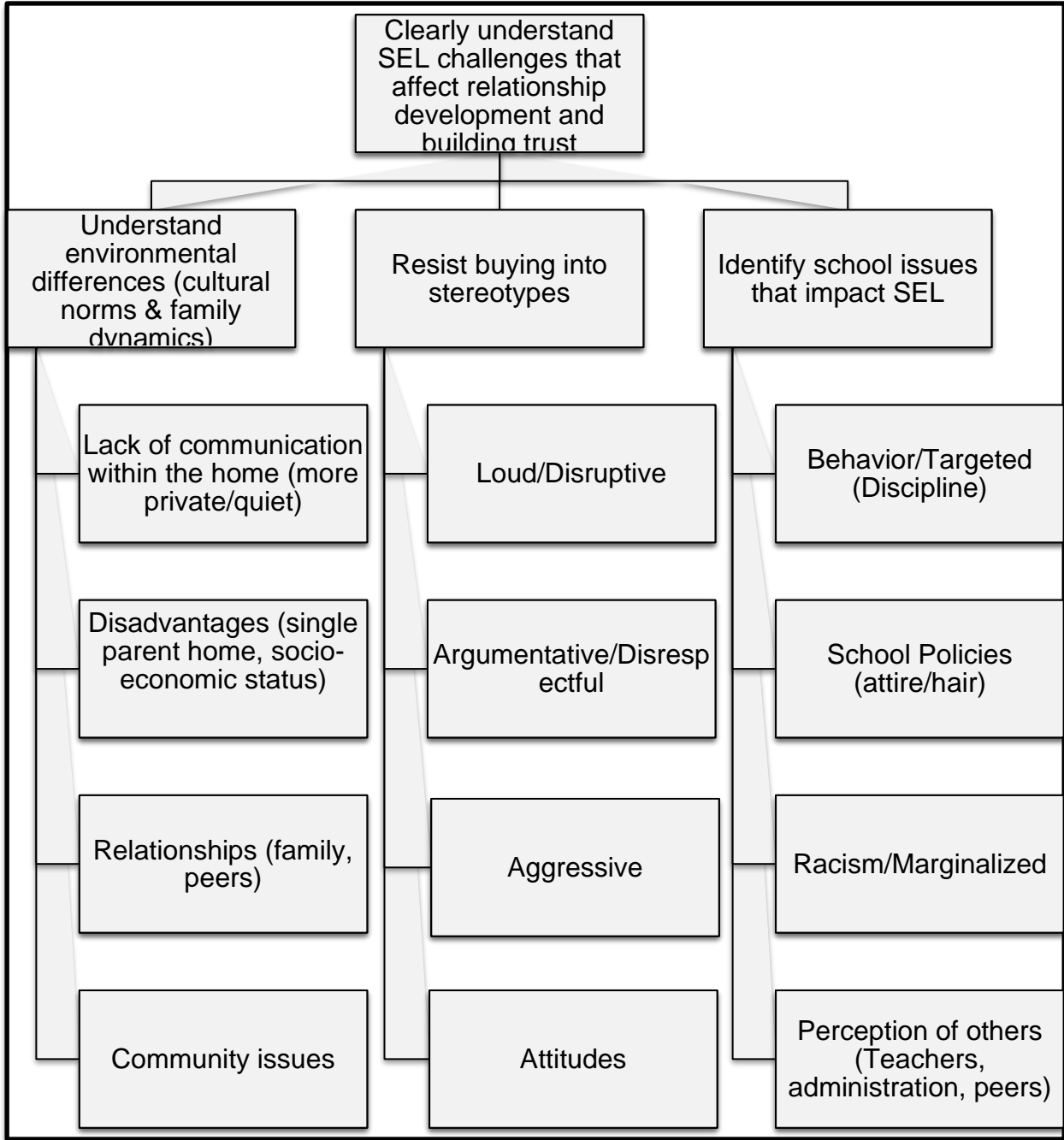


Figure 2. Theme 2 and subthemes: SEL challenges.

Notes. This figure outlines SEL challenges identified by school counselors that participated in this study that may impact African American middle school girls.

Theme 3: Use Effective Methods

Data collected from the individual interviews and the focus group discussion produced evidence that effective methods are important when school counselors are trying to help African American girls. School counselors identified mediation, individual and group counseling, and classroom guidance lessons as SEL methods that are effective with supporting African American middle school girls. Another effective method was parental support. During the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, school counselors reported that if the parents supported the student meeting with the school counselor, African American girls were more receptive to the SEL support.

School counselors that participated in this study identified parental support as a significant and effective method for delivering SEL support to African American middle school girls. The school counselors felt support from the parents encouraged the young ladies to become open to developing a relationship with the school counselor as well as receive the SEL support. During one of the individual interviews, school counselor #1 shared “I think that, where I have found success with African American girls is when I’ve reached out to the parents and if I could get mom’s buy-in and she wants to support that conversation then African American girls were more willing to participate.” The school counselors shared that by reaching out to the parents and oftentimes, developing a rapport with them helps with supporting African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

School counselors that participated in this study, also considered the possibility of adjusting material designed to support and teach SEL development. The school counselors shared that they present SEL through individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom guidance lessons; which have been identified as effective methods of delivery. However, they felt that the material did not always support the needs of African American girls and was

oftentimes, not relatable. During an individual interview, school counselor #2 shared “some of the cookie cutter type lessons may not always work.” School counselor #3 shared during the individual interview “I really do try to hear where my African American girls are coming from, what their particular issue is, and then I try to strategize with them so that I find something that they’re comfortable with and receptive to as well.” Throughout the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, the school counselors also felt that checking in, doing a pulse check was just as significant as the other methods to deliver SEL support to African American middle school girls.

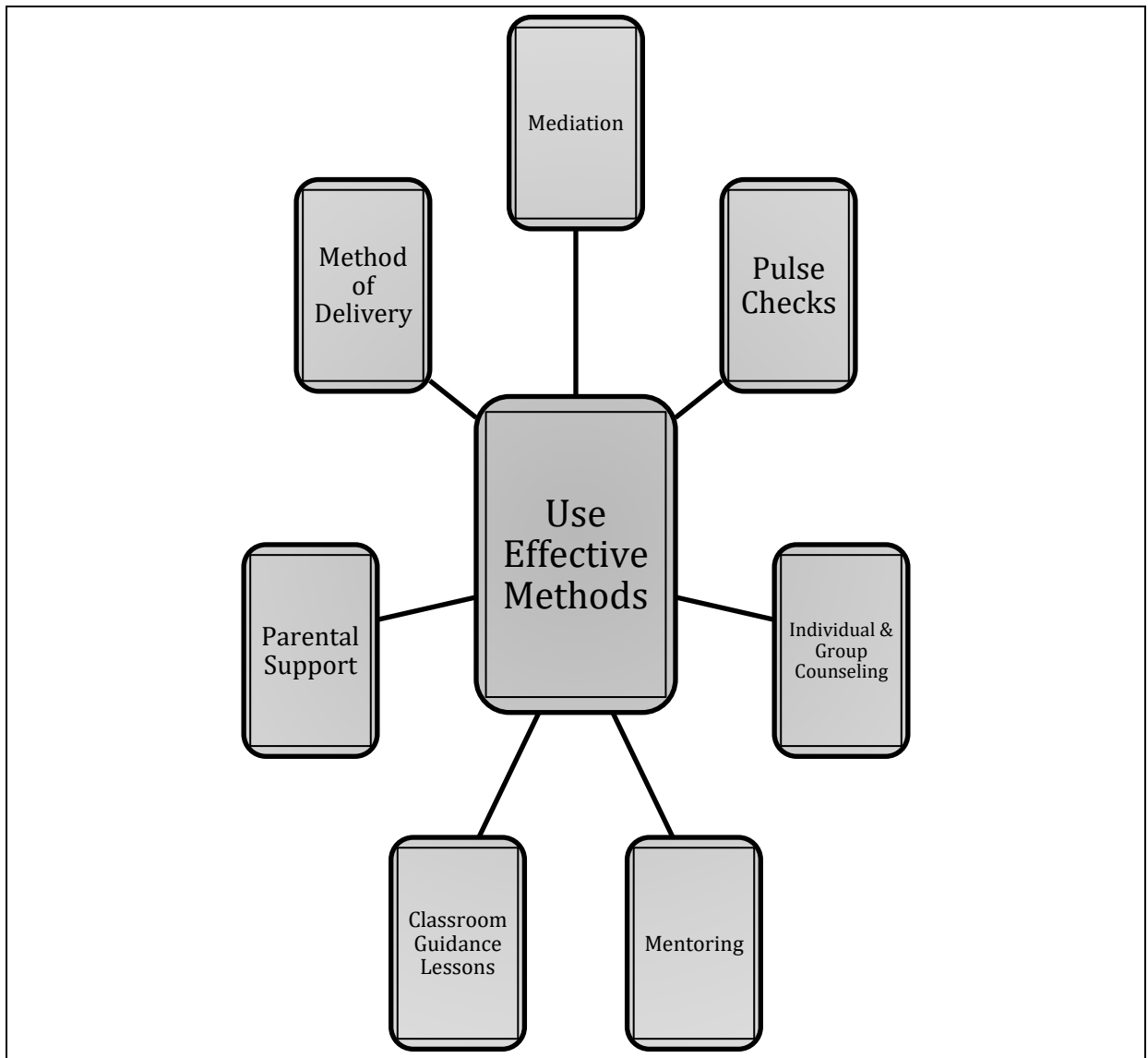


Figure 3. Theme 3: Use effective methods.

Note. This figure represents effective SEL methods to support African American middle school girls identified by the school counselors that participated in this study.

Data collected through the six individual interviews and the focus group discussion produced three major themes and three subthemes that addresses the research question: How do school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their socio-emotional learning challenges? The school counselors that participated in this study felt that

developing a rapport with African American girls allowed them the opportunity to support the girls through challenges that impact SEL. The school counselors identified being welcoming, coming from a place of love, being available, and showing empathy as effective ways to develop rapport with African American middle school girls. The school counselors found the most success when they got to know the girls, genuinely listen to their concerns, and just letting them talk.

Through data collection and analysis, school counselors identified environment, school issues, and stereotypes as challenges that seem to impact African American middle school girls the most. The school counselors that participated in this study identified family issues such as a socio-economic status contributing to barriers that affect SEL for some African American girls. During the individual interviews school counselor #4 shared “Sometimes African American girls have challenges that differ maybe a little more. Like when they are telling me I don’t have electricity or I can’t get on the internet or I don’t have food at home.” It was shared that understanding the environment of African American middle school girls was an important element for support them SEL challenges.

School issues that were identified as SEL challenges for African American girls consisted of racism, being targeted, and discipline. The school counselors that participated in this study shared that oftentimes subtle racism occurs that may impact how African American girls view themselves. School counselors shared that the subtle racism can make the girls feel like they are not good enough. It was shared that African American middle school girls are also targeted more for attire related to hair ties and head wraps, which often leads to a trip to the principal’s office. During the individual interview school counselor #2 shared “There are some situations that become almost traumatic because African American females will be wearing larger headband

and will be told to take them off. They will be crying and so upset because their mom is not able to get their hair done.” The school counselors felt that the way the schools respond to these young ladies sometimes leaves them traumatize.

In addition to environment and school issues, school counselors also identified stereotypes as an SEL challenge that impact African American middle school girls. School counselors shared that African American girls are often described as being loud, disruptive and disrespectful. School counselors also shared that the girls were often looked at as more aggressive, argumentative, and having an attitude. These stereotypes often affected how African American girls perceive themselves. During the focus group discussion school counselor #3 shared “It causes a lot of anger in my girls. Those issues have to be addressed because it affects their self-esteem” School counselors shared that the stereotypes affected the girl’s self-esteem and self-worth.

After developing a rapport with African American girls, school counselors felt in order to help guide the girls through their SEL challenges, the method of delivery must be taken into consideration. School counselors realized the more of the one size fit all lessons were not always designed to support African American girls through their challenges. School counselors have been most successful with SEL delivery through individual and group counseling, mediation, mentoring or girl groups. During the focus group discussion school counselor #6 shared “Developing a relationship and being genuine with the family goes a long way. It’s the additional support and teamwork that helps with working African American girls.” School counselors find a lot of success when they have parental support.

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter presented data from a qualitative case study. Results were generated from individual interviews and a focus group discussion composed of middle school counselors with a minimum of three years of experience on the middle school level, that work directly with African American middle school girls. The data collection process in this study produced findings that aligned with the literature and previous research related to this study's research question: How do school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their socio-emotional learning challenges?

Themes that emerged from the data revealed clear evidence that support how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. School counselors are working with African American girls on a daily basis and have realized over the years that what might work for one student may not work for another. They have realized that some of the lessons and groups may need to be adjusted to meet some of the specific needs of African American middle school girls. They have also realized that some of these changes may result in them doing more advocacy work for these girls.

School counselors that participated in this study provided their perspectives based off of their work with African American middle school girls. Information shared during the individual interviews and focus group discussion allowed for data to be collected, coded, and organized in a manner that emerged three major themes and three subthemes, each relating directly to the research question. Findings that emerged from the data collection, coding, and analysis suggested that the most effective way for school counselors to help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges is to develop a rapport with the girls. Being

available, being genuine, and being accepting, were key elements for developing rapport shared by school counselors throughout the individual interviews and the focus group.

Other areas that were identified during the individual interviews and the focus groups discussion for school counselors to focus on was understanding SEL challenges that affect relationship development and building trust and the utilization of effective methods. School counselors identify methods of deliveries that they were currently utilizing that had shown success with African American girls. Some of these methods included parental support, mediation, mentoring, and groups. Understanding SEL challenges that were currently impacting African American middle school girls, were also highlighted throughout the data collection process.

School counselors identified stereotypes, school policies, and environment (specifically home life) as challenges to be aware of. These challenges impact relationship building, developing trust, as well as how African American middle school girls view themselves. During the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, several school counselors spoke about the impact stereotypes have on the self-esteem and self-worth of African American middle school girls. It was shared that oftentimes; these girls feel like there is something wrong with them.

SEL is more than addressing the academic, behavior, and social-emotional needs of students. It is developing a well-rounded, emotionally healthy individual. SEL is designed for everyone, but that also means tailoring it to meet the needs of specific groups or individuals, such as African American middle school girls. Developing a rapport with African American middle school girls is imperative for school counselors to support them through SEL challenges.

Understanding the impact that SEL challenges have on African American middle school girls is also an important factor for school counselors.

Chapter 5 will generate conclusions that deepen my analysis of the data results.

Reflective interpretation of the data will include drilling down to the meaning of the data and how it relates to supporting African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges.

Chapter 5 will provide further interpretation via the emergent themes, implications, and recommendations.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this section is to discuss implications and summarize results, including connections to the relevant literature. The analysis and explication of the results for this study will help to guide further research that may add to the understanding of SEL challenges and supporting African American middle school girls impacted by these challenges.

Summary of Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. SEL consists of five components (relationship skills, responsible decision-making, self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness). These components work together to help students with goals, emotions, and relationships. As presented in previous chapters, SEL is a reliable resource for addressing the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of middle school students (Main & O'Neil, 2018). School counselors are school personnel that support students through their educational journey. School counselors play a significant role in addressing the social and emotional needs of middle school students (ASCA, 2017). Because school counselors are licensed by state educational agencies, they have the ability and skills to support educational goals by addressing students' socio-emotional needs (Kozlowski & Huss, 2013). School counselors are trained to teach SEL strategies that provide SEL support for middle school students through individual and small group counseling as well as through classroom guidance lessons. The literature recommends SEL as an effective school-based practice for all students (Coelho et al., 2014; Durlak et al., 2011; Silverthorn et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017; Yang et al., 2018). School-based SEL practices have shown to decrease classroom behaviors and improve academic success. However, SEL has not been beneficial for all students, resulting in researchers recommending

expanded SEL research to include race, ethnicity, and gender (Flannery et al., 2017; Hamlat et al., 2015; West et al., 2017). Hence, the research question for this study was: How do school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges?

As discussed in Chapter 4, data was gathered from middle school counselors in Southeast Virginia with a minimum of three years of experience. Data was collected, utilizing semi structured interviews and a focus group discussion. Data collected from the individual interviews and the focus group discussion were analyzed through chunking and coding, identifying emergent themes. The school counselors that participated in this study shared their experiences and perspectives regarding supporting African American middle school girls. During both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, the participants freely and openly shared their personal and professional experiences and perspectives as they pertained to African American middle school girls and SEL. The information collected provided data that supported the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 1. The findings produced three key themes and three subthemes: (1) develop strong rapport; (2) clearly understand SEL challenges that affect relationships development and building trust; (3) use effective methods; (a) understand environmental difference, (b) resist buying into stereotypes, and (c) identify school issues that impact SEL.

Discussion of Results

This section explores and interprets the findings from Chapter 4, including practical and theoretical implications. It will also address the key themes and subthemes developed through the coding of the data. The school counselors that participated in this study found success with supporting African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges when they had a

strong rapport with their African American girls. The school counselors played a pivotal role in the socio-emotional wellness of their African American middle school girls.

Data collected from this study were obtained from middle school counselors with a minimum of three years of experience, through semi structured individual interviews and a focus group discussion. The school counselors provided their professional knowledge on SEL, SEL barriers, SEL approaches, and challenges they observed their African American middle school girls experiencing. Artifacts collected (i.e. ASCA Model, Role of the School Counselor, School Counselor Curriculum Domain) were also used as data in order to help create triangulation. The researcher sought to secure lesson plans from the participants, however, it was determined during the interviews and the focus group that the school counselors did not have lesson plans that were specifically designed for African American middle school girls. The themes helped to answer the research question and provide insight into how school counselors impact the socio-emotional development of African American middle school girls.

Theme 1: Develop Strong Rapport

Developing rapport was a logical first step in working with students who face SEL challenges. Developing a strong rapport is centered around school counselors fostering a relationship with African American middle school girls. School counselors that participated in this study identified developing trusting relationships with African American girls as the most important step in helping and supporting them through SEL challenges. School counselors felt that developing a caring and trusting relationship with the girls would be more effective than utilizing any philosophy or theory related to SEL. In every individual interview and the focus group discussion, the school counselors identified relationship building as the number one factor for guiding African American middle school girls.

Developing rapport was achieved with specific strategies. As mentioned in Chapter 4, the school counselors that participated in this study identified being genuine (honest and real), being available, and being accepting as effective ways to develop a rapport with African American middle school girls. Oftentimes, the school counselors did this by getting to know the girls, having an open-door policy, and showing empathy. School counselors developing strong rapport was a key contributor to how they helped guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

Theme 2: Clearly Understand SEL Challenges That Impact Relationship Development and Building Trust

Understanding SEL challenges is an important step for school counselors seeking to help guide African American middle school girls through these challenges. Throughout the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, challenges that emerged from the data included environmental challenges (home, family), school issues (attire, discipline, policies), and stereotypes (loud, attitudes, disrespectful). Oftentimes, these challenges can affect the development of positive and trusting relationships. Understanding the SEL challenges that impact some African American middle school girls, support how the school counselors will guide them.

The school counselors identified the environment as a barrier that has impacted the SEL for some of their African American middle school girls. Specific environmental barriers included cultural norms and family dynamics. The non-African American school counselors shared their experiences with African American families, noticing they were more private about issues that might be going on in the home. This often accounted for African American middle school girls being more private. However, the African American school counselors that participated in this

study could relate to this particular cultural norm and even shared that it was a part of their upbringing. The African American school counselors considered this to be generationally entrenched behavior that may impact African American middle school girls.

School counselors shared how family dynamics, such as single-parent homes also impacted SEL development for some African American middle school girls. It was reported that 53% of African American children come from single-parent homes (mother only), which is three times higher than the percentage of Caucasian children in single-parent homes (Toldson, 2019). African American children without a father or father figure are often impacted academically, behaviorally, emotionally, and socially (Burke, 2017). The school counselors that participated in this study shared that for some of their African American girls, the lack of a father or father figure impacts the relationships they have with other males within their lives. During one of the individual interviews, the school counselor mentioned, the effect of not having a father or father figure in the home often impacts the relationship some African American girls have with male teachers or male authority figures. The school counselor shared that they often struggle with developing that positive relationship.

The counselors identified school issues as another SEL barrier. The school counselors from both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion spoke of racism and school policies as being major barriers for some African American middle school girls. Micro-inequities, such as biases and unintentional discrimination (Nadal, 2017), continues to impact African American students all over the world and the school counselors that participated in this study shared how these inequities impacted their African American girls. They shared that racial inequities impacted the self-esteem, self-perception, and self-worth of the African American girls

they work with. Oftentimes, these inequities come in the form of discipline infractions and school policies.

The school counselors that participated in this study shared that school policies that should apply to everyone, often only impacts their African American middle school girls. The U.S. Department of Education for Civil Rights reported that between 2011 and 2012, suspensions increased for African American girls by 12% in comparison to the rate of suspension of Caucasian boys and girls, and Asian boys (Wun, 2016). It was also shared that African American girls were being disciplined for reasons different from African American boys; such as defiant, disruptive, and disrespect (Wun, 2016). The school counselors in this study shared that their African American girls were receiving discipline for violating school policies linked to attire, more specifically headgear (headbands and headwraps). It was shared that in recent years, African American girls have been sent home or suspended more often than their peers for hair violations that did not comply with the dress code policy (Latimore, 2017). In middle school, appearance is a big issue, including specific hair trends. When other barriers, such as lower socioeconomic statuses are already a challenge, school policies can make it worse. During both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, school counselors shared that requiring their African American middle school girls to remove hair wraps or larger headbands as soon as they walk into the building, can be very traumatic. These events often leave the girls upset, crying, and/or frustrated. Many times, these events lead to a disciplinary infraction.

Stereotypes were another barrier that was discussed. Stereotypes can impact the social identity and positive sense of self of African American girls (Barrie et al., 2016). Oftentimes, African American girls are described as loud or disruptive. They are perceived as disrespectful or argumentative. The school counselors that participated in this study shared their observation of

these stereotypes being held against their African American girls. The school counselors shared that the girls are very aware of these stereotypes and how others perceive them. The school counselors have open discussions and are very transparent with the girls about stereotypes because for many of the girls these stereotypes are a trigger. For many of the African American middle school girls, these stereotypes are frustrating and very upsetting, oftentimes leading to them receiving a discipline infraction. It was shared that African American middle school girls postulate collective self-esteem to serve as a buffer against the harmful effects of stereotypes (Barrier et al., 2016).

During both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, the school counselors shared barriers and challenges that they observed impacting their African American girls. Through developing a strong rapport, they were able to help guide them through some of those challenges. Having open discussions about inequities and stereotypes, showed the girls that someone cared about they were going through. The school counselors got their girls involved in activities or groups that were designed to empower African American girls. The school counselors also advocated more for the African American middle school girls when they noticed stereotyping trends or inequities that may impact their SEL.

Theme 3: Method of Delivery

Method of delivery was the third theme that emerged from the data. School counselors typically used three formats to approach SEL: through individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom guidance lessons. However, they also shared that some of the more mainstream “cookie-cutter” lessons were not always designed to support the needs of African American middle school girls. Because the lessons did not always support the needs of African American girls, the school counselors that participated in this study considered the possibility of adjusting

some of the SEL material so that it was more equitable and relevant for African American middle school girls. It was noted that lessons should be more culturally sensitive and gender approaches that assist African American girls through systemic and social challenges (Belser et al., 2016). Many of the school counselors that participated in either the individual interviews and/or the focus group discussion shared that they addressed this by having a small group or lunch bunch sessions with their African American girls.

A key method of helpful support identified by the school counselors was parent buy-in. Parental support includes the social and emotional development and facilitation of the educational success of the child in the home and the school (Roy & Giraldo-Garcia, 2018). It was shared that oftentimes, socio-economic status and cultural background may impact the effectiveness of parental support (Roy & Giraldo-Garcia, 2018) During both the individual interviews and the focus group discussion, school counselors felt they had the most success with African American middle school girls when they had support from the parent/guardian. African American middle school girls were described by the school counselors as being more private or quiet when it came to home or personal issues. The school counselors shared that the girls showed more interest in support from the school counselor when they felt they had permission from their parents/guardian. This behavior relates back to cultural norms that have been passed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, if parental support was not available, the school counselors reported that African American girls were more hesitant to receive support from the school counselor.

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature

The question this study sought to answer was how school counselors help African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. While seeking to answer the question, it

was important to understand what challenges may impact SEL as well as how school counselors effectively support African American middle school girls impacted by these challenges. The findings that emerged in this research consistently addressed the research question. The findings help to identify the role of the school counselor and how they guide African American girls through their SEL challenges.

This study produced three key themes (develop rapport, understand SEL challenges, method of delivery) that linked to the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework was based on Bandura's social learning theory and the ASCA national model for school counselors, which supports the five components of SEL (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, relationship skills). Bandura's (1977) social learning theory supports how educators frame and implement SEL. The ASCA national model supports how school counselors implement a comprehensive school counseling program that benefits all students, meeting their academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs (ASCA, 2019). The findings in this study demonstrate how school counselors build relationships with African American middle school girls in order to address challenges that impact their SEL.

Although the research supports the benefits of SEL improving academics, behavioral, and social-emotional development (Coelho et al., 2014; Wang & Eccles, 2012; Yang et al., 2017), the research also identified SEL gaps as it pertained to race and gender (Flannery et al., 2017; Hamlat et al., 2015; West et al., 2017). SEL was identified as an intervention with promise to support African American girls. However, it was shared that targeted resources and interventions should be tailored to support the unique experience of African American middle school girls (Crenshaw et al., 2015). Although beneficial for improving student success, there are barriers that impact the effectiveness of SEL. This study demonstrates positive findings utilizing current

SEL methods as well as produced additional methods that present success when guiding African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

From previous literature, school counselors are considered essential to the SEL process. Through structured and organized school counseling programs, school counselors support the social and emotional needs of their students (Atici, 2014). School counselors are often identified as key individuals for addressing the socio-emotional needs of the students. School counselors often do this through individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom guidance lessons. One major finding from the research was developing rapport. The school counselors that participated in this study identified relationship building as a key component for effectively guiding African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. The literature also identified building relationships as an important factor for SEL. It was reported that building trusting relationships seem to increase a positive learning environment and support SEL (Berman, 2018).

The results from this study were consistent with the literature presented regarding African American girls, SEL, and school counselors. The data collected and analyzed during the study yield results similar to previous research and literature similar to the topic of the role of the school counselor, the effectiveness of SEL, and SEL gaps as they pertain to race and gender. However, findings in this study revealed a focus on developing rapport and building relationships as the primary step to guiding African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

Implication of the Results for Policy, Practice, and Theory

In the profession of school counseling, building relationships is a key component in the process of addressing the needs of students. School counselors play a vital role in the academic,

behavioral, and social-emotional development of all students (Chandler et al., 2018). School counselors are key for identifying and addressing SEL needs in the educational setting (ASCA, 2017). Therefore, continuous research that seeks to address issues related to SEL gaps (gender, race) is necessary.

This study was a qualitative case study that sought the perspective of school counselors that worked with African American middle school girls. SEL was identified as a component that supports academic, behavior, and emotional success. School counselors were identified as individuals, important to the social and emotional development of students. However, barriers, such as discipline, racism, and stereotypes may impact SEL success for some African American middle school girls. These barriers may also impact the relationship the school counselor has with these girls. Participants in this study felt it was imperative for school counselors seeking to support African American middle school girls through SEL challenges, to understand the effects of SEL barriers and the affect the barriers could have on gaining trust and developing rapport; which are important elements for supporting the girls. The following subsections interpret the study's findings as to implications for policy, practice, and theory.

Policy

When considering policies for school counselors, the researcher referred to the ASCA national model (2019). The ASCA national model outlines exactly what a school counselor should be doing, which includes focus areas (academics, careers, and social-emotional). ASCA identifies a specific percentage (80%) that should be spent conducting direct services (meeting with students, collaborating, and/or advocating on the student's behalf) and a specific percentage (20%) that should be spent on indirect services (emails, phone calls, paperwork, etc.). However, school counselors rarely have the opportunity to dedicate 80% of their time working with

students. Oftentimes, they are spending a great deal of their time completing non-counseling task (hall duty, bus duty, cafeteria duty, substituting, etc.), which hinders their ability to effectively meet the needs of the students.

Based on the interpretation of the data collected from this study, school counselors are vital to supporting African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. Developing a strong rapport is beneficial for supporting African American middle school girls. Trice-Black et al. (2013) stressed the importance of developing relationships with students to support their needs and promote student success. However, a concerning aspect of school counselors developing rapport with African American middle school girls in this study was the school counselors' need for additional time with the girls. The school counselors expressed that they find it challenging at times to spend the time needed with the girls because of duties not related to their role. Non-counseling related duties often included section 504, testing, bus duty, hall duty, lunch duty or other administrative related task.

School counselors are critical to the development of social and emotional learning for all students (ASCA, 2019). School counselors have the ability to promote and support SEL. However, the role of the school counselor has often been unclear for many stakeholders, resulting in school counselors conducting duties outside of their role (Lambie et al., 2019). When school counselors are not used appropriately, it takes away opportunities to address the needs of the students. It was shared that students of color benefit from having access to the school counselors and that African American students are more likely to identify the school counselors as the person that influences them the most (ASCA, 2019) The time spent completing a non-counseling related task could be time spent talking to students, building that trusted relationship, developing rapport in order to address the SEL needs.

When considering policies as they relate to the findings, another area of policy modification is SEL lessons/materials. Although SEL is often presented as a school-based program (Bieman et al., 2010; CASEL, 2017; Coelho, 2014; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Merrell et al., 2008; Oberle et al., 2016; Silverthorn et al., 2017), it is also a part of the school counselor's curriculum. Oftentimes, school counselors are presented with a pacing chart, a core curriculum action plan, and a lesson plan template to utilize when preparing for group and classroom guidance lessons. The findings for this study indicate that relationship building is key to SEL support for African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges. The findings also indicate that mainstream lessons do not always support the SEL needs of African American middle school girls.

Although just getting to know the girls, listening to their concerns and talking to them creates the opportunity to develop a relationship; school counselors also refer to and utilize parts of the curriculum. School counselors inspiring to help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges should be aware of current methods of delivery and be willing to make any necessary adjustments. Following the curriculum, as outlined by ASCA (2019) is important, but it is also important for ASCA to provide school counselors with SEL material that is more diverse, relevant and relatable that will not only help address specific SEL barriers that impact African American middle school girls but provide them with lifelong tools.

Practice

The results of this study have implications for school counselors working with African American middle school girls that will support them through SEL challenges. School counselors that are inspiring to support their African American middle school girls through SEL challenges can reflect on and utilize themes identified in this study to determine if these themes have been

effective when working with their girls. The discussion can include that school counselors can advocate for additional professional development or training on barriers that impact SEL and relationship development.

Implications that can be identified from the results of this study indicated that school counselors must develop a strong rapport with African American middle school girls in order to effectively support them through SEL challenges. Although school counselors strive to build relationships with all of their students, some of the school counselors that participated in this study shared that they had to work harder to gain trust from their African American girls. Being genuine, coming from a place of love, and having an open-door policy were key components that helped them develop rapport. However, there were barriers identified that could impact the development of these relationships. These findings confirmed findings from the literature presented earlier. African American girls encounter many challenges that may impact their ability to be successful. Cattenhead (2017) noted challenges that African American girls face are educational and socialization barriers, resulting in a need to teach the skills needed for success.

Perhaps the profession of school counseling should consider more developmental opportunities for school counselors to learn more diverse approaches to support SEL for minority students. Williams et al. (2014) noted that school counselors are rarely, if ever, intentionally taught to identify, mobilize, and utilize the strength and resources of African American students. Previous research found that SEL studies need to be expanded to address gaps related to ethnicity and gender (Bailey et al., 2015; Hamlat et al., 2015; Teston, 2017; West et al, 2018). Although the ASCA national model offers several tools and training to address the SEL needs of all students, it could be very beneficial to address and provide professional development opportunities that explore SEL gaps (gender and race) and the effects of SEL barriers.

The study results highlight SEL challenges that may impact African American middle school girls. The findings also presented some best practices identified by school counselors working with African American middle school girls impacted by SEL challenges. Going forward, practice should include revamping material related to SEL groups, lessons, and programs to ensure they are relatable and relevant to the students. More training related to SEL barriers and how to support students impacted by these challenges would lead to meaningful practices and provide more support for African American middle school girls.

Theory

The theoretical suggestion for this study includes developing rapport and understanding how SEL barriers may impact the relationship. Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory defines how people learn, supporting the importance of SEL. The study relied on the perspective of school counselors regarding how they guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges.

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory supports how school counselors frame and implement SEL with African American middle school girls. Furthermore, the results of the study produced evidence that supports social learning as well as the literature review. The theory was the foundation for the study. Previous studies support the framework and findings of this study. The literature related to African American girls revealed that some African American girls endure challenges, such as adult's perception, discipline, racism, and stereotypes that impact their SEL (Annamma et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017; Morris & Perry, 2017). However, SEL is a tool that has the potential to support African American middle school girls impacted by barriers (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017; White, 2018; Zakrewski, 2016).

A study reviewed by Zakrewski (2016) found similar results when guiding African American girls through SEL challenges. The study revealed that SEL approaches cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” scope, the approach must consider the cultural context (Zakrewski, 2016). The data and analysis of this study produced results that placed significant value on school counselors developing a strong rapport with their African American middle school girls.

CASEL (2017) identified five components supported by SEL (relationship skills, responsible decision making, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness) and ASCA (2019) identified four components that guide school counselors (accountability, delivery system, foundation, management system). Key themes that emerged in this study included relationship-building and method of delivery, which are supported by these components. Bandura’s social learning theory combined with the components from ASCA and CASEL supports how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this research led to a deeper understanding of SEL barriers and identified how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. Previous research found that SEL studies need to be expanded to address gaps related to ethnicity and gender (Bailey et al., 2015; Hamlat et al., 2015; Teston, 2017; West et al, 2018). This study also produced results that could be utilized to further research on SEL gender and race gaps.

Future researchers may want to consider a longitudinal approach. A longitudinal approach consists of studying a group over an extended period of time (Caruana et al., 2015). This would allow the researcher to observe the school counselors and African American middle girls from the beginning of the school year to the end, observing their interactions and changes

that may occur throughout the year. This would also allow the researcher to extensively review SEL barriers and effective SEL techniques.

This study could also be expanded to include a larger sample size, observations, or an additional focus group. This study collected data through individual interviews with six school counselors. By expanding the sample size to 8–10 more interviews, the data may have produced more evidence. This study also collected data through a single focus group. By adding an additional focus group with African American middle school girls could have produced richer data to support the study. This study utilized interviews, a focus group, and documents to ensure triangulation, however, the study could have produced more substantial evidence with a few observations.

Although this study focused on the perspective of school counselors, most SEL programs are school-based (Bieman et al., 2010; CASEL, 2017; Coelho, 2014; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Merrell et al., 2008; Oberle et al., 2016; Silverthorn et al., 2017). Future research could include administrators and teachers that work closely with African American girls. For instance, teachers are usually the first point of contact and often observe many of the challenges that impact African American middle school girls. White (2018) noted that African American girls impacted by barriers often bring their experiences and coping mechanisms to school. African American girls depend on support to help them overcome academic challenges and maintain connectedness (Butler-Barnes et al., 2017). The research can also include elementary and high schools to see if developing rapport is an effective way to support African American girls and if school counselors identified similar methods to support the girls with their SEL challenges. Including different stakeholders that work closely with African American girls will help identify additional SEL barriers and establish effective methods for supporting them. The findings could produce

opportunities for additional training for school counselors related to developing rapport with African American students, identifying and understanding SEL barriers, and effective methods of delivery.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter was to interpret the findings based on the research question to better understand how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through SEL challenges. This chapter provided a discussion related to the findings, including implications for policy, practice, and theory. This chapter also highlighted the limitations of the study and provided recommendations for future research. School counselors work diligently to help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. The school counselors that participated in this study identified best practices that had positive results for supporting their African American middle school girls.

This study sought to explore how school counselors help guide African American middle school girls through their SEL challenges. Although previous studies addressed the benefits of SEL and barriers that impact African American girls, this study was unique and viewed this challenge from the perspective of school counselors. Results from the study revealed that developing a strong rapport was the most effective way to help guide African American middle school girls. Strong rapport building allowed school counselors that participated in this study, the opportunity to support their African American middle school girls through tough situations. Without having that trusted relationship with the girls, the support from the school counselors may not be effective. Other key themes that emerged from the study included developing method of delivery and SEL challenges.

The profession of school counseling is an ever-changing field. Skills and techniques change because the needs of our students are different. School counselors are vital to the educational setting and should be valued more for the work they do, especially on the middle school level. Middle school is a challenging time for many students. Our students are often impacted by so many challenges (social media, sexuality, mental health) and SEL is a great tool to support them through these challenges. Understanding that there are barriers that impact the effectiveness of SEL is important for not just school counselors but all stakeholders. School barriers are crucial and stakeholders (Superintendents, administration, school board members) need to consider reviewing and revamping some of the school policies to ensure the rules are equitable for all students and not targeting a specific group.

SEL is an effective strategy for addressing the academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of all students. However, there are also SEL barriers that impact the effectiveness of the strategies being taught. SEL material that is available does not always support the needs of African American middle school girls. Although school counselors work around the “cookie cutter” lessons, SEL material needs to be updated to be more diverse, relatable, and relevant for all students, ensuring to support their needs. Some African American middle school girls are impacted by barriers at home and at school. These barriers may impact every aspect of their lives. However, school counselors in southern Virginia have identified best practices that are working with their African American middle school girls. Effectively taught, the skills learned through SEL will last a lifetime.

This study may support how school counselors support African American girls, but it should not be the last. There are SEL gaps related to gender and race that require additional research.

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Appendix A: Participant Eligibility Survey

Social-Emotional Learning Research: Middle School Counselor Survey

PROMPT:

YOUR RESPONSE:

I currently work at:	(enter the name of your school)
My current position is:	(X one or both) Department Chair ____ School Counselor ____
I have been a school counselor at the middle school level for _____ years.	(Your answer)
I currently work with:	(X the ones that apply) Grade 6 ____ Grade 7 ____ Grade 8 ____
Student gender (X one)	More boys than girls ____ More girls than boys ____ About equal number of boys and girls ____
Do you help African American girls with their socio-emotional learning?	Yes ____ If yes, about what % of your time? ____% No ____

Appendix B: Interview Protocol and Questions for School Counselors

<p><u>Go over the Consent form, obtain signature, and provide a copy to the participant:</u></p> <p><u> Yes No</u></p>
<p><u>Time of Interview:</u></p>
<p><u>Date:</u></p>
<p><u>Place:</u></p>
<p><u>Interview Context: Phone face-to-face Other:_____</u></p>
<p><u>Interviewer:</u></p>
<p><u>Interviewee:</u></p>
<p><u>Position of Interviewee:</u></p>

Questions:

- A. How many years have you been a school counselor?
- B. How many years have you been a school counselor on the middle school level?
- C. How many years have you utilized SEL with middle school students?
 - 1. What theorists, if any, do you use to inform your approach to SEL?
 - 2. What’s your philosophy for how to work with African-American girls?

Follow-up question:

- a. So, you talked about knowing your situation and stereotypes. Can you name some of those as they pertain to African American girls?

3. Could you describe how you guide African American middle school girls through socio-emotional learning?

Follow-up question:

- a. Do you think that has a lot to do with the way you build relationships and like you mentioned the open-door policy and being more welcoming?
4. Could you describe how socio-emotional learning may be the same or different for African American middle school girls?

Follow-up questions:

- a. You started touching on barriers and challenges and mentioned race and socio-economics. What are some other barriers that you notice with specifically the African American girls that could impact how they received the SEL strategies and techniques that we're trying to offer them?
 - b. You mentioned that noticing the friendship changing as they transition from six to seventh grade, and then from seventh to eighth, were there any other noticeable changes?
5. Could you describe any challenges you may have with utilizing socio-emotional learning with African American middle school girls?

Follow-up questions:

- a. You mentioned home environment with your African American girls, do you notice that there's more of a challenge when there's not buy in from the parents?

- b. Have you noticed that you are able to help African American girls more with social emotional when you have parent buy in? Is parent buy in an issue?
 - c. You mentioned male teachers, can be a barrier. Could you give me an example of what you would typically see or may have observed from some of your African American female students who struggle with male teachers?
 - d. Some examples of those challenges would be?
 - e. So, do you think stereotypes like “having an attitude” play a part in some of the challenges that our African American girls experience or barriers, especially as it pertains to social emotional learning?
6. Could you describe how you guide African American girls who experience socio-emotional challenges? Any strategies or specific techniques?

Follow-up questions:

- a. Do you feel that parents buy in plays a part in how we support the girls, African American girls with social emotional learning? Do you notice that there that you require that buy in or not so much?
 - b. Any particular challenges that you’ve seen with your African American girls that stand out when it comes to trying to support them with social emotional learning?
7. Could you describe the main negative and positive characteristics or processes of socio-emotional learning?

8. How do you evaluate socio-emotional learning? That is, how do you know it is working for African American girls?

Follow-up question:

- a. When you are noticing these changes and the improvement, are you noticing the improvement among African American girls at the same rate as other students? Or is there a significant difference?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about socio-emotional learning that helps to support African American middle school girls?

Appendix C: Focus Group Protocol and Questions for School Counselors

Go over the Consent form, obtain signature, and provide a copy to the participant:
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Time of Focus Group:
Date:
Place:

Questions:

1. What are your thoughts on SEL?
2. What's your philosophy for how to work with African-American girls?
3. Could you describe how you see socio-emotional learning supporting African American middle school girls?
4. Could you describe how socio-emotional learning may be the same or different for African American middle school girls?
5. Could you describe any challenges you may have with utilizing socio-emotional learning with African American middle school girls?
6. Could you describe how you guide African American girls who experience socio-emotional challenges? Any strategies or specific techniques?
7. Could you describe the main negative and positive characteristics or processes of socio-emotional learning?
8. How do you evaluate socio-emotional learning? How do you know it is working?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share about socio-emotional learning that helps to support African American middle school girls?

Appendix D: IRB Consent Form

CONSENT FOR SURVEY (click consent) with follow-up

The purpose of this study is to explore how school counselors guide African American middle school girls through their SEL barriers. I expect approximately 6–8 volunteer participants. No one will be paid to be in the study. I will begin enrollment on 10-18-19 and end enrollment on 12-01-19.

To participate in this phase you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire. Completing this phase should take less than a half hour of your time.

You will be invited to share contact information if you wish to enter the next phase of this research project. This information will be destroyed immediately after the conclusion of this research. All other study data will be held securely and then destroyed after 3 years.

There are no risks to participating in this study other than the everyday risk of your being on your computer as you take this survey. Information you provide will help the researcher gather middle school counselors' perspectives regarding African American middle school girls impacted by SEL barriers. You could benefit from participating in this study by experiencing your own growth and self-reflection regarding SEL barriers and the impact it may have on African American middle school girls.

Your personal information will be protected. This survey is firewall and password protected so that only the researcher (me) can see your answers. I will keep this in strict confidence. The information/topic of the questions are not sensitive or risky. However, if you were to write something that might allow someone to possibly deduce your identity, we would remove this information and we would not include this information in any publication or report. And data you provide would be held privately. All data will be destroyed three years after the study ends.

You can stop answering the questions in this online survey if you want to stop.

Please print a copy of this for your records. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, Towana Hunter at [email redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranche@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390).

Click the button below to consent to take this survey.

Appendix E: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

Statement of Original Work (Continued)

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Towana L. M. Hunter

Digital Signature

Towana L. M. Hunter

Name (Typed)

April 20, 2020

Date