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AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS NECESSARY TO PROMOTE
COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS FOR A RURAL CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL

By

Anna A. Whitesides

A Dissertation Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Benerd College
Counseling Psychology

University of the Pacific
Stockton, California

2022

AN EXAMINATION OF THE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS NECESSARY TO PROMOTE
COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS FOR A RURAL CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL

By

Anna A. Whitesides

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By

Anna A. Whitesides

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the school district in this study. The community within this district has provided me with the utmost support, encouragement, and motivation throughout this process. And as an employee, it is an honor to serve and work alongside these individuals. The staff is comprised of intelligent, kind, and compassionate individuals whose goal is to serve their community to the best of their ability. It is my hope that this study will provide valuable information that may be used to increase social and emotional skill development and support.

Acknowledgements

My gratitude goes to my brother, Christopher; you inspired and encouraged me to pursue my doctorate in education. Without your continuous support and our ongoing sibling rivalry, I would not be where I am today. To my parents, Tom and Becky Whitesides, thank you for teaching me to be independent and capable, and to believe in myself in all facets of life. To my fiancé, Jack, I am beyond thankful you came into my life when we did. We met when I needed your motivation, encouragement, and love more than ever. With you by my side, I know I can accomplish anything. To the rest of the Swimley family, thank you for your abundant love and support, and for welcoming me into your family with open arms.

Finally, thank you to the educators at the University of Pacific, Benerd School of Education for providing me with the opportunity to grow personally and professionally. To my dissertation committee, Dr. Justin Low, Dr. Rachelle Hackett, and Dr. Sarah Hendricks; your guidance and insight throughout this process is what made it all possible.

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Abstract

By Anna A. Whitesides

University of the Pacific
2022

Data from the National Center for Education Statistics suggest that as academic standards continue to rise, students' mental health continues to decline (Carr, 2022). Public schools today have a unique opportunity to support the ongoing learning of students, while also encouraging the development of social and emotional skills that will benefit students' academic performance, as well as their general wellbeing. While schools today follow rigorous state standards and support academic learning, many students attending rural high schools are graduating without the skills necessary to be successful in college or career (Farrington et al., 2012).

This mixed-methods case study examines the social emotional skills necessary to promote college and career readiness for a rural California high school. Two research questions frame the study. First, what skills do rural educators, students, families, and community members believe are necessary for students to be successful in college or career? Secondly, in what ways do participants believe rural educators can help in the development of the skills identified in Research Question 1? Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with school staff, parents, students, and community members to support both research questions. Quantitative data was later obtained through a follow-up survey with school staff, to identify five key, social emotional competences that school staff believe the be most critical for rural students to learn. It was determined that responsibility, work ethic, social skills,

communication, and critical thinking skills are believed to be the most important social

emotional skills to learn, for students attending high school within a rural community. Findings

from this study contribute to current research as well as provide the district this set of core

competencies to assist educators in developing school-wide practices and procedures that

promote the development of the whole child.

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List of Abbreviations

CCR   College and Career Readiness

CASEL   Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

SEL   Social Emotional Learning

SAT   Scholastic Aptitude Test

ESEA   Elementary and Secondary Education Act

ESSA   Every Student Succeeds Act

SEA   State Educational Agency

LEA   Location Education Agencies

CDE   California Department of Education

NACE   National Association of Colleges and Employers

IEP   Individualized Education Plan

APA   American Psychological Association

SM   Staff Members

CM   Community Members

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Today, secondary schools face increased dropout rates, poverty, school-related violence, teen suicide, low academic achievement, and inadequate preparation for college and career (Aud et al., 2013; Brackett & Rivers, 2014). These are just some of the challenges our educational system is facing. Schools continue to witness instability of students' social, emotional, and mental conditions (Zhang et al., 2016). Some believe these issues are most prevalent in urban schools; however, limited research has been conducted in regard to rural schools. Title VI under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 qualifies the local education agency as rural if the total number of students in average daily attendance at all its schools is fewer than 600, or each county served by that school has a total population density of fewer than ten persons per square mile, and all of its schools meet the definition of rural as described by the National Center for Education Statistics. To paint a more descriptive picture, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (2021) defines rural communities as, "Small country towns, defined by geographic isolation from other communities, absence of large metropolitan centers, low-density settlement patterns, historic dependence on agriculture, and continual population loss, out-migration, and economic upheaval or economic distress" (para 1). Although these schools may not have metal detectors and 24-hour security guards like some urban districts, geographic isolation, economic distress, poverty, and unstable households significantly impact students attending rural schools. These students struggle with the same, if not more severe, social emotional distress. This level of distress can severely impact a student's performance and achievement in school, becoming a risk-factor for future academic and mental health problems.

In addition to academic achievement, students should possess a wide range of skills, necessary to help them succeed in college and careers. These include the ability to work well with others, understand and manage emotions, and set and achieve goals (CASEL, 2012). These skills are commonly referred to as social emotional skills, non-cognitive, or non-academic skills. For the purpose of this study, the term social emotional skills will be utilized to define the skills and knowledge that students need to communicate effectively, interact with peers, resolve conflicts, and manage their emotional responses to stressful situations.

Although research continues to highlight the critical role social and emotional skills play in supporting the academic success of students, it has yet to become a main focus of most schools (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Yoder, 2014). Within the Collaborating States Initiative many states are developing competencies to articulate goals for what students should know and be able to do in terms of their social and emotional development (Dusenbury et al., 2015).

To improve students' social emotional competencies, schools should emphasize their importance and directly teach these skills. When developing plans to implement practices to support social emotional skills, it is critical that district leaders draft a vision statement that clearly defines the specific skills the district hopes to emphasize and influence. With an increasing focus on social emotional skills, many school districts have created their own social emotional learning competencies, referred to as Graduate Profiles (Elk Grove Unified School District, 2020). With a clear vision, leaders can create graduate profiles that identify practices and strategies, specific to their districts' needs, that ensure graduating students are prepared for college, careers, and their future. Therefore, it is imperative to understand what teachers and other adults need to do at school to help students develop the necessary social and emotional skills to succeed in high school and beyond. This research study seeks to establish core

competencies for a rural high school that promote social and emotional skills essential for college and career readiness.

Background of the Problem

The focus on Social-emotional learning (SEL) has become an important trend in education, specifically curriculum and instruction; however, it is frequently overlooked at the high school level. Arguably, SEL is even more important at this level than other grade levels for the purposes of effective college and career readiness preparation (Carr, 2021). According to Hanover Research (2014) students must be college and career ready in order to be productive and successful citizens in today's global economy. Additionally, special attention needs to be paid to student engagement, social, and academic behaviors.

In 2017, educational leaders created what is known as The Graduate Profile. Unlike a mission statement, a graduate profile is a document that a school or district uses to specify the cognitive, personal, and interpersonal competencies that students should have when they graduate (Kay, 2017). Every school system is unique, but they are generally connected by a shared aspiration: that all students have an educational experience preparing them to be effective lifelong learners and contributors.

The Graduate Profile initiative is based on the notion that school districts need a clear answer to this seemingly basic question: How can we guarantee that the students that graduate from high school are ready for the challenges of college, work, citizenship and life in the 21st century? While curricular competency is a worthy goal of educators, that alone is not sufficient to prepare students for life after high school. As the skills and competencies for success in college are similar to those needed for success in the workforce, it is imperative that districts focus on both college and career readiness.

Statement of the Problem

Compared to urban children, rural children are at greater risk for mental health issues and have less access to mental health services (Moore et al., 2005). Rural teachers, administrators, school-based mental health and other support personnel (e.g., speech language pathologists, nurses) have an important role in fostering students' resiliency and improving their social-emotional well-being (Nicols et al., 2017).

Research conducted by ACT in 2020 found that a large majority of the surveyed K-12 teachers and administrators agreed that it is both possible to teach and assess social and emotional skills in school. Specifically, 90% of high school teachers reported it possible. But many high school teachers are not actively focusing on these skills throughout the day and the school year. Marzano and Toth (2014) found that far too many teachers are not utilizing instructional practices that promote deeper levels of connection to the social and emotional learning that college and career readiness requires.

Regarding assessment of readiness for college, many schools focus on academic readiness and place less emphasis on measuring social emotional readiness. Placement tests, such as the SAT are then used to determine a student's potential for success. Researchers have found that this type of academic data may not adequately capture students' aptitude and potential for success. Measuring students' self-reported non-academic aptitudes and beliefs may be just as important. The use of non-academic measures, in addition to the traditionally available academic data, might lead to better placement, more efficiently targeted support, and higher success rates (Bahr et al. 2019; Gore 2006; Gore et al. 2017; Hodara et al. 2012). By focusing on the student as a whole, and increasing these non-academic skills, educators can better prepare students for life after high school.

Research Questions

The following research questions are designed to examine rural educators' beliefs of social and emotional competencies essential for college and career readiness.

1. What skills do rural educators, students, families, and community members believe are necessary for students to be successful in college or career?

2. In what ways can rural educators help in the development of the skills identified in Research Question 1?

Significance of the Study

By identifying social and emotional skills necessary for rural high school students to be considered college or career ready, districts have the opportunity to create a guide for reviewing, developing, and enhancing school programs and practices to better support the social and emotional wellbeing of their students. In addition, district initiatives, facilities, and professional development opportunities can be beneficial to staff, students and their families. Identifying key competencies through the education system can have long term implications for their well-being in both school and in life.

This study focuses on a small, rural high school district in the foothills of California, Forest River High School District (FRHSD) Forest River is a pseudonym that will be used to maintain the privacy of the district within this study. This district houses a total of 620 students enrolled in Forest River High School, Forest River Independent Study, and Forest River Continuation High School. This school is considered a Title 1 school. The Title I program is a federally funded program authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 as reauthorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. It is a program in which the State Educational Agency (SEA) awards grants to geographically diverse Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). The purpose of this funding is to ensure all children have a

fair and equal opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. While this quaint district includes

talented educators, supportive community members, excellent counselors and engaged students

and families, it would benefit from a clear vision in which to infuse curriculum and instructional

practice with elements that address social emotional skills, thereby providing its students with

the necessary competencies to be both college and career ready.

Theoretical Framework

In 2018, the California Department of Education (CDE) established California's Social

and Emotional Learning Guiding Principles. These five principals have been utilized as the

theoretical orientation that guides this study. The following Social and Emotional (SEL)

Guiding Principles are intended to inform and support strong SEL practice across the state based

on the collective experience of the contributors. In working to establish a Social and Emotional

Learning framework that best supports rural high schools in California, the researcher has

focused on the following as suggested by the CDE:

1. Adopt Whole Child Development as the Goal of Education

2. Commit to Equity

3. Build Capacity

4. Partner with Families and Communities

5. Learn and Improve

In addition to the CDE's principles, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and

Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2012), has assisted in the guidance of this program, as CASEL has

significantly helped grow social and emotional learning from just a theory, to a critical part of

education. CASEL addressed five broad and interrelated areas of competence: Self-Awareness,

Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness.

With this framework, schools and districts can foster knowledge, skills, and attitudes within their students, through establishing equitable learning environments that coordinate practices across four key settings that support students' social, emotional, and academic development. Those settings include the classrooms, schools, families and caregivers, and communities (CASEL, 2012).

In order to adopt whole child development as the goal of education, FRHS is attempting to take a systems approach to promoting student academic, social, and emotional learning, physical well-being, and college, career, and civic life readiness. As a commitment to equity, the district has ensured all students have the opportunity to build SEL skills in a manner that is personalized, culturally relevant, and intentionally addresses racism and implicit bias. It will build the capacity of both students and adults by focusing on relationship-centered learning environments and attempt to maximize the resources of the school community. Lastly, with the use of data, continuous improvement practices are able to enhance the quality of student social and emotional learning opportunities (CDE, 2018).

Summary

Little research has been done to determine what social emotional skills are necessary for rural high school students to be college or career ready. But research has determined psychological resources are critical to student success and to a 21st century education. Educators have a unique opportunity to support the social and emotional development of today's youth. Through engagement with a coalition of stakeholders, social emotional competencies that are believed to be important for rural students to learn, can be identified and emphasized for the betterment of all students.

Definition of Key Terms

Non-Academic Skills. Broadly defined skills not measured on standardized or IQ tests, but necessary to prepare students for success and independent living (Stanfield, 2015).

Non-Cognitive Skills. Skills representing the patterns of thought, feelings, behaviors, traits and skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, social-emotional skills, persistence, creativity, and self-control that allow individuals to contribute meaningfully to society and to succeed in their public lives, workplace, homes, and other societal context (Bloom 1964; Borghans et al. 2008; Garcia, 2014).

Soft Skills. The non-academic knowledge, skills, habits, and character traits needed to succeed in both college and the workplace, such as social and emotional skills and dispositions, and self-management skills. Soft skills are a subset of lifelong learning skills, which may also include technology skills, financial literacy and consumer skills, civic skills, higher order thinking skills, and the ability to apply knowledge in cross- disciplinary contexts (http://nces.ed.gov/pubs).

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy (CASEL, 2012).

College and Career Readiness. The acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and succeed in credit-bearing first-year courses at a post- secondary institution, such as a two or four year college, trade school, or technical school without the need for remediation (ACT, 2015; Conley, 2012).

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Intellectual ability is a key factor in academic achievement; however, student performance and outcomes are also influenced by social emotional skills. These skills aid students in navigating the education system, establishing a career, and are essential for future successes. Much of the research on non-academic factors suggest the factors influence a student's well-being, however, little research supports the idea that these factors are critical for college and career readiness. An even smaller pool of research has been conducted to consider the needs of students residing in rural areas. The purpose of this literature review is to determine how these skills can impact students' college and career readiness, specifically students who attend high school in rural parts of California.

Researchers have referred to social emotional skills by various names. In 1994, scholars from multiple fields—such as emotional intelligence, child development, prevention science, bullying prevention, and public health—came together to identify key skills and competencies students need to successfully navigate school and life, which they called social emotional learning, or SEL. SEL was developed as an umbrella framework in an attempt to end a piecemeal approach to social and emotional issues that students face and create a common understanding and goal for student development (CASEL, 2012). Garcia prefers to term noncognitive skills. She defines noncognitive skills as patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that individuals cultivate, refine and develop over their lifespan (2014). However, Tuckwiller et al. (2017) believes the term non-academic is more appropriate as all mental processes, even those not relating to literacy, math, or written expression, require cognition. Some additional terms include social and emotional learning, emotional intelligence, soft skills,

character education, and 21st century skills. While current research uses various terminologies to describe social and emotional skills that describe the psychological influences of learning, for this review and following research, the term *social emotional skills* will be used to encompass these varied terms.

In the studies reviewed in this chapter, researchers looked to determine why social emotional factors are so imperative for students in rural areas, what constitutes college and career readiness, the relevance of academic ability, and how noncognitive factors impact success. The following research also considers various instructional strategies to enhance noncognitive skills in the educational setting. While research suggests that noncognitive factors influence a student's well-being, little research has examined whether these factors are critical for rural high school students. Further research is necessary to determine the benefits of social emotional skills as they support college and career readiness from the perspective of students, parents, educators, and employers. With this increasing focus on social-emotional outcomes, many schools and districts throughout the country are exploring ways to actively foster students' SEL skills. This research identifies a need and provides strategies and tools that schools and districts can use to promote the development of social and emotional skills that lead to better educational outcomes.

Rural High Schools

Many students who graduate high school are not prepared to navigate the college experience or excel in a chosen career. Research by Kannapel et al., (2017) suggests that poverty, unemployment, and a lack of understanding about possible careers and the education needed to pursue them continue to present challenges for educators, students, and families. Though urban and rural communities face similar challenges in education, rural districts are often more significantly impacted. Rural students have lower literacy rates than urban and

suburban students, which is likely a reflection of the high levels of poverty often found in rural areas. Poverty rates for children under the age of 18 living in rural communities reaches 22.9%, according to The Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, whereas the poverty rate for children living in urban communities is only 17.7%. In the recent report *Why Rural Matters*, The Rural School and Community Trust found that many rural districts "face nothing less than an emergency" (p.1). Thus, rural students need the support of educators to ensure they possess the necessary social emotional skills to be considered college or career ready.

Funding disparities between rural and urban communities mean fewer resources and opportunities for rural students. Rural students do not have access to as many advanced classes as compared to urban students (Public Schools First NC, 2020) and as a result, are less likely to enroll in college than their urban peers (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, High School Benchmarks Report, October 2013). Additionally, with minimal funding, rural high schools are less likely to be able to provide career and technical courses that offer many students in urban areas a pathway to careers that require minimal training after high school. Due to their small size, rural schools are often overlooked by researchers and policy analysts. The National School Board Association found that 57% of policy insiders felt rural education was not important to the U.S. Department of Education. This is an alarming percentage, considering more than half a million students in California live in rural areas (Jones, 2012). Thus, funding to promote social emotional learning in rural schools would play an important role in addressing students' mental health to support educational outcomes.

College and Career Readiness (CCR)

College and Career Readiness has been the dominant topic in educational reform for almost two decades (Hanover Report, 2014) and refers to the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to be successful in post-secondary education and/or training that lead to gainful employment. Readiness is defined as the state of being fully prepared for something, and research has found that in order to be considered college and career ready, individuals must obtain both cognitive and non-cognitive skills, behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge.

High school graduates have the opportunity to decide whether to pursue higher education or begin their career upon graduation. Although college and career readiness is reported to be a key priority in education in the United States (Hein et al., 2012), few students are prepared for either path. According to survey research, it is believed by most that students should exit high school with a full understanding of the career opportunities available to them, the education necessary to be successful in their chosen pathway, and a plan to attain their goals (West Virginia Department of Education, 2018).

College Readiness

College readiness refers to the knowledge, skills, and habits that students must possess to be successful in postsecondary education or training that leads to a sustaining career (Sommerfeld, 2011, p.19). William Sedlacek (in press), theorized that there are eight essential non-cognitive components of college readiness: positive self-concept regarding academics; realistic self-appraisal; understanding and dealing with racism; long-term goal setting; having an available support person; demonstrated experience and success with leadership; community service; and knowledge acquired.

Although eight out of 10 students from rural areas graduate from high school, many are not ready for college. When comparing rural students to students in urban areas, fewer rural students, 28 percent, compared to 41 percent of students in urban areas, took the required coursework for admission to the University of California or California State University systems according to an EdSource (2019) analysis of 2018-19 state data. In 2007, Snyder interviewed 11 parents of high schoolers in West Virginia who had a high school education or less, and a common theme emerged — negative conceptions of college. These parents had preconceived beliefs about college, that it was for the wealthy, less safe than remaining at home, characterized by partying, and less profitable than manual labor (Snyder, 2007). A similar study conducted by Hendrickson (2012), found that parents of students in a rural Appalachian high school regularly encouraged them to forgo college and follow them into industry. Students in rural areas need to be prepared for and aware of opportunities alternative to college and be prepared to enter the workforce.

Career Readiness

Many high school students choose to forgo continuing their education and enter the workforce immediately after graduation. These students must possess various skills and traits to be considered career ready. Career readiness requires a student to possess both the necessary knowledge and technical skills needed for employment (Mayes & Hines, 2014, p. 34). The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) state career readiness is a foundation from which to demonstrate requisite core competencies that broadly prepare the college educated for success in the workplace and lifelong career management (n.d). NACE states there are eight career readiness competencies including: career and self-development, communication, critical thinking, equity and inclusion, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, and technology.

Research has proven that college and career readiness reflect a variety of academic and social emotional factors and a complex combination of reciprocal academic behaviors (Farrington et al., 2012; Morningstar, Lombardi, Fowler, & Test, 2015). Luckily, there is much overlap between college and career readiness competencies. To be college and career ready, an individual must acquire competencies such as perseverance, grit, self-discipline, social awareness, and positive relationship skills. A national study was conducted including nearly 2,000 faculty members who taught entry-level courses in 25 subject areas at more than 500 two and four-year post-secondary institutions. Results from this study revealed that college readiness and career readiness share many essential elements, such as study skills, time-management skills, persistence, and ownership of learning (Conley, 2011). Therefore, teachers can be confident that all students will benefit from increased social emotional skills, regardless of their chosen path.

Social Emotional Skills to Promote College and Career Readiness

Various non cognitive and social-emotional skills have proven to play an essential role in the academic success of adolescents. Non cognitive skills can be the difference between success and failure in the education system. Starting as early as infancy and continuing through early adulthood, different experiences can impact an individual's development of social emotional skills. Research by Villaseñor (2017) identified four main factors that are crucial for the development of socio-emotional skills in the classroom: curriculum, pedagogical methods, classroom management, and school climate. For each of these four main elements, teachers play a unique and imperative role in the development of the social emotional skills of their students. Their ability to do so effectively has to do with their own endowment of social emotional skills – either innate or acquired, their actions and behaviors in (and outside) the classroom as the result of this endowment, their interaction with their students, their ability to identify and manage

social and emotional challenges in the classroom, the training they receive and the resources they have access to in order to improve their own social emotional development (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

Teachers at rural high schools have an exceptionally unique opportunity to help develop students' social emotional skills. Within small communities, it is not uncommon for educators to have pre-established relationships with families of the school. These relationships can support the teaching and development of professional and personal development. Garcia (2014) defines noncognitive, or social emotional skills as patterns of thoughts, feelings and behaviors that individuals cultivate, refine and develop over the lifespan. The recent inclusion of nonacademic factors in the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), the most recent reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, encourages the acceptance of factors other than academic being an important consideration in educational achievement (Dardick & Tuckwiller, 2019). Although the term nonacademic factors have gained recent attention, Sparks (2011) suggested that, "most schools do not teach or measure nonacademic readiness indicators directly, though they do pop up through conduct reports, attendance, team-project evaluations, and other areas".

Modern education often focuses on academic standards, or what students must learn. Whereas certain social emotional skills support how they learn. By putting emphasis on foundational non-cognitive skills and social emotional learning, educators can help to support students in their development of other skills such as resiliency and agency (Stafford-Brizard, 2016), as well as promote academic progress.

Researchers at University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research asked the question, "What does it take for students to graduate from high school, go to college, and persist

to earn a degree?" They determined the list of potential answers to be long and extends far beyond content knowledge and academic skills (Farrington et al., 2012). Utilizing an experimental approach, this team of researchers organized the vast array of traits into a conceptual framework of five non cognitive, or nonacademic factors attributing to a student's academic performance.

1. Academic Behaviors

2. Academic Perseverance

3. Academic Mindset

4. Learning Strategies

5. Social Skills

Although these factors do not consist of all the non-cognitive skills and habits students need to succeed in life, they are a starting point for further discussion (Farrington, 2012). These five categories encompass a wide range of traits, skills, behaviors, and attitudes. They were organized into similar constructs to bridge the gap in terminology between researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds (economists, psychologists, sociologists) who may use different terms for similar constructs (Farrington et al., 2012). If students are to achieve their full potential, they must have opportunities to engage and develop a comprehensive set of non-academic skills (Haynes-Judon, 2013).

Academic Behavior

Academic Behavior includes the act of going to class, doing homework, organizing materials, participating, and studying. These behaviors are positively correlated with academic achievement. Academic behaviors are most proximal to a student's consideration to be college or career ready. Academic behaviors are the visible, outward signs that a student is engaged and

putting forth effort to learn. Although no one can directly "see" intangible characteristics such as perseverance, motivation, or a sense of belonging, one can infer their presence or absence by the way a student behaves toward his or her schoolwork.

In one Chicago study, attendance and studying not only strongly predicted academic course failures but also were the strongest predictors for getting high grades, more so than test scores or student background characteristics (Allensworth & Easton, 2007). In order to have positive school attendance and strong study habits, students need to possess the social emotional skills needed to do so. While it may be difficult to change one's personality, a basic tenet of psychology is that it is almost always possible to change one's behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Skinner, 1953; Staats, 1963). One of the goals of this study is to help determine how educators can best facilitate these changes or instill these skills in ways that promote college and career readiness.

Academic Perseverance

Perseverance is often defined by the words, grit, tenacity, and resilience. Perseverance encompasses self-discipline and self-control and is necessary for students to succeed despite distractions, obstacles, or challenges. The ability to accomplish long-term goals in the face of challenges and setbacks, requires psychological resources and social emotional skills. Students who exhibit academic perseverance may be considered engaged, focused, determined, and hard working. However, these skills are not always innate. A popular study conducted by Walter Mischel and colleagues, sometimes referred to as the "marshmallow" experiment (Mischel & Mischel, 1983; Mischel et al., 1988; Shoda et al., 1990), emphasizes the importance of self-control as it relates to perseverance. In this experiment, children at the Stanford University preschool were left alone with one marshmallow after being told they could have two

marshmallows if they waited to eat the one until the experimenter returned. It was more challenging for the children to wait for the second marshmallow when the marshmallow was put in plain sight, making it difficult for the children to avoid thinking about it, and when the children were not given strategies for distracting themselves from thinking about the marshmallow. While the experiment results do not provide evidence that self-control leads to better test scores independent of the effects of students' initial intelligence levels, it does provide evidence that self-control, perseverance, and resilience are dependent upon context (e.g., whether the marshmallow is in plain sight or not), and on *strategies* (i.e., distraction strategies provided by the experimenter). Similarly, the development of social emotional skills can contribute to a students' ability to persevere and can assist them in being able to develop strategies for their own learning and performance.

It is well documented (Moore et al., 2005; Howell & McFeeters, 2008; Stewart et al., 2015) that students from rural backgrounds are especially likely to face great stress and limited social support for academic achievement. These factors can undermine perseverance toward academic and career goals. While students may have different innate levels of perseverance as a personal trait, the degree to which they demonstrate perseverance is also impacted by context and the skills and strategies that they possess, all of which can alter the difficulty level of the task in front of them. Rural schoolteachers and educators may be able to instill positive social emotional strategies to increase students' perseverance.

Academic Mindset

Mindset includes a student's beliefs that they belong to their academic community, have the ability and competence to grow with effort, can succeed, and the work is of value to them. One element of this concept is growth mindset, a term coined by psychologist Carol Dweck in

2006. A "growth mindset," sees intelligence as something that can grow and develop with effort.

Students who believe in their ability to learn put forth more effort than those students who

believe their ability to learn is limited (Dweck et al., 2011). Students with a growth mindset are

often considered to have a positive attitude, to be optimistic, confident, and determined. A study

conducted by Dweck in 1975 found that beliefs in intelligence and attributions for academic

success or failure are more strongly associated with school performance than is actual measured

ability. In 2017, a sample of rural adolescent girls participated in an online growth mindset

intervention (Burnette et al., 2017). Results showed an indirect increase in motivation to learn,

learning efficacy and grades through the shifts in their growth mindsets. Growth mindset may

also influence college or career readiness. Students living and attending school in rural areas are

often deterred from continuing their education beyond high school when they doubt their ability

to handle learning challenges. Educators may be able to support the development of a growth

mindset, which may then increase students' desire to attend college or strive towards a profitable

career.

Learning Strategies

The term learning strategies does not describe one uniform, scientific concept. Weinstein

and Mayer understand learning strategies as internal and external actions influencing the

learner's motivation, attention, as well as selection and processing of information (Weinstein &

Mayer ,1986, p. 1). Typical learning strategies may include study skills, note taking, flash

cards, and the review and repetition of material. However, learning strategies also include

various social emotional skills including cooperation, metacognitive strategies, self-regulation,

independence, time management, and smart goal setting. By utilizing these strategies, students'

academic behaviors may become more productive and effective, contributing to improved

academic performance. As a result, learning strategies tend to increase students' self-efficacy, which in turn is related to increased academic perseverance when work gets challenging (Farrington et al., 2012). Pintrich and DeGroot (1990) examined the self-regulated learning, motivational orientation, and classroom academic performance of 173 seventh- graders in science and English. Results showed that self-regulation was the strongest predictor of student performance in both English and science. This study suggests self-regulation, along with other relative executive functioning skills, may be an identified area of need to support adolescent college and career readiness.

When students are actively engaged in learning and exploring new ideas, they are learning in a deeper and more meaningful way. With this type of learning, students are then able to apply that knowledge and skills to other parts of their lives, such as in higher education or a career. Small rural communities often consider school to be the community center. Rural schools often have smaller class sizes, and smaller teaching staff, allowing for students and staff to build meaningful relationships. Teachers have the ability to increase student independence and engagement as well as helping students to realize that it is sometimes the use of ineffective strategies—not lack of ability—that hinders performance (Protheroe & Clarke, 2008).

Social Skills

Social skills, such as interpersonal skills, empathy, cooperation, assertion and responsibility, although not seemingly educationally related, all play a large role in students' ability to succeed. In the words of Walker (1983), "Social skills are the set of competencies that allow us to initiate and maintain positive social relationships, contribute to peer acceptance and to a satisfactory school adjustment, and allow us to cope effectively with social environments" (p. 27). Social skills are the abilities to interact and behave socially and effectively, establishing

and maintaining positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations confidently with appropriate self-control. By having good social skills, students have the ability to make social choices that strengthen their relationships with others. Social skills may otherwise be considered people skills, interpersonal skills, or communication skills. Students who are considered to have strong social skills may be referred to as: kind, friendly, outgoing, a leader, an active listener, and self-reflective.

In a 2010 study, Ericsson and colleagues analyzed children's experience of social capital while growing up in a rural community. This study revealed, from a rural perspective, the complexity of the children's perceptions of their social environment. Specifically, the results found that the children perceived a lack of social capital due to environmental and social constraints in their everyday lives. However, their wellbeing was enhanced by strong cohesion in the neighborhood. Settings such as the school were highly valued and determined to be a crucial factor for enhancing the children's wellbeing. This study highlighted how important it is for health professionals and educators in rural areas to consider the complex influence of social capital on children's wellbeing, and to be aware that it can promote exclusion as well as cohesion (Eriksson et al, 2010).

Instructional practices that promote College and Career Readiness

Over the years, many primary, secondary and university level schools have created or adopted a systemic approach to social emotional learning developed within their districts and colleges. There is great diversity in SEL programs designed to improve student outcomes and research has indicated the effectiveness of this approach across a range of student populations and contexts. Research has identified that effective programs often incorporate a set of core elements referred to as SAFE practice. These practices are sequenced, active, focused, and

explicit. Boylan (2009) recommends gathering data on students' academic, nonacademic, and personal attributes and then tailoring institutional services to best serve them, similar to the idea that students with disabilities are provided with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to better serve them educationally, socially, and emotionally. These students undergo psychoeducational assessments in order to determine their specific needs and how educators can best support them in the classroom. While this research reveals the effectiveness of considering the whole student to best support them academically, the general education curriculum continues to offer limited instructional practices related to social emotional learning. Research conducted by Pintrich et al., (1994) discovered that students with learning disabilities do not have any lesser positive motivational beliefs than their typical peers. Therefore, school wide connection protocols may be useful in addressing the social emotional wellbeing of all students.

Throughout the history of education, guidance counselors, social workers, special education case managers, paraprofessionals, instructional coaches and other support staff have most often been identified and designated to support and encourage social emotional skills. In 2013, a study was conducted with more than 600 teachers to gain an understanding of their perspectives on SEL and the need for it in a school setting (Cervone & Cushman, 2017). The findings showed that over 75 percent of the teachers believed that SEL was one of the greatest assets to students and prepared them for graduation and post-secondary options, increased student attendance, and improved academic achievement. By considering the beliefs of all school staff, students and community members, a well-developed platform to encourage social emotional learning can be established.

As mentioned above, the implementation of social emotional curriculum is one-way educators can assist in the development of such skills. Curriculum sets the content, knowledge,

and skills that students are expected to learn, and therefore shapes the learning experience. Curricula can promote the development of social emotional skills within a particular subject or across different disciplines or subjects.

The Yale Center for Emotional Learning, including the Center Director, Marc Brackett and Deputy Director Susan Rivers, created the RULER approach in 2005. RULER is an acronym for the five skills of emotional intelligence: Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, Regulating. The development of these five RULER skills supports the entire school community in understanding the value of emotions, building the skills of emotional intelligence, and creating and maintaining a positive school climate. This approach involves a series of evidence based SEL programs focused on emotional literacy at the elementary, middle, and high school levels (Brackett et al., 2011). It is believed that by teaching students how to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate their emotions, their personal, social, and academic outcomes are enhanced (Brackett & Rivers., 2014). Through education, teachers have the ability to encourage students to understand how emotions impact the way they feel, think, make decisions, and interact with others. By doing so, they can become more productive, effective, students, employees, and individuals.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) established five social emotional learning competencies designed to promote improved academic outcomes and behaviors. Research found that students participating in SEL programs focusing on self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills, showed improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, as well as better attitudes about themselves, others, and school (CASEL, 2012). A more recent systematic review from 2021 found that universal SEL interventions enhance young

people's social and emotional skills and reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety in the short term (Clarke et al., 2021). Although social emotional learning is not typically an appointed subject like English or Math, it can be incorporated into virtually any school curriculum. Educators have the ability to modify lessons to support the development of social emotional skills specific to their students' needs.

The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders identified ten practices that represent instructional practices that support positive learning environments, social and emotional competencies and rigorous academic learning. These practices include student centered discipline, teacher language, responsibility and choice, warmth and support, cooperative learning, classroom discussions, self-assessment and self-reflection, balanced instruction, academic expectations, and competence building (Yoder, 2014). Teachers have a unique opportunity to connect with students and build meaningful relationships that contribute to their social and emotional development. Having established guidelines and goals for such development can assist educators in focusing on meaningful skills and traits to support their students. Fortunately, rural schools often have a smaller ratio of students to teachers due to the community's population size. Because of this ratio, students and teachers have more opportunity to build such meaningful relationships.

There are various curriculum, competencies, and frameworks that strive to promote social emotional learning in students. Although each includes a variety of skills, there are many commonalities to be found. Through this research, it was determined that most social emotional competency frameworks include the importance of self-awareness or self-reflection, and self-discipline or self-management. These two skills are found to be imperative to students' success, whether it be in college or career.

Conclusion

There are a wide range of traits, skills, behaviors, and attitudes that students must develop in order to be considered ready for college or a career. Many policy makers and leaders in education emphasize curriculum, statewide assessments, and national norms; however, social emotional functioning plays a more significant role in learning processes, academic performance, and human development than some may believe. Based on this research the evidence is clear - teachers influence their students' social emotional development and they can do so directly or indirectly, intentionally or unintentionally, in positive ways or negative ones. This study has sought to identify the perceptions of school staff, students, parents, and community members of a rural community, on how teachers can influence students' social emotional development in a meaningful way, to encourage college and career readiness.

Chapter III: Research Design and Methodology

This case study examines students, parents, educators, and community members' thoughts and ideas of what skills and practices promote college and career readiness. The research questions are designed to examine the skills that promote social and emotional competencies essential for college and career readiness. This chapter discusses the role of the researcher, the research design, and the methodology necessary to best analyze the research questions. By using qualitative and quantitative research, gathered through interviews and data analysis, the researcher seeks to answer the following questions.

1. What skills do rural educators, students, families, and community members believe are necessary for students to be successful in college or career?

2. In what ways do rural educators believe they can support the development of the skills identified in Research Question 1?

Research Design

This study utilized a mixed methods design that allowed the researcher to explore social emotional skills that are believed to be essential for college and career readiness of students attending a rural high school in California. This design methodology allowed the researcher to gather data quantitatively and qualitatively align the data and analyze the results (Creswell, 2015; Maxwell, 2012). Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies each contain different strengths as well as limitations. Using them together allowed the researcher to more fully examine the phenomena in a way that may not have been possible using either method alone (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010).

As a means of gathering initial data, qualitative methods, such as semi-structured interviews, were conducted. Qualitative research examines life experiences in an effort to understand and give them meaning (Byrne, 2001). Following, a follow-up survey has served as the quantitative portion of the study. The quantitative portion of the study was utilized to generate numerical measures of specific social emotional competencies. This post-survey was created by the researcher to include all social emotional competencies or characteristics identified within the previously conducted interviews. Participants completed the follow-up survey as a checklist, identifying their top five essential social emotional skills. Using a case study design, the researcher conducted a single-site study, using a sequential exploratory design. By doing so, this research aims to discover a need for social emotional skill development in students attending a rural high school in California, based on the collection and analysis of real-world data.

Positionality

As the researcher, and school psychologist in this school district, I have chosen to utilize this population to explore and describe the social emotional skills essential to students' attending school within the Forest River High School District. As an active member of this school district and community, my positionality allowed me to have a clear understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of this district and address them to the best of my ability.

Participants

This school district was selected because this is a problem of practice that I personally experience. By conducting research within the district that I work, I have the ability to best address the immediate need of the school. In addition, staff, students, parents, and members of the community were selected for this study because this school and community meet the low-

socioeconomic and rural demographic criteria proposed in this study. Specific participants were selected using maximum variation sampling, in order to illuminate different aspects of the research problem (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). To obtain qualitative research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the following participants: School staff, students who have recently graduated from this high school, parents of current high school students, and community members who own or work at local businesses. Four individuals from each category have been included in this study, totaling 16 participants. Maximum variation sampling allows for the researcher to collect data from a variety of individuals, for example, students who graduated at the top of their class and students who were identified as having a specific learning disability, and first year teachers, as well as veteran teachers.

Table 1

Participant Profiles

Category	Frequency	Percent
Parent	4	25%
Former Student	4	25%
School Staff	4	25%
Community Member	4	25%

Before conducting the interviews, the participants were provided with a letter notifying them about the research study and allowed them to provide informed consent. Participation was voluntary and they could choose to participate in the study or refrain. Following these interviews, a follow-up survey was distributed districtwide, to staff members, including staff from the high school and continuation high school, in order to identify five key competencies. There are currently 114 district employees. Of those employees, 52 responded to the survey.

Data Collection

Qualitative

Initial data, to address both research questions one and two, was collected through semi-structured interviews. A semi-structured interview is a type of interview in which the interviewer asks only a few predetermined questions while the rest of the questions are not planned in advance. It is important to allow for open communication when discussing students' needs, as clarifying questions may be necessary, and additional information may prove beneficial to the study. Much of qualitative research depends on the interpersonal skills of the inquirer, such as "building trust, keeping good relations, being nonjudgmental, and respecting the norms of the situation" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010, p. 327). As the researcher, and active member of this school district, I have had the opportunity to utilize my personal experiences and relationships to obtain reliable and valid data.

Four interview protocols were developed for this study. The first being the educator version, next the parent version, then the student/adolescent version, and the last being developed for community members. Each protocol was similar in format and questioning. By maintaining consistency, the researcher was better able to compare responses between varying participants during data analysis. Interviews lasted between ten and twenty minutes, and were voice recorded to ensure the interviewer was able to openly communicate with the interviewee and all information shared was then transcribed appropriately.

Upon introductions, the researcher familiarized the participant with the goal of the research, as well as the semi-structured interview process. The researcher highlighted the purpose of semi-structured interviews and encouraged the participant to engage in reflective dialogue. Semi-structured interviews employ a blend of closed and open-ended questions, often

accompanied by follow-up why or how questions (Wholey et al., 2010). In interviewing

educators, the interviews took place at the school site in a location providing privacy, such as a

teacher's classroom or private office space. Student, parent, and community member interviews

were conducted in a small office located on the school site. For all participants who could not

meet face-to-face, phone interviews or a video chat platform such as Zoom or Google Meets

options were made available.

      With permission from the participants, interviews were audiotaped, and later transcribed

for use as collected data in the study. All audiotapes or transcriptions, once analyzed, are stored

in a secure location for a minimum of three years after the conclusion of the study. Each

participant was identifiable as their role in this study (i.e., parent, student, etc.). All other

identifiable information was kept confidential.

      In order to enhance the validity of this research, mechanically recorded data, such as the

use of tape recorders allowed for accurate participants' language; verbatim accounts, so the

researcher can obtain literal statements of participants. While also actively taking notes through

observations, the researcher utilized the participant review strategy, which allows the participant

to review the researcher's synthesis of interviews for accuracy (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

Quantitative

      The follow-up survey was created by the researcher, utilizing information obtained

through the previously conducted interviews. This survey includes all of the social emotional

skills identified by participants during their interview. The survey was later distributed online,

through the use of Google Forms, and asked participants to select five social emotional skills or

characteristics they believe to be the most essential for students to develop while attending a

rural high school in California.

Data Analysis

In order to obtain trustworthy data a mixed methods research design integrated two forms of data so that insight could be gathered beyond the information gleaned from choosing one or the other (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). For this study, the issue of credibility was addressed through participant checks, a thorough description of the interview data, as well as a field log, maintained by the researcher.

Interviews were then transcribed using Transcribe and Microsoft Word, giving close attention to repeated words or phrases related to the research questions. The researcher created a password protected Microsoft Word file to hold all interview data. All files were only accessible to the researcher and research committee.   Once the interviews had been transcribed, the researcher analyzed the data in order to identify social emotional skills or characteristics believed to be essential by students, parents, school staff and community members. These skills included terms such as motivation, peer relations, growth mindset, positivity, or optimism.   Once these skills were identified, the researcher created a follow-up survey that included all terminology utilized by the participants.

The quantitative data gathered does not include the school staff's demographic information. The follow-up survey was conducted only to examine the five social emotional skill domains determined to be most essential for rural high school students to be considered college and career ready.

Ethical Considerations

All of the participants were treated in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the University of Pacific Institutional Review Board (IRB).   All participants, guardians, and school faculty including teachers received a

research description of the study that outlined the program goals and research methods before

agreeing to participate in the study. Participants had volunteered to participate in the study and

were reminded that they may withdraw from the study at any time.   The interviewee sought

consent before audio recording during interviews. No information that personally identifies any

participants was voluntarily released or disclosed.   In documents, participants remain

anonymous, and have been given a number for organizational purposes.   As this study is

designed, there are no identifiable risks for participating in this study. The researcher took every

caution to ensure that all participants felt safe, comfortable, and had the freedom to withdraw

from the study if they so choose.

Assumptions and Limitations

Findings from this study are based on the assumptions that all respondents have been

honest in their responses. Assumptions are made that participants understand what constitutes

college and career readiness and appropriate definitions of social emotional terminology. In this

study, there are limitations to the number of participants and design. Participants in this study

are limited to parents, recently graduated students, high school staff and community members in

one rural high school, resulting in a small sample size. Interviewees may not be a complete

representation of the entire teacher population. Interviews and observations were conducted

during the spring, resulting in a design limitation. Educators' perspectives may have been

impacted by the end of the year and student behavior.

Summary

Chapter Three outlined the research design, the role of the researcher, introduction to the

participants, description of the data collection methods, and the process for analyzing the data.

The design of this qualitative research examines life experiences and beliefs, through semi-

structured interviews, in an effort to understand individuals' perceptions of the need to develop

social emotional skills in adolescents. Collected data from semi-structured interviews was coded

and reviewed in order to support the validity of the findings. Thus, we obtained varied

perceptions of what social emotional skills are necessary for rural high school students to be

successful in college or careers.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The purpose of this case study was to examine the social emotional skills necessary for students attending a high school in rural California to be prepared for college or a career after high school. In this study, the term social emotional skills is utilized to define the skills and knowledge that students need to communicate effectively, interact with peers, resolve conflicts, and manage their emotional responses to stressful situations. The mission is to establish a set of core competencies in which teachers and other adults can support students to develop the necessary social and emotional skills to succeed in high school and beyond.

Description of Site and Participants

For the purpose of this research, a high school located in rural California was selected as the sample. Staff, students, parents, and members of the community were selected for this study because this school and community meet the low-socioeconomic and rural demographic criteria proposed in this study.   The student population is described in table 2, while table 3 represents post-graduation activity of the graduating class of 2021.

Table 2

FRUHSD Demographics

Enrollment	Ethnicity	Free/Reduced Lunch
612	68.9% White	55.8%
	21.4% Hispanic/Latino	
	6.1 % Two or More Races.	
	1.2% American Indian	
	0.8% Asian	
	0.7% Filipino	
	0.5% African American	

With a high graduation rate, and a diverse course of action following graduation, Forest River Union High School District strives for academic success, but participants agree that there is still a need for support in other areas, in order for these students to be successful after graduation.

Table 3

Self-Reported Post-Graduation Activity

Senior Class	Graduation Rate	College or Career
116	98%	55% 2-year college/Technical program 28% 4-year college 5% joined the Armed Forces 12% Employment/Other

Data Collection

Data collected in this study was obtained through qualitative and quantitative measures. Individuals participated in semi-structured interviews as well as a follow-up survey. Participants answered questions about their individual experiences within education, their thoughts on college and careers and their understanding of social and emotional skills. Questions asked during the interviews were designed to answer the two research questions of the study.

1. What skills do rural educators, students, families, and community members believe are necessary for students to be successful in college or career?

2. In what ways can rural educators help in the development of the skills identified in Research Question 1?
   Semi-structured interviews were used as the initial data collection for this study.

Following the analysis of these interviews, a survey was created that included all of the social emotional skills identified as important by the interview participants (staff, students, parents, community members). This survey was then completed by districtwide staff members, including staff from the high school and continuation high school, in order to identify five key competencies.

Data Analysis

The purpose of data analysis is to extract useful information from data, describe, condense, and recap, as a means of evaluating data to then make informed decisions. A close analysis of data collected through interviews provided a basis for recognizing themes and key concepts. Attention was given to repeated words or phrases that aligned with the research questions.

General themes emerged during the analysis process, and specific themes emerged within different subgroups of participants. School Staff agreed that *responsibility* is a critical skill necessary for success throughout high school and beyond. Parents of high school students commonly identified *coping skills,* and *perseverance* as skills they have observed to be useful in the success of their children. Students who participated thought that *independence* and the ability to be self-sufficient has increased their ability to feel ready for life after high school. Members of the community, across various backgrounds and occupations all agreed on one skill, *resilience*. Although various themes emerged, one common skill was clear across groups, *communication*.

Discussion of RQ 1 Themes

Staff Members

Of the four staff members (SM) that were interviewed for this study, responsibility appeared to be the most emphasized skill believed to be necessary for college or career success. Personal responsibility can be defined as "people [s' skill of] taking individual accountability for their decisions and actions, together with the outcomes they create and their impacts on others" (Linley & Maltby, 2009, p. 685). SM 2 identified ways in which students display responsibility as, "keeping themselves organized, managing time between academics and social activities, and advocating for themselves if needed. We as teachers want to help our students, but if they don't take responsibility for their actions and advocate for their needs, it's tough." SM 4 shared from their personal experiences, "When I went to college after high school, at first, I was excited to have all of this responsibility, but I quickly realized that there was a lot I could mess up if I wasn't responsible. When I think about my seniors this year, I feel confident in many of them because they know that their education and their success is their responsibility."

Parents

The theme of coping skills emerged as parents discussed their views regarding skills they believe their student(s) need to be successful in college or a career. Students need the tools, support, and resources necessary to cope with stress, failure, and challenges they will face in college or in starting a career. According to Anspaugh et al. (2003), stress affects the lives of everyone. Stressors, in the opinion of Anspaugh et al. (2003) are any physical, psychological, or environmental events or conditions that initiate the stress responses. As students prepare for the significant changes that come with enrolling in college or starting a career, it is important to prepare them for the stressors that are likely to follow.

Parents 1, 2, and 3 all acknowledged their student's ability to easily build connections with school staff due to the school's small size and small community, however Parent 2 noted, "I worry that [my student] is going to struggle with stress of a big college and being surrounded by new faces within a new community. I want her to have the skills to cope with these new challenges she's about to face." Parent 4 acknowledged the challenges that COVID-19 caused during their student's high school years, stating, "COVID was tough. [My student] did not know how to cope with distance learning, quarantine, and all of the other changes that came along with COVID. He became depressed, it was really hard, as a parent, to watch that happen."

Students

In analyzing student data, the theme of independence or the ability to be self-sufficient was evident. Each student reported to be ready or nervous for life after high school, based on their believed level of independence. When asked about skills necessary to be successful in college or a career, Student 3 listed self-sufficient. When asked later if they felt they had these necessary skills they reported, "No. I don't feel very self-sufficient. I rely a lot on my parents and my friends for help." When talking with Student 2, they shared that they believe they are ready for college. As a minority, this student identified independence as a strength they have had to develop overtime as a result of their position in society and this community. She shared, "I grew up looking different from everyone else, so I've always had this sense of independence. I think because of that, I am ready to move on and feel confident that I will be okay."

Community Members

Community members (CM) who participated in this study commonly identified resilience as an important social emotional skill that can lead to success in college or a career. More

specifically, participants used phrases such as, "the ability to deal with obstacles", "perseverance", and "bounce back," to describe characteristics of successful employees.

When asking CM 1 what the phrase "social emotional skills" means to them, they stated, "I think it means that you have the ability to overcome any situation. It means having thick skin, the ability to take criticism, and persevere when faced with any obstacle." When CM 3 was asked what social emotional skills they believe to be necessary for high school students to be successful in a career after high school, she shared a list, beginning with resiliency. She stated, "Resiliency is huge. Life is not always easy, and I think for kids in this community, they always have someone looking out for them, or someone that can help them overcome challenges. But in the workforce, that isn't always available. Kids need to learn to overcome challenges on their own." Another CM pointed out that, "Students in this community are a bit sheltered. Because everyone knows everyone, someone is always looking out for them and available to help. I worry that when they leave here, when that support is no longer there, will they be able to push through?"

Resiliency is demonstrated by overcoming and successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences. High school students who are approaching graduation, whether pursuing post-secondary education or seeking employment, are quickly approaching new life experiences. Community members, business owners, and local employees provided insight into one of the many skills useful in managing these new experiences.

Discussion of RQ 2 Themes

The second research question asked; In what ways can rural educators help in the development of these identified skills? Educators have a unique opportunity to support not only the academic achievement of their students, but also the development of their social emotional

skills. Although this type of teaching is most often not done through a specified curriculum at the high school level, social emotional skill development can be achieved through various forms of instruction and connection.

Staff Members

Staff member A identifies human connection as a way of supporting the development of social emotional skills. "We have a unique ability to connect with lots of students because we are at a small school, everyone knows everyone, and we can build connections easily. But that being said, we need to remember that these students are soon going to be leaving this small town and need to be able to create these same connections in new communities." Staff member B believes that educators can support this development by leading by example. They reported, "We can try to enhance our professional development to include the importance of social emotional skills, teaching to the whole child, and encouraging positive pro social skills."

Another staff member shared their approach to supporting the development of these skills; "I really push acceptance. I encourage all of my students to accept others, regardless of gender, race, financials, all of that. I am direct, and I hold them accountable. Being a small community, we can push and encourage this, but we as educators aren't pseudo parents, we can't overdo it." Staff member 4 takes a more literary approach, stating that he uses literature to discuss topics such as mental health, which encourages discussion regarding different social emotional skills. Although staff members each take a unique approach to social emotional skill building, students have the ability to learn various skills throughout their high school experience, by learning from and building connections with different staff members.

Parents

Parents of high school students were also asked how their students' schoolteachers support the development of social emotional skills. Parent 1 mentioned the Freshman Requirements course that is required for all students to take while attending Forest River High School. Although this is designed as an academic based course, it incorporates topics such as a 10-year plan, self-discovery, and planning for the future. Parent 2 also noted various academic courses to involve discussions surrounding mental health, and reports feeling as though their student's well-being is supported by educators, "my student knows that they have the ability to access supports on campus, like the wellness room and the counselor. Most of the teachers are very supportive and allow for those necessary breaks." Parent 4 discussed the role of parents versus teachers in today's educational setting. "I feel like it is our job as parents to teach these [social and emotional] skills. And then teachers can encourage and support students in demonstrating those skills. But I don't think it is their responsibility to teach them or introduce them to students. I would just like them to hold my kid accountable for their behavior."

Students

Student participants were asked how their school supported the development of their social emotional skills, or the skills necessary to be successful in college or a career. Student 1 identified that many of her teachers primarily encourage academic success. Further stating, "No one really talked about 'social emotional skills,' I think I heard that term once in middle school, but not since." When having a discussion with Student 2, about how his experience in high school encouraged the development of social and emotional skills, he was unsure. He stated, "I don't know. We live in a bubble. Everyone knows everyone. I think it's easier to build relationships with the adults here, they notice, they care. It was kind of like having another set of

parents at school that remind you to turn in your homework, to be nice to others, that kind of stuff." Student 3 reported that school supported their development of social and emotional skills by encouraging friendships. When asked if their school could have done anything else to better support the development of these skills they responded, "I don't know what more they could have done."

Community Members

When discussing how educators can support the development of students' social emotional skills, community members agreed that teachers and other school staff within this district are doing their best to support their students. However, CM 1 also discussed their belief that students play a role in their own development as well. He stated, "I think we need to hold students to a higher standard. We need to encourage them to be resilient, understand that we are all a part of a team, where everyone has a role to play. I think if we hold our kids accountable, they will feel empowered and level up."

CM 2 shared that they believe there is room for improvement, in regard to educators supporting the development of social emotional skills. She shared, "It feels like we are just going through a check-list, problem solving, not truly supporting the development of these skills." When asked how the school system could improve, she said, "Honestly, we need to hire more people. The teachers in this community are pushed to their limit, they have standards and responsibilities, I understand why they may not focus on this."

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Qualitative Data Summary

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Research shows that teaching is one of the most stressful occupations, and that stress in the classroom is contagious, meaning stressed-out teachers tend to have stressed-out students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Based on interviews with school staff, it is clear that these educators

care for their students, however due to increased stress and lack of funding, it does not appear that these educators are directly teaching social emotional skills in the classroom. With the support of research and the results of this study, the Forest River High School District has critical information that may be helpful in understanding the importance of supporting teachers and students in regard to social emotional skills.

Survey Results

Twenty key traits or skills were identified through analyzing the individual interviews. Key traits and skills were included in the survey to support the identification of the five most relevant and important skills for this particular population. The survey was sent via email to all district employees. District staff were asked to select five social emotional skills that they view as the most prevalent in supporting high school students' development for success in college or a career. There are currently 114 district employees. Of those employees, 52 responded to the survey. Figure 1 represents the percentage of employees who identified a specific skill as being impactful when preparing high school students for college or careers.

Figure 1

Critical Social Emotional Skills Identified by District Staff

Social Emotional Skills
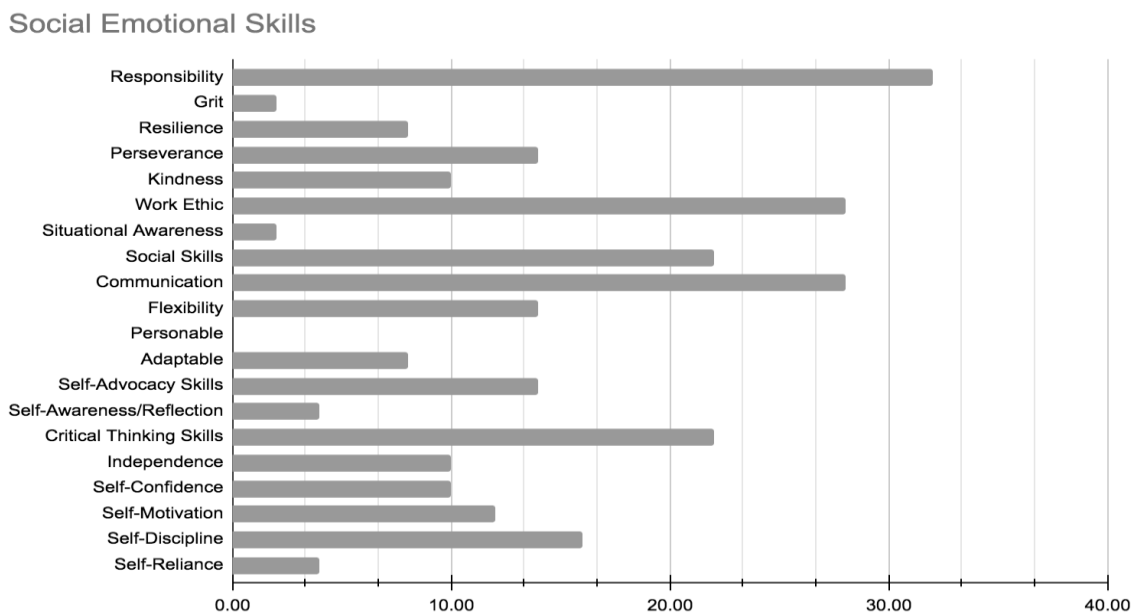
Note. Number of staff members who identified each social emotional skill as being among the top five, most critical for students' success in college or career.

Of the responses obtained, results rendered the following top five social emotional skills.

Table 4

Top 5 Social Emotional Skills Identified by District Staff Members

Social Emotional Skill	%
Responsibility	61.5
Work Ethic	53.8
Communication	53.8
Social Skills	42.3
Critical Thinking Skills	42.3

Note. Top five social emotional skills ranked by percentage of participants who included such skill in their identification of top five skills they believe to be most critical for college or career success.

Results from the survey strongly correlate with that of which was identified during the semi-structured interviews. While each interviewee's response varied in focus, communication appeared to be a common theme amongst all subject groups. Additionally, responsibility was mentioned by all subject groups as well. It is clear to see too, that district-wide, staff agree with parents, students and community members, that communication and responsibility are key skills necessary for success.

Summary

Chapter four presented the high school site and participants demographics, results from data collection, including an analysis of interview questions, and data obtained from the follow-up survey. Upon initially coding and observing themes that arose from the semi-structured interviews, several themes emerged, including responsibility, coping skills, independence, and resiliency. These themes were extracted from semi-structured interviews with school staff, parents, students, and community members. In addition to these themes, individuals identified social emotional skills that they thought to be important. The skills were all integrated into a post-survey, in which interview participants, as well as district employees, identified the following key competencies: Responsibility, work ethic, communication, critical thinking skills, and social skills.

In addition to clearly identifying the skills rural educators, students, families, and community members believe are necessary for students to be successful in college or career, this chapter analyzed how educators can support the development of these skills. Respondents agreed that although there are no specific curriculums or guidelines that structure the support of social emotional skills at this particular school, educators are doing their best, with the resources

they have, to encourage students to acquire and demonstrate positive social emotional skills that

will support their success in high school and beyond.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of the present study was to identify social and emotional skills necessary for rural high school students to be considered college or career ready. It is a primary goal that this research provides the district the opportunity to create a guide for reviewing, developing, and enhancing school programs and practices to better support the social and emotional wellbeing of their students. In addition, this study sought to emphasize the importance of addressing whole child development through education. This can be done by promoting students' academic, social, emotional, and physical well-being, as well as college, career, and civic life readiness.

In today's society, secondary schools face increased dropout rates, poverty, school-related violence, teen suicide, low academic achievement, and inadequate preparation for college and careers. Research and statistics have shown that 21st century students require support and guidance within their education. Many educators that participated in this study identified various skills other than academic knowledge as critical for success in life after high school.

After analyzing the data, it can be concluded that teachers, families, students, and community members within Forest River County, believe that social and emotional skills are a crucial part of a student's development through education. Many of the participants who were interviewed deemed the most important thing for their students, children, employees, and self is happiness. This acknowledgement opened up the conversations to consider and observe that much of what educators encourage is academic achievement, high test scores, and curriculum-based success. With happiness in mind, participants sought to understand the skills necessary to succeed not only academically, but also socially, and emotionally as these students embark on a new journey, life after high school.

Discussion of Findings

There is a long list of factors beyond content knowledge and academic skills that have an impact on student achievement. Previous research suggests study skills, attendance, work habits, time management, help-seeking behaviors, metacognitive strategies, and social and academic problem-solving skills allow students to successfully manage new environments and meet new academic and social demands (Farrington et al., 2012). This study identifies skills such as these, however specific to rural high school students, attending school within the Forest River High School District, that aim to support their continued development as they strive toward college or career readiness.

Previous research determined that there is an increasing focus on social emotional learning among many schools and districts within the country. Specially, research by Barsalou (2010, p.325) states research in human cognition has moved away from the idea that cognition is isolated within an individual brain, rather it depends on the context in which it exists, "including the environment, perception, action, affect, and sociocultural systems." Various school sites within the county are exploring ways to actively foster students' SEL skills and create positive learning environments. This study, along with previous research identifies a need to provide strategies and tools that schools and districts can use to promote the development of social and emotional skills that will lead to better educational outcomes.

Through interviews and a brief survey, responsibility, communication, work ethic, critical thinking skills, and social skills are the five key competencies identified as being the most significant in supporting students' college and career readiness. Of the responses obtained by district staff, *responsibility* was identified as the most important skill for students to develop in order to be successful in college or a career. The relationship between personal responsibility

and learning has been examined extensively (Ayish & Deveci, 2019). One belief is that

successful students are considered to be responsible, by taking an active role in ensuring that

their needs are met and sustained over time (Alghamdi, 2016). Others suggest that personal

responsibility can lead to life-long learning by overcoming many of the challenges inherent in

developing deeper and more meaningful learning opportunities over time (Deveci & Ayish,

2017a). Additional examples include the beliefs that, developing personal responsibility

positively contributes to one's well-being, self-esteem (Cho & Hongsik, 2015; Deveci & Ayish,

2017b), and psychological health (Ruthig, Haynes, Stupnisky & Perry 2009) by empowering

individuals to take ownership over their behaviors and actions. Overall, it is believed by the

majority of district staff that being responsible for one's learning is essential for success in

college or a career.

Following responsibility, 53.8% of staff members included *communication* as additional

skills that students should develop to be successful in college or a career. Research by Hein and

colleagues (2012) found that "effective communication" is a skill that students need to develop

to ensure that they are successful academically and in the job market. Communication is

essential in establishing and maintaining positive relationships (Morreale et al., 2000), and as

identified within this study, relationships are highly valued within rural school districts.

Similarly, 53.8% of staff members also identified work ethic as a critical skill. The

American Psychological Association explains that work ethic encourages individualism,

competitiveness, and high personal expectations, with an emphasis on self-discipline, self-

improvement, and delayed gratification. School staff at Forest River High School agree that

positive learning results come from a strong work ethic, and skillful applications of learning

strategies. Forest River is similar to other rural communities, in that many families raise cattle,

farm agriculture, or work in lumber yards. Many of the families within this community have emphasized the importance of hard work, in all aspects of their lives.

Almost half of all district staff believe that students need to know how to solve problems or develop *critical thinking* skills.   Research from Conley (2012) stated that college and career readiness should set higher expectations for critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaborative skills across a range of academic subjects. As student's move through the 21st century, their life problems grow increasingly complex (Choi et al., 2011). Teachers have noticed these changes, and have identified an even stronger need for students to adapt and make positive decisions to deal with new situations they encounter. Although rural communities were historically protected from some issues present in urban communities, social media continues to expose all students to diverse and challenging situations (Tamam et al., 2021).

Finally, *social skills* was the fifth final social emotional skill identified by 42.3% of district staff. According to Cartledge and Milburn (1995), social skills are seen as socially acceptable, learned behaviors that enable individuals to interact in ways that elicit positive responses and assist in avoiding negative responses. Social skills are composed of competencies necessary for students to initiate and maintain positive social relationships with their peers, teachers, family, and other community members (Walker et al., 1995). When considering that graduating high school students are soon to embark on a new journey, likely within a new environment, it is important that they develop social skills in order to interact with, adapt to, and function within this new environment. In addition, being able to interact successfully with others is a key to many of the experiences that enrich life, such as having friendships, participating in recreational activities, or joining groups (Chen, 2006).

With the development of these skills, students have the opportunity to become more independent and capable of achievement, whether that be within postsecondary education settings or in a career. These rural educators, and rural educators in general, have a unique opportunity to provide such support to their students. Within small communities, it is not uncommon for educators to have pre-established relationships with families of the school. These relationships allow for students to feel supported in their academics and their development as young adults. Coaches, counselors, and teachers have the ability to lead by example, encourage positivity, and hold students accountable in order for them to find strength in their independence as they progress through high school.

Recommendations for Forest River Union School District

Dweck, Walton, and Cohen (2011) explicitly suggest that the ways to improve academic tenacity are through interventions aimed at changing students' mindsets directly or by establishing classroom conditions that support the development of positive mindsets (Farrington et al., 2012). Educators within this study identified various unique ways in which they believe they support students' development of social emotional skills. Many state that they lead by example, they encourage students through praise and positively reinforcement positive pro social behavior, and even include social emotional and mental health related topics within their curriculum.

While these are excellent strategies, participants also suggested barriers to doing more. Most commonly, finances and time were reported as being the biggest barriers in supporting students' social emotional growth. However, there are various ways in which schools and the community can highlight social emotional growth without having to purchase a specific

curriculum, participate in lengthy training, or require teachers to take time out of their academic

focused class time.

While rural high schools typically have smaller class sizes, ensuring this is true in all

classrooms can allow for students and teachers to establish more meaningful relationships, where

students can be easily identified if they are struggling academically, socially, or emotionally.

Encouraging students to participate in community service projects would provide them the

chance to practice their social skills while gaining insight and additional learning opportunities

from members of the community. Additionally, the district may wish to take a look at their

current classroom curriculum. Teachers expressed their current curriculum to be focused

primarily on preparing students academically; however, this leaves little to no room to teach the

social emotional skills they believe students need. Forest River Union High School District

should consider adding components of social and emotional learning to their curriculum, as

social and emotional skills are critical to being a good student, citizen, and skilled worker. Many

risky behaviors such as drug use, violence, bullying, and drop out can be prevented or reduced

when schools have a curriculum that integrates strategies that help students develop social and

emotional skills (CASEL, 2015).

Recommendations for Further Research

This study gives insight into where a specific rural high school community stands

regarding their role in supporting the developing students' social emotional skills. It was clear

throughout this study that rural communities differ vastly in their resources, support systems, and

exposure, when compared to more urban communities. Other rural schools in the surrounding

areas may benefit from this data and may wish to include the development of social emotional

skills in their schoolwide practices, including elementary and middle schools in preparation for

high school. This would provide students the opportunity to develop such skills at a younger age and may increase the likelihood of college and career readiness. It is recommended that future studies, similar to this one, increase the sample size of participants completing the survey to include parents, students, and community members could have increased the representation of beliefs. Additional research could be conducted to compare and contrast data, by conducting the same study in a nearby urban district and analyzing the similarities and differences within responses. Lastly, it may be beneficial to conduct an action research study, where the school would develop a plan to support teachers and students in focusing on these competencies, and then analyze the change overtime.

Conclusion

Teachers in this study expressed a lack of time and resources necessary to teach social emotional skills throughout the school day. Teachers, however, did report that they believe they are able to encourage the development of such skills organically, throughout the relationships they have built with their students. This study shows that even though teachers acknowledge the relevance of social emotional skills, there is a lack of opportunity to intentionally teach those skills.   Parents in this study feel as though the school system is doing the best they can to support their students while they are in school, while continuing to worry about the success of their student after high school.

While research and literature support the importance of the development of social emotional skills, it has been determined within this study that it has yet to become universally understood and widely accepted. In small towns and rural high schools, such as the one in this study, staff, parents, community members, and students are fortunate to reside in a close-knit community that provides valuable support systems, the ability to build connections, and a place

in which individuals feel accepted. However, these populations may benefit from more direct

encouragement and development of social emotional skills, which these students need to

continue to be successful in life after high school.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Parent Interview

1. How many students do you have enrolled in school?

2. What grades are they in?

3. Tell me about your own education.

4. What are your hopes for your student(s) after graduating high school?

    a. Do you hope your students attend college or begin working upon graduating?

5. From your experience, to be successful in college, what skills do you think a student would need?

6. From your experience, to be successful in a career, what skills do you think an employee would need?

7. Sometimes we hear people talk about social emotional skills. What does that phrase "social emotional skills" mean to you? What comes to mind?

8. In what ways does your students' school teach or support the development of student's social emotional skills?

9. In what ways do you think schools could better teach or support the development of student's social emotional skills?

10. Do you think these skills differ for students who grow up in rural communities versus urban communities?

    a. If so, how?

Student Interview

1. What grade are you in?

2. Do you hope to attend college after graduating?

3. If not, do you have a career goal you'd like to pursue after graduating?

4. From your experience, to be successful in college, what skills do you think a student would need?

5. From your experience, to be successful in a career, what skills do you think an employee would need?

6. Do you feel like you have the skills to be ready for college or a career?

7. What skills do you think students need in order to be successful in college or a career?

8. Sometimes we hear people talk about social emotional skills. What does that phrase "social emotional skills" mean to you? What comes to mind?

9. How has your schooling supported the development of your social and emotional skills?

10. How do you feel your school could better support the development of social and emotional skills?

11. Do you think these skills differ for students who grow up in rural communities versus urban communities?

    a. If so, how?

Educator Interview

1. How many years of teaching/education experience do you have?

2. What subject(s) do you teach/how long have you taught this subject?

    a. If in a different role, what positions have you had as an educator?

3. Do you believe all students should attend college after high school?

4. Do you believe all students should have a career goal they'd like to pursue after graduating high school?

5. From your experience, to be successful in college, what skills, apart from academic skills, do you think a student would need

6. From your experience, to be successful in a career, what skills, apart from academic skills, do you think an employee would need?

7. Sometimes we hear people talk about social emotional skills.What does that phrase "social emotional skills" mean to you? What comes to mind?

8. Do you think the development of these skills differ for students who grow up in rural communities versus urban communities? If so, how?

9. In what ways, do you teach/support the growth of social emotional skills? Please give specific examples.

10. How do you hold students accountable for demonstrating appropriate social and emotional skills?

11. Does your district offer professional development learning opportunities to help you teach social emotional skills?

    a. If so, please explain. If not, in what ways do you think your district could better support your development in this area.

Employee/Business Owner/Community Member Interview

1. What is your role at this company/business?

2. How long have you worked here?

3. What were some personal or professional requirements necessary to obtain employment?

4. From your experience, to be successful in college, what skills do you think a student would need?

5. From your experience, to be successful in a career, what skills do you think an employee would need?

6. Sometimes we hear people talk about social emotional skills. What does that phrase "social emotional skills" mean to you? What comes to mind?

7. Do you think these skills differ for students who grow up in rural communities versus urban communities?

    a. If so, how?

8. What social emotional skills do you look for when hiring new employees?

9. How well do you feel the schools in this county are doing in terms of preparing students for college or careers? What do you base that opinion on? Please provide an example or two.

10. In what ways do you believe schools could better support the development of social emotional skills necessary for students to be successful after high school?

Appendix B

Survey

Social Emotional Skills

 The purpose of this study is to identify social and emotional skills essential for rural high school students to be successful in their lives after high school, whether that be in college or in a career.

This list was developed following interviews with students, teachers, parents, and community members. Please select FIVE skills you believe support students' ability to be successful in high school and beyond.

- Responsibility
- Grit
- Resilience
- Perseverance
- Kindness
- Strong Work Ethic
- Situational Awareness
- Social Skills
- Communication Skills
- Flexibility
- Personable
- Adaptable
- Self-Advocacy Skills
- Self-Awareness/Reflection
- Critical Thinking Skills
- Independence
- Self-Confidence
- Self-Motivation
- Self-Discipline
- Self-Reliance