Perceptions of Social Emotional Learning Needs in High Poverty Schools

Yoksulluk Oranı Yüksek Okullarda Sosyal Duygusal Öğrenme İhtiyaçlarının Analizi

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceived social emotional learning needs of students in high poverty schools. Social emotional learning (SEL)is recognized within the literature as critical to success in school and in life. Emergingwork supports the acquisition of a SEL skillset within grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12) schools. This survey examines the perceptions of social emotional needs as reported by students, parents and school faculty members across four different high poverty schools in the USA.Findings provide effective strategies and valuable data for school leaders, educators, and counselors in addressing the social emotional needs of urban students.

Key Words: *Leadership and Social Emotional Learning, Urban Education, School Counseling*

Özet

Bu makale, yoksulluk oranı yüksek olan okullarındaki öğrencilerin algılanan sosyal ve duygusal öğrenme ihtiyaçlarını araştırmaktadır. Literatürde sosyal ve duygusal öğrenme yetenekleri, okulda ve hayatta başarılı olmak için kritik bir etken olarak tanımlanmaktadır. Bu çalışma, anaokulundan başlayarak lise son sınıfa kadar, öğrencilerin sosyal ve duygusal öğrenme yeteneklerinin gelişmesini desteklemek için hazırlanmıştır. Bu araştırma ABD'de dört farklı okuldan öğrencilerin, velilerin ve eğitimcilerin rapor ettiği sosyal ve duygusal ihtiyaçları kapsamlı olarak incelemektedir. Araştırma sonuçları okul liderleri, eğitimciler ve psikolojik danışmanlar için yoksulluk oranı yüksek olan okullarındaki öğrencilerin sosyal ve duygusal ihtiyaçlarını karşılamada etkili stratejiler ve değerli veriler sunmaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Liderlik ve Sosyal Duygusal Öğrenme, Kentsel Eğitim, Okul Psikolojik Danışmanlığı.*

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Introduction

Social emotional learning (SEL) is not a new concept. Yet,significant variation existsacross school programsseekingtoteach this critical skill set.Broad categories of skills associated with SEL include emotion regulation, conflict resolution, self-control, social skills and problem solving (CASEL, 2013). The skills, attitudes and behaviors associated with SEL have been shown to impact academic performance (Durlak, Weissber, Dymnicki and Taylor and Schellinger, 2011; Wiessberg&Cascarino, 2013).SEL skills are essential for students to meet goals of learning, achievement and life-long success. In recognition of their overall importance, SEL skills and competencies are imbedded in manyschool mission statements,includingthe goals for students to become caring citizens, productive life-long learners and problem solvers. Necessarily SEL is thought to help with attainment of thesegoals.

The school counselor's role in teachingsocial emotional learning skills and behaviors will vary widely across the profession. Yet, the aim of all school counseling programs remains consistent—to meet the needs of all students across three domains: academic, career and social emotional (Stone & Dahir, 2006). These three domains serve to guide the K-12 services provided to students throughout a comprehensive school counseling program. The academic domain includes strategies to support student's ability to learn. The career development domain is rooted in the history of the school counseling profession, connecting student's experience in school to the world of work. The socialemotional domain is broad in focus, addressing social skills development, emotion regulation, and healthy problem solving (ASCA, 2012; Davis, 2015).

Based on work conducted by the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (2012), the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) created 35 mindsets and behaviors associated with career and college readiness (Farrington, et al. 2012). These standards were established to guide school counselors, supporting college and career readiness for all students in grades kindergarten through twelve (ASCA, 2014). These mindsets and behaviors outline the attitudes, knowledge and skills that support student college and career readiness, and align with the Common Core State Standards (ASCA, 2014). Woven throughout these mindsets and behaviors are attitudes, knowledge and skills associated withthe SEL-relevant concepts of healthy social emotional development (ASCA,2014). Social emotional competencies include skills related to emotion regulation, problem solving, help seeking, advocacy, stress management, behavior regulation and healthy communication. CASEL identifies five core competencies associated with SEL: relationship skills, social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision making (Zins, Walberg, & Weissberg ,2004). When social emotional skills are not addressed, school wide problems such as bullying, discipline issues, violence and fighting, and truancy can result.

Best practices recommend that social emotional learning (SEL) and development is supported throughout a student's academic career, and provided to all students regardless of their level of need (Hamedani& Hammond, 2015; Jones &Bouffard, 2012). The acquisition of school aged children's social emotional skills are impacted by many environmental influences across their lifespan. Brofenbrenner's ecological systems of development explains how a child is influenced throughout development in complex ways. From the perspective of Brofenbrenner's(1989) theoretical model, the acquisition of social emotional skills and behaviors are impacted on multiple levels, specifically the microsystem, mesosytem, macrosystem, exosystem and chronosystems. Many of the challenges students face require the foundation of social emotional skills and knowledge learned over the course of their childhood development. Yet

social emotional challenges can also be further complicated by atypical or harmful stressors such as poverty, violence, unnatural loss, and physical and mental illness. Students may also encounter social emotional issues in need of intervention beyond their foundational skill level. Increases in stress at home and school results in a greater incidenceof depression, anxiety, stress related health issues, relationship conflicts, academic problems and behavior problems (McWhirter, McWhirter, McWhirter, &McWhirter,2013). School counselors need to be ready with tools to address school related issues that impact social emotional functioning and achievement.

Poverty andSocial Emotional Learning

Poverty has a direct impact on a student's SEL needs. Children living in poverty are more likely to live in unsafe or inadequate housing, have parents with elevated life stressors, and to be from a minority represented group and thus facing related bias and discrimination (Luby, Belden, Botteron, Marrus, Harms, Babb, Nishino &Barch, 2013; Milner, 2015; Roy & Raver, 2014). Families may be dealing with issues such as economic pressures, heightened stress, unemployment, homelessness, crime, and substance abuse (Chow, Jaffee, & Snowden, 2003; Dearing, 2008). As well, likely resulting from their own stress burdens, the parents of children living in poverty are themselves less likely to be actively involved in their child's schooling, putting children at a further disadvantage. Researchers have identified barriers to parent's participation in schools includinglimited time and access, lack of financial resources, and awareness (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). In light of these additional stressors related to poverty, children living at or below the poverty level are more likely to experience anxiety, depression and fearfulness (Dearing, 2008).

Recent work documents how poverty has a direct impact on the brain development of children living within this social economic stata (Lacour&Tissington, 2011; Luby et al, 2013), contributing to disparities in achievement within the poorest student populations. These differences in brain development may be attributed to stress, limited stimulation and inadequate nutrition among the poorest of children (Hair, Hanson, Wolfe &Pollak, 2015). To further limit the success of children growing up in poverty,the schools that many of these children attend tend to be underfunded, to have fewer books and supplies, as well asto have teachers and counselors with less training and experience (McWhirter, et al., 2013). Despite the increased challenges in providing students living in poverty with SEL skills, research supports the successful acquisition of SEL skill development through evidence-based programming within school settings (Alicia, Pardo, Conover, Gopalan& McKay, 2012; Bavarian, Lewis, DuBois, Acock, Vuchinichi, Silverthorn, Snyder, Day, Ji, & Flay, 2012; McCormack, et al, 2015).

Impact of School Based Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Universal social emotional learning programs typically involveschool-wide activities to create more supportive school climateand school settings, as well asclassroom activities thatenhance children's abilities to recognize and manage emotions,solve problems, appreciate others' perspectives, anddevelop interpersonal skills (Payton,Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger&Pachan, 2008; Zins, Walberg & Weisberg (2004). Indicated SELincludes interventions that are focused on targeted social, emotional or behavioral problems for groups or individual children in schools (Payton, et al., 2008).

Several studies have explored the impact of SEL programs in school settings. Overall, results are very promising. Recent studies find that SEL programs havepositive effects on the quality of interactions between teachersand students in classroom,they improve academic engagement, and they increase self-control and on-task behavior (Conduct Problems Prevention Group, 2010; Durlak, et. al, 2011). As well,

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there is empirical support forincreased positive attitudes and improved social behaviors (Payton et al, 2008) after SEL interventions. Most notablly, there is strong support for the impactof these interventions on overall student achievement grades kindergarten though grade 12 (Bavarian, et al., 2013; Durlak et al.,2011; Hanedana& Darling-Hammond, 2015).

In a 2015 study, Belfield and colleagues (Belfield et al. 2015) completed a cost benefit analysis of SEL programs across national samplings ofschools. They found considerable benefit compared to cost (11-1 ratio) across six prominent interventions (4Rs; Positive Action; Life Skills Training; Second Step; Responsive Classroom; andSocial Emotional Training (Sweden)) with six different samples.Findings highlighted that all six SEL interventions yielded benefits far exceeding their cost. Of note, Belfield, et al., reported the greatest benefit-cost ratio in the Second Step, Responsive Classroom, and Social Emotional Training (Sweden) programs.

Clearly SEL is widely used, with demonstrated benefits, yet we know relatively little about the perceived needs of students, parents and school faculty. This study was designed to explore the perceived SEL program needs of students within high poverty schools.

Methods

Sampling

In selecting participating districts, a purposive sampling technique was used to identify high poverty schools. Four schools agreed to participate. All schools included in this analyses were located in urban areas in the Northeast region in the USA.Overall, all participating schools serve students withsignificantly low socioeconomic status and have high rates of minority student enrollment. Their median family income was also significantly low. It means within the schools, over 85% of students were enrolled in the free and reduced lunch programs, and over 80% of the student population in these schools identified as African American or Hispanic. As well, higher rates of students reported being English Second Language Learners (ELL) compared to other school districts in the region.

In total, 1032 participants (231 parents, 580 students and 221 faculty members) completed the survey.Demographically, students in this study identified as 30% Middle School, 70% High School; 24% White, 33% African American, 43% Hispanic, 53%; Female, 47% Male; 63% First Generation Students; 83% Free and Reduced Lunch; 16% English Second Language (ESL) Learner; 17% Special Education, and 63% who comes from single parent families.

Data Collection Procedures

The research project and consent forms were approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at Southern Connecticut State University. At each research site, the authors described the project to school leaders and directors who assisted in getting permission to conduct the online survey. The survey was administered in the beginning of 2016 calendar year. Procedures were put in place to provide participants with the least amount of risk possible, while maintaining their comfort throughout the completion of the survey. It was participants' decision whether or not they would like to take part in this study. If they chose to participate, they were able to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process. Even though the survey did not pose any psychological, legal, social, or physical harm towards the participants, an electronic letter of consent was attached to the survey, and

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survey participants were required to electronically indicate they had read and consented to participate prior to responding to any further questions.

During the data collection process, online surveys were used for this investigation. Survey items were finalized based on the pilot study and peer reviews; the survey was prepared in the online Select Survey system. With the approval of school administrators, emails including the survey link were sent to students, parents, and faculty members requesting their completion of the online college and career readiness need assessment survey. Completed surveys were automatically collected through the online Select Survey Software. Surveys were collected and coded, they were uploaded to the SPSS program. All responses in the survey were recorded anonymously.

Instrumentation

The Comprehensive College & Career Program Need Assessment (CCCPNA) was developed to assist schools in theselection, design and evaluation of school counseling programs intended to meet student needs in areas of academic, social emotional and college and career readiness. This instrument was created based on the three domains of the ASCA national model of school counseling (ASCA, 2012). The first three sections of survey included only multiple-choice items under the following categories: (1) Academic Development Program Needs, (2) College and Career Readiness Program Needs, (3) Social Emotional Development Program Needs. For the purpose of this report, only the results related to social emotional student needs are explored (see Table 1. for a list of social emotional student needs items).

In this study, researchers used and analyzed the third section of the survey which includes 14 social emotional development related programs. To validate the survey instruments and determine the reliability of these 14 items, a pilot study of the survey instruments was conducted on a small scale. The survey questions were administered to over 20 selected participants. After the participants completed the survey, they were asked to share their experiences regarding the length of the survey, content, wording, and clarity of questions, as well as the format of the survey. Pilot respondents indicated that they were satisfied with the quality of the questions. In particular, participants responded that the survey questions were all associated with social emotional development. However, participants found the survey to be too lengthy and some of the statements were confusing. The survey was further edited for clarity and brevity.

The survey tookapproximately 5-10 minutes to complete. In each section, participants were asked to rate the level of need for each particular program from 1 (lowest need) through 5 (highest need). In the final section, participants were asked to rate the level of agreement to a number of statements regardingthe perceived relationship between the student and counselor using the following Likert-type scale: 1= Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4-Agree, 5=Strongly Agree. Demographic information was collected from each participant.

Internal consistency of the social emotional student needs was assessed by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and it was determined that internal consistency was in an acceptable range for an exploratory study of .69 to .94. Overall, the instrument was found to be highly reliable (14 items; $\alpha = .91$). To validate the assertion that the 14 items can be classified as one whole category that represents social - emotional development related activities, the researchers solicited the opinions of a panel of school counseling professionals who were familiar with socialemotional development activities and the roles of school counselors. The panel of counseling professionals included experienced five practicing school counselors,

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two counseling coordinators, and three counselor educators at state universities. The panel of school counseling professionals confirmed that each of the 14 items are aligned with studentsocialemotional development.

Data Analyses

In this study, the social emotional program items measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "lowest need" to "highest need" were analyzed. To calculate the difference between the social emotional program needs, the total mean scores of social emotional program needs were used as dependent variables. Independent variables were identified as school level, coded as 1 for middle school or2 for high school, and particpants were coded as 1 for student and 2 for parent and 3 for faculty member. Finally, descriptive statistics and total mean scores were used in order to rank the participants' perceptions regarding counselor and student relationship factors.

In order to analyze what parents, students and faculty perceive as the highest and lowest social emotional program needs, descriptive statistics, ranked total mean scores and standard deviationswere tablulated. Secondly, in order to explore howsocial emotional program needs vary by grade level (middle and high) and respondent (parent, student and faculty) perception, a factorial ANOVA was conducted. Based on the results of this test, an interaction contrast test was also performed.

Results

To explore what parents, students and faculty perceive as the highest and lowest social emotional program needs of middle and high school students, 1032 participants (231 parents, 221 faculty members and 580 students) were asked to rate the level of program needs from 1 (lowest need) through 5 (highest need). As shown in Table 1, the following programs' total mean scores are ranked from highest to lowest:(1) Healthy Relationship Program (M = 4.13, SD = 1.31), (2) School Clubs & Extracurricular Activities (M = 4.12, SD = 0.94), (3) Social Emotional Lessons (M = 3.92, SD = 1.19), (4) Motivational & Leadership Speakers (M = 3.90, SD = 1.00), (5) Community Service (M = 3.85, SD = 1.08), (6) National & International Projects (M = 3.71, SD = 1.08), (7) Positive Behavioral Interventions (M = 3.59, SD = 1.25), (8) Individual Social Emotional Counseling (M = 3.58, SD = 1.31), (9) Substance Abuse Prevention (M = 3.57, SD = 1.25), (10) Suicide Prevention Program (M = 3.57, SD = 1.06), (11) Harassment Intimidation and Bullying (M = 3.55, SD = 1.31), (12) School Climate, Crisis Prevention (M = 3.47, SD = 1.24), (13) Small Group Social Emotional Counseling (M = 3.37, SD = 1.30), (14) Peer Mentoring (M = 3.30, SD = 1.28).

Table 1.Mean and Standard Deviation of Each Social Emotional Program Needs (N = 1032)

Core Program Needs	Student	Parent	Faculty	Total
Social Emotional Lessons				
M	3.18	3.92	3.18	3.92
SD	1.29	1.19	1.29	1.19
Individual Social Emotional Counseling				
M	3.22	4.01	4.08	3.58
SD	1.35	1.20	1.02	1.31
Small Group Social Emotional Counseling				
M	3.11	3.58	3.84	3.37
SD	1.31	1.37	1.05	1.30

Harassment Intimidation and Bullying				
M	3.21	4.17	3.81	3.55
SD	1.35	1.09	1.10	1.31
Community Service				
M	3.87	3.89	3.76	3.85
SD	1.06	1.13	1.07	1.08
Positive Behavioral Interventions				
M	3.24	4.14	3.93	3.59
SD	1.24	1.12	1.09	1.25
Substance Abuse Prevention				
M	3.2	4.15	3.93	3.57
SD	1.31	1.03	0.92	1.25
Suicide Prevention Program				
M	3.25	4.13	3.82	3.57
SD	1.42	1.09	0.96	1.32
Healthy Relationship Program				
M	4.13	4.13	4.14	4.13
SD	1.14	1.03	0.86	1.06

Mean and Standard Deviation of Each Social Emotional Program Needs *(Continued)*

Core Program Needs	Student	Parent	Faculty	Total
Peer Mentoring				
M	3.17	3.2	3.72	3.3
SD	1.27	1.42	1.06	1.28
School Climate, Crisis Prevention				
M	3.16	3.89	3.83	3.47
SD	1.28	1.08	1.05	1.24
Motivational & Leadership Speakers				
M	4	3.79	3.73	3.9
SD	0.88	1.16	1.1	1
School Clubs & Extracurricular Activities				
M	4.21	4.24	3.81	4.12
SD	0.84	0.92	1.13	0.94
National & International Projects				
M	3.78	3.96	3.27	3.71
SD	0.98	1.09	1.18	1.08

Note. ($N_{student}$= 580, N_{parent}= 231, $N_{faculty}$= 221).

As noted, the total mean scores of these fourteen social emotional programs are greater than 3.30, which are considered as moderately high need. Particularly, Healthy Relationship Program (M = 4.13, SD = 1.31) and School Clubs & Extracurricular Activities (M = 4.12, SD = 0.94) are the only programs having higher than 4.00 mean scores. Based on the total mean scores, Healthy Relationship Program, School Clubs & Extracurricular Activities, Social Emotional Lessons, Motivational & Leadership Speakers, Community Service have the first five highest mean scores.

Furthermore, analysis was done of the urban schools' total social and emotional program need score by means of a two-way between-subjects ANOVA test with two levels of grade (Middle and High School),and three levels of the stakeholders' perceptions (Parent, Student, and Faculty). The main effects of the independent variables were investigated, and possible interactions among the grade levels and stakeholders were explored. The results revealed main effects were statistically significant at the .01 significance level. Since the assumption of homogeneity of variance is violated and unequal sample sizes exist, p-values equal to less than .01 were used to deal with this violation.

The main effect for the stakeholders' perceptions on social and emotional program needs yield an F ratio of $F(2, 1026)=34.570$, $p< .01$, indicating a significant difference between students (M= 48.72, SD=11.85), faculty members (M= 53.49, SD=9.62), and parents (M= 55.19, SD=10.39).Moreover, interms of social and emotional program needs, the main effect for the grade level yields an F ratio of $F(1, 1026)=6.069$, $p=.014$, indicating a marginally significant difference between middle school (M= 52.60, SD=11.21), and high school (M= 50.46, SD=11.25). The interaction effect was not significant $F (2, 1026) = 3.075$, $p> .01$.

Since the parents reported the highest social and emotional program needs in both middle school and high school, the researchers investigated parent perceptions of student and counselor relationships in the last part of the findings. Particularly, the questionnaire instructed the parents to rate how much they agreed with statements about student and counselor relationships. The overall means of the five statements were calculated in order to rank the faculty members' perceptions. Table 2 presents the means and standard deviations of the parents' ratings regarding their students' relationship with school counselors. The total mean score of these four statements is 3.03 which is less than 4 (Agree) or 5 (Strongly Agree), indicating that the majority of parentsdo not agree with the statements regarding school counselors and student relationships.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Faculty Members' Ratings of Counselor and Student Relationship Activities*(N_{parent}= 231)*

Parent Responses	M	SD
My child feels comfortable to see counselor to get help with school and personal concerns.	2.86	1.179
A school counselor is available to my child when he/she needs to see the counselor	2.87	1.279
I believe there is at least one staff member in the school that cares about my child success	3.02	1.356
I know who my child counselor is	3.12	1.444
The counselor meets individually with my child at least once per year to help improve his/her academic planning and school success	3.29	1.175
Total	3.03	1.287

Specifically, parents (N = 231) rated the five statements in the following order based on mean score: *My child feels comfortable going to see the school counselor to get help with his/her school and personal concerns* (M =2.86, SD = 1.179), *A school counselor is available to my child when he/she needs to see the counselor* (M =2.87, SD = 1.279), *I believe there is at least one staff member in the school that cares about my child success* (M =3.02, SD = 1.356), *I know who my child counselor is* (M =3.12, SD = 1.444), *The school counselor meets individually with my child at least once per year to help him/her improve his/her academic planning and school success* (M =3.29, SD = 1.175).

Discussion

Overall, the total mean scores of all fourteen social and emotional development programs listed on our survey are higher than 3.30. These averages are an indication of perceived moderately high need

by parents, faculty and students. This pattern may be a manifestation of the need to address the social emotional climate in schools and attend to the social emotional needs of the student population, particularly within these high poverty schools.It is evident to parents, faculty and students that schools are no longer responsible for only the academic well-being of children in our communities. It is clear in the literature that social emotional skills impact academic success (Durlak, et al., 2011). All survey respondents can agree on the need for these services within the school environment.

Based on the total mean scores, Healthy Relationship Program, School Clubs & Extracurricular Activities, Social Emotional Lessons, Motivational & Leadership Speakers, Community Service have the first five highest means.

In terms of social emotional development program needs of urban schools, there is a significant difference between students, faculty members, and parents. Parents indicated higher social emotional program needs. This may be similar to the overall perception of need across all social emotional categories and responders. When parents see the possibility of programming related to social emotional development for their children, they recognize the benefits from this type of programming. School faculty and students are inundated with the message that academic attainment is the primary goal when in the school environment. They may not see this as an appropriate setting for social emotional development needs or deem academic skills as priority in comparison.

In terms of social and emotional development program needs of urban schools, marginally significant difference between middle school and high school is identified. Results indicated, compared to high school, middle schools have significantly higher social and emotional development program needs. Middle school is a tumulturous time for most adolescents, dealing with issues of peer pressure, sexual identity, and hormonal changes(McWhirter, et al., 2013). These developmental challenges support the need for SEL programming across school settings, regardless of economic privilege.

Overall, urban parents chose eitherdisagree orstrongly disagree with the positive statements about the student and counselor relationship. Specifically, parents rated the five statements in the following order from least mean score to highest mean score: *My child feels comfortable going to see the school counselor to get help with his/her school and personal concerns* (M =2.86, SD = 1.179), *A school counselor is available to my child when he/she needs to see the counselor* (M =2.87, SD = 1.279), *I believe there is at least one staff member in the school that cares about my child success* (M =3.02, SD = 1.356), *I know who my child counselor is* (M =3.12, SD = 1.444), *The school counselor meets individually with my child at least once per year to help him/her improve his/her academic planning and school success* (M =3.29, SD = 1.175).

These negative perceptions may also be related to inherent barriers that exisitfor parents in high poverty schools, resulting in less involvement in his/her child's school setting (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). There are several explanations for this lack of involvement including lack of transportation, conflicting work schedules, less access to school related information, and discomfort in their child's school setting. As well, it is likely that parent have less knowledge of the role of the school counselor in their child's life.

Conclusion

The literature supports the significant relationship between SEL and school success. In fact, there is a plethora of research to support the effectiveness of SEL as primary prevention (Zhal, et al,. 2015) and

indicated treatment in a school setting. School climate is also clearly impacted by the focus of SEL. The aqusition of SEL is a critical component of school success.

This survey research confirms the perceived needs for SEL programming within schools across all groups of stakeholders: parents, students and school staff. In fact, stakeholders rated moderately high SEL needs across all 14 areas of programming. In particular, parents rated SEL needs higher than either career or academic relms of service delivery. This is a strong message for school leaders and personnel regarding SEL programming. As a response to parent's perceived perceptions of the school counselor role, an increased focus on collaborating and communicating with parents is necessary. School principals should consult and collaborate with school counselors torecognize and target the barriers to school involvement that many parents living in poverty may face. Since this study provide data to identify social and emotional needs of student in urban schools and classrooms School leaders and counselors can utilize this information to strengthen the collaborative relationships with parents while similaneously focusing on the SEL programming needs of students.

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