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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2021.235>

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BUILDING COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, AND SELF-EFFICACY
AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF
PRACTICE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
College of Education
at the University of Kentucky

By

Garrett Rimey

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Tricia Browne-Ferrigno, Professor of Educational

Leadership Studies, 2021

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

BUILDING COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, AND SELF-EFFICACY AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

There are few life-changing experiences like transitioning from elementary school to middle school. A new setting, new peers, new teachers, and new structures have been shown to elicit a myriad of emotions from students as they transition into middle school. A student's academic record, accommodations, and other pertinent academic information follow a student into middle school; however, their social and emotional portfolio does not. Research has shown that students who are negatively impacted the most by transitioning into middle school also show their academics are negatively impacted, with title 1 students showing to be even more negatively impacted. However, school counselors have been shown to positively support students as they transition into middle school to alleviate those emotions that negatively impact them during the transition process.

The school counselors of Haddonfield Independent School District (HISD) have shown that they do not have set processes to support students' mental health needs as they transition. Some counselors had created their processes but had not shared their ideas with others, or the counselors had no processes at all. The reasons stated for this are that they had not thought to implement such processes, they had not been told to do so, and they had not been trained to do so. During the designing and reconnaissance phase of the study, it became apparent that the counselors' ability to communicate and collaborate as a possible reason for the lack of processes, as well as the belief, or self-efficacy, of the elementary school counselors being low because they had not been trained to do so.

Throughout January to March of the 2020-2021 school year, I implemented a Communities of Practice (CoP) consisting of six elementary school counselors who all

work in a Title 1 school setting. Using mixed methods action research, the participants engaged in pre and post-surveys and end-of-meeting surveys. I also took meeting observation notes for each of the meetings. Throughout the study, we engaged with several stakeholders that included elementary school counselors and middle school counselors, and we presented our possible transition processes to the area superintendent. The study results being that by participating in the CoP, the participants saw an increase in their perception of communication and collaboration with their peers and increased perception of self-efficacy as it pertains to supporting the mental health needs of transitioning students from 5th grade into 6th grade.

Keywords: Elementary School Counselor, Communities of Practice, Transitioning, Communication, Collaboration, Self-efficacy

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05/21/2021

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BUILDING COMMUNICATION, COLLABORATION, AND SELF-
EFFICACY AMONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COUNSELORS
THROUGH COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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DEDICATION

To my wife, Katlyn, and our two amazing daughters, Fiona and Penelope. No amount of degrees or formal education will ever rival the amount you have taught me about honor, passion, commitment, and above all else, love. Always and forever in my heart.

My daughters like to ask me riddles and questions all the time, and so I end this with one of my own, for you girls.

How does a tree thank a thousand raindrops for giving it life? By growing to be the strongest, it can be.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank my wife, Katlyn, for being my rock throughout this whole process. I have been like a kite most of my life, and you have been holding the string for the longest time. Never letting me fly away, but letting me fly nonetheless. You are the love of my life. To my daughters, Fiona and Penelope. I hope I inspire you. I hope you dream bigger than I could imagine. I hope you live and love this life ferociously and with an unrivaled passion. Whatever you do in this life, make it worth something, and know that I will always be proud of you and love you. You all have sacrificed so much to give me so much, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Now let's go on vacation.

To my mother and father, Patti and Les. You raised me to be a nice blend of loving and crazy and have supported me my whole life. I know I make you proud because you have told me countless times. Still, nonetheless, your support has been nothing short of incredible. If you measure a person by how much they are loved, then you two make me unmeasurable.

To Professor Tricia Browne-Ferrigno. Thank you for being an ear to bend, a shoulder to cry on, and a means of support that helped carry me through this process. May those Georgia pines sing songs of sweet happiness as the winds blow through them. To the rest of my committee, Professor Björk, Dr. Cahill, and Dr. Woods, thank you for your feedback and support that really helped shape this study.

To the RS Club for being with me and supporting me for so many years. Brent, Beyers, Chris, Dan, Doug, Justin, and all my brothers who have believed in me longer than I have believed in myself.

To my UKY family, Lori and Joshua. Joshua, you have been so supportive during this process and have helped me keep that whole process in perspective. Hook 'Em! Lori, my "cohort wife," you have been so incredibly supportive, whether it be editing my papers, sharing ideas, or just a person to talk to. I could not have asked for a better comrade for this process.

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CHAPTER 1

DIAGNOSING PHASE

Transitioning students from one school setting to the next is not a novel concept in education. Although parents are more concerned about their child's academic achievement as their child transitions from elementary to middle school (Akos & Galassi, 2004), teacher and principals understand that social and emotional support plays an even more critical role in students' success (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hamilton, Doss, & Steiner, 2019). This understanding of the importance of support has been highlighted more and more frequently in society. For example, as part of recent teachers strike in Chicago Public Schools, teachers saw such value and need in supporting social and emotional learning for their students that hiring more school counselors was one of the teachers' demands. The sentiment of having more counselors was also recently on display in educator strikes in California, Arizona, and Florida. As the prevalence of suicide rates and suicidal ideations increases (Hedegaard, Curtin, & Warner, 2018) and other mental health needs increase amongst America's youth (Data and Statistics on Children's Mental Health, 2019), there is a corresponding need to increase mental health services for students within the public school system.

Some school districts are working to find innovative ways to address students' mental health needs. To help address the social and emotional needs of these students, the school counselor is in a unique position to work with students because "elementary school counselors are educators uniquely trained in child development, learning strategies, self-management, and social skills, who understand and promote success for today's diverse students" (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019a, p. 2).

Haddonfield Independent School District (HISD), located in central Texas, has become somewhat of a pioneer in the social-emotional learning realm by adding a Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) coordinator to address how the district is implementing the SEL curriculum. The district also added a director of behavioral health to help educators understand more clearly how trauma affects students and to teach strategies in coping with trauma.

District and school leaders in HISD are undertaking similar strategies for addressing the mental health needs of students. Their goal is to develop a well-documented strategy that helps in two ways. The first is to increase students' academic achievement (Carey & Dimmitt, 2012; Davis, Davis, & Mobley, 2013; Goodman-Scott, Sink, Cholewa, Burgess, 2018; Lapan, Gysbers, Bragg, & Pierce, 2012). The second is to support students' social and emotional well-being (Curtis, Van Horne, Robertson, & Karvonen, 2010; Dimmitt, & Wilkerson, 2012; Lemberger, Carbonneau, Selig, Bowers, 2018; Malott, Paone, Humphreys, & Martinez, 2010). However, strategies to support students transitioning from elementary to middle school support are generally lacking. Transition processes from elementary school to middle school in HISD, especially at Title I schools, do not have district mandated processes in place to support students. However, supporting Title I students transitioning between schools is particularly important because they are less likely to have their mental health needs met outside of the school setting (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002; Wadsworth & Achenbach, 2005). Having the support of a school counselor is extremely important to the well-being of early adolescents.

Few scheduled life-altering experiences are as significant as moving from an elementary school to a middle school due to the varying psychological effects it potentially has on students (Akos, 2006; Choi, 2012). Stress and anxiety are the most common emotions that affect students as they transition between academic levels (Symonds, 2015). HISD has no set processes in place to support students as they transition because each elementary school and middle school has autonomy concerning the counseling and support strategies they implement. Thus, supportive opportunities may range from having none in place to multiple that support students' academic, social, and emotional well-being (e.g., unique lessons, parent and student orientations, communication between elementary and middle school counselors about students who could benefit from extra counseling support).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of using collaborative leadership through a community of practice (CoP) composed of elementary school counselors who focused on ways they can improve the school transition process to assist the mental health needs of HISD students. Chapter 1 of this dissertation begins with presentation of the study context, key stakeholders' roles in the district, and the researcher's role. Next, an overview of the problem of practice is discussed, followed by an overview of the mixed-methods strategies to gather data. As part of the diagnostic phase of the study, a review of the literature highlights effects that transitioning to middle school has on elementary students with a focus on those who come from a low socioeconomic status (SES) as well as stakeholder conversations to highlight their perceptions and beliefs on transitioning students. Then, findings from the diagnostic phase are discussed followed by a summary of the problem statement. Finally, supporting

literature describes how a CoP can potentially support the current transition processes in HISD.

Context of the Study

HISD is a P-12 public school system located in central Texas. The district currently serves over 50,000 students and has over 6,000 employees working in 34 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, and 9 high schools located across 210 square miles. Around 28% of the students in the district meet criteria required for identification as economically disadvantaged, meaning children who come from families within the federal poverty guidelines (USDA, 2019).

Among the 34 elementary schools, 14 are Title I schools that serve students from families identified as low SES. Due to the unique needs of Title I schools, HISD supports two counselors at each Title I elementary school. Therefore, the district has 28 elementary school counselors working at Title I campuses where they also serve on school leadership teams led by the building principals.

The organizational setting for this study focuses on the counselors at each of the Title 1 elementary schools in HISD. The purpose of focusing on Title 1 schools is because students attending Title 1 schools typically need more social and emotional support (Symonds, 2015). This perception of unique need is discussed in the diagnostic phase of the study presented below.

Stakeholders

To diagnose the problem more thoroughly, several stakeholder groups were engaged to clarify how the elementary to middle school transition processes are

perceived. These stakeholders included the director of counseling services, school principals, elementary and middle school counselors.

Director of counseling services. The director of counseling services has been in that role for six years and has worked in education for 36 years, serving as a teacher, school counselor, and student supports services coordinator. She holds a doctorate in educational leadership. As the director of counseling services in HISD, she oversees the professional development of the 58 elementary school counselors, 26 middle school counselors, and 60 high school counselors.

The director of counseling services is responsible for providing the topics and professional development to the counselors in HISD. She conducts four mandatory professional development meetings a school year, two all-day long and two half-day long. Her primary responsibility is to ensure that all students in the district are aware of college and career-readiness preparation programs and to connect professional organizations (e.g., universities, vocational schools, military services) with the students to promote postsecondary readiness for careers and advanced education.

The director's role in the transition process for elementary to middle school counselors is narrowly focused. For example, one task is reminding elementary school counselors to submit student choice-sheets. These student sheets are completed by the students and requires them to identify the elective courses they would like to take at the middle school.

School principals. Elementary and middle school principals who participated in the diagnostic phase had an average of 12 years of administrative experience in assistant and principal positions, were female, and an average age of 37 years. Each grade-level

team (at both an elementary school and middle school) is overseen by an assistant principal, who is assigned to the team by the principal. Although principals provide input for academic success and planning, they do not work with the school counselors for SEL program design and implementation.

With regard to transitioning students, these elementary school principals are required to attend the sixth-grade transition orientation on their campus. They do not assist in the process and are at the event mainly to represent the school. The middle school principal speaks at their student orientation about the importance of working hard in middle school and choosing appropriate courses. Neither of the principals' roles include addressing specific needs of the students.

Elementary school counselors. The school district has 14 Title 1 elementary campuses, with two school counselors serving at each campus. In Texas, all school counselors must have at least two years of teaching experience and hold a graduate degree in school counseling and a State of Texas School Counseling certificate. In HISD, school counselors must adhere to the guidelines promulgated by the American School Counselors Association. These guidelines were designed to ensure the school counselor is involved in developing and encouraging students' current and future success by supporting social, emotional, and academic growth.

Middle school counselors. Middle school counselors are required to have at least two years of teaching experience and hold the same credentials as elementary school counselors. HISD has three Title I middle schools that have two to three school counselors on campus depending on student enrolment and student needs. Although the middle school counselor's role is similar to that of the elementary school counselors, their

primary responsibilities are scheduling of students' courses and informing students about college and career readiness.

With regard to transitioning students, the middle school counselor organizes a half-day field trip in late January that introduces the incoming sixth-grade students to the various electives they can take. The middle school counselor also organizes a half-day event that focuses on showing the students around the building and helping them find their classrooms and lockers.

Researcher Role

I have worked in HISD since August 2010 as a teacher of Kindergarten, first grade, and physical education. During the past five years, I have served as the school counselor at Elementary School 31 (ES31). As a school counselor, I am in charge of creating and fostering an emotionally balanced environment to maximize learning by assisting students, parents, teachers, and administrators. I also coordinate with and teach strategies to teachers and other staff members, both individually and in group settings, to enhance their understanding of students' emotional well-being on campus and to assist them in creating an emotionally balanced environment. Further, I assist with transitioning students from fifth grade to middle school by acting as a chaperone to our feeder school and by collecting the students' course selection sheets for sixth grade. I am also required to attend a school transition night in which my responsibilities are limited to supporting the event as deemed necessary.

I coordinate and lead the following committees on campus: (a) Language Proficiency Assessment, (b) At-Risk Students Positive Behavior and Interventions Systems, (d) WatchDOGS© (Dad's of Great Students), (e) Friday Backpack, and (f)

Families in Transition. My primary instructional responsibilities are to teach all students (i.e., pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5) in different settings (e.g., individual, small group, whole school) about various topics related to the social and emotional well-being of preadolescents.

I provide professional development to staff on various topics (e.g., grief, trauma, behavior management, SEL implementation, restorative practices) and perform various other assigned administrative duties. It is through these professional development opportunities that I foster and build relationships with my staff as well as receive pertinent feedback about how my counseling initiatives are functioning. These relationships have also helped me understand student needs by allowing the teachers to know me better and so that they feel comfortable to talk openly and honestly to me about student issues.

Overview of the Problem of Practice

Since becoming an elementary school counselor in HISD, I have witnessed and been part of many areas of growth in the areas of social and emotional learning (SEL). From the district mandating 15 minutes a day for classroom teachers to implement SEL lessons to an increase in the number of school counselors to assist students and creation of new positions to oversee SEL and mental health for the students, the district has expanded services to support the well-being of its students. My ability to serve the students as a school counselor has improved now that more support is in place. However, one area that has not seen any growth in the well-being of fifth graders is in their transitioning from elementary school to middle school.

Mixed Methods Action Research Process

Mixed methods action research (MMAR) is a research methodology that uses both qualitative and quantitative data to identify a potential solution to a problem (Ivankova, 2015). The MMAR approach consists of examining how processes are currently being conducted within an organization and reevaluating the norms, values, and assumptions to create social change (Pettit, 2010). The MMAR process consists of a team or community composed of stakeholders who have a vested interest in eliciting change and are willing to participate in the various MMAR phases. Their input is what helps the researcher understand the problem, extent of the problem, and potential strategies to address the problem. This study uses Ivankova's conceptual model that consists of (a) diagnosing, (b) reconnaissance, (c) planning, (d) acting, (e) evaluation, and (f) monitoring. Below is an overview of the various phases of an MMAR.

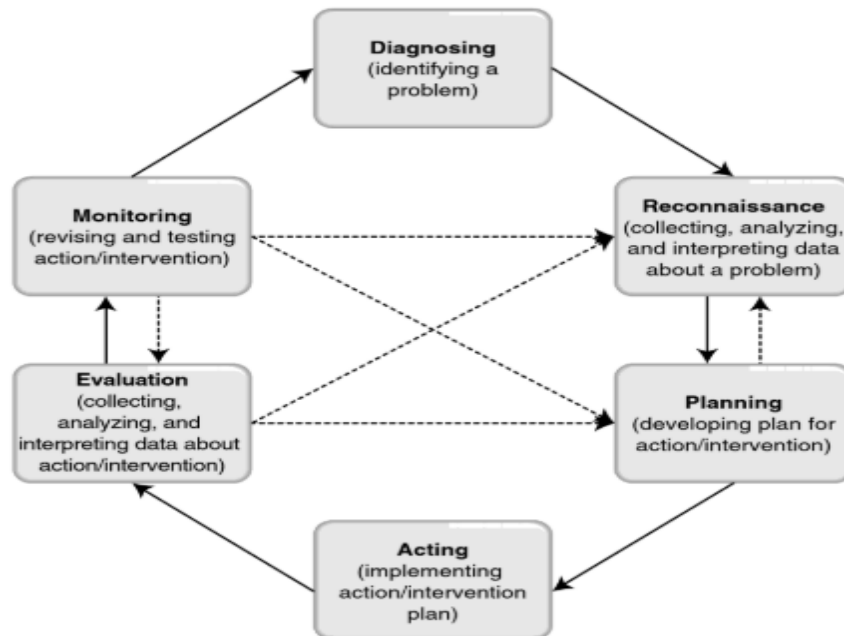


Figure 1.1 Methodological Framework of Action Research. The above figure describes the action research framework used in this study. This framework was adapted from Ivankova's (2015) MMAR principles.

Diagnosing phase. The diagnosing phase of this MMAR process utilizes diverse information to identify what the problem is. To diagnose the problem addressed in this research, various stakeholders were asked to provide their perspectives about an organizational issue. I then conducted an extensive literature review to conceptualize the problem more fully.

Reconnaissance phase. Once the problem has been identified through completion of the diagnosing phase, the researcher moves to the reconnaissance phase to understand the problem with greater depth and then develop a potential action (i.e., intervention) to address the problem or to improve the situation. This is done through data collection, particularly interviews with stakeholders with a focus on their clarifying what the problem is and offering possible interventions. During this phase, the researcher also reviews relevant literature to identify possible interventions.

Planning and acting phase. With the data evaluated from the diagnosis and reconnaissance phases, the researcher then determines what the intervention should be and how it will be implemented. Throughout the planning and acting phase, the researcher analyzes data to determine the duration of the intervention and identifies additional data that may need to be collected to create an action plan.

Evaluation phase and monitoring phase. During the evaluation phase, data are analyzed to determine the efficacy of the intervention. A thorough review of the collected data helps to identify strengths and weaknesses of the study and areas of needed improvement. The evaluation of the study is completed through presenting the results to various stakeholders to elicit feedback focused on maintaining or reframing concepts that emerged during the study. Based on the feedback from the stakeholders, the monitoring

phase continues to follow the intervention's progress as well as any further iterations of the intervention.

Diagnosing Phase

A portion of the district's vision statement asserts that students will "be equipped with the skills and attitudes to be able to resiliently deal with challenges." Although specific challenges are not stated in the vision statement, research shows that one area where major challenges arise occurs when students are transitioning from elementary to middle school.

HISD describes their counseling services as being formed through collaboration with other schools, community members, and parents and through data as the basis of information for designing direct and indirect services provided to students. Although the district describes their counseling services program in this way, no evidence exists, either through already gathered data or reports by school counselors engaging in their counseling services processes, that students transitioning from elementary to middle school receive the support needed to assure their success at the secondary level.

A traditional belief about leadership in schools is that the principal leads and everyone else follows. However, according to Bolman and Deal (1991), "Leadership is distributed rather than concentrated at the top" (p. 345). Further, according to the ASCA (2019a), school counselors are in a unique position to lead from the standpoint of mental health: "School counselors are educators uniquely trained in child development, learning strategies, self-management, and social skills, who understand and promote success for today's diverse students" (p. 1). School counselors' skills place them in a unique position

to lead students through the transition process in ways principals cannot (Hines, Lemons, & Crews, 2011).

One primary role of a school counselor is to lead from a place of advocacy (Galassi & Akos, 2004; Dollarhide, 2003; Hatch & Bowers, 2002). By leading with advocacy in mind, a school counselor can work to ensure that transition processes are implemented to support students. Part of the problem within HISD is that no one above the school counselors on the hierarchical leadership chain has requested such transition processes. My contention is that through advocacy, a school counselor can work to ensure transition processes are in place.

Through collaborative efforts with the stakeholders, school counselors have a higher likelihood of making meaningful change (Dollarhide, 2003). In particular, these changes include collaborative efforts from educational leadership teams and strategies to identify and resolve issues in the school setting (Katzenbach, & Kahn, 2010). School counselors need to work collaboratively with stakeholders to ensure students' success (Stone & Clark, 2001). Through a CoP, school counselors work with each other as both stakeholders and as part of an educational team. Since ASCA (2019b) has stated that it is the responsibility of school counselors to serve students as they transition, then HISD has done those students a disservice in not meeting the SEL needs of its students.

Diagnostic Process

The purpose of the Diagnostic Phase in the MMAR framework is to identify the problem, review the literature, develop study objectives, and research questions (Ivankova, 2015). To identify the problem, stakeholder conversations were held to obtain an understanding of how they perceived transitioning students from elementary to middle

school is effective in HISD. The literature was reviewed to help me understand the effects that transitioning has on students. An amalgamation of stakeholder conversations and literature created the basis for identifying the problem and the next steps in the study.

Guiding Questions

Although I have been a school counselor in HISD for several years, I have no experience in assisting student's transition for elementary school to middle school. I determined that I needed to understand whether my experience was the norm or the exception. To address this issue, I engaged with diverse stakeholders with the understanding that I sought their perceptions regarding the current transition processes and their beliefs about transitioning students from elementary school to middle school. A review of the literature helped me frame the extent to which transitioning affects students.

Stakeholder Conversations

Conversations with other school counselors revealed similar experiences to my own, which was limited knowledge about transitioning students from elementary school to middle school. The district's director of counseling services, elementary and middle school principals, and elementary and middle school counselors were the stakeholders with whom I engaged. Several themes emerged from the conversations that gave me more insight and understanding of the problems associated with transitioning students for one school level to another.

Lack of awareness. The consensus from the stakeholders was that there was a lack of awareness that transitioning students from the SEL perspective was even a problem. Most stakeholders revealed that they had not ever thought about transitioning students with a focus on their SEL. One elementary counselor noted, "We are so focused

on the students we have on campus and not as much where they are going when they leave us." Several other counselors shared the same sentiment. . Only one of the elementary school counselors had thought about such processes because she had worked previously as a middle school counselor and felt it would be beneficial to share information about students with whom she was working.

Two of the three principals felt that they did not have SEL-focused transition processes because it was not something they have been told to do. If they received a directive from the district to make SEL and transitioning a focus, then they would implement such processes.

Lack of knowledge. None of meeting participants indicated they received training or professional development about transitioning students with a focus on SEL or even school-level transitioning in general. They also reported that transition training was not something that they considered developing. However, all elementary school counselors felt they needed some training to help advocate for their students as they enter the next school level. They also felt that if they had training, then they would be more inclined to add transitioning topics to their current SEL program.

Principals and the director of counseling services also felt that this was an underdeveloped area. Further, the director indicated this was something she had never thought of adding to the training of elementary school counselors but realized that it should be. The director further hoped that this study would provide more insight and guidance in developing transition processes. Most responses by the elementary principals aligned more with the belief that they were worried about the students they had on their campus rather than what happens when they move to another school. A middle school

principal felt that it would be helpful to know about the SEL needs of "more challenging behaviors" among entering sixth graders but was also concerned about time restraints among counselors to meet and share such information about students.

Lack of communication. Only one elementary school counselor stated she shared information with the middle school counselors, mainly because she had worked as a middle school counselor prior to moving to elementary school. She felt relaying information about incoming 6th-grade students was significant for middle school counselors. Most elementary school counselors stated that they do not usually share information unless the middle school counselor reached out to them, which was a rare occurrence. The middle school counselors felt that having information on incoming 6th-grade students would be helpful but admitted that they are overwhelmed at the beginning of the year handling the needs of all their middle school advisees. Finding time to obtain this information and reviewing it would be challenging.

Another area of disconnect in communication was between parents and counselors. A parent expressed concerns about having her child's social and emotional needs met at the middle school through counseling services. When she asked what processes would be in place for her child, the elementary school counselor indicated not being aware of how middle school counselors serviced students.

Lack of collaboration. School counselors in HISD stated they feel that they do not have time to discuss such issues as transitioning students because there is never time to purposefully collaborate with other school counselors. When I spoke with a small group of elementary school counselors, they shared different experiences in transitioning students. They did not realize that every campus has different expectations or even who

and how they could assist with transitioning. Some counselors did not work with the transition process at all, whereas others reported having simple responsibilities such as giving a transition lesson on middle school to 5th-grade students or serving as the collector of choice sheets for the incoming sixth graders. One of the newer counselors to the profession felt all counselors should have information on how campuses use transition processes as opposed to "figuring it out" independently.

One reason for the lack of consistency in transition processes is that HISD allows principals and counselors on campuses to work autonomously. Therefore, it is really at the discretion of each building team concerning how transition issues can be addressed. However, it is difficult to implement processes about the transition since most counselors and principals with whom I spoke had never even thought about student transition processes from the SEL perspective or generally. .

Many counselors acknowledged having another counselor in the district that they call when the need arises, but such communication occurs more as a response to an intervention than as a planned collaboration. The idea of having an agenda and time for the counselors to collaborate appealed to the elementary school counselors. They expressed an interest in collaborating not just about transitioning but regarding student issues and counselor practices in general.

Supporting Literature

The following review of the literature provides context concerning the various emotions students feel during transitioning and how transitions affect students from a low SES household. Since all school counselors that would probably compose the study sample were serving schools with students from a low SES, I felt it was pertinent to

understand how transitions specifically affects this demographic group. Additionally, the effects of having a school transition process in place was a topic of discussion during the reconnaissance phase to clarify the importance of having processes in place to support students' SEL needs. Since ASCA (2019b) states that transitioning students should be a key element of the school counselor's role, leadership principles within the literature were examined to discern how school counselors could assume the lead in establishing and maintaining transition processes. Further, I in the section below I present a short review of literature on self-efficacy and how it can influence a school counselor's actions. The section also includes a brief overview of the assumptions concerning participation in a CoP that could potentially help school counselors work together in establishing transition processes.

Students Emotions during Transition

As students transition from elementary school to middle school, they experience myriad emotions and changes that can produce worry, sadness, anxiety, and fear (Akos, 2002; Cox, Kennedy, Bishop, & Porteners, 2005; Howard & Johnson, 2000, & Schacar, Suss, & Sharan, 2002; Buehler, Fletcher, Johnston, & Weymouth, 2015). The negative association with stress during transitioning can trigger additional emotional responses (Harden et al., 2001). Many students feel stress as they enter middle school due to new settings, new peer interactions, increased homework, and greater emphasis on grades (Akos, 2002; Cauley, & Jovanovich, 2006; Fields, 2002). The skills a school counselor has are meant to assist students as they are experiencing these emotions (ASCA, 2019a).

According to Goldstein (2015), students who were most stressed by transitioning into middle school struggle the most academically and socially. Outward signs of this

struggle include poor grades, poor attendance, and dropping out of school. However, students who receive more support from staff, peers, and parents evidence an increased resilience to this stress (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2019; Lapan et al., 2013).

Students from Low Socioeconomic Status

Although any student is susceptible to the negative emotions associated with school transitioning, Newman, Lohman, Newman, Myers, and Smith (2000) found that students who came from a lower SES are less likely to have individuals in their life to provide encouragement to do well and to monitor the student's schooling. Further, students who came from a single-parent home or low-SES household are at higher risk of being negatively impacted by stress due to transitioning (Newman et al., 2000).

Therefore, students who come from a lower SES household or a single-parent home could benefit from having a unique school transition program that addresses their unique needs (Berger, 2013).

SES is not the only predictor of students' who have an increased likelihood of struggling throughout the transition process. In a study conducted by Lane, Oaks, Carter, and Messenger (2015), students who scored highest on the Student Risk Screening Scale were more likely to lack success academically in middle school and to misbehave in middle school. The Student Risk Screening Scale assesses a student's emotional status by the degrees to which the student feels depressed, lonely, shy, anxious, or other similar emotions. Students who evidenced elevated levels of emotions at the end of fifth grade displayed decreased emotional levels when they first entered sixth grade. However, as these students progressed through the first year in middle school, they often reverted back to the same emotionally elevated state they identified having at the end of fifth grade.

These findings are important because they indicate that as students enter sixth grade, they typically do not exhibit the same behaviors they did at the end of fifth grade, which means a middle school counselor typically will not see any of these behaviors until after the school year has been established. Further, students who achieved lower grades also evidence lower self-esteem (Wiggins, Schatz, & West, 1994), thus making transition between elementary school and middle school more difficult (Eccles, Lord, Roeser, & Barber, 1997; Seidman & French, 2004).

Within the research literature, it is difficult to find many articles that discuss implications of counseling for individuals from a lower SES. One reason is undoubtedly that private counseling is a luxury for most families. Not having outside services makes in-school counseling essential particularly because students who come from lower SES households are less likely to receive outside counseling services (Kataoka et al., 2002; Wadsworth & Achenbach, 2005).

School Transition Programs

Understanding school transition processes is imperative to address successfully the needs of SEL students transitioning into middle school. For instance, having processes that connect the students to various individuals can create a support system. Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm, and Splittgerber (2000) discovered that increasing peer-interactions, having accessible teachers, and having older siblings contributed to a more supported and successful school transition. Another potential helpful strategy was engaging the middle school counselor with these students, rather than expecting the students to seek assistance independently. Such students, however, are less likely to seek assistance from the middle school counselor about transitioning than they did while in

elementary school (Akos, 2002). Students who previously worked with a school counselor further indicated that they wanted more positive relationships with teachers and adults (Berger, 2013). Unfortunately, students responding to and requesting help from adults do not always receive it.

During the transition from elementary to middle school, counselors at both locations should work together to connect the transitioning students to their new school (Symonds, 2015). However, most elementary school counselors do not collaborate or share program materials with their middle school counterparts (Dixon, DeVoss, & Davis, 2008). By not providing the middle school counselor pertinent information about incoming students, it could be more challenging to service the SEL needs of students whose background information the school counselors do not have. Negative emotions associated with transitioning can be ameliorated by having a clear understanding of the transition process, consistent support from family members, peers, and school personnel (Akos & Galassi, 2004). If a student is provided the knowledge and support during the transition process, there is an increased likelihood he or she will be better equipped to cope with the transition process.

All students benefit from receiving support from adults within the school they attend (McElroy, 2000; Morgan, & Herzog, 2001); however, those students who do not work with the counselor are at a higher risk of not having their needs met outside of school (Kataoka et al., 2002; Wadsworth & Achenbach, 2005). Since the majority of students in this study come from a low SES household, they are potentially at higher risk of being affected by the elementary-to-middle school transition and thus would benefit from a well-constructed and delivered transition program (Berger, 2013).

School Counselors as Leaders

Since the educational system generally places an emphasis on hierarchical leadership, it can frequently be forgotten that school counselors act in leadership roles as well. “Many experienced school counselors have been trained to assume the relatively invisible role of the helper in the school rather than the leader” (Amatea & Clark, 2005, p. 16). It is essential to understand how school counselors engage in leadership and how they lead change in the school-transition processes of HISD. Applying Bolman and Deal’s (2013) four-frame model of leadership to the school counselor’s role illuminates how a school counselor leads and enacts change. Their model consists of four frames identified as (a) structural, (b) human resources, (c) political, and (d) symbolic.

School counselors are in a unique leadership position to address the SEL needs of students. To do this, Dollarhide (2003) compared the various leadership contexts that a school counselor embodies as it pertains to Bolman and Deal’s four-frame model. Table 1.1 below provides examples of the assumptions of the four frameworks for understanding leadership as applied to school counselors.

Table 1.1

Leadership Contexts and Activities Applies to School Counseling

Leadership Context	Leadership Activities Applied to School Setting
<i>Structural Leadership:</i> Leadership in the building of viable organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Build foundation of an effective school counseling program.• Attain technical mastery of counseling education.• Design strategies for growth of the school counseling program.• Implement an effective school counseling program.
<i>Human resource leadership:</i> Leadership via empowerment and inspiration of followers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Believe in people.• Communicate that belief.• Be visible and accessible.• Empower others.
<i>Political Leadership:</i> Leadership in the use of interpersonal and organizational power	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Understand distribution of power within the building and district.• Build linkages with important stakeholders (e.g., parents, administrators, teachers, board members)• Use persuasion and negotiation.
<i>Symbolic leadership:</i> Leadership via interpretation and re-interpretation of the meaning of change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use symbols and metaphors to gain attention to followers.• Frames experience in many ways for followers.• Develop and communicate a vision.• Maintain a relationship with community you represent (e.g., students, parents, school colleagues).• Model health on levels to inspire others.• Lead by example.

Table informed by Dollarhide, C. T. (2003).

Structural frame. This frame focuses on the systems that keep an organization viable, and if left unregulated, can lead to unfulfilled organizational goals and misappropriation of resource allocation (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Structural systems are a reflection of the principle that leadership “in the structural frame uses logic, facts, and data to guide decision-making” (Wong, 2013, p. 24). In the case of a school counselor, having a structural mindset is crucial in establishing and maintaining systems that support stakeholders, especially since “structural form both enhances and constrains what an organization can accomplish” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 46). Thus, since the ASCA

(2019b) recommends that school counselors support students during transitions, the structural frame would exemplify the systems and structures needed in supporting the students as they transition from an elementary school to a middle school. Under the structural frame, HISD must create and provides structures to stakeholders to supports students SEL through transitioning.

Political frame. The second organizational frame serves as a means through which individuals or groups work to disperse sparse resources through bargaining or negotiating (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The individuals and groups with whom school counselors work (i.e., teachers, students, parents, administrators, other engaged individuals) are those who can impact outcomes. Further, working with stakeholders is a vital component of effectively implementing the ASCA model of program delivery (ASCA, 2019b).

Counselors can sometimes have a difficult time implementing their strategies and activities because, historically, principals have been perceived as the authority within a school—even though they rarely have the training for or knowledge of counseling-related processes (Meyers, 2005). However, within a hierarchy “power does not always correlate with the levels of authority. In a school, like most other organizations, the person ‘in power’ does not always have the power” (Wong, 2013, p. 24). This authority power is exemplified by the fact that many principals place school counselors in non-counseling related roles (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007). Applying the political frame to P-12 education, the school counselor has to gain advantage with various stakeholders to have their counseling-related processes implemented (Wong, 2013).

Human resources frame. This element of Bolman and Deal's (2013) vision of an organization focuses on the people and providing them what they need to be successful. In the case of the school counselor, an organization can assure equitable distribution of power among school counselors by providing them autonomy and empowerment (Wong, 2013). When utilizing the human resources frame, school counselors must work strategically to assure access they have the necessary autonomy and empowerment to assure the students' needs are met.

Symbolic frame. The fourth frame assures organizational members possess a collective sense of meaning and purpose concerning the work they must complete, which is accomplished by inspiring them to believe their work is significant (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Within P-12 education, a responsibility of school counselors is to inspire teachers, students, and parents that their recommended transitioning processes are effective. Just as transitioning from elementary school to middle school is symbolic of the students growing up, school counselors must like inspire adults in understanding how this process can promote social emotional learning with students.

Conclusion. By using the four organizational frames creatively, school counselors can redefine their counseling program or processes to align more with the ASCA model of supporting students through transition. For instance, the structural frame sets the perimeters for the transition processes, the human resources frame assures others engage in creating and implementing change, the political frame is used to influence others that transition processes are necessary, and the symbolic frame inspires the goal of having transition processes.

Self-Efficacy

As part of his social-cognitive theory, Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as “a belief in one’s own capabilities” (p. 4). He posited that it is not only one’s knowledge and skills that yield results, but also the coupling of the individual’s knowledge and skills with belief in self that yield successful results. In other words, one’s belief in self (i.e., or self-efficacy) has been shown to correlate to one’s “level of motivation, affective states, and actions” (Bandura, 2001, p. 12). In essence, self-efficacy is how well a person believes he or she can use his or her skills and knowledge in a situation to achieve a goal.

Individuals who have high self-efficacy feel more competent in their jobs, feel more successful in their role, and involve themselves more in the required tasks associated with their position (Tan & Chou, 2018). The opposite of having a positive self-efficacy can lead to negative perceptions about job productivity, effectiveness, and turnover (Lai & Chen, 2012). People are less likely to accomplish a goal or task if they do not believe they can do so and are more likely to attempt a task if they do believe.

Self-efficacy can be developed through a person’s thoughts, feelings, and actions to affect personal agency (Pajares, 2002). It is through this development that self-efficacy influences a person’s abilities in effort, persistence, and resilience (Pajares, 2002). Bandura (1995) noted that mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and emotional states are the primary sources a person draws upon to cultivate their self-efficacy.

Several studies have shown how self-efficacy influences school counselors and their role. For example, Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, and Johnston (2008) found that school counselors’ self-efficacy increased as the number of training sessions they had about a topic increased. This outcome correlates to similar findings by Finnerty (2015),

who found that as school counselors received more training about guidance programs, the higher their reported self-efficacy concerning implementation of guidance programs. Another outcome of an enhanced sense of self-efficacy was that school counselors increased their engagement with the students, thus resulting in more guidance lessons provided. Further, Ernst, Bardhosi, and Lanthier (2017) reported that school counselors with higher self-efficacy predicted an increase in interventions with students. All these studies revealed that as school counselors' self-efficacy increases, their interaction with the students likewise increases. In theory, if the school counselors could increase their self-efficacy around the topic of transitioning students with a focus on their SEL, the more likely the school counselor would be to engage in transition processes.

Findings from the Diagnosing Phase

Several themes regarding transition to middle school emerged throughout the diagnostic phase. First, all participating stakeholders had a vested interest in developing processes to support students as they transition from elementary school to middle school. However, collectively they lacked a clear understanding of what these processes should be on their campuses, with the campus leaders and director of counseling services acknowledging that these processes have not been recognized for implementation.

Since these processes have not been taken into consideration by campus and district leaders, they have not had any training or professional development on transitioning students. However, school counselors believe there needs to be some sort of training for elementary school counselors. Additionally, some of the counselors requested that time be spent at meetings collaborating over the transition processes.

As the literature review revealed, students often experience a myriad of emotions before, during, and after transitioning for one school to another, suggesting that a school counselor is uniquely trained to provide the necessary support. Students from low-SES households are particularly vulnerable due to their lack of access to counseling support outside of school and the emotionally compounding effects of being raised in low-SES settings. The literature indicates that transition processes have been shown to support students' social and emotional well-being during the transition process. The literature reviewed also revealed how school counselors lead and use their leadership skills to support students during transitions. Among the numerous ways to ensure counselors support students during transition is the importance of enhancing counselors' sense of self-efficacy to ensure they experience success in implementing transition processes. School counselors' collective self-efficacy can be boosted through collaboration and shared experiences.

Summary of Problem Statement

Overall, the majority of stakeholders in HISD who participated in brainstorming sessions had never thought about transitioning students from fifth grade to sixth grade. The consensus is that if a student was no longer assigned to their campus, their SEL needs were no longer a concern of the previous school's leaders. School counselors varied on their thoughts about what their role and duties were in assisting transitioning students. They were also concerned about the level of consistency in implementing processes because roles and responsibilities vary campus to campus such as some counselors having to do assessment related work while other counselors do not.

Conversations with stakeholders revealed that most school counselors do not have transition processes in place but feel that this is an important topic to address. Principals, parents, and the director of counseling services also agreed that having transition processes in place is necessary to ensure that students and staff are successful. Counselors also perceived they needed the district to provide them with time to meet regularly in order to assure needed processes are in place and to explore what else they could be doing to enhance their school transition process. Thus, the goal of this project was to create transition processes that are reflective of servicing students' social and emotional well-being as they transition from fifth grade to sixth grade—regardless of what school the student previously attended in HISD or elsewhere.

Summary

Addressing the SEL needs of students is imperative to ensuring students are being supported academically, socially, and emotionally. This chapter provided the context of the study, the stakeholders, and the researcher's role within HISD. This chapter also highlighted findings from stakeholder conversations and literature reviews that show what effects transitioning to a new school and having transition processes in place have on a student's academic, social, and emotional well-being.

The diagnostic phase findings showed that HISD does not have consistent practices in place and that transitioning students from elementary school to middle school is an issue HISD needs to address. Chapter 2 presents more information about findings from the Reconnaissance Phase and the literature to support the chosen intervention.

CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH PLAN

In this chapter, I discuss the purpose of the study and how I used qualitative strategies to gather data during the reconnaissance phase of MMAR (Ivankova, 2015). Using these data, I then present a comparison of possible interventions. Following comparison of interventions, I then describe how the chosen intervention of creating CoPs for elementary school counselors impacts their sense of self-efficacy. The chapter concludes with quality assurances and ethical considerations.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this MMAR study is to explore the impact of developing school counselor self-efficacy through participation in communities of practice (CoP) that focus on transition processes for students moving from elementary schools to middle schools. Current literature asserts that members of an engaging, purposeful CoP effectively share ideas and help fellow members of a community grow as leaders (Printy, 2007; Smith, Kempster, & Wenger-Trayner, 2018; Webber, 2016). This study sought to determine if the CoP is a viable means of enhancing and supporting school counselor self-efficacy in HISD. A major purpose for participating in the study was to support members of the unique CoP in using strategies and skills that assure students successfully transition from elementary school to middle school and school counselors implement change on their campuses using SEL transition processes.

Reconnaissance Phase Introduction

The purpose of the reconnaissance phase of an MMAR study is “to assess the problem or situation revealed during the diagnosis phase” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 91). This chapter describes the methods and procedures that were used to assess

the degree to which counselors are addressing the needs of students in HISD who are transitioning from elementary school to middle school. I used qualitative research questions to elicit responses from the participants of the reconnaissance phase.

Methods and Procedures

The reconnaissance phase is part of the mixed methods research that involves “fact-finding about the situation, planning action, or intervention plan” (Ivankova, 2015, p. 38). Although my primary action plan and intervention utilize both qualitative and quantitative data, during the reconnaissance phase, I only employed qualitative data because qualitative research focuses on providing an exploratory experience within a setting (Mann, 2003).

During the reconnaissance phase, I assessed stakeholders’ perceptions of their transition processes to gain an understanding of how transition processes were operating within the district and to learn how school counselors could support students more effectively during transition from elementary school to middle schools. During this exploratory phase, I talked with the district coordinator of counseling services, the principal of ESC 31, and three elementary school counselors. These conversations were informal consultations informed by the qualitative questions.

Research Questions

The purpose of the qualitative questions was to learn how various stakeholders perceived the district’s elementary-to-middle school SEL (i.e., social and emotional learning) transition processes were functioning. The diagnosis phase provided information about SEL transition processes and existing problems. In contrast, the intent

of the reconnaissance phase was to gain suggestions and ideas about how the problem could be resolved. Below are the primary questions asked during the consultations.

- Why do you believe the SEL needs of students who are transitioning from elementary school to middle school are not being met?
- What are some ideas on how we can address the SEL needs of students as they transition from elementary school to middle school?
- How can the elementary school counselors work together to ensure fidelity in supporting the SEL needs of elementary to middle school students from each Title 1 campus?

My goal was to elicit responses from the participants about how they perceived their transition processes were effective or ineffective and how those processes could be enhanced. The interviews also helped me generate further interest in participating in the study as new ideas presented from other counselors helped create intrigue.

Study Participants

For the reconnaissance phase, I interviewed the coordinator of counseling services, an elementary school principal, and three elementary school counselors (which included one who had middle school counseling experience before becoming an elementary school counselor). The stakeholders' commentary revealed diverse opinions and helped to illuminate various perspectives these individuals held about needed changes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews as a means to gain greater understanding about how the school counselors viewed their transition programs. Interviews were conducted on separate days with the principal's interview on her campus and with the coordinator and school counselors after one of the counselor meetings.

Data Analysis and Integration

With the information gathered from the design phase of the study, I was able focus on how to resolve SEL transition processes. These individuals provided insight into how the various stakeholders viewed SEL transition processes that I can use to guide the choice of intervention.

The first question I posed asked, *Why do you believe the SEL needs of students who are transitioning from elementary to middle school are not being met?* The question elicited interesting and various responses. The coordinator of counseling services felt that SEL transition processes were an idea that had not been previously presented. She reiterated that principals had significant autonomy about what transpired on their campus, and thus, they determined how SEL needs were met. The principal shared similar sentiments, asserting that since this was such a new idea, the tasks should be part of the school counselor's role—thus, the principal simply assumed that the tasks were being taken care of by the school counselors. The principal's central belief was that principals had not received any training or professional development about SEL transition processes.

The school counselors had a different view about why needs were not being met. According to two school counselors who only had experience in elementary schools, the

SEL transition processes were not something that they considered to be their responsibility. They also indicated that because of their end-of-the-year administrative duties, their focus was not on transition students. Their only task was to collect student choice sheets and to attend various academic-themed transition nights. Interestingly, the school counselor who had worked the previous year as a middle school counselor stated that she was attempting to connect with the middle school counselors to convey which students she perceived the middle school counselors needed to meet. She believed that it was an essential part of her job to provide SEL assistance through the transition processes. Although no one had told her to do so, she felt it was an essential component of the transition process.

Responses to the second question were quite similar: *What are some ideas on how we can address students' SEL needs as they transition from elementary school to middle school?* The school counselors and the coordinator believe that having some committee to discuss students' needs and to understand more clearly what other counselors were doing would generate desired SEL transition processes. Since the coordinator of counseling services did not have much understanding of the SEL transition processes, she felt that elementary school counselors could create them. The principal asserted that professional development might be useful in informing teachers about the SEL transition processes.

New insights about how to address the problem were evident in responses to the final question of the reconnaissance phase: *How can the elementary school counselors work together to ensure fidelity in supporting the SEL needs of elementary to middle school students from each Title I campus?* The principal believes it is important to create

fidelity within the SEL transition processes to assure they are like any of the other processes in our schools; that is, structures are needed similar to those already in place to guide school counselors in their actions. This sentiment was also shared by the school counselors: They felt that since no one had taught them explicitly what SEL transition processes were needed, working together to create an action plan and required processes would be beneficial. The school counselors also thought that since different counselors had various experiences in the SEL transition process, they could learn from one another. The coordinator of counseling services also felt that the district could benefit from creating and sharing a plan with the counseling department to use on all elementary campuses.

Analyses of the findings from the reconnaissance phase showed that all stakeholders who were interviewed felt there was inconsistency in how SEL transition processes were being addressed. Further, all parties agreed that established processes need to be created to assure maximum success. In particular, the coordinator of counseling services and the school counselors felt that a group should be formed to share ideas and experiences and then create SEL transition processes to be used districtwide. These findings also provided insight into possible interventions, which are discussed in detail below.

Literature Review on Interventions and Self-Efficacy

Through my analysis of findings from the reconnaissance phase, I determined that professional development, professional learning communities, and CoPs were potential strategies for an effective intervention. A literature review of the three strategies are presented below.

Professional Development

The overarching goal of professional development in the field of education is to increase educators' skills and knowledge that help them become more proficient at their jobs (Wiggins, 1989). It is not merely sufficient that educators learn new knowledge—they must also acquire applicable skills and knowledge to increase student learning. However, many professional development activities in P-12 education have been created or delivered by administrators who address needs as they perceive them—often without gaining teachers' input (US Corwin, 2007). According to Lucillo (2009), "Teachers know best what they need in the classroom, and the more they are involved in implementing professional development, the more effective it will be" (p. 64).

Without teachers' input, their interest and engagement in professional development may not create needed new knowledge or skills. Self-efficacy bolsters teacher learning. O'Connor and Korr (1996) posited that as a teacher's self-efficacy increased, so also does student achievement. Further, teachers who were not empowered would not feel self-efficacious. To help ensure teachers become successful adult learners, they need to feel autonomous and possess a desire to become better educators (Trotter, 2006). These research findings suggest that professional development for counselors in HISD is not effective because they have not able to provide their input on what they receive.

Historically, many of the professional developments provided in HISD have been single, 3-hour day sessions to distribute information quickly with the expectation that it will be assimilated and utilized in increasing educator capacity. However, professional development strategies that are used in this manner are viewed as ineffective because

after the training, participants operate in isolation (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). This type of professional development results in fragmentation of the content being taught across the district due to inherent the inconsistencies between what teachers were supposed to learn through professional development and what they actually apply in their classroom (Desimone & Garet, 2015).

Professional Learning Community

A professional learning community (PLC) is based on the concept of a group of individuals coming together through cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth to create data-informed results (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). One of the primary components of a PLC is the group composed of individuals working together to accomplish goals that they would otherwise not be able to do if they worked in isolation (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). Often, school principals serve as leaders of PLCs who dictate what knowledge or skills the group should learn to enhance student learning. Although the group learns together, knowledge and skills acquired are informed by what the principal determines is appropriate. That is, most PLCs are hierarchical with the principal making decisions.

HISD uses PLCs as a strategy to help enhance student learning. The PLC structure is data driven, rather than needs based, and the group is led by an administrator with assistance from several coaches who also determine the focus of the PLC. Teacher input on what information or strategies the PLC will cover is not perceived as necessary because statistical data are typically used to determine what topics are presented.

Communities of Practice

CoPs are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting

on an ongoing basis" (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p.4). The significant difference among a professional development (PD) session, a PLC, and a CoP is that focus in a CoP is on the collaborative work determined by the group members and informed by their collective learning. Unlike PD sessions or PLC meetings with mandated attendance and leadership by one individual, CoP members self-determine the topics addressed the activities conducted, they share leadership in accomplishing their shared goals. Thus, a CoP is organic and fluid because the members work together equally to address an issue or problem. Unlike a PD event or PLC session, leadership within a CoP is not hierarchical but rather distributed throughout the group (Blankenship & Ruona, 2007). The dimensions of the relationship of a CoP are mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, as shown in the Table 2.1 below.

Table 2.1

Dimensions of the Relationship of Community of Practice

Mutual Engagement	Joint Enterprise	Shared Repertoire
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaged diversity • Doing things together • Relationships • Social Complexity • Community Maintenance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negotiated enterprise • Mutual accountability • Interpretations • Rhythms • Local response 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Styles • Artifacts • Stories • Tools • Historical Events • Discourses • Concepts

(Wenger, 1998, p. 73)

Mutual engagement. Although school counselors in HISD have limited interactions with their district peers, mutual engagement is crucial in creating a CoP. Mutual engagement is the participants’ act of negotiating meaning in the CoP, thus making mutual engagement from the members a CoP (Wenger, 1998). Without

engagement from community members, the individuals would work in isolation and would not constitute a community. Therefore, the CoP must establish mutual engagement in what the community is and what tasks the community is trying to complete.

Throughout the process of mutual engagement, members bring their perspective but also assimilate the perspectives of others. The participants' perspectives help ensure that the group is working towards a holistic outcome that is representative and beneficial to all. However, this does not mean that mutual agreement is the same as homogeneity. According to Wenger (1998), CoPs cannot function effectively without tension and conflict because dissent is a part of community work. Different perspectives elicit change that is reflective of perspectives among all members of the community. In the case of the CoP whose members are HISD counselors, mutual agreement is the creation of shared meaning about transitioning students from elementary school to middle school.

Joint enterprise. A joint enterprise is a concept or idea that binds the members as a community. Although varying, and sometimes conflicting, ideas are presented by members of the group about how it addresses the new processes. This interchange among community members is a joint enterprise because decisions are “communally negotiated” (Wenger, 1999, p. 78). Group autonomy and group identity are created as an indigenous enterprise. Thus, although a group may be part of a larger organization, the norms, goals, and regulations for the CoP are developed by its community members. Joint enterprise also requires mutual accountability. Mutual accountability means all community member work to share their knowledge and skills and support the other members of the community.

Shared repertoire. When group members connect through similar knowledge, skills, concepts, styles, and beliefs, they create a shared repertoire, which helps to sustain the group. One of the critical components of a shared repertoire is of the group's shared history. In the case of a CoP, its members become part of their collective shared history, which creates feelings of unity and belongingness. The shared repertoire also creates richness because it provides the language needed for mutual engagement. As the CoP functions over time, connections between the members are deepened through their shared repertoire.

Connecting CoP to Self-Efficacy

For reasons presented above, I determined that CoPs were the best intervention to support development of transition plans. I then shared how a CoP could affect self-efficacy and related its effects for school counselors to implement an SEL focused transition program successfully. As part of his social cognitive theory, Bandura (1997) defined *self-efficacy* as "a belief in one's own capabilities" (p. 4). He posited that it is not just one's knowledge and skills that yield results, but rather the coupling of individuals' knowledge and skills with their belief in themselves that can be produce successful results. One's belief in self, or self-efficacy, has been shown to correlate with how well a person believes he or she can accomplish a task, or as Bandura asserts, "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true" (p. 12).

Individuals who possess high levels of self-efficacy feel more competent in their jobs, feel more successful in their role, and involve themselves more in their position (Tan & Chou, 2018). The opposite of having a positive self-efficacy can lead to negative

perceptions about job productivity, effectiveness, and turnover (Lai & Chen, 2012).

People are less likely to accomplish a goal or task if they do not believe they can do so and are more likely to attempt a task if they do believe. Bandura (1997) posited that mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological and affective states influence a person's self-efficacy.

Mastery experiences. One way to influence a person's self-efficacy is through actually doing the task and finding success. According to Bandura (1997), if a person could have direct experiences that brought about success, that person would gain a greater belief in their abilities and skills. This belief is not limited to that specific experience but actually provides individuals with the belief that they can continue to master new and other experiences. Bandura viewed the mastery experiences as a means to build self-efficacy but pointed out that the difficulty of the experience had implications on how much self-efficacy is impacted. If the task was comfortable and of little challenge to the person, then self-efficacy would not be impacted or changed minimally. However, if the experience was challenging, the more significant amount of a person's self-efficacy is changed. An example of this is the difference between writing a grocery list and a dissertation: The more challenging the task, the greater belief in one's self-efficacy.

Being an active member in a CoP requires an individual to be willing to change and to engage in creation of new goals, outcomes, or processes. In this sense, change and engagement could also be considered the new norms of the group or organization. Self-efficacy increases through meeting group norms (Prelli, 2016).

Vicarious experiences. Although mastery experiences impact self-efficacy, the most vicarious experiences also contribute to increasing one's self-efficacy (Bandura,

1997). Vicarious experiences occur when a person can experience something new through observing another. Bandura perceived that if a person had prior experience in completing a new task, he or she would make a stronger connection with learning, thus increasing his or her self-efficacy. Conversely, if a person did not have much experience or connection to the new experience, he or she would not experience an increase in their self-efficacy.

One of the main components of a CoP is bringing people together to share their experiences and model what they have done to create change. The CoP acts as a medium through which its participants can have vicarious experiences through shared learning. Active participation in a CoP could enhance the group's self-efficacy and create deeper connections among its members.

Verbal persuasion. Verbal persuasion is used by others to positively encourage or reinforce others as they undertake new experiences to help build self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). By receiving positive and supportive encouragement from peers, they are more likely to believe in their skills and abilities, especially as they are working through a new experience. Bandura warned that verbal persuasion could have negative repercussions on self-efficacy if used negatively. Bandura also asserted that although verbal persuasion was not nearly as effective in influencing self-efficacy as mastery or vicarious experiences, "verbal persuasion alone may be limited in its power to create enduring increases in self-efficacy . . . it can bolster self-change if the positive appraisal is within realistic bounds" (p. 101).

Verbal persuasion affects not only an individual's sense of self-efficacy but also the amount of effort the individual puts forth to achieve something. Hutchinson,

Sherman, Martinovic, and Tenenbaum (2008) found that when individuals received positive verbal persuasion, they exhibited more effort in completing their task. Since verbal persuasion is a component of building self-efficacy, it is posited that having overall higher self-efficacy could influence the level of effort given by a person.

Participating as an active member a CoP requires one to be supportive of others as the group works toward change. To be supportive, school counselors must employ verbal persuasion to affect their peer's self-efficacy positively. It is also essential for them to recognize that increased self-efficacy from verbal persuasion leads to more significant effort in engaging in a new experience, such as being part of CoP focused on the SEL needs of transitioning students.

Physiological and affective states. How individuals view their abilities during a new experience is their physiological and affective state (Bandura, 1997). How their body responds (e.g., sweating, shaking) and mind responds (e.g., having negative or positive beliefs) affects their perceptions of self-efficacy. For instance, when a principal observes a teacher working in a classroom, the teacher may become sweaty (physiological state) and believe that the principal will find only things the teacher does wrong (affective state). However, a person with a higher level of self-efficacy may not become sweaty and believe that the observation will highlight how skilled he or she is as a teacher.

New experiences cannot be so overwhelming that the physiological and affective states illicit negative thoughts in a person (Bandura, 1997). Rather, the individual should be challenged only enough to bring about positive physiological and affective states. The person should be able to work through the experience successfully and thus increase her or his feelings of self-efficacy. Working through the experience is similar to what

educators refer to as scaffolding or progressively enhancing their student's skills and abilities.

For collaborative learning to be effective, meaningful relationships must be created (Dooner, Mandzuk, & Clifton, 2008). Part of being a CoP member is recognizing and building one's self-efficacy in order to feel confident to engage actively with group members and in the change process: Developing meaningful relationships and supporting fellow CoP members is essential in building meaningful experiences and satisfying outcomes.

Findings from Reconnaissance Phase

Through use of qualitative interviews, I was able to gather perceptions about stakeholders' views on why SEL transition processes were lacking and how SEL transition processes could be improved. The lack of continuity in implementing and training school counselors about how to implement SEL transition processes effectively became apparent. Suggestions provided by stakeholders were used when deciding how to address transitioning programs for school counselors via a CoP. The principal felt that universal structures across the district would be helpful. The coordinator of counseling services and the school counselors felt that since everyone had her or his own unique experience in transitioning students, a community that worked together to create new processes would be most effective. Both concerns were addressed by the principles for working effectively as a CoP.

Upon analyzing the different possible interventions of professional development, professional learning communities or CoPs, it was evident that the principles of a CoP aligned best with what stakeholders had stated in the reconnaissance phase. Since the

coordinator for counseling services felt that the counselors should work together, leadership would not be hierarchical but distributed (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002). The counselors also felt that sharing knowledge, shown to be beneficial by Wenger and colleagues (2002), was critical because they recognized that each counselor works with such autonomy that the counselors could come together to construct diverse SEL transition processes. Finally, the nature of an MMAR study is that participation is voluntary and based on interest in the research topic, which in this case aligns with CoP participation—participation is voluntary and based on a participant’s interest (Wenger et al. 2002).

Since SEL transition processes are in such infantile stages in HISD, I also sought to understand better how HISD could increase the likelihood of implementing the SEL transition processes. To do this, I attempted to align Bandura’s (1997) theory of self-efficacy with participation in a CoP. Thus, my personal goal for engaging with my peers was to ascertain if participating in a CoP can positively influence a school counselor’s self-efficacy and thus increase the likelihood of his or her implementing the SEL transition processes that we developed. Not only was communication and collaboration missing and requested amongst the elementary school counselors of HISD but since self-efficacy is linked with and impacted by other people, self-efficacy naturally integrates itself within how individual’s communicate and collaborate.

CHAPTER 3

PLANNING PHASE AND ACTING PHASE

The purpose of this mixed methods action research (MMAR) study was to explore how a community of practice (CoP) could affect the communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy of Title 1 elementary school counselors' ability to transition students from Grade 5 to Grade 6 with a focus on social and emotional (SEL) well-being. Findings from the reconnaissance phase explicated that the school counselors would like to have a concise transition program. With no official mechanism of support in place for school counselors to support transitioning students, school counselors had to act transition students with little to no support from the district. The concept of utilizing a CoP became more apparent as school counselors discussed varying experiences in transitioning students as well as the need to have support of their peers, which a CoP can provide when developing new procedures. Many school counselors felt they were sufficiently knowledgeable or skilled to support students' transition from elementary to middle school. Although school counselors wanted to assist students' SEL as they transition, they had not addressed this issue because it was not a topic they had considered. Since the state of affairs in Texas at the time this study was conducted, online meetings were the primary modality of meetings and data collection.

Chapter 3 begins with a description of the planning phase, which entails describing the methods and procedures, research questions, study participants, and data collection. The next part includes a discussion about how the data was collected and the timeline the CoP was implemented. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion on the quality assurance and ethical considerations.

Methods and Procedures

The purpose of this MMAR study was to implement a CoP for school counselors that would positively impact their perceptions of communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy as it pertains to addressing the SEL needs of fifth-grade students in elementary schools transitioning into sixth-grade at middle schools. The systematic implementation of the CoP provided the schema to affect the school counselors' perceptions of self-efficacy and to generate the necessary data to measure the efficacy of the study. The planning phase of the MMAR study utilized a concurrent study design that employed both qualitative and quantitative methods, which by design provides a more holistic view of the data (Ivankova, 2015). Multiple surveys, interviews, and observations were utilized to generate the conclusions of the impact of the study. Table 3.1 below is a timeline of the MMAR study.

Research Questions

Although the district prides itself on being inclusive, one key element missing from the student experience is the lack of SEL support provided to students as they transition from elementary school to middle school. Because the school counselors role does not include this in this activity, the school counselors role as a leader in transitioning students is not emphasized, which was defined as the problem of practice in this study. Hence, the aim of this MMAR study was to assess how the implementation of the CoP would effect the self-efficacy of the school counselors concerning their support for transitioning students. The overarching question of this study was: *How does a CoP effect the communication, collaboration and self-efficacy of school counselors as it pertains to transitioning students? What other effects did the CoP have on the school counselors?*

Study Participants

Participation in this study was open to all elementary school counselors in HISD that had Title 1 experience. Since it was determined in the literature review portion of this dissertation that students who come from a low socio-economic status (SES) are more likely to be impacted by a lack of support, it was decided to focus the CoP on those counselors that had experience working this demographic group. Expectations for the CoP were to participate in completing all pre- and post- surveys administered by me. Study participants were also required to engage actively in four one-hour meetings to share their experiences and knowledge, to construct a new procedure to support transitioning students, and to provide feedback on the CoP meetings. At the conclusion of the study, participants were also required to participate in one 30-minute interview where they reflected on their experiences working in the CoP.

As part of the requirements of conducting a research study in HISD, approval was granted through HISD's Research and Evaluation department. Once approved by the department, area superintendents give approval concerning which counselors could participate in the study. Then, principals gave final approval for their counselor's participation. Once all district-based approvals were granted, two area superintendents determined which of their schools could participate. Ultimately, five campuses were allowed to participate; however, one lost their counselor due to relocation to another school district.

Electronic mail requests were sent out, and responses were immediate from the six counselors wanting to participate in the study. I also held an informal meeting with these counselors to address any questions or areas of concern they had. Via the electronic

mail message and orientation meeting, I informed all participants that they were not required to participate and that there would be no implications on their job or job performance if they chose not to participate. I also informed participants that all of their information was confidential and they would be receiving pseudonyms in my dissertation.

All participants were female and ranged in age from 26-50 years old with school counseling experience of 1-18 years. In addition the school counselors elementary counseling experience, (ranging from 1-14 years with a n average of seven years of elementary school counseling experience) two of the six counselors have had middle school counseling, one with high school experience, and three only having elementary school counseling experience. All participants stated that they have not received any trainings about transitioning students from the district or as part of their counseling degree program and all participants believe that the district does not support collaboration. One counselor believes the district provides enough opportunities to develop school counselors as leaders, while the remaining five participants do not.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred throughout the 2019-2021 school years that began with the reconnaissance phase and ended with the evaluation phase of the MMAR study. The reconnaissance phase consisted of interviews (qualitative data) to gain insight into the problem of practice. Once the problem of practice was confirmed, I gathered participants' insights via surveys, observations, and an interview (qualitative and quantitative data) report how participating in the CoP affected the school counselors. This information was gathered during the planning and acting phase of the study. Quantitative data was

analyzed using Mean and Standard Deviation. I followed Creswell’s (2009) steps in qualitative data analysis in which I organized the responses, coded for like words and ideas, which in turn the codes were grouped into themes. Finally I interpreted the meaning of the themes and compared them to the quantitative data findings. Table 3.1 below shows the source of data, data collected, and data collection periods.

Table 3.1

Data Collection Timeline

Data source	Sample	Data Collected	Collection period
Participant Pre-Survey	School counselors	Demographics and perception of current transition procedures by the school counselors	February 2021: Prior to first meeting
CoP Observation Form	Researcher	Observations from each meeting	February-March 2021: At end of each meeting
CoP Meeting Feedback Form	School counselors	Feedback from school counselors provided after each session	February-March 2021: During the sessions
Participant Post-Survey	School counselors	Individual reflection on CoP effects	March 2021: After conclusion of last meeting

During creation of the pre- and post-survey, I consulted with two other counselors who were not-participants in the study and a campus administrator in creating the survey. I also sent to my dissertation committee to receive feedback about needed changes.

Quality Assurance and Ethical Considerations

Prior to implementing the CoP, the district office granted permission for me to conduct the study. As part of that process, the director and coordinator of counseling services provided feedback about the CoP. Participation was voluntary, and information was distributed about what the commitment to the CoP would be and what study participation entailed. Informed consent was acquired from all participants, which

included an assertion that data collected during the study would remain secured by the researcher and anonymous. To protect their anonymity, each participant was provided a code that correlated with his or her name. The code was employed to keep their names off all their responses and to maintain data anonymity from other participants in the study.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND REFLECTIONS

In the instance of Haddonfield Independent School District (HISD), it can be argued that the antithesis of communities of practice (CoP) is the norm. In a CoP, members have a shared interest that unifies them; the community is comprised of people who want to learn, help, and support one other; and they work together to resolve a problem (Cummings & Zee, 2005). In the case of HISD, although elementary school counselors came together for district-lead counselor meetings, community practice and committed actions were lacking. When transitioning students from elementary school to middle school, the elementary school counselors and middle school counselors did not work together on assuring the students' mental health needs were addresses. The primary reason for this lack of professional engagement was because it was a concept that had not been considered as necessary. .

The principals of each campus act with such autonomy in HISD; hence, the notion of supporting the social and emotional needs of preadolescent students moving from elementary school to middle school had not occurred to the principals. Nor had the district's counseling department leaders thought of the consequences of not creating a program or processes that supported these students. Further, it was not an issue broached by campus counselors to their administrators because they too had not thought of such a concept. The fact that counselors were not discussing the matter with their principals stemmed from the lack of knowledge they received in graduate school, the lack of training held by local agencies, and the lack of need that was overlooked by the district. In essence, this was a case it was not knowing what needed to be known (i.e., you don't

know what you don't know"). As a parent and an educator of 11 years, I found this concerning that students who had exhibited a need for mental health support were losing those supports because of the lack of acumen and processes implemented within the district.

To address this issue, I created a CoP whose invited members were Title 1 elementary school counselors. My goal was (a) to help them learn from each other and support each other and (b) to facilitate new ideas, processes, and procedures that could help them support their students as they transitioned into middle school. I knew a CoP offered the potential of creating a safe and trusting environment where the counselors could learn from one another and increase their knowledge and skills. Utilizing the CoP model recommended by Wenger and associates (2002), Title 1 elementary school counselors with varying degrees of experience worked together to address the transition processes for HISD students that focused on their mental health during an often challenging transition from elementary education to secondary education.

Purpose of the Study

Various stakeholders have reported that students are not receiving assistance for their mental health needs as they transition into middle school in our district. The two most influential factors in why the counselors felt this way were the lack of communication and collaboration among school counselors in our district. As school-campus leaders, counselors can impact the processes and practices on their campus. However, due to a lack of knowledge, skills, and guidance from the district in supporting the mental health needs of transitioning students, several school counselors lack of belief in themselves on effectively supporting these students.

This study's significance is multifaceted in the implications it has on Haddonfield Independent School District (HISD). First, I choose a communities of practice (CoP) intervention because counselors felt disconnected from one another and therefore felt isolated about creating and launching campus initiatives. Since one of the primary functions of a CoP is to bring people together to solve a problem, the CoP was selected to serve as a unifier of counselors and provide an opportunity for them to communicate and collaborate. Second, a CoP is meant to function across time to enable members to navigate through the multiple processes from collaborative problem identification to collaborative problem solving. This approach—of counselors working together over a long-term project—is also new to HISD. Although the ultimate purpose of this study is to see how the CoP affects communication, collaboration, and participants' self-efficacy, another hope of this study is that the CoP can be model for HISD to implement when counselors work together. By having a set model of collaboration, such as a CoP, district administrators could provide counselors other opportunities to create change throughout the district. Finally, participating in a CoP provides school counselors the opportunity to build relationships with their peers, gain new knowledge and skills, and become better equipped to be leaders on their campus.

Data Collection

As part of the study, concurrent qualitative and quantitative data was collected in the forms pre- and post-survey measurements as well as end of the meeting surveys. I also used qualitative data from my own observation notes. The following narrative is included here to illuminate the effects that participating in a CoP had on the communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy of Title 1 elementary school counselors

in HISD with an emphasis focused on the students' mental health needs during their school transitions. The narrative is also used to help answer the research questions of *How does a CoP effect the communication, collaboration and self-efficacy of school counselors as it pertains to transitioning students? What other effects did the CoP have on the school counselors?* Using the findings from the reconnaissance phase, I focused on communication and collaboration because it was clear that these two elements were absent when school counselors even considered the transitioning and mental health needs of early adolescents. I added the component of self-efficacy because I also wanted to see to what extent the CoP affected the counselor's ability to work to implement new processes or a program. Since one of the underlying concerns for counselors was that principals had such autonomy over what counselors did on their campus, revealing how participation in the CoP increased the counselors' self-efficacy could lead to a greater likelihood of creating and implementing new processes to support students.

The efficacy of CoP structures put in place is reflected in study participants' responses on pre- and post-surveys and end-of-meeting surveys. The triangulation of this mixed-methods approach helped determine the impact the CoP had on the school counselors' communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy beliefs. After I discuss how the CoP affected the participants and how this data relates to the research questions, I discuss recommendations and the implications of instituting a CoP. Finally, I reflect on my journey as a leader and researcher working with fellow school counselors in the CoP.

Setting the Stage

Before our first meeting, the participants were asked to complete a pre-assessment survey that focused on counselor's perceptions on communication, collaboration, and

self-efficacy. The pre-assessment survey generated both quantitative and qualitative data. I then conducted five meetings with school counselors during the middle of the school year. I designed the meeting agendas that reflected as many of the principles of a CoP that I could: (a) potential, (b) coalescing, (c) maturing, (d) stewardship, (e) transformation. See Table 4.1 for details.

As the facilitator of the meetings, I provided resources that generated a deeper understanding of the effects transitioning (from elementary school to middle school) that the students may experience as well as why it is detrimental not to support these students. I provided resources that were reflective of the direction the group wanted the CoP to be. Understanding the group's focus was gathered through the End of Meeting Feedback forms that participants were asked to complete after each session. This information illuminated areas of concerns and growth that they wanted to address and served as a guide for conducting our following meetings. At the end of the five sessions, participants then completed a post-survey assessment to assess how participating in the CoP affected counselors' beliefs concerning communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations were apparent in this study. The first was that the district allowed me access to only a limited number of elementary school counselors. Since only five campuses were permitted to participate, with four of the schools belonging to the same learning community, experiences may not have been as varied they may have been if other learning communities within the district had participated.

Another limitation was the duration of the study. I originally had requested to hold four to six sessions but was limited it to five. One was that I had joined the Navy

Reserves in October 2020 before starting this study and originally had a ship date that allowed me to schedule only four sessions. After a snowstorm that left many of the participants without energy or water the same week the study began, it also made me realize how life events can interrupt a research project. The short duration of time meant that participants might not feel like they were a member of the CoP because they did not have enough time to engage fully with others. The final potential limitation may be bias due to researcher influence. Having worked in the district for 11 years and having been a school counselor for 6 years, the some participants had a prior work relationship with me—the primary researcher.

Data Analysis

The following report of data analysis results is provided in two parts. The first is a narrative reflecting on what transpired during each session and an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data that were derived from the post-meeting surveys and the quotes by study participants that I recorded during the meetings. The second part of the data analysis consists of a deeper review and comparison of the pre- and post-intervention data, which were drawn from the pre- and post-study surveys. However, presenting the narrative, I feel it is pertinent to give a general overview of what was found in the pre-survey to provide deeper understanding about context to the participants' perceptions and thus their experiences working together in the CoP.

Results

This study explored the effects of six Title 1 elementary school counselors participating in a Communities of Practice (CoP) to address the issues of creating processes that support the mental health needs of students as they transition from 5th

grade to 6th grade. Below is an account of what happened at each of the meetings and the results of the qualitative and quantitative surveys used to assess the degree to which the elementary school counselor's belief about communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy changed throughout the study.

Before The First Session

With the participants secured, I sent out a pre-survey that focused on demographics, communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy as it pertained to the confidence counselors held about transitioning students into middle school, focusing on the students' mental health needs. The overall response in the pre-survey was unanimous in that all three areas (i.e., communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy) were not perceived very favorably in our district (see Table 4.2, Table 4.4, Table 4.6). The pre-survey results did not surprise me because the different people I had met with during the reconnaissance phase presented a similar sentiment. What I had hoped to glean from the information gathered via the pre-survey was a deeper understanding of what these counselors felt was needed to support the transitioning students. This information helped guide our first discussion as well as providing the group insight into their own beliefs.

Our district has a somewhat unique tradition of calling administrators, counselors, and teachers by last names only—and without any prefix before the individual's last name. Hence, Mrs. Joan Smith is known simply as Smith, and Mr. Jason Boone is called Boone.

First Meeting

The CoP's first meeting was initially planned to begin the week of February 15, 2021, but a severe snowstorm, unlike anything most Texans have seen, swept across the

state resulting in power outages and water loss. The storm's effects impacted all group members, and naively, I tried to reschedule another time that week. I quickly realized that my hope of beginning the study that week was treading deeper into delusions of grandeur instead of the reality of the situation. With the effects of the storm still wreaking havoc, I postponed our first meeting for a week.

During the first meeting, I discussed the participant's agreement to be a part of the study, group norms associated with engaging in a CoP, and an overview of the information I had on students' mental health needs as they transition into middle school. We discussed personal experiences with transitioning students and what goals would be achieved as a group, and what steps needed to be taken. After I presented pertinent information, there was an apparent sense of what Wenger (1998) would call the "Potential" phase of the group. This occurs when members are not very open with communicating and hesitant to share their experiences. As the facilitator, I was able to recognize that the group needed support to feel comfortable engaging honestly with one another. Thus, I decided to talk about vulnerability and what it means to be vulnerable and about how being a part of a group that is initially forming can create hesitation in sharing. I also reminded that study participants that we are all counselors, and thus, it is in our very nature to open ourselves up to being vulnerable, just as we ask our students to do. The reframing of vulnerability and applying it to our group accelerated engagement in the discussion.

With the veil lifted, the group was able to move forward more cohesively in sharing their experiences and give insight into why they were not supporting these students' specific needs. Burton shared that it was "very difficult to support students

because there were different expectations at different schools and that no middle school counselor ever reached out to talk about the mental health needs of any students.” The other group members shared this sentiment in that expectations were not the same at each campus, which resulted in elementary school counselors having no structure and no connection to the middle school counselors as it pertained to discussing the students' mental health needs.

However, Bishop, who had experience working in a neighboring school district, did convey that at least on the campus she where she previously worked, processes did exist for the elementary school counselor to discuss students' mental health needs with the middle school counselors. She explained,

We had a set time of an hour to talk about the students who needed the most support and the ones we were most concerned about. This information really helped the middle school counselors so they could be better prepared in supporting those students.

Bishop also provided the group with an example of how schools could successfully implement processes to support the mental health needs of students. Through her experience, the group gravitated toward the idea that this process was more and more feasible. By providing the group a vicarious experience, Bishop was able to utilize her own mastery experience to begin to connect us to boosting self-efficacy in the participants. As Macready wrote in her response on the post-meeting survey, “It was good to hear others’ opinions and experiences in elementary to middle school transitions, especially those with experiences in other districts or learning communities.”

The meeting ended with the group deciding that we needed to hear more about other counselor’s experiences with transitioning. Since Briggs, a new to elementary school counselor who had previously worked at a middle school, had been one of the

sources during the reconnaissance phase of the study, I suggested that we reach out to her and planned to have her discuss her experience during the next meeting.

Below is the data taken from the quantitative section of the post-meeting survey for each session. Unfortunately, the quantitative-based self-efficacy question was not posed correctly due in part to my error in survey design; thus, that data had to be nullified. To measure the quantitative data, a Likert-scale school was used that ranged from 1-5 with the possible responses being: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neither Disagree or Agree (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

Table 4.1

End of Meeting Survey Results

Question Posed	Meeting 1	Meeting 2	Meeting 3	Meeting 4	Meeting 5
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
	Count	Count	Count	Count	Count
This session has increased my communication with other counselors.	5.0 (0.00) 6	4.83 (.37) 6	4.83 (.37) 6	4.83 (.37) 6	5.0 (0.00) 3
This session has increased my collaboration with other counselors.	4.83 (.37) 6	4.83 (.37) 6	4.83 (.37) 6	5.0 (0.00) 6	5.0 (0.00) 3

Second Meeting

After sharing our own experiences during the first meeting, our group decided that we needed other stakeholders' perspectives who had greater experience working in both an elementary school (ES) and a middle school (MS) as a counselor in HISD. Briggs was eager to discuss the topic at hand at our meeting as she had explicitly seen a need for transitioning students, having worked in MS the previous years. Briggs, who also worked in a different learning community within HISD, said that it had already been an established practice to have the ES and MS counselors meet and discuss specific students

who needed more mental health support. She also stated that she was able to check the status of these students at the beginning of the year because she knew which ones needed support. Because discussing pertinent information between the ES and MS counselors had already been established, Briggs felt that the district would benefit from aligning these practices within each learning community. She also said that she was trying to connect some 8th-grade students to participate in a mentorship role for specific incoming 5th-grade students. After Briggs left the meeting, we validated our group's purpose of creating transition processes that would be implemented in each learning community and began thinking of ideas about how we could create those processes.

During this session, communication and collaboration started to take hold as the participants listened to Briggs' experiences and how we as a group could begin to create new student transition processes. The overall responses on the survey showed that communication and collaboration were successful during this meeting (Table 4.1). In terms of communication, Burton felt that "communication was clear and open," and Macready said, "I thought it was a really great experience to hear from a previous middle school counselor."

Third Meeting

At the end of our second meeting, the group decided to reach out to the middle school counselors in our school's feeder pattern. Based on the school they attend, students feed into two different middle schools in the learning community. I reached out to the middle school counselors in our feeder pattern and received two counselors' responses from the same middle school. After the second session, Crow emailed me wondering if we should involve those middle school counselors since she is in a different

learning community. I recognized that Crow had also been relatively quiet during our meetings. As a first-year counselor, being part of this process may have felt different for her than it was for those who have more experience and are members of the group's learning community. When she asked if she could her middle school counselors to join the group, I gave her permission. I also commented that it might be somewhat challenging for her to be a part of this group and thanked her for participating. During the third session, I mentioned Crow's position (i.e., the difficulty of being new), which also sparked a more profound discussion within the group about how we can be more inclusive and what direction the group was heading. We determined that we were going to focus first on our learning community (the district's five feeder patterns that feed into the five high schools are split into separate learning communities), which five of the six participants present. We decided to do this because we felt it made sense to see how our learning community would respond before we cast our net to include other learning communities. This interaction elicited the following response from Crow after the meeting survey was completed.

My experience communicating with my peers this session was great. I felt like I was able to communicate my thoughts and ideas. and my peers really listened. Even though I am in a different learning community, I felt that my thoughts and ideas were validated.

The discussion about Crow's position within the group helped move us into what Wenger and colleagues (2002) would call the *coalescing* part of becoming a CoP: Our group had finally come together and felt unified in addressing an important issue. This was also apparent in Crow's quote above.

For the fourth session, we invited MS counselors to discuss how creating processes that bridge the work of the elementary school and middle school counselors.

This session started disjointed as several members arrived late, and one of the MS counselors and I had to leave the meeting briefly for personal reasons. Although I started the session, the other members asked Darcy, the MS counselor who was present, about keeping the discussion going. Once Atkins, the second middle school counselor, arrived, she shared how she would connect with us. Rather than collaborating with us directly, she thought it would be more appropriate for her to share her plan. The response from the group was that they felt the middle school counselor, Atkins, did not understand how a CoP operates collaboratively and responded negatively to this in the End of the Meeting: survey.

Nonetheless, overall feedback concerning this session was positive because the counselors felt that communicating and collaborating with the middle school counselors was very beneficial. Crow also commented that she felt that communication and collaboration with other stakeholders positively impacted our group.

In this session, we heard from other middle school counselors and their ideas on how to support our 5th graders in transitioning into middle school. It is helpful to know their perspective and what works to collaborate to inform them about the incoming 6th graders. Having a conversation with the middle school counselors at the end of the school year is a great idea. This session will allow us to work together and know some of our students who may need extra support at the beginning of the school year.

Near the close of this meeting, we determined that it was best to request a meeting with the area superintendent who represented the majority of the participants' vertical community. At the participants' request, we added an additional meeting to our agenda to prepare our presentation.

Fourth Meeting

During the fourth meeting, the group worked primarily on the presentation, which included (a) a review of research about supporting students as they transition from elementary school to middle school, (b) feedback on our proposal received from various stakeholders, and (c) possible processes to implement with approval from the area superintendent. The post-meeting comments contained many positive responses about collaborating and communicating—particularly related to working together to construct our presentation.

The end-of-meeting survey responses indicates that the study participants strongly agreed that collaboration and communication were positive. For example, a participant wrote, "I think our group did an awesome job collaborating by putting together their ideas and providing feedback from each other" Another asserted, "My experience with communicating with my peers has been very positive. Our group has been beneficial and encouraging." Overall, the group members continued to feel that participating in the CoP was creating an opportunity to for them collaborate and communicate constructively and in turn build their sense of self-efficacy.

Due to the confusion created during the third session when a visiting middle-school counselor told the group what to do, rather than engage collaboratively with them in brainstorming ideas, I opened up the fourth session with a review of our purpose and the elements of an effective CoP. I communicated my concerns about what had happened earlier and assured the group that we would work together in presenting our recommendations to our area superintendent. I assured them that “we are all in this together.”

In response to my comments, Plisken expressed surprise that the middle school counselor wanted to “nail down a plan right then and there” and then leave. . She also stated “it felt awkward telling them that's not what we are doing. . . . and I appreciate you reiterating that for us.” The belief among the group was that they can lead change” and that being leaders “starts with believing in ourselves.” During this session, the counselors expressed more of their beliefs in themselves. Crow supported that assessment in her response at the end of the session survey:

Participating in the CoP this session gave me a little more confidence in improving our transition process. Our group created some helpful tools, such as the Google form, to help collaborate with the middle school counselors. Being new to this field, I am still learning what is the best process on how to support our 5th graders' social and emotional well-being. By working with . . . knowledgeable and experienced counselors, I am able to learn a lot of great ideas on how to improve our transition process. This is a great learning opportunity for me to understand how to best support our students when transitioning to middle school. I learned that each campus is different and each vertical learning community is different. Having a vertical alignment is truly beneficial in order to help support new counselors and counselors who are new to the district so that they know how to best support our students during their transition process.

Several of the participants expressed that participating in the CoP made them feel more confident. Another study participant wrote that “through creating new tools, she is gaining mastery experience and through listening to her peers, she is experiencing vicarious experiences.”

Fifth Meeting

Our fifth and final session was a presentation to the area superintendent of the culmination of work we had done thus far. Unfortunately, three members of the CoP (i.e., Burton, Macready, Crow) were unable to attend due to other engagements they could not miss.

The area superintendent, Carpenter, was eager to learn more about our findings and recommendations. Her overall response was that our presentation "was amazing and wonderful." She provided feedback by asking us questions on how we could change some of our forms to make them more concise pertaining to gathering and providing information for the middle school counselors about transitioning students. She also provided positive feedback on how we named the level of need in our district explicitly and provided new insights about our current transition processes and what they could be. Although Carpenter provided a lot of feedback for enhancing our plan, the idea of focusing on the students' strengths resonated most with the counselors.

The post-survey responses were positive, evidencing improved confidence level regarding helping the students' transition into middle school. Myers' reaction to the meeting evidenced her newfound confidence: "I feel very confident because I know that we have a plan, and we are backed up by individuals in positions of power that can make this happen." Plisken's response was, "Wow! I feel empowered. We are on the path to implementing real and meaningful change."

Receiving the positive feedback from Carpenter, the area supervisor, cannot go understated. Plisken explained it best: "This was the first time in my 18 year career as a school counselor that I felt we had the power to change the way HISD operates its counseling department."

Although not all the counselors were able to attend the meeting, when they learned the outcome, all responded positively via email messages. They also reiterated their position about continuing the CoP after this study's conclusion. The culmination of the CoP's work at this point showed all of us how communication and collaboration

boosted every participant's sense of self-efficacy, which is discussed below in the discussion about pre and post-survey results.

Communication, Collaboration, and Self-Efficacy

The intent of this study was to show how participating in a CoP is enhanced through communication and collaboration. That engagement can also enhance participants' sense of self-efficacy. To gain an overall understanding of the change the participants experienced, I administered a pre- and post-survey to understand the participants' views on communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy.

Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the pre-survey gathered data to help me understand how the study participants perceived communication and collaboration were being used within our school district. The survey gathered their sense of self-efficacy about supporting students transitioning into middle school a focus on their mental health needs. The quantitative questions in the study were measured using a 5-point Likert scale with the ranges of 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Neither Agree or Disagree*, 4 = *Agree*, and 5 = *Strongly Agree*. The quantitative ranges for the self-efficacy questions were 1 = *Not Confident*, 2 = *Slightly Confident*, 3 = *Moderately Confident*, 4 = *Generally Confident*, 5 = *Highly Confident*. As part of my final request to complete the survey, I reiterated to the counselors to be truthful on the survey and to share their perceptions about whether or not their time participating in a CoP would be or was a good or bad experience. All participants were able to complete both the pre-survey and the post-survey. Because one of the participants had a baby the last week of the study, she could not attend the final meeting nor respond to the final-meeting survey.

Findings Regarding Communication

Through my research, I wanted to understand what effect participating in a CoP have on the participants' perceptions about communication. To do this, I first had to understand what their current views were about communication and how they perceived it while working in the district.

Table 4.2

Pre-Survey Results in the Area of Communication

Question	Mean (SD)
The district facilitates communication with other elementary school counselors in the district	3.00 (1.41)
I feel that I have had to create my own means of communicating with other school counselors	4.67 (.47)
I feel the communication level amongst school counselors in our district is effective	2.83 (.90)
I feel the elementary school and middle school counselors are encouraged to communicate	2.00 (1.15)
I feel that I communicate with the middle school counselors about the social and emotional well-being of students going into middle school	1.50 (.50)
I feel that communication, about the social and emotional needs of students, from elementary school counselors to middle school counselors, is encouraged	1.50 (.76)
I feel that the district has provided me with a strong understanding of the social and emotional needs of students transitioning	1.83 (.90)
I feel that my collegiate educational experience provided me with a background in helping students transition to middle school with a focus on the social and emotional well-being of students	1.83 (.90)

As seen in Table 4.2, the prevalent beliefs about communication were not perceived highly by the counselors in our district. Except for Question 2, which focused more on how counselors have to create their means of communication in the district,

counselors' average response put them in *Disagree* about the district supporting communication in the district (average Mean of 2.07).

Many counselors felt that communication amongst counselors was "lacking," and the district did not provide enough time to do so. Although the district does hold meetings for counselors, they were described by the participants as more "sit and gets" through which information is told to the counselors. Nor do counselors work together to understand how other campuses provide counseling. Several recommendations to increase communication included having "encouraged and planned" meetings that focus on "collaboration and problem-solving."

The post-survey about communication was intended to gain information to help understand how participating in the CoP affected the participant's perceptions about communication. Respondents were also asked if participating in the CoP was a worthwhile vehicle that the district could use to increase communication amongst school counselors.

Table 4.3

Post-Survey Results in the Area of Communication

Question	Mean (SD)
The Community of Practice (CoP) has increased my communication with other counselors regularly	5.00 (0.00)
Participating in the CoP could be used by the district to facilitate communication with other elementary school counselors in the district	5.00 (0.00)
Participating in the CoP could help increase communication levels with other school counselors in our district who did not participate in the study	5.00 (0.00)

Table 4.3 (continued)

Participating in a CoP would increase communication amongst elementary and middle school counselors	5.00 (0.00)
Participating in a CoP would encourage communication amongst elementary and middle school counselors as it pertains to the social and emotional well-being of students transitioning	5.00 (0.00)
I plan to use what I learned in the CoP to educate students, educators, parents, and other pertinent stakeholders	5.00 (0.00)

The overall response towards participating in the CoP and its effects on the participants was positive as 100% responded *Strongly Agree* for each question with a mean average of 5.0 (Table 4.3). In the qualitative responses, I found that "learned" was very commonly used as many of the participants stated that the CoP provided them an opportunity to learn to from each other through the "idea(s) and knowledge" shared to create new processes. Four out of five of the counselors also stated that they plan to share the information discussed in the CoP with "colleagues, parents, students and other community members."

Findings Regarding Collaboration

Similarly, the survey results about collaboration in the pre-survey reflected that the participants disagreed (Table 4.4) that HISD has supported the partnership of counselors. Except for Question 3 (which focused on how the counselors must find their ways to collaborate with peers), the participants *Strongly Disagreed* (avg = 1.69) that HISD's counselors collaborate.

Table 4.4**Pre-Survey Results in the Area of Collaboration**

Question	Mean (SD)
Collaborating with other counselors is a district priority	2.17 (1.07)
The district provides me with time to collaborate with my peers	2.00 (1.00)
I feel that I have had to create my own means of collaborating with other school counselors	4.33 (.75)
I feel the collaboration level between counselors in our district is sufficient	2.00 (1.00)
I feel the elementary school counselors and middle school counselors collaborate frequently	1.17 (.37)
I feel the elementary school and middle school counselors are encouraged to collaborate	1.83 (.90)
I feel that I collaborate with the middle school counselors about the social and emotional well-being of students going into middle school	1.33 (.47)
I feel that elementary school counselors are encouraged to collaborate about the social and emotional needs of students with the middle school counselors	1.33 (.75)
I feel that the district has created a collaborative environment that focuses on the social and emotional needs of students transitioning to 6th grade	1.67 (.75)

In the qualitative portion of the pre-survey about collaboration, many counselors expressed that if they had a partner counselor on their campus, collaboration was strongest amongst them; however, collaboration outside of their building was limited.

The belief that outside collaboration amongst counselors is not strong was reflected in the

pre-survey results as Crow stated that “the only time she felt they collaborated was with the middle school counselors when they were working on transitioning students to middle school.” Her response was the group's exception.

After the participants engaged in the CoP, their beliefs about collaborating changed. Unanimously, the participants *Strongly Agreed* (avg = 5.00) that participant in the CoP impacted their collaboration with peers in a positive way (Table 4.5).

Table 4.5
Post-Survey Results in the Area of Collaboration

Question	Mean (SD)
I collaborated with my peers during the CoP	5.00 (0.00)
If the district provided the option to participate in future CoPs it would increase collaboration	5.00 (0.00)
If the district provided CoPs I would feel more supported in collaborating with my peers	5.00 (0.00)
Participating in the CoP has increased collaboration with my peers	5.00 (0.00)
Collaborating has helped me build relationships with my peers	5.00 (0.00)
A CoP that involved middle school and elementary school counselors would increase collaboration	5.00 (0.00)
I would likely participate in future CoPs to address other topics relevant to district needs	5.00 (0.00)

After participating in the CoP, all participants *Strongly Agreed* that if the district provided opportunities for counselors to participate in a CoP, there would be benefits to doing so and not limited to addressing the mental health of students transitioning into

middle school. The model of the CoP could be used to address any other issues that school counselors wanted to address. According to Bishop, "That way if we have another problem of practice, we can use a CoP to fix it."

The qualitative data gathered through the post-survey provided more details about why and how the CoP impacted collaboration. Throughout comments, the theme of "trust" and "vulnerability" were identified as outcomes of participating in the CoP. Burton wrote, "It felt as if all voices were heard and valued in the process." McCready expanded on the value of participating in the CoP.

I feel so blessed and thankful to have been able to have this time set aside for me to be able to collaborate with my peers and discuss concerns and hear what they have been dealing with. Collaboration and vulnerability are such gifts, and I felt like I got both during the CoP.

A part of the collaborative process is to understand others' opinions and ideas; however, if participants do not feel their insights are valued or feel threatened by sharing their ideas, they are less likely to do so. In the case of the CoP, the participants acknowledged they felt a part of the group and perceived the collaboration amongst them was positive. According to Wenger and colleagues (2002), a key element of a CoP is the coalescing among the members.

Findings Regarding Self-Efficacy

The final component that I sought was if participating in the CoP affected the study participants' sense of self-efficacy. Bandura (1994) posited that if a person had low-self-efficacy they were likely to try or accomplish a task. I also wanted to see if study participants' perception of self-efficacy was impacted by participation in this study for two reasons: (a) to compare results gathered during the reconnaissance phase of the study and (b) to affirm my experiences working as a school counselor in HISD. In the

past, counselors had been given non-related tasks to complete at the end of the year, which made it difficult to complete counseling-related jobs (e.g., supporting students' mental health as they transition into middle school). However, several of these tasks were removed recently from the counselor's schedule, thus giving us the opportunity to support our students fully. Through recent conversations with peers, many reported still feeling over worked. It seems the feeling of being very busy is still a barrier in the mind of many of my peers.

Another barrier that I felt needed to be overcome is the belief that we counselors could be empowered to make a change. Each campus in HISD has considerable autonomy, yet many counselors do not perceive we have established processes to support our students' mental health because no one in authority or power had implemented them.

As part of my research on working within a CoP, I was curious to see what implications participating in a CoP had on the counselors' perception of self-efficacy. I also wanted to understand if they would feel more empowered to make real change and implement new transition processes. In this part of the pre- and post-survey, I used the same questions to determine if any change transpired upon completion of the study.

Table 4.6

Pre and Post Survey Results in the Area of Self-Efficacy

Question	Pre-Survey Mean (SD)	Post-Survey Mean (SD)
Help educate parents of students who need social and emotional support as their student transitions to 6th grade	2.67 (1.11)	4.00 (.63)
Help educate students who need social and emotional support as the student transitions into 6th grade	2.67 (1.11)	4.00 (.63)

Table 4.6 (continued)

Help inform middle school counselors of students who need social and emotional support as students transition into 6th grade	2.00 (1.00)	4.40 (.80)
Share your personal experience of transitioning students into 6th grade with a focus on the students social and emotional well-being	2.00 (.89)	4.40 (.80)
Coordinate the exchange of information to the middle school counselor about the social and emotional needs of your students	2.00 (1.00)	4.40 (.80)
Facilitate a meeting with the middle school counselor(s) about the social and emotional needs of your transitioning students	1.83 (.90)	4.40 (.80)
Develop plans to implement a transition program that focuses on the social and emotional needs of students transitioning into 6th grade	1.17 (.37)	4.20 (.75)
Consult with and collaborate with staff about transitioning students with a focus on the students' social and emotional well-being	1.17 (.37)	4.40 (.80)
Ensure that pertinent information about specific students who have benefited from your services are being communicated to the middle school counselors	1.67 (.75)	4.40 (.80)

Based on the quantitative post-survey data, the CoP did positively affect the participants' sense of self-efficacy (Table 4.6). The overall mean on the questions under self-efficacy change from a 1.91 (*Slightly Confident*) to a 4.28 (*Highly Confident*) or a 2.37 change between the pre- to post-survey overall mean. The responses from the qualitative section helped illuminate this change.

The goal of any CoP is to address a problem by finding a solution to it. In this study, the CoP created a plan and presented it to the area superintendent, receiving

positive feedback and permission to implement our processes. Bandura (1997) states that mastery experiences are most influential in increasing self-efficacy. In the case of the CoP, we experienced a mastery experience as we worked to construct new advising processes and gained the permission to implement them. Macready stated, "I am so much more confident than I was before. I feel like we have a plan for improving our transition process, and it's something I look forward to implementing!"

Part of being in a CoP is sharing experiences to allow others to learn and grow. Bandura (1997) would call this the vicarious experience in which individuals experience something through their peers. According to Crow, working with her peers is what boosted her confidence.

I think it definitely improved my confidence. Since this is my first year as a school counselor, I still have a lot to learn. By participating in the CoP, I was able to learn a lot from my peers, and I am excited to implement them and learn more so I can continue to build my self-confidence.

As evidenced by comments in post-meeting questionnaires, a recurring theme was how the participants learned from each other by sharing their experiences and validating the work that the CoP was doing.

Bandura (1997) posited that the third most influential self-efficacy component social persuasion, or other people influencing one's belief in oneself. Social persuasion was most apparent when the area superintendent, Carpenter, provided an overwhelming amount of feedback to the group, particularly as she used the word "love" repeatedly in her response to our work. The term "validated" appeared often within the study participants' responses to Carpenter's feedback. The study participants' positive emotions were palpable, which relates to Bandura's (1997) final factor influencing self-efficacy, physiology and wellness.

The physiological and wellness state of an individual is how a person feels when faced with a task. If a person feels nervous or scared, then they are less likely to have a high sense of self-efficacy than a person who feels happy or safe in the same situation. Throughout the survey responses, common terms such as "trust," "vulnerability," and "gratitude" appeared often. Those same words were commonly used in describing how the CoP operated. These words also had a positive effect on the study participants' perceptions about their ability to navigate their role within the CoP safely. With all of the components of self-efficacy (i.e., mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, physiological and wellness state) being overall influenced positively, it is no surprise that the participants reported an increase in confidence from *Slightly Confident* to *Generally Confident*.

Recommendations

Although I followed the Wenger and colleagues (2002) model for a CoP with as much fidelity as possible, there were several opportunities to learn. The most glaring component of implementing the CoP was limiting it to five sessions, even though we added a fifth. The natural progression of a CoP is to allow it to unfold as members feel more confident in how the group members interact and the extent to which members prevent outside influences to effect members' interactions and collaborative work. In this study, the outside factor was the researcher because of his obligation to serve in the U.S. Navy.

Although several stakeholders participated in the CoP, having more feedback from students and parents may have provided more insight. The opinions and experiences of parents and students could also have a more significant influence on the actual

implication of processes and procedures because HISD is mindful of the needs of the families it serves.

Another recommendation would be to have more participants from various learning communities participate in the study. Although the participants in this study provided a lot of practical knowledge, it would have been helpful to have more breadth of knowledge—particularly the opinions of members of the three missing learning communities. Based on Briggs' experience working in another learning community, our two learning communities appear to be the only two lacking transition processes within the district.

I would also recommend reminding the participants about how in a CoP, all participants are leaders sharing in a common goal. Several survey responses and, at times, awkward silence with participants indicated that the group was expecting me to take the lead more times than not. Although I addressed this issue in the fourth meeting, it would have been beneficial to give the participants more of an opportunity to lead and remind them that they are all leaders in the CoP. During the fourth meeting, I reiterated the roles each of us has as leaders, and one of the responses to this was, "I feel that the refresher on CoPs at the beginning led more people to lead with ideas and co-lead the group." Although the CoP did not focus specifically on leadership traits, perhaps if that had been more a part of our discussions (and perhaps my research), leadership would have been perceived differently.

Initiating Communities of Practice

Through participating in the CoP, our group was able to work together to enhance the communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy of the participants as it pertains to

supporting the students' mental health needs as they transition from elementary school into middle school. Although our district has not historically supported elementary school counselors' communication and collaboration, this study shows that communication and collaboration among them are desired. CoPs can positively influence stakeholders within a school district. In HISD, most meetings of school counselors have been either information-based, in which an outside presenter presents information, or a meeting in which discussion is open to any topic. Having a strategic group meet and work on a problem of practice, such as the CoP in this study did, shows that school counselors can work together to create meaningful change. The HISD counselors that participated in this study all felt that participating in the CoP positively affected their perceptions about communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy.

Organizational Leadership Practice and Educational Policy

Although the primary focus of an action research study like is to determine processes or practices that need to be addressed and then attempting to improve upon those processes. The findings from an action research study are not meant to stay hidden but rather used to improve something. I hoped that the study's results would not only impact communication, collaboration, and self-efficacy for the study participants but also that the CoP itself could be seen as a viable model for HISD to utilize in addressing any other processes that needed to be addressed.

Traditional views on leadership hold that leadership needs to control other's behavior as a necessity and that someone needs to be in control by another to impact change (Marion & Gonzalez, 2014). These traditional views of leadership are the antithesis of a CoP and how this study was conducted. This study helped to show that

each individual in the group played an integral part in the success of the CoP and that control was not the purpose of the CoP, but rather a liberation of control that led to autonomy and relatedness amongst the members. The study showed that participating in a CoP makes individuals feel a part of a group within an organization and could further deepen the connection participants held to the organization.

Based on the response the CoP received from the area superintendent concerning the group's collaboration and how the CoP was able to affect organizational policy and practices, it may be judicious of HISD to develop more CoPs in other areas whose processes need evaluating. Using the CoP model has been shown to impact leadership growth positively and effectively (Smith, Kempster, Wenger-Trayner, 2018). Findings in this study showed participating in the CoP positively impacted the counselors' beliefs about their self-efficacy to lead.

One idea that has been posited is that learning communities can be the most impactful in changing how a school works outside of the classroom. Hence, the CoP has been suggested as a model in which changes in procedures and policy outside of the school could take place (Howorth, Smith, & Parkinson, 2012). Since leadership and community are intertwined, the CoP provides individuals a platform to deepen their connection with the community while impacting their leadership abilities (Fox, 1997). A learning community, like a CoP, acts as a microcosm of the organization itself (Vince, 2018). In the case of this study, six participants in the study and I worked as a microcosm of HISD. As Title 1 elementary school counselors, we were able to come together, share our experiences, work with others towards creating processes, and finally develop counseling processes that will be implemented across our learning community. Although

leadership has a plethora of definitions, I believe one facet of any depiction would ultimately be that leadership impacts change. In the case of our CoP, impacting change was what the CoP did.

As seen in this study, school districts could benefit in many ways if they implemented a CoP. First, the group members themselves went through a transformative process in which the group members gained new knowledge through collaboration and communication. They were able to work through the process of creating an idea to implementing processes. Second, the counselors felt valued and more connected to the CoP and, in turn, felt valued and more connected to the district. Feeling validated created a positive atmosphere for the counselors, in which they were enthusiastic in addressing the transition processes for students going into 6th grade. Finally, a district would benefit from using a CoP because it led to a changed perspective within the organization. Not only did the participants benefit from the CoP, but a multitude of stakeholders as well. The middle school counselors now have more information on incoming students. The students themselves for having met the middle school counselors and now knowing who can support their mental health needs in high school. As well as, supporting the students should also impact other stakeholders, such as parents, as their child will continue to receive mental health supports as they did in elementary school.

Reflections

Navigating this study as a primary researcher and participant lead to many challenges as well as many opportunities for growth. Below is a reflection on the dual roles I possessed in the study as well as how the CoP supported leadership growth for myself and how it could be used to do the same for others in a counseling role.

Researching and Participating in Action Research

I found acting in a dualistic role as a researcher and as a participant in this study presented many challenges and provided many opportunities for growth and learning. From the beginning of the study, I knew that I would have a difficult time relinquishing authority to my peers even though I reiterated to the participants how each member was to be viewed as an equal and as a leader. I felt that as the study progressed, there were ebbs and flows in this idea of control. Mostly because being a researcher and the facilitator concurrently meant at times I had to be the one who guided individuals and who assured the ultimate purpose of the study was achieved. For instance, one of the participants wanted to bring in many stakeholders who I met with during the reconnaissance phase over several weeks. Due in part to the length of the study, this would have only allowed us to gather data, which probably would have led to a different experience for our participants.

In our third CoP meeting, I could also tell that the overall demeanor of the group was less responsive to our guests compared to the one the week before. The unresponsiveness led to brief periods of awkward silence and recognizing this, forced me to be the primary responder and question-asker. Moments like that made me feel like I was "reclaiming" too much control for what should have been shared leadership.

That meeting also made me realize that although I had conveyed to the group that I wanted this CoP to have shared leadership, it had not truly embraced this mentality yet. This was apparent in how I took the lead and how in survey responses for Week 3, there needed to be more "structure" in our meetings. As a result, I made it a point to discuss in our fourth meeting how we are all leaders as we were working together to create change.

Although I may be the facilitator and organizer of the sessions, we all carried equal weight in the area of leadership.

During one of our meetings, Plisken shared that the participants felt that since I was the one who brought them all together under the CoP and that this was my dissertation, there was a natural inclination from the group to look to me as the authority. The idea that they could hold more leadership in my project created ambivalent feelings about me being a leader. Plisken also mentioned that being a male in a leadership role with all other participants being females may have contributed to an imbalance in perceived leadership. Although the gender issue was not addressed, it was an interesting perspective that could warrant further discussion.

Community of Practice and Leadership

As discussed in Chapter 2, I framed counselors as leaders using Bolman and Deal's (2004) four-frame model to understand more clearly how the counselors act as leaders on their campus. From what I learned from this study, if there are stakeholders determined enough to work at and make change, then change is possible. The participants came together only under the pretense to help students and their mental health needs as they transitioned into middle school. I do not believe that any of us had the foresight to know that we would present to our area superintendent and receive permission to implement the processes we created.

Using Bolman and Deal's (2004) four-frame model, I can now see why *structure* is their first component. I think that the structure we worked to create in this study elicited all of the positive results. I believe that the absence of structure was what was preventing counselors from making change. The study participants unanimously agreed

that participating in the CoP benefited them and a rewarding process in which they would gladly use as the model address other problems of practice.

One of the reasons I choose a CoP was because so many counselors that were either a part of this study or were colleagues with who I have worked over the years have expressed that they want meetings with other counselors to be more structured. They want the structure because many of our counselor meeting are either unproductive or simply a means to complain, yet change rarely happens. However, the CoP structure provided us the path to change.

I also learned that an organization cannot flourish if it depends only on the people at the top of the hierarchy to lead and that employees want to feel that they are a part of the organization—not just an extension of it. Bolman and Deal (2004) would refer to this as the human resources element of their four-frame model of organizations. Not only did we feel like we were affecting the organization, but also our CoP worked together and was rewarded with the area superintendent's blessing in implementing new processes. In the meeting we held with her, she told us that we had done all the work and only needed her to say "yes" to our initiatives. She claimed she was proud of us for taking on this problem and finding a solution to it. The overall feeling after this meeting was positive and uplifting. In that moment, we were HISD. In the end, I learned that an organization is nothing without its people, and people need the opportunity to grow to change, as these counselors did.

Although we did not lean heavily on any kind of symbolism as the symbolic frame (Bolman & Deal, 2004) would call for, we did utilize the political frame in achieving our microcosm of an organization's goal. Through the counselors discussions

with other counselors and based on our own past experiences, the CoP members understood that real change needed to come by working with someone with real influence. That is why we choose to present to the area superintendent and in that meeting request her blessing and to help us implement new processes by helping us communicate that to the principals. As one of the principals had stated in data collected during the reconnaissance phase, she had not been told to do this and she was going to be.

Bolman and Deal (2004) refer to organizations as coalitions and within those coalitions; the coalitions must make alliance and networks. In presenting to the area superintendent, we were able to plant the seed of networking and alliances. She ended the meeting with wondering how we could even expand our processes to the middle to high school transition process. These types of alliances or relationships are crucial in creating change. As Bolman and Deal (2004) state, “In much of organizational life, individuals are interdependent: they need things from one another, and power relationships are multidirectional” (p. 190). For our CoP, we finally felt that we were not limited by what expectations we might have had from our own counseling department, but rather, we felt empowered in knowing that we could create change on our own and that our limits know no bounds.

Appendix A

IRB Approval



Office of Research Integrity
IRB, RDRC

Modification Review

Approval Ends:
1/14/2022

IRB Number:
63901

TO: Garrett Rimey, Masters of
Education - School
Counseling College of
Education
PIphone#: 8478404308
PI email: gri228@uky.edu

FROM: Chairperson/Vice Chairperson
Nonmedical

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

SUBJECT: Approval of
Modification Request

DATE: 2/8/2021

On 2/5/2021, the Nonmedical Institutional Review Board approved your request for modifications in your protocol entitled: Building Self-Efficacy, Communication, and Collaboration Among Elementary School Counselors Through Communities of Practice

In addition to IRB approval, you must also meet the requirements of the [VPR Resumption of Research Phased Plan](#) (i.e., waiver for Phase 1, training & individualized plan submission for Phases 2-4) before resuming/beginning your human subjects research. If your modification request necessitated a change in your approved informed consent/assent form(s), the new IRB approved consent/assent form(s) to be used when enrolling subjects can be found on the approved application's landing page in E-IRB. [Note, subjects can only be enrolled using consent/assent forms which have a valid "IRB Approval" stamp unless special waiver has been obtained from the IRB.]

Note that at Continuation Review, you will be asked to submit a brief summary of any modifications approved by the IRB since initial review or the last continuation review, which may impact subject safety or welfare. Please take this approved modification into consideration when preparing your summary.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "[PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research](#)" available in the online Office of Research Integrity's [IRB Survival Handbook](#). Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through [ORI's web site](#). If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at 859-257-9428.

see blue.

405 Kinkead Hall | Lexington, KY 40506-0057 | P: 859-257-9428 | F: 859-257-8995 | www.research.uky.edu/ori/

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10. About how many hours of training have you received on transitioning students to the 6th grade? _____ If applicable, how many of the hours focused on the social and emotional aspects of students and transitioning?

11. If you responded with more than zero to the above question, where did you receive this training?

12. Do you feel that the district provides enough training about transition processes for school counselors? Yes____No ____

13. Do you feel the district provides enough opportunity to collaborate with school counselors?

Yes
____No

14. Do you feel the district provides enough opportunities to develop school counselors as leaders on their campus? ___Yes_No

Part II: Communication:

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how often you participate in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

*SD = Strongly Disagree A = Agree
D = Disagree SA =
Strongly Agree U = Undecided*

At the present time, I believe . . .	SD	D	U	A	SA
15. The district facilitates communication with other elementary school counselors in the district					
16. I feel that I have had to create my own means of communicating with other school counselors					
17. I feel the communication level amongst school counselors in our district is good					
18. I feel the elementary school and middle school counselors are encouraged to communicate					
19. I feel that I communicate with the middle school counselors about the social and emotional well-being of students going into middle school					
20. I feel that communication between elementary school counselors are encouraged to communicate the social and emotional needs of students to the middle school counselors					
21. I feel that the district has provided me with a strong understanding of the social and emotional needs of students transitioning					

22. I feel that my collegiate educational experience provided me with a background in helping students transition to middle school with a focus on the social and emotional well being of students.					
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23. How would you describe your experience with communicating with your peers while in the district?

23. How would you describe your experience with the district supporting your communication with your peers while in the district?

How would you change how communication transpires amongst your peers?

Part III: Collaboration

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how often you participate in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

- SD = Strongly Disagree A = Agree*
- D = Disagree SA = Strongly Agree*
- U = Undecided*

At the present time, I believe. . .	SD	D	U	A	SA
26. Collaborating with other counselors is a district priority					
27. The district provides me with time to collaborate with my peers					
28. I feel that I have had to create my own means of collaborating with other school counselors					
29. I feel the collaboration level between counselors in our district is sufficient					
30. I feel the elementary school counselors and middle school counselors collaborate frequently					
31. I feel the elementary school and middle school counselors are encouraged to collaborate					
32. I feel that I collaborate with the middle school counselors about the social and emotional well-being of students going into middle school					

33. I feel that elementary school counselors are encouraged to collaborate with the social and emotional needs of students with the middle school counselors					
34. I feel that the district has created a collaborative environment that focuses on the social and emotional needs of students transitioning to 6th grade					

35. Describe your experience with collaborating with your peers while in the district?:

45. Consult with and collaborate with staff about transitioning students with a focus on the students' social and emotional well-being					
46. Ensure that pertinent information about specific students who have benefited from your services are being communicated to the middle school counselors					

47. Describe why you do or do not feel confident serving the social and emotional well-being of your students as they transition into 6th grade.

48. What changes would you like to make to your current processes of transition students with a focus on their social and emotional well-being?

49. How could the district help in implementing new transition processes as it pertains to the social and emotional well-being of students?

50. What do you feel is necessary for ensuring your success in implementing processes that focus on the social and emotional well-being of students as they transition into 6th grade?

APPENDIX C

Post-Survey

Your Self-Selected 4-digit Code: _____

Part I: Communication

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how often you participate in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

SD = Strongly Disagree A = Agree
D = Disagree SA = Strongly Agree
U = Undecided

At the present time, I believe . . .	SD	D	U	A	SA
1. The Community of Practice (CoP) has increased my communication with other counselors on a regular basis					
2. Through participating in the CoP my communication amongst my peers has improved					
3. I plan to use what I learned in the CoP to educate teachers					
4. I plan to use what I learned in the CoP to educate students					
5. I plan to use what I learned in the CoP to educate parents					
6. I plan to use what I learned in the CoP to educate administrators					

7. How would you describe your experience with communicating with your peers while in the CoP? _____

Part II: Collaboration

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how often you participate in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

SD = Strongly Disagree A = Agree
D = Disagree SA = Strongly Agree
U = Undecided

At the present time, I believe. . .	SD	D	U	A	SA

8. I collaborated with my peers during the CoP					
9. Participating in the CoP increased my level of collaboration with other school counselors					
10. Participating in the CoP has helped me build relationships with my peers					
11. Collaborating has helped me build relationships with my peers					
12. The CoP gave me a sense of belonging					
13. I would like to continue participating in a CoP to address other topics relevant of district needs					

14. Please describe your experience with collaborating with your peers while in the CoP?:

PART III: Self-Efficacy

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how confident you are in your abilities to engage in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

NC = Not Confident

SC = Slightly Confident

MC = Moderately Confident

GC = Generally Confident

HC= Highly Confident

At the present time, I am confident I can . . .	NC	SC	MC	GC	HC
15. Help educate parents of students who need social and emotional support as their student transitions to 6th grade					
16. Help educate students who need social and emotional support as the student transitions to 6th grade					
17. Help inform middle school counselors of students who need social and emotional support as students transition into 6th grade					
18. Share your personal experience of transitioning students into 6th grade with a focus on the students social and emotional well-being					
19. Coordinate the exchange of information to the middle school counselor about social and emotional needs of your students					
20. Facilitate a meeting with the middle school counselor(s) about the social and emotional needs of your transitioning students					
21. Develop plans to implement a transition program that focuses on the social and emotional needs of students transitioning into 6th grade					
22. Consult with and collaborate with staff about transitioning students with a focus on the students' social and emotional well-being					

23. Ensure that pertinent information about specific students who have benefited from your services are being communicated to the middle school counselors					
--	--	--	--	--	--

24. Describe how participating in the CoP has affected your confidence in improving your transition processes as they pertain to students' social and emotional well-being.

PART IV: GENERAL CoP EXPERIENCE

Please assess your overall experience as a participant in the CoP.

25. How could the district help in implementing new transition processes as it pertains to the social and emotional well-being of students?

26. What do you feel is necessary for ensuring your success in implementing processes that focus on the social and emotional well-being of students as they transition into 6th grade?

27. What was your experience like participating in the CoP?

28. What information from the CoP did you use in addressing your own school's transition processes?

29. Did you or do you plan to share any of the information from the CoP with colleagues, parents, students, or other community members? If so, which information and how?

30. Describe how your transition processes have changed since participating in the CoP?

31. What impact do you think participating in the CoP has had on your ability to be a campus leader of transition processes on your campus?

32. How did hearing how other counselors operate their transition processes affect you?

33. Do you feel that continuing to work in a CoP would benefit you as a counselor and/or as a campus leader, and if so how?

34. How has the CoP affected how you believe in your abilities as a counselor, specifically as it pertains to transition processes?

APPENDIX D

End of Meeting Post-Survey

Your Self-Selected 4-digit Code: _____

Part I: Communication

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how often you participate in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

SD = Strongly Disagree A = Agree
D = Disagree SA = Strongly Agree
U = Undecided

At the present time, I believe . . .	SD	D	U	A	SA
1. This session has increased my communication with other counselors.					

2. How would you describe your experience with communicating with your peers this session while in the CoP?

Part II: Collaboration

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how often you participate in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

SD = Strongly Disagree A = Agree
D = Disagree SA = Strongly Agree
U = Undecided

At the present time, I believe. . .	SD	D	U	A	SA
3. This session has increased my collaboration with other counselors.					

4. Please describe your experience with collaborating with your peers this session while in the CoP?:

PART III: Self-Efficacy

Please assess your professional behaviors as a school counselor by rating how confident you are in your abilities to engage in the following activities. Use the following scale and place an "X" in the box that most closely applies:

NC = Not Confident

GC = Generally Confident

SC = Slightly Confident

HC= Highly Confident

MC = Moderately Confident

At the present time, I am confident I can . . .	NC	SC	MC	GC	HC
5. Help support students, parents, administrators, and other pertinent stakeholders who need social and emotional support for their student(s) as they transition to 6th grade					

6. Describe how participating in the CoP this session has affected your confidence in improving your transition processes as they pertain to students' social and emotional well-being.

PART IV: GENERAL CoP EXPERIENCE

Please assess your overall experience as a participant in the CoP.

7. What would you like to see improved upon in the CoP to make the next meeting better?

APPENDIX E

CoP Observation Form

Use the Note Taking section on this form to collect field notes of actions and dialogue used between teachers and coaches. Immediately following observation, use the *Note Making* section to reflect on what occurred.

Date:

Time:

School Counselor	Note of Observation

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Vita

Garrett L. Rimey

Education

Louisiana State University Master of Science in Human Resources	2016
University of Texas at Austin Master of Education in School Counseling	2016
Texas State University Certificate in Teacher Education	2010
Columbia College Bachelor of Arts in Management	2006

Professional Experience

Elementary School Counselor Round Rock Independent School District	2016-Present
Elementary School Teacher Round Rock Independent School District	2010-2016

Professional Certifications

State of Texas School Counselor Certification (Grades EC-12)	2016
State of Texas Physical Education Certification (Grades EC-12)	2014
State of Texas English as a Second Language Supplemental	2011
State of Texas Teacher Generalist Certification (Grades EC-4)	2010