

CONSULTATION TO SUPPORT SUSTAINABILITY OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING INITIATIVES IN SCHOOLS

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Sustainability of implementation has emerged as a major challenge for school-based social and emotional learning initiatives. There is a growing consensus regarding the importance of framing the issue of sustainability within the broader ecology of the school setting, and consultants have been advised to draw from ecological models in their work. Little has been written, however, about the implications of the consultant's own self being an element of the ecological system of implementation of the social and emotional learning initiative. In this article we present the idea that implementation involves the creation of an ongoing set of ecological relationships in which the implementers and the consultant constitute a community with the shared goal of promoting positive social and emotional outcomes among youth. We discuss the implications of this idea for consultants working with schools as well as for training and supervising such consultants.

Keywords: sustainability, consultation, social-emotional learning, school change, character education

School-based initiatives aimed at promoting the social and emotional development of students have proliferated over the past three decades. Whether referred to as social and emotional learning (SEL) or character education (CE), these efforts address outcomes such as emotional awareness, empathy, communication skills, prosocial problem solving, self-control, and community-building that have been linked to positive developmental and academic outcomes (Elias, Parker, Kash, & Dunkeblau, 2007). During this time, the field of SEL/CE implementation has shifted from a focus on relatively short-term, narrowly focused programs to an appreciation of the need for longer-term multicomponent efforts to build social and emotional skills. Best practice in SEL/CE calls for direct instruction in social and emotional skills and infusion not only across the curriculum, but also throughout the school environment (Elias et al., 1997) including public events (e.g., assemblies) and policies (e.g., how discipline is handled). This constitutes an SEL/CE *initiative*, a term we will use here to encompass this school-wide, multicomponent approach.

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That a research-validated SEL/CE initiative can be effective, however, does not mean that it will be when introduced to a particular school. The nature of implementation is a key mediator. Implementation, once seen as basically a matter of teachers using prescribed lessons and units, is now understood as a complex process involving multiple individuals that must be sustained over time (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2007). Although Goldberg (2003) concluded that “many programs and approaches work very well in the schools and have theory, practice, and research behind them” (p. 304), he also pointed out that these same practices will have instances of failure. His observations echo those of Blankstein (2011), who pointed out that interventions must be tailored to the culture and context of specific schools. Sound program design does not guarantee successful implementation. Rather there are multiple contextual, systemic factors that contribute, or create barriers, to successful implementation (Gager & Elias, 1997; Adelman & Taylor, 2007).

The processes involved in bringing an initiative into the life of a setting are crucial and taking implementation for granted can have a negative impact. In fact, research has repeatedly pointed to the steep drop off of implementation efforts after the initial introduction of an SEL/CE initiative (Ennett et al., 2011; Ennett et al., 2003; Gager & Elias, 1997; Hallfors & Godette, 2002). This is consistent with broader concerns about implementation of evidence-based programs, such as those discussed by Fixsen (Fixsen, 2012; Fixsen, Blase, Duda, Naoom, & Van Dyke, 2010).

Paradoxically, implementation is often spoken about as if it is a process independent of those putting the initiative into practice, and this is a telling shortcoming in implementation theory and action, particularly in school settings. Therefore, in this article, we focus on the role of the consultant in the sustainable implementation of SEL/CE initiatives from an ecological systems standpoint. After introducing key concepts, we describe the consultant’s role as engaging with school-based SEL/CE implementers in an ongoing community of practice as well as some of the challenges inherent in such a conceptualization. We then turn to implications for SEL/CE consultancies in terms of moderating levels of complexity within relationships with school constituents, balancing fidelity of implementation with adaptations for specific school contexts, the distribution of expertise within the community, and the role of assessment in building communal awareness. We close with thoughts about implications for the training of SEL/CE consultants.

Sustainability and Ecology

As a construct, sustainability defies easy description. A working definition suggested by those conducting research into intervention procedures (Greenberg, Kusche, & Riggs, 2004; Mocerri, Elias, Fishman, Pandina, & Reyes-Portiollo, 2012; Shediach-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998) involves the notion of an initiative becoming part of standard operating procedure of a setting (i.e., “the way things are done here”). Dalton et al. (2007) described sustainability as ongoing implementation “not dependent on an influential leader or a few staff members, all of whom will eventually leave the setting” (p. 374). To use Sarason’s (1996) classic space-alien thought experiment, a visitor from another planet would not see an SEL/CE initiative (or any other initiative brought into a school setting) as any more distinct from the day-to-day life of the school than any other instructional activity (e.g., the math curriculum). Sustainability can also be defined by its absence or opposite; namely, revolving door initiatives that are greeted with great excitement but little or no ongoing action before the next new exciting initiative is introduced.

The implementation of an SEL/CE initiative occurs within the ecology of a school. Ecological models describe systems as embedded networks of mutually influential, dynamic roles and relationships. Although one might, in theory, isolate a particular moment in time, ecological systems are ever-evolving. As a simplified example, as a teacher implements SEL/CE in her classroom, she is taking on a new series of role expectations (i.e., to implement certain lessons) within the context of existing ones (implementing the existing curriculum she has been teaching before the start of the initiative). This might bring a change in relationship with school leaders, who now need to train the teacher on the SEL/CE work (with the teacher playing a “learner” role). The teacher’s work with SEL/CE might impact on the way she interacts with students who, in turn, may themselves demonstrate new behaviors or modes of interacting.

Overall, ecological systems are marked by dynamism; changes in any one element impact on the whole. There is a trend, however, to understand the concept of sustainability as involving stasis, in which sustainability can be seen as a fixed point to be reached. Sustainability has been described as *routinization* (Pluye, Potvin, Denis, & Pelletier, 2004; Rogers, 1995; Yin, 1981). We agree with one connotation of this term, that a sustained initiative is part of the ebb and flow of that which goes on in a school. However, we do not accept a connotation of routine as static or immutable. In fact, as we will discuss, sustainability requires not only ongoing engagement with an initiative, but also the incorporation of processes and procedures by which work with the initiative evolves along with the ever-changing demands of the ecology of the school.

To provide a deceptively complex but common example, imagine that a school is implementing a new math curriculum. A sixth-grade teacher will learn how to implement the curriculum with his or her sixth graders, who will never have experienced any aspect of the curriculum before. The following year, when the teacher implements the curriculum, the students will include those who had varying levels of implementation of the new math curriculum in 5th grade, and some who have come from another school (especially in high mobility urban environments). Therefore, adjustments will be required to teach the material effectively year after year. Further, there will be the inevitable system-wide changes in the curricular expectations handed down to teachers. So the new math curriculum will be routinized, but in order for it be sustained, the way a teacher implements will be different from the first year and in fact from any directly preceding year, at least to some extent. From an ecological-developmental systems perspective, implementation stasis leads to a particular kind of routinization, one that is not sensitive to clear changes in the ecological context. In most educational contexts, and especially in complex and less-defined curricula such as SEL/CE, this kind of routinization is more harmful than helpful.

Sustainability can be seen as the ecological coevolution of the SEL/CE initiative and the setting (Kress & Elias, 2006). As the SEL/CE efforts adapt to the realities of the school context, and the school adapts to the changes brought by the initiative, the result is a melding of the two. This adaptation is consistent with Piaget's use of that term, to describe a process of mutual assimilation and accommodation of initiative and setting. Sustainability is an ongoing developmental process that begins even before the formal "start" of an intervention. As such, "program implementation and sustainability are not distinct and successive phases but are concomitant processes" (Pluye, Potvin, & Denis, 2004, p. 127). Even the "best designed, most adaptable" initiative within "the strongest school" will not automatically be sustained. To assume so ignores the active elements of ecology (Kelly, 2007; Trickett, 1997) and the need to shape the course of development across levels over time. Sustainability results from the longitudinal effects of multiple decisions at multiple points; as in our math curriculum example, it "is likely to be affected by all the preceding program activities" (Scheirer, 2005, p. 323).

The process of bringing new SEL/CE practice to a school brings with it new roles, relationships, norms, and expectations that must be integrated within those that already exist in the setting. Models of implementation around school-based youth services have embraced such a systemic or ecological understanding (A. B. Meyers, Meyers, Graybill, Proctor, & Huddleston, 2012). Peirson et al. (2011) are among many researchers who call attention to the nested ecological levels into which interventions must be introduced and embedded on the path to be implemented and sustained. The process of implementation is also unfolding within a dynamic setting. For example, along with the implementation of any SEL/CE initiative, the school is likely undertaking other new initiatives—some may have preceded the particular SEL/CE initiative, and some may be initiated after the SEL/CE initiative has begun. The school has a set of guiding values and ideals—well-articulated and/or implicit—that frame all work in the setting. Further, the ecology of the school is itself nested in other systems, notably the students' parents and that of governmental bodies that impact the school system through mandates and funding. The picture is one of dynamic complexity rather than linear progress. The nature of ecological systems is constant change (and in the case of introducing an initiative, change is itself the goal of the consultation!), calling for constant adaptation.

Consultation, Sustainability, and Community of Practice

As noted earlier, neglected in almost all discussions about the challenges of implementing and sustaining evidence-based approaches is the human element: implementers must make sense of complex processes and maintain momentum for positive change. One persistent finding is that even effective, well-implemented SEL/CE efforts generally require external support to be sustained (Elias, 2008; Leverett, 2008; Vetter, 2008). Along with the growing appreciation of ecological factors, in part due to the complexity of ecologically based change models, consultants are increasingly becoming involved in school-based SEL/CE implementation processes. We use the term *consultant* to describe anyone whose role it is to shepherd the introduction and implementation of new practice within a setting. Often, for SEL/CE initiatives, the consultant comes from outside of the school system—from a university, mental health center, a social service agency such as United Way, or from an organization that develops mental health-related curricula with an eye toward systems-level implementation (e.g., Committee for Children, Northeast Foundation for Children, Lions-Quest International). Perhaps the most salient current example involves consultants who enter failing schools from the outside as part of “turnaround” efforts. Other times, the consultant is an employee of the school district but may be based primarily outside of the implementation context; this is the case in New Jersey, for example, when a member of central administration is designated as the antibullying coordinator responsible for consulting with building-based school safety teams in every school.

Growing scrutiny of public and private expenditures on initiatives fostering positive youth development, taken together with discouraging statistics regarding implementation, provide an impetus for increased research and attention to the idea of sustainability and the mechanisms that support it. Issues of systemic sustainability raise questions about the role of outside consultants in what clearly is emerging as a much more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of SEL/CE implementation. A. B. Meyers et al. (2012) explicitly recognized the challenges of applying an ecological model to organizational consultation in educational settings, focusing on the need for the consultant to address nested systems, conduct force-field analyses of those systems, work extensively with a diverse range of professionals, and provide support to those professionals at their zones of proximal development (cf., Truscott et al., 2012). These authors make it very clear that few schools have the internal expertise needed to serve in the ecological organizational consultant role toward the goal of implementing evidence-based social-emotional and character development interventions, as well as approaches to improving the overall school climate and creating coherent and well-articulated multilevel systems of care.

Commenting on a special issue of *School Psychology Review* devoted to integrating and supporting research-based interventions in schools, Becker and Domitrovich (2011) described three trends common in examples of successful implementation: (a) creating systems that allow integration of the intervention at multiple levels of the school and across risk levels, (b) developing an infrastructure for progress monitoring, and, most significantly for our concerns, (c) ongoing support systems for professional development that often includes coaches external to the school system. Indeed, external consultants played a key role in most of the interventions discussed in the special issue. But Becker and Domitrovich (2011, p. 586) also noted that the field lacks clear models of how these outside experts should be conducting themselves and this constitutes “a hindrance to scientific advancement.”

Even though teachers and other direct implementers need more support than previously envisioned, and even if they are using evidence-based initiatives that are more rigorous and extensive than prior approaches (Rosenfield & Humphrey, 2012), consultation is often seen as an “add-on service provided if time permits, and if the given professional values it” (Gravois, 2012, p. 83). However, given the increased availability of new evidence-based approaches, “educational consultation offers the greatest chance of addressing a stubbornly intractable problem—the challenge to translate researched knowledge of teaching and learning into practical application by the classroom teacher” (Gravois, 2012, p. 86). A. B. Meyers et al. (2012, p. 112) summarized the importance of consultation as follows, “the prevention of children’s emotional, learning, and

behavioral problems depends upon the delivery of indirect services. Thus, consultation in general and organizational consultation in particular represent important tools within an ecological prevention framework.”

Given these realities, it is essential to explore the role of the consultant within an ecological framework of implementation and sustainability. As the process of implementation evolves, the relationship among implementers is changing along with the development of all involved. Central to our discussion, the external consultant’s roles and relationships within the implementation system are evolving as well (Kress & Elias, 2006). When a consultation is going well, implementers increasingly trust the consultant to provide support for implementation in ever-more-complex situations, and a successful consultant, with growing familiarity with the work context and the work of the implementers, is increasingly able to provide this. For example, a consultant working with a professional sports team on optimal performance was first asked to work with individuals, but as he demonstrated success and as he spent more and more time in the team’s stadium complex (including pitching batting practice), he began to be entrusted with input on training and personnel selection regimens.

The Consultant in Ecological Context

The research suggests that what is ultimately sustained is an optimally functioning community of practice that subsumes the evolving pattern of roles, relationships, norms, and expectations related to the initiative within the larger context of the school. As the consultant has been a member of this community of implementers, the ongoing sustainability of this system must take into account the consultant’s evolving role. As such, we see sustainability as the creation of an ongoing set of ecological relationships in which the implementers and the consultant constitute a community with the shared goal of promoting positive social and emotional outcomes among youth. Accompanying this is the progressive building of local implementation capacity, though not necessarily the complete exclusion of the consultant role.

The partnership between consultant and setting is not equal in terms of the expertise that each holds. At the beginning, it is obvious that school personnel are expert about the school context, and the consultant starts as expert about the nature of the particular SEL/CE initiative and, ideally, how to navigate its implementation successfully within a school setting. Consultation for sustainability is sometimes framed as a process of the setting attaining a level of expertise such that the input of the consultant is not needed. If the consultant and the setting, however, are conceptualized as existing within an ecological context, it is not clear why independence should be a goal. The social, emotional, and academic development of students is and should be a primary function of schools. If the nature of SEL/CE interventions—also a relevant contextual factor—continues to evolve (with new theory and research data impacting on understandings and “best practices” at any moment), then independence from a consultant requires the school to add to its set of responsibilities that of keeping up with the latest ideas and procedures for intervention and implementation.

Further, if a particular school might learn from the experiences of other settings working with SEL/CE, then the school personnel would also need to be responsible for identifying such sites and organizing an ongoing exchange of resources. And, assuming that the initiative brings with it requirements for competencies that new faculty may not bring with them when they enter the school, the setting would also need to develop internal methods for training and ongoing supervision of work with the initiative. Schools are not always well-positioned to fill these functions on an ongoing basis. In theory, of course, school leaders could develop the internal capacity to keep up with best SEL/CE practices, network extensively with other schools working with SEL/CE, fully train new staff on matters related to the SEL/CE initiative, supervise new and continuing staff regarding this work, and assess the ongoing progress of implementation with the school. However, the initial identification of the need for a consultant likely emerged from a perceived shortcoming in capacity to address one or more of those elements and, therefore, resources and external expertise would be involved in the training and ongoing supervision of internal consultants.

The development of the consultant’s expertise, in comparison, is (or should be) geared specifically toward these sorts of issues. The model we propose is the coming together of consultant

and setting into an evolving relationship in which the expertise of the consultant is a communal resource that can be drawn upon as needed. The removal of the consultant-as-resource, then, will result in either an ecological shift away from the initiative, or a shifting of resources from elsewhere in the system to cover the roles filled by the now-absent consultant. It can be argued that it is the consultant's responsibility to help the school develop that internal capacity (an argument we have made ourselves; Kress, Cimring, & Elias, 1997), but resource constraints may actually make it more cost-effective and efficient to maintain some relationship with the consultant as opposed to expecting complete transfer of expertise.

One may argue that this creates a mutual dependency—the school needs the consultant's expertise, the consultant needs the school's funding. We agree but see this as a reality of interconnected systems of relationships (in the same way that one can say that a school needs a math teacher's expertise and the math teacher needs the school's funding). One may further argue that this is not feasible because it requires a financial commitment on the part of the school to maintain an ongoing relationship with the consultant. Although concerns about cost are warranted, it is not the case that weaving these consultative functions into the school itself is "free." The fact that they are sometimes considered free may be a factor leading to the frequent neglect of such tasks once a consultancy ends. What a school leader might consider to be a task someone will do internally might actually require a shifting of personnel or other resources if it is to be accomplished successfully at the same or better levels as when the consultant was involved.

Consultation for an Evolving Context

There is a parallel between this discussion and that of a medical model of intervention in which an "inoculation" is provided in the form of, for example, a particular program, which is meant to sustain a youth throughout his or her development. This model has rightly been rejected in favor of one that embraces the ever-changing ecology of child development in providing intervention on many levels (e.g., family, community) over time (e.g., Gutkin, 2012). In the current discussion, the consultant enters a school's ecology at a specific point within a highly dynamic process involving the histories, needs, and trajectories of the students, the staff, various mandates, and other elements of the system. (Kress & Elias, 2006). Decisions are made by school personnel, together with a consultant, based on a reading of the status of trending needs at the moment and where they are likely to go in the future. Applying the cautions surrounding the medical model to consultation, we run the risk of making the assumption that the decisions made at that point regarding a particular element of the system would be sufficient to see the school through future needs or hurdles. In short, although we support the idea that schools should develop increased capacity to support the initiative internally, we also are wary of moving too far toward an inoculation model in which consultation is assumed to be delivered and the school progressing irretrievably on the "right path."

Although we prefer to view the relationship between the consultant and setting as one of one of coconstructed growth in the face of ever-evolving contextual exigencies, we acknowledge the potential for such a relationship to result in an unhealthy sense of enmeshment, or mutual overdependence. It is important that expectations about the relationship are not only clarified ahead of time, but are also subject to continual reappraisal and renegotiation as the process develops.

From the current perspective, the focus of the relationship is organizational capacity building but not necessarily, or even desirably, completely independent of outside consultation. Ecological realities make it unlikely, though not impossible, for schools to have the capacity to respond effectively to any and all external or internal contingencies. Thus, the process of negotiating contracts has been described as "a dynamic and recursive process not a fixed or finished agreement" (B. Meyers, 2002, p. 180). However, as Meyers' own experiences with a challenging consultation agreement show, such flexibility should not be confused with lack of clarity. Though agreements may go through an evolutionary process, all should be aware of the expectations and roles at any given point in the process.

Failure to constantly assess and, as needed, renegotiate the terms of the relationship can result in "mistrust, miscommunication, and failure" (Nastasi, 2002, p. 221). As Li and Julian (2012) suggested, the creation and maintenance of developmental relationships is a key component in any

intervention for youth. Talking about macrolevel efforts at providing aid, these authors hypothesized that “the key to sustainable and enduring impacts and positive change might be whether or not the two groups manage to foster a developmental relationship over time” (Li & Julian, 2012, p. 163). This plays out in the vital nature of the relationship between consultant and consultees. Ongoing reevaluation of the relationship and agreements not only can prevent misunderstanding but serve to build common understanding and commitment (Adelman & Taylor, 2002) or allow more easily for needed changes in direction to take place.

Considerations for Consultants

Understanding that the nature of implementation is complex, and that the consultant is part of the system, is only a starting point. The notion that a consultant is entering into the evolving ecology of the school has important ramifications for the process of consultation.

Complexity, Concerns, and Resistance

Within the complexity of the ecology of SEL/CE implementation, the concerns of some constituents will likely be quite concrete (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987; Novick, Kress, & Elias, 2002). Consultants may, for example, encounter educators who are not confident about how they will handle classroom management during program sessions or are unsure where they will find the time to carry out the initiative and still meet their existing responsibilities, most or all of which are unlikely to abate (Ghaith & Yaghi, 1997). Such concerns often underlie what is framed as resistance. But the answer is not always to expect implementers to be able to immediately address all of these issues.

In addressing these concerns, a consultant must balance work with teachers to solve immediate problems with support for teachers to develop mechanisms to address similar issues as they arise in the future. To borrow from a well-known expression, a consultant must consider how much to “do the fishing” and how much to “teach implementers to fish,” even at the expense of some uncertainty, discomfort, and lack of immediate success. An answer to the question that might foster short-term logistical success and comfort (do more fishing) is likely to preclude sustainability (which would benefit from more teaching about fishing, as implementers develop processes to address the obstacles that will inevitably come up; Commins & Elias, 1991). A consultant may respond by normalizing the concerns of the implementers and even using these as a marker of progress. Instead of expecting such issues to be “resolved,” ways of containing the situation can be provided, along with a person to go to for a conversation about how to better handle future situations or prevent them.

Further, as a function of prior experience with a particular kind of initiative, teachers will begin the implementation process with varied levels of self-efficacy. For most, however, their perceived success or failure with initial implementation is likely to have a significant impact on continuity. This is why Elias, Bruene-Butler et al. (1997) emphasized framing initial work as a “pilot” project to allow shortcomings to be normalized and their negative consequences minimized, and Elias, Zins et al. (1997) spoke about how “small wins” early in the implementation process can create positive momentum. Positive programmatic results can help maintain teacher buy-in (Forman, Olin, Hoagwood, Crowe, & Saka, 2009). At the same time, however, the consultant must contextualize this momentum within the realities of the bigger picture of the process of implementation. Oversimplification has been found to be related to reduced program longevity whereas a realistic—but not excessive—degree of detail was related to sustained implementation efforts (Commins & Elias, 1991; Kloos, Hill, Thoman, Wandersman, & Elias, 2011).

Pragmatically, how consultants frame the relevant issues is important. What the consultant says, when, where, how, and to whom, all matter significantly, as Jim Kelly (1979) noted many years ago in his prescient article, “T’ain’t what you do, it’s the way to do it.” The consultant must keep a finger on the emotional pulse of the implementers to make sure that what is expected from them “doesn’t challenge risk tolerance too much, yet is sufficiently different from current practice to move the change trajectory in a positive direction” (Century, 2009, p. 23).

Fidelity and Flexibility

As implementation meets the realities of the particular school context, adaptations to the initiative will inevitably occur. The balance between flexibility and fidelity is a common consultation and program implementation issue that has implications for sustainability in all schools that are rarely articulated. As implementation progresses, the implementers are more able to individualize the intervention to better mesh with their own style and contextual realities (e.g., space, time, other mandates) and to adapt the initiative for increasingly specific needs that emerge among the students. The consultant's relationships with the implementers allow for identification of different talents, motivations, and concerns that exist among the educators, as well as the development of the local educators' implementation-related skills. Individualizing implementation in this way requires considerable flexibility and creativity, as most support materials do not provide guidance about such complex adaptations. Indeed, to have spoken about such variability in a research report would likely risk attaining "gold standard" status! At the same time, however, individual adaptations occur alongside recognition of the need to adhere to core elements or practices that will allow for cumulative and synergistic effects over time and across varied implementers (Hord et al., 1987).

Successful navigation of the pulls of adaptation and fidelity will require deep knowledge of the focal SEL/CE initiative to allow for the kinds of modifications needed by implementers at various stages of comfort and familiarity with what they are being asked to do. An initiative is developed along a theory of how the initiative leads to the desired outcomes. This underlying theory is the kernel of the initiative and is expressed through its activities. The theory can also become a reference point for programmatic adaptation: Does an adaptation run counter to the core elements required for the impact of an initiative? Support it? Seem unrelated to it?

A common example is how evidence-based SEL/CE initiatives developed under conditions favorable to controlled research are then brought to settings that are much less favorable (i.e., typically urban disadvantaged contexts). Dilworth, Mokrue, and Elias (2002) discussed a case involving an SEL/CE intervention (Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving; SDM/SPS) in which the underlying theory was brought into the urban context, but the surface appearance of the initiative underwent substantial changes to reflect the changing application context from the white majority populations with which it had been validated to African American and Latino majority populations. Two examples of adaptation included a change in the stimulus materials to incorporate an African American lead character, "TJ the DJ," and modification of the many examples and vignettes in the original curriculum materials that implied students lived with a two-parent family, which was not the case with over half of the current student population.

The idea of distilling out and building upon core elements of initiatives as a way of mediating between fidelity and flexibility is also useful in the face of pressures to continuously adopt new initiatives. These pressures can be external (e.g., governmental mandates) or internal, as in the following example drawn from our work. A private out-of-district special needs school had been, with the consultation of the authors, implementing the SDM/SPS initiative. Reacting to particular needs of the student population, school leaders expressed interest in taking on a new approach, based on a different set of curricular materials, that they regarded as having a more behavioral (as opposed to cognitive or emotional) focus. At this point, the decision could have been made to discontinue work with SDM/SPS and start anew with the initiative. However, the consultants worked with school leaders to weave the new approach into the framework of the existing SDM/SPS framework. The behavioral lessons and materials of the new curriculum were implemented within the curricular scope and sequence of the existing SDM/SPS approach in a way that provided additional practice opportunities for elements of the SDM/SPS approach. In this way, continuity and change were both possible.

If adaptability is essential to sustainability, one may wonder how much adaptation can take place before an exemplary research-validated approach can no longer be considered to be that exemplary research validated approach. If I own a high priced supercomputer and have, over the years, swapped out several components, whether or not I still have a superb device will depend on how many—and which—parts were swapped, the quality of those that replaced them, and their

mutual compatibility. Although a new monitor may make little difference, a change in processor might, and a cheap replacement processor would change the nature of the product as a whole. Successful consultation requires attention to the balance of adaptation within limits.

Like the conductor of a jazz orchestra, the consultant's role is to facilitate the weaving of the prescribed elements together with necessary improvisational interpretations so that the result is harmonious within the particular context. The consultant often has to strike this balance with what might be called an *informed feel* of the situation. The process is unscripted, yet not unstructured. Consultants, through ongoing relationships and embeddedness in the context, as well as experiences in related contexts, may get a feel for the individual implementers and of the system as a whole that usefully inform judgments about when to redirect and when to embrace variation of practice. Indeed, it may well be the consultants' accumulation of "related experiences" that makes them as valuable to a setting as any degree of technical expertise with a particular initiative. An example can be found in Kress and Elias's (2006) description of consultants working with psycho-dynamically trained school-based social workers to weave elements of SEL/CE practice into their work, even as these staff members remained hesitant (and even unwilling) to embrace broader elements of the implementation process.

Given the range of challenges (both on the level of individual teachers, and systemically) to implementation and questions related to elements of practice, a successful consultant must keep the overall goal of the initiative in mind and constantly remind consultees of this as well. The developmental goal is similar to Fowler's (1981) universalizing stage of faith—the joining of individual efforts to work toward the collective good, which, in the current case, is the positive social, emotional, ethical, and intellectual growth of students.

The notion of an initiative being implemented in a static way over the course of time needed for it to have its intended outcome is not supported by the realities of school-based intervention. Rather, the goal is "establishing practices and programs that last *and* change" (Century, 2009, p. 22, emphasis in the original). This leads to an important reconceptualization of the nature of the consultant's expertise. He or she is not clairvoyant with regard to necessary adaptations. Rather, the consultant knows that adaptations will be needed and knows how to lead theoretically salient attempts to do so effectively and dynamically, from an action-research perspective in which the impact of adaptations is monitored. For this to be successful over time, expertise cannot reside only, or even mainly, in the hands of the consultant.

Distribution of Communal Expertise

We have described, above, the consultant and implementers as existing in a community of practice. Although there are times when a consultant may need to take a more directive stance, ultimately, responsibility for implementation is distributed throughout the community. This conceptual framing requires structural support—perceiving oneself to be part of a community of practice must flow from opportunities to actually function as a community of practice.

In developing the community of innovators, it is crucial that the superordinate goal—here, the promotion of social and emotional growth—remains a central focus. This is complicated by the day-to-day challenges of implementation. One can lose the forest for the trees, as it were, and get caught in a sense of being stuck and losing momentum, potentially leading to a desire to disengage with the community (i.e., to step away from the initiative). One way to maintain goal-oriented momentum in the context of the community is through implementers coming together to share their progress and to brainstorm solutions to challenges. Growth in any one educator's facility will be enhanced by the extent to which his or her efforts are given an opportunity to intersect with the efforts of others who are also involved in the process. The result is not only a process of problem-solving but characterizes the essential nature of a community of learner-innovators. Such efforts "can enhance relationships, facilitate contextually relevant modifications, and foster understanding of the role of school culture in program implementation" (Nastasi, 2002, p. 222).

This also ensures that expertise is distributed within the community and not dependent on individuals who might leave the system. Transitions are inevitable within the community, both in terms of the implementers and the consultant. Teachers are leaving and entering the system. As a

practical matter, new staff will need to come up to speed with regard to the initiative. These educators are working within a very different social and emotional climate vis a vis the initiative than members of the initial, or “founding,” cohort, who shared the emotional ups and downs of going through a change process together. They also bring with them different “prehistories” (Sarason, 1972) of engagement in SEL/CE or other initiatives, experiences with consultants, relationships with school leaders, and other contextual factors relevant to the implementation process. In data gathered from the Developing Safe and Civil School project, Elias and colleagues (Elias, Mocerri, & Reyes-Portillo, 2013) found that levels of teacher mobility accounted for over 50% of the variance in a cross section of over 500 schools’ standardized test score performance and levels of violence, vandalism, and substance abuse, assessed over three years. The schools involved had attempted numerous “gap closing” educational initiatives but were not able to overcome the impact of having a revolving door of teaching staff. As Cherniss (1995) and others have noted, in such schools, a certain percentage of staff who remain despite the levels of failure and difficulty are likely to have poor morale and psychological dis-investment in creating positive school change.

The idea of distributed expertise applies to the consultant as well. Just as it can be beneficial for schools and consultants to exist in dynamic relationship, it can also be helpful for the SEL/CE consultant to exist within a community of consultants who are familiar with the broad parameters of the initiative, have experienced the adaptation process in a variety of contexts, and can step into the role of a colleague who leaves his or her position. The engagement of the consultant in a community of SEL/CE consultation beyond the school also allows for expertise to enter the consultancy from external sources. A consultant’s experiences and relationships outside of the school can help implementers learn how those at other schools have confronted challenges similar to those they are facing. Although we typically refer to an individual consultant, sustainability is fostered by access to a consultative team that reduces dependence of the setting on the continued availability of a single person, while recognizing knowledge of the setting-based ecology and history is invaluable and is not easily transmitted to others, particularly if they are not regular visitors to the setting. Access to a consultative community also reduces the vulnerability of a school to the departure of their consultant.

The switching of a consultant in the course of an initiative can also be seen as a shifting of relationships, even when a new consultant with specific expertise in the initiative steps into the role. A consultant coming into a process begun under someone else’s watch must take time to gather as much history as possible, to understand not only the current context he or she is facing but the vectors that have propelled events to the present point and set the direction for where things are likely to be headed. To the extent that the initiative has evolved into a unique ecosystem, coming “up to speed” about the various contextual elements can be difficult.

These kinds of connections are often underdeveloped and need to be more intentional and widespread, particularly if SEL/CE initiatives are going to scale up. An important area for future research is the impact of different timing of consultant departure, likely combined with degree of core implementation team stability. There may well be critical periods and/or critical elements of progression of the implementation, after which settings can better withstand departures.

Enhancing Communal Self Awareness Through Feedback and Evaluation

The sustainability of a community of practice around SEL/CE requires feedback mechanisms; individuals must simultaneously be in this community of practice and also be able to step out to assess the community’s progress. Integration of ongoing assessment provides a self-regulating structure. Although evaluation often begins with concerns about outcomes and impact (and indicators of such are core to any evaluation), consultation for sustainability requires a multipronged approach to evaluation. Staff and student satisfaction with any initiative—the extent to which they enjoy their involvement and believe it to enhance their experience in the school—should not be downplayed. It is unlikely that SEL/CE efforts that are not seen as enjoyable and useful will receive ongoing implementation efforts. Assessing fidelity of implementation also yields benefits in terms of tweaking for sustainability.

Ongoing feedback about the implementation process can provide a springboard for the site-based leaders' ongoing and realistic shaping of any initiative. Are some student populations not being addressed? Do some implementers need additional support? Are there changes in the instructional context that must be incorporated into how the initiative is delivered? How can the initiative mesh with new mandates within the school or those coming from the State level? Site-based leaders must maintain a proactive role in sustaining programmatic efforts by adapting the core elements without losing their essential attributes, as discussed previously.

Although site-based leaders will also need to know the impact of any school's efforts, this can be deemphasized until later in the implementation process. It is the rare system-level initiative that yields a stable outcome in fewer than three years (Sarason, 1996). This underscores the importance of including key stakeholders in the leadership and management team overseeing SEL/CE efforts, and ensuring that SEL/CE are seen as a core function of schools, integrated with academic competence to have significant implications for success in life (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Assessment information is not only crucial to understanding outcomes (e.g., if implementation is not occurring as it should, lack of impact would not be a surprise) but can also help the leadership team and consultant to target ongoing training and support needs. Further, assessment is an iterative process; feedback can be obtained about the distribution of expertise and the building of a community of practice (Patti & Tobin, 2006) to ensure, for example, that implementers feel that their concerns are heard and accounted for in the process. An ecological approach underscores the need for ongoing, multifaceted assessment.

At the same time, a consultant must consider the "use" of any assessment information within the context of the community of practice. Although data are important for improvement, they may not necessarily be seen as good news. Effective use of data requires a level of trust within the school and between the implementers and the consultant. Site-based leaders can help in this regard by making sure that the data-collection process is conducted in the spirit of continuous improvement, rather than "gotcha" evaluation. Addressing the need to know what we are doing, how well we are doing it, how our constituents like it, and what they would like to see more or less of, or done differently is simple common sense and an ethical imperative.

Implications for Training and Supervision

The basis for training and supervision of school-based consultants from an ecological perspective begins with organizational consultation, and training programs once known as organizational school psychology (Maher, Illback, & Zins, 1984). However, as A. B. Meyers et al. (2012) noted, ecological and systems influences on the school and the contexts that surround it continue to be underemphasized in training and in practice, despite continued calls for a change in paradigm (e.g., Ehrhardt-Padgett, Hatzichristou, Kitson, & Meyers, 2004). Hazel, Laviolette, and Linemans's (2010) review of syllabi from consultation courses in school psychology doctoral programs suggests that only 60% of such courses address ecological modes. Far fewer programs make ecological approaches the center of their praxis.

An ecological understanding of the role of the consultant adds urgency to the need for modifications in the training and ongoing supervision of school-based consultants. At the most basic level, consultants must be conversant in ecological models (Gutkin, 2002) and see their work within a systemic framework. Our model, in which the consultant is a part of the broader community of implementers in the school, also speaks to the need for consultants to develop skills in ongoing networking. The consultant is not the purveyor of disembodied advice, but rather someone who can help navigate the complex set of roles and relationships within a system. The ability of a consultant to connect with other sources of expertise is beneficial to supporting sustainability, and the likely continued growth of social-emotional and character development interventions will make it extremely difficult for any individual consultant to stay abreast of emerging best practices and caveats.

However, Conoley, Conoley, and Reese (2009, p. 242), writing specifically about training school psychologists as consultants, pointed out that there is "very little research that illuminates the necessary qualities a school psychologist must have to engender an interpersonal alliance that would

predict consultation success.” It is our view that experiential training and supervision is the best way to develop the complex skill set required. Becoming part of such networks should begin in graduate school and be continued during internship and as an early career focus, providing consultants with early imprinting with regard to their carrying out their role within the context of professional learning communities. Organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists, the SEL Interest Group within the American Educational Research Association, CASEL, the Character Education Partnership, ASCD, the American School Counseling Association, and key divisions with APA (Society of Consulting Psychology, Division 13; School Psychology, Division 16; Society for Community Research and Action/Community Psychology, Division 27) could work together to provide infrastructures for networks of those consulting to school on SEL/CE and related initiatives. Such collaborations would also facilitate adding some of the elements we advocated earlier into preexisting programs to provide consultation training, as well as professional development opportunities for existing consultants through their key professional organizations.

As others have pointed out (Newell, 2012), simulations and case studies are promising training tools in this regard. Excellent examples of case studies already exist (Gutkin, 2009). Another recent, promising development is the establishment of an online credential in creating a coherent, cohesive school climate and integrative, ecologically sensitive approaches to fostering social-emotional, character, and academic development. Using a problem-based learning approach, the credential culminates in a year-long supervised case study “internship” in implementing school-level change. This credentialing process, supported by a National Credentialing Council and including an ongoing, networking process, can form a basis for in-service improvement of the skills of key school leaders as ecologically and organizationally attuned consultant (Elias, Heindel, Norris, & Poedubicky, 2013). Taken together, these approaches allow trainees to confront the type of complexity they would encounter in real-world settings, and to think about the broader systemic implications of choices made in response to a specific challenge. In addition, arranging for supervised consultation experiences, especially when the consultant finds him or herself in relatively new or unfamiliar school contexts can be a substantial learning experience that would also improve the quality of the consultation.

Conclusion

Ecological complexity is the result of a myriad of human interactions. Though implementation is multidetermined, its root, as Evans (1996) has pointed out, is in the “human side.” Or, to use Rossi’s (1978) term, it is *operator dependent*. These “operators” are in developmental flux vis a vis the initiative while also nested in other coevolving ecological systems such as their work outside of the initiative, the broader school context, the role of the consultant, and the students with whom they work (Kress & Elias, 2006). The implications of this are that consultants play important, pivotal, core, and ongoing roles in the implementation and sustainability of SEL/CE in schools.

We cannot conclude without addressing the elephant in the room: Should the group of professionals tasked with implementing school-wide change—school principals—have the same basic skills set as external consultants? The short answer is “yes,” but this would require changes in the process of how principals are prepared and subsequently mentored, particularly in the area of SEL/CE and school mental health interventions. Until these occur, it will be more the exception than the rule to find the required expertise for school-wide sustainable SEL/CE implementation within the existing resources of schools. And the consultant’s role will continue to be paramount in the foreseeable future.

A skilled consultant is one who can understand the ecological complexity of a system of implementation, who can translate this understanding into the support needed by the implementers at any given point, and who ultimately can build the competencies of those in the setting to effectively adopt a similar approach while still being available as a backstop. For schools seeking to implement SEL/CE, prevention, and other positive school climate and character initiatives, such expertise is better seen as an integral and ongoing part of the school ecology, rather than as a short-term external role that can be easily phased out. The demands of ongoing implementation are

great, but the consequences of taking sustainability for granted are greater. Good intentions and quick fixes are insufficient to create the needed systemic supports needed to ensure that students have the opportunity to benefit from SEL/CE initiatives. The ultimate benefits—healthy youth development in the social-emotional and character arenas—demand that consultants address the complex processes of sustaining SEL/CE interventions.

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Received July 20, 2012

Latest revision received March 18, 2013

Accepted March 18, 2013 ■