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SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PATROL: A
STUDY OF BEST PRACTICES FOR TRAINING, DUTIES, AND MEMORANDUMS
OF UNDERSTANDING

By
Lisa Duffey

A Dissertation Submitted to the
Gardner-Webb University College of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Gardner-Webb University
2022

Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Lisa Duffey under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

Stephen Laws, EdD
Committee Chair

Date

Benjamin Williams, EdD
Committee Member

Date

Johnnye Waller, EdD
Committee Member

Date

Prince Bull, PhD
Dean of the College of Education

Date

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Abstract

SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS AND ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PATROL: A STUDY OF BEST PRACTICES FOR TRAINING, DUTIES, AND MEMORANDUMS OF UNDERSTANDING.

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The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine practices for school resource officers (SROs) in elementary schools to gain a compilation of best practices for this position in schools. Through this study, three district leaders, three law enforcement leaders, and 12 law enforcement officers serving in elementary schools from three school districts in North Carolina completed 10 open-ended response items and fifteen 5-point Likert scale response items. The survey instrument was constructed based on practices regarding trainings, duties, responsibilities, and memorandums of understanding (MOUs). The content validation index was utilized to measure the validity of the survey tool. The theoretical framework chosen to explore this topic was the organizational role theory, a framework within the larger theoretical body, role theory. The elements of organizational role theory that were explored to support this study were role taking, role consensus, role ambiguity, and role conflict. To eliminate role ambiguity and the possibility of role conflict, achieving a consensus on the expectations for the position of elementary SRO allows for the individual serving in this capacity to take on the role efficiently. From this research, a collection of best practices for the training, professional development, duties, and responsibilities for elementary SROs to be included in a clear and precise MOU for the benefit of elementary SRO programs was established.

Keywords: school resource officer, elementary, memorandum of understanding,

role

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Chapter 1: Introduction

To operate effectively, policymakers and school leaders expend significant resources and funding for the hiring and retaining of qualified employees for positions within public schools. A growing body of research indicates that the hiring of the right candidates for the right positions in which they can understand and fulfill duties within the schools is key to the improved productivity and effectiveness within these organizations. Effective human management policies are essential to the success of organizations and “each state of the human capital pipeline-attracting, selecting, developing and retaining talent is an opportunity for organizations to strengthen the quality of their workforces” (Papay & Kraft, 2016, p. 791). Criteria for employment for positions in public schools include specific experience, training, and education as well as the ability to understand and accomplish established responsibilities that are aligned with the goals and missions of the school and district. Once hired, in partnership with the school site and district, employees are provided with and expected to adhere to established guidelines of their employment. Unfortunately, these same expectations are not consistently considered for one position that is becoming more common within our public schools. A school resource officer (SRO), despite becoming a more prevalent individual to interact with students daily, continues to have significant variations in the training, education, expectations, and duty requirements pertaining to their role.

Seventy years ago, when the concept of an SRO first came into existence, there were less than 100 officers placed in schools nationwide. The concept of placing law enforcement officers within schools originated in Flint, Michigan in the 1950s, due to a belief that their presence would decrease school violence. Legislation in 1968, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act, encouraged schools and law enforcement

to work collaboratively, and the Safe Schools Act of 1994 expanded the use of SROs and provided funding through the U.S. Department of Justice's COPS in Schools grant program (Ryan et al., 2018). According to Botelho and Ellis (2015), the National Center for Education Statistics indicated at the end of the 2013-2014 school year that there were approximately 46,000 full-time and 36,000 part-time SROs on school campuses across the United States. Although most SRO placements were initially at the middle and high school levels, following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, major increases in the number of officers at the elementary school level occurred across the nation. What was once just 1% of elementary schools having SROs is now more than one third of all elementary schools having an SRO assigned to their campuses across the nation. This is the largest increase in SRO presence in recent years (Viano et al., 2021). Although the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction does not require records of the numbers of SROs in North Carolina public schools, according to Dukes (2021), it was determined that approximately 79% of schools have SROs who serve over 84% of students in public schools. This number includes almost all middle and high schools and two thirds of all elementary schools (Dukes, 2021).

Over time, the increase in the number of SROs in schools has not been the only change to these programs. The purpose and role of these individuals have changed over the years as well. SROs were originally meant to be peace officers who focused on school safety. As the nation experienced an increase in SRO programs, community-oriented policing became the dominant model. Federal funding from the Community Oriented Policing Services Initiative then had SROs serve as teachers of law-related information and, at times, as informal counselors (Glenn et al., 2019). It is apparent that as time has

passed and with the steady increase in their use, the role of SROs continues to experience change and modifications. Since their inception, SROs have experienced “a significant degree of mission creep, a gradual expansion of the original goals/intent of the position” (Ryan et al., 2018, p. 188). With these program adaptations, it is increasingly more challenging to find consistent protocols and policies pertaining to an SRO’s current role and use in schools.

Statement of the Problem

While there is a growing body of research regarding the impact of SROs in schools, there is a lack of research focused specifically on elementary school SROs. As elementary schools become more accustomed to having a law enforcement officer on campus daily, district leadership, law enforcement agency leadership, SROs, and school leaders would benefit from creating and maintaining a clear understanding of the qualifications of the job. Additionally, establishing duties and responsibilities of the role that are free of ambiguity would positively contribute to efforts to maintain and manage a successful elementary SRO program. It would be advantageous for a school district to indicate these expectations through memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with the local law enforcement agency.

Training and Preparation

Human skill is a common indicator of value at all levels of an organization. Those who work in the organization must have enough knowledge and information to improve the overall effectiveness of the organization (Pasban & Nojede, 2016). The various employees in a school should be equipped with adequate training and education to fulfill their duties appropriately. This standard is just as applicable to the law enforcement

officers serving as SROs in our elementary schools. The National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) is a nationwide organization that trains SROs, but there are no federally or state-approved standards for SRO programs; therefore, preparation programs vary significantly. Without specific requirements in the training, experience, or preparation for this role, major inconsistencies across districts can create issues for the success of SRO programs. Despite the value of thorough training for elementary SROs, a 2012 Strategies for Youth study revealed that 80% of SROs indicated they had no training in juvenile justice, adolescent psychology, or child behavior in a school setting (Thurau, 2019).

Ellem and Richards (2018) also indicated that police officers often have poor training in adapting responses based on the possible needs or disabilities of an individual. Ellem and Richards reviewed studies that showed young people with disabilities are often overrepresented in the criminal justice system. Due to some characteristics consistent with impairments, these students may find themselves in more interactions with police (Ellem & Richards, 2018). Particularly true at the elementary level, these students may struggle with regulating their emotions, using good reasoning, understanding the implications of their behavior, or communicating when interacting with police. Additionally, some law enforcement officers may believe it is not their responsibility to determine if someone is cognitively impaired, thus supporting a growing need for experience and training in this area of work in the school setting (Ellem & Richards, 2018).

With police in elementary schools, it is also worth noting that many criminal justice degree programs do not include curriculums that explore policing in school. These

individuals often lack knowledge or understanding of trauma-informed practices or working with diverse populations of youth (Glenn et al., 2019). One can imagine how this is problematic in the elementary school setting; and due to an increase in cases that involve legal violations, parental disapproval of actions of SROs, and over-criminalization of youth, districts must examine the training and education of these individuals to ensure qualifications for these duties are met. It would be of benefit for educators and law enforcement officers to reevaluate and establish preparation and training protocols for elementary SRO programs to ensure SROs in elementary schools can maximize possible benefits while eliminating possible concerns.

Districts and law enforcement agencies must address the need for careful research and planning for the allocation of resources and training specific to improving the quality of SROs in schools. There is a significant priority in improving procedures and policies to further enhance the recruitment, training, and accountability for SROs and their use in schools (Zirkel, 2019).

Duties and Responsibilities

With all employees in the school setting, a clear understanding of the duties and responsibilities of the job is imperative to the success of the individual in the position.

This applies to the SRO role as well. As detailed in the work of Ryan et al. (2018),

The NASRO defines the role of SROs as threefold, including law enforcement, teaching, and mentoring. First and foremost, SROs are police officers responsible for the protection of life and property through the enforcement of laws and ordinances. Beyond that, SROs also serve as teachers in a host of programs. In addition, SROs serve as mentors to students as well as advisors to the educators

and administrators who work with them. (p. 189)

With a broad range of expectations for an SRO, incorporating the role into the day-to-day happenings of the school through specific guidelines and expectations regarding duties and responsibilities would contribute to a more appropriate use of these individuals in schools. In research by McKenna and White (2018), participant survey results conducted of officers working in Texas schools indicated that the official role of the officers in the school impacts how they respond in interactions with students. This is important to note as it reiterates the necessity to create specific duties and responsibilities of SROs to positively impact their response to incidents on school campuses (McKenna & White, 2018).

As school and district leaders carry out their visions and missions throughout the day-to-day operations of their organizations, they seek employees who do the same. Having an individual on campus who is an employee of the law enforcement agency as opposed to the school district can present an issue if there are no clear expectations and guidelines for job duties and responsibilities. It is essential that the involved parties work together to have a clear understanding of the role of the SROs in the district at the various levels to include elementary campuses. Without clarity, “ambiguity and confusion relative to which of the two organizational structures serve as the primary guide to their role in schools” exist and are counterproductive to the work of the schools (Glenn et al., 2019, p. 133).

MOU

According to a survey in 2018 of North Carolina SROs, 25% of the responding SROs indicated they either had no MOU with their district or were not aware if they had

one (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). As noted previously, the duties and roles of SROs can vary, thus creating a greater need for detailed, clear, and thorough MOUs.

Currently, SROs are guided by varying regulations according to each state.

However, Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) encourages law enforcement agencies and schools to adopt a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to clearly document the roles, expectations, and responsibilities of all individuals involved for the purposes of maintaining and increasing safety in schools and communities. (Ryan et al., 2018, p. 190)

As we consider the steady increase in SROs in elementary schools, the importance of these MOUs and their inclusion of expectations in the elementary setting are greater.

There is a need to develop MOUs that include specific duties for SROs and require the reporting of law enforcement activities in schools (Klotz, 2016). According to Glenn et al. (2019), “There is often a gap between existing memorandums of understanding between law enforcement agencies and school districts and the use of the MOU to guide the interactions of the SROs, school personnel, and students” (p. 134).

While most MOUs offer generalized expectations for the SRO program, a thorough and detailed description of duties and responsibilities allows for a total understanding of how the programs will operate, thus creating a greater opportunity for a successful program that increases safety and serves the school community effectively.

Purpose

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to examine practices with the placement of SROs in elementary schools across several school districts in North

Carolina to gain a compilation of best practices for this position in our schools. This study yielded a collection of specific protocols and practices to put into place for the effective use of SROs in elementary schools. Revealed in this research are considerations regarding the professional development and training of SROs for the appropriate placement of these individuals to schools based on the needs of the school community and the duties and responsibilities of these individuals in the fulfillment of the expectations of their role in elementary schools. From this study, a clear and precise MOU can be established and enforced to benefit the elementary SRO program and to fulfill the missions of the SRO program, the schools, and the district.

Research Questions

Through this study, I investigated the significance of consistent, appropriate, and effective expectations for the use of SROs in elementary schools as should be indicated in MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies. The research questions that guided this research were

1. What trainings or skills of SROs hired for placement in elementary schools are considered beneficial in fulfilling the goals of their role?
2. What duties and responsibilities should be assigned to SROs in elementary schools?
3. What components of MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies benefit elementary SRO programs?

Significance of the Study

The growing presence of SROs in all schools, particularly elementary schools, puts a greater demand on the need to examine best practices for this position to ensure the

effectiveness of the role of SROs.

According to a 2005 study for the National Institution of Justice, a frequent mistake made by SRO programs is that they lack a detailed written definition of roles and responsibilities to guide officers in their duties and to govern school administrators in the use of SROs. (Ryan et al., 2018, p. 188)

Unfortunately, the lack of consistency in the guiding protocols for SROs continues to be an issue across schools, districts, regions, and states. This is especially true with the more prevalent use of SROs in the elementary school setting in recent years. The findings of this research offer a better understanding of how school districts can operate the most effective SRO programs in the elementary school setting.

Growing concerns in society regarding the training, qualifications, and performance of law enforcement officers also put a greater responsibility on school districts to ensure these individuals are adequately prepared and equipped to serve in their roles appropriately. According to Timpf (2017), there is an overall need for police reform but also an understanding that law enforcement officers need to feel valued and appreciated in their roles to be successful in their positions. This emphasizes the need for district and law enforcement agencies to work together to ensure MOUs fulfill the goals of both organizations and ultimately serve to positively impact students, staff, families, and the school communities they serve.

Overview of Methodology

This case study involved a mixed methods approach to collect information from multiple stakeholders to gain insight regarding the role of SROs in elementary schools. The participants in this research included the district-level leaders who oversaw the SRO

programs in three districts in North Carolina and law enforcement officers who oversaw the SRO program for their agency. Additionally, the participants included the SROs in the district who were assigned to serve at the elementary schools. Qualitative data were collected through a survey containing 10 open-ended questions to gain thorough insight to inform efforts to combat the ambiguity regarding the role of SROs in elementary schools. Responses from participants allowed for the identification of significant statements, clusters of meaning, and themes across the research (Creswell, 2013).

Quantitative data were collected through 15 Likert scale response items. These data were analyzed to identify best practices for the role of SROs assigned to elementary schools for the application of research to improve current elementary SRO programs.

Setting

This research study involved the participation of individuals associated with the elementary SRO programs in three North Carolina school districts. The first district utilized in the research is in the foothills of North Carolina. The district serves approximately 9,300 students in Pre-K through 12th grade. The district is comprised of 13 elementary schools. The second district is in southwestern North Carolina, approximately 20 miles west of Charlotte. The district serves over 30,000 students in Pre-K through 12th grade. The district consists of 29 elementary schools. The third district is in the northern part of the state with approximately 6,000 students and 11 elementary schools. All three districts utilize law enforcement officers to serve in elementary schools.

Role of the Researcher

I am currently an elementary school principal serving in the North Carolina public school system. As a veteran educator, I have served in elementary and middle school

settings. I have been a teacher, assistant principal, and most recently in my role as principal for the past 10 years. I have a Bachelor of Science in elementary education and a minor in psychology. I also hold a Master of School Administration in educational leadership. Prior to this position, I served as an elementary and middle school teacher and assistant principal. During my 10 years as principal and the 2 years prior as assistant principal, I have worked with nine SROs assigned to the elementary schools. With an aspiration to work within a district-level leadership team, I sought to complete research on a topic I believe directly impacts students, employees, the district, and the school community. Through my research, I gained a greater understanding of best practices for the training, duties, and MOUs for the officers in the school setting. My research is beneficial to the enhancement of elementary SRO programs through its exploration of best practices for the preparation, training, duties, and responsibilities of SROs as well as best practices for MOUs representing the understood expectations of the elementary SRO program for all school stakeholders. Additionally, increasing the program's success at the elementary level lays the foundation for the continued effectiveness of the program at the middle and secondary levels.

Overview of Theoretical Framework

The research of this study is viewed through the lens of role theory. This extensive collection of theory investigates how roles are developed and understood by an individual. Within this body of work, a role is defined as behaviors expected of someone who occupies a particular position. The scholarly work of this theory can be organized into five major areas to include functional role, symbolic interactionist role, structural role, cognitive role, and organizational role (Biddle, 1986). Despite these branches

having distinct differences in their assumptions, several proposals of role theory exist as commonalities. Role theory declares that roles help us make sense of our social world and the need to have established expectations. If those expectations are violated, conflict arises (Biddle, 1986). For my research regarding the ambiguity of the role of SROs in elementary schools, these findings were applicable, as defining consistent expectations for this position is necessary to avoid the ineffectiveness of elementary SRO programs due to unnecessary conflict created by unclear expectations.

The work of this dissertation is a study of the role of an individual within an organization, thus making the organizational role theory an appropriate framework for consideration in my research. A major focus within this theory is how a system defines roles and how fulfilling those roles can lead to predictable outcomes. Organizational role theory studies the context of these roles and the interaction of these defined roles within an organization (Katz & Kahn, 1978). This body of research considers the interactions of the organization's roles to the integration, how "roles fit well together" (Biddle, 1979, p. 77), or to the conflict that can arise among the roles. Katz and Kahn (1978) elaborated on the potential for conflicting forces reflected in competing roles, stating, "Role conflict is the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations such that compliance with one would make the other more difficult" (p. 204). Job descriptions, communications of the job expectations from the organization's superior, and the structure of the organization have the potential for role conflict when the person in the role must balance competing or poorly defined expectations for the position. A vast amount of research on role conflict indicates the conflict is often based on interactions between the person fulfilling the role and the person who defines and supervises the role (Katz & Kahn,

1978). As the role of SROs in elementary schools was studied for this research, the singular role of the position managed by two systems made organizational role theory an appropriate framework.

Another concept within role theory and role interaction is ambiguity. According to Katz and Kahn (1978), ambiguity is “uncertainty about what the occupant of a particular office is supposed to do” (p. 206). Considering the concept of role ambiguity, insight from this area of organizational role theory applies to the role of elementary SROs, as research is conducted to determine protocols to avoid continued inconsistencies with this position.

Definition of Terms

Criminalization

The action of turning an activity into a criminal offense by making it illegal.

Juvenile

A young person.

Juvenile Petition

A document filed in juvenile court alleging that a juvenile is delinquent or a status offender and asking the court to assume jurisdiction over the juvenile.

MOU

A type of agreement between two or more parties.

School Grounds

In relation to a school, means land, whether it is contiguous or not, buildings or accommodation, sporting or other facilities, used for or in connection with the activities of the school.

SROs

An SRO is a career law enforcement officer employed by a police department or agency to work with schools and community-based organizations.

Students With Disabilities

Students who are diagnosed with one or more of the 13 disabilities covered by the federal Individuals With Disabilities Education Act.

Trauma-Informed Practice

An approach in the human service field that assumes an individual is more likely than not to have a history of trauma.

Zero Tolerance

Refusal to accept antisocial behavior, typically by a strict and uncompromising application of the law.

Summary

This case study considered ways to effectively eliminate current ambiguity with the role of SROs in elementary schools. While there is a growing body of research regarding SROs, a need exists for continued work on how to strengthen the program at the elementary school level with an examination of best practices for this position. This mixed methods study collected data from various stakeholders to support the thoughtful consideration of the training of elementary school SROs as well as the assigned duties and responsibilities of these individuals within several school districts in North Carolina. The study sought to identify components necessary in effective and appropriate MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies that utilize SROs in elementary schools. Following a presentation of existing research that aligns with the research

questions and purpose of this study within the context of role theory with an emphasis on organization role theory in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 details the methodology and elements of this study. Details provided will explain the mixed methods design of the research.

In Chapter 4, there is a presentation of the data collected during my research, and an analysis of the information is provided. Chapter 5 summarizes the work within the research and its findings and conclusions. Finally, suggestions and recommendations for practical future research are provided.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review investigates existing research that examined the duties and responsibilities of SROs in elementary schools as well as bodies of work that considered findings related to the MOUs between the school districts and law enforcement agencies that oversee these programs in the elementary setting. This chapter presents literature that addresses the research questions of this study:

1. What trainings or skills of SROs hired for placement in elementary schools are considered beneficial in fulfilling the goals of their role?
2. What duties and responsibilities should be assigned to SROs in elementary schools?
3. What components of MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies benefit elementary SRO programs?

This literature review is presented in a structured format. The first component of the literature review introduces the theoretical framework for this research, role theory. Scholarly research that influences this framework is reviewed. Following a theoretical framework review, research involving the hiring and placement of SROs within schools with emphasis on elementary schools is presented. The next component of the literature review details research regarding the training and education of SROs with relation to the expectations of the position. Following this research is a closer examination of existing studies on the duties and responsibilities assigned to SROs. Next, an exploration of the available research on best practices between law enforcement agencies and school districts as indicated in MOUs is presented. The main points of this research are summarized at the end of Chapter 2, setting the stage for Chapter 3 and its description of

the methodology I used in my research for my mixed methods case study.

Role Theory

This study is framed by the expansive lens of role theory. Role theory supports “the idea that roles are important aspects of human behavior that help us make sense of our social world” (Gesualdi, 2017, p. 10). This large body of research examines not only how roles are created but also how those roles are executed by individuals. The theory supports the notion that roles should be defined by a set of expectations guiding their enactment. According to role theory, roles are generated by norms and are related to identifiable social positions (Biddle, 1986). Various sociologists and anthropologists, among them being Margaret Mead, Talcott Parsons, and Robert K. Merton, are credited for the origination of this theory, but role theory of a social context is credited to the American sociologist, Robert Merton (Aartsen & Hansen, 2020).

With continued research, role theory has evolved since its origination and now includes an extensive collection of findings that further investigates how roles are developed and understood by an individual in various contexts. Functional role theory, symbolic interactionist role theory, structural role theory, cognitive role theory, and organizational role theory are the major branches of work examined within the totality of role theory research (Biddle, 1986).

Work within the functional role theory framework emphasizes the behavior of an individual within a social system. This theory seeks to explain how people perform their roles to keep the total system stable and balanced. This theory applies to formal as well as informal social groups and involves an examination of how people perform their roles within these groups (Gesualdi, 2017). This functionalism approach focuses on the social

structures institutionalizing expectations across situations. Role positions such as manager, director, and technician are considered in relation to status, hierarchy, and function for their influence and effect on one's concept of self (Ashforth, 2001).

Contrary to the emphasis on stability within a system explored in the functional role theory, symbolic interactionist role theory is focused on how people change their roles based on interactions with other individuals (Gesualdi, 2017). Its findings involve more fluid considerations, and the roles in this approach are "thought to reflect norms, attitudes, contextual demands, negotiation, and the evolving definition of the situation as understood by the actors" (Biddle, 1986, p. 71). Symbolic interactionist role theory focuses on how people internalize cues about roles. As a result of this emphasis, this approach is most applicable to interpersonal and informal situations (Gesualdi, 2017).

Less concerned with the behaviors of the individual, structural role theory concerns itself with the social structures that determine roles. The focus of this theory is on "stable organizations of sets of persons called 'social positions' or 'statuses' who share the same, patterned behaviors ('roles') that are directed towards other sets of persons in the structure" (Biddle, 1986, p. 73). Overall, this theory emphasizes environments of social networks and social systems over the actual behavior of an individual within these systems (Gesualdi, 2017).

An additional branch of work within role theory, cognitive role theory focuses on how people make sense of "social conditions that give rise to expectations, to techniques for measuring expectations, and to the impact of expectations on social conduct" (Biddle, 1986, p. 74). It is the thinking behind the conditions, expectations, and behaviors of a role; this theory is used to understand situations where people need to behave within

social expectations (Gesualdi, 2017).

The last major body of theoretical work within role theory is organizational role theory. According to social role theorists, a role is “a behavioral repertoire characteristic of a person or a position; or a set of standards, descriptions, norms, or concepts held for the behaviors of a person or social position; or (less often) a position itself” (Biddle, 1979, p. 9). Organizational role theory, therefore, is specifically concerned with how these roles are conceived and enacted within organizations. Roles in organizational role theory are “assumed to be associated with identified social positions and to be generated by normative expectations, but norms may vary among individuals and may reflect both the official demands of the organizations” (Biddle, 1986, p. 73). For this mixed methods case study in which research was conducted regarding the duties and responsibilities of an elementary school SRO within a school organization, assumptions specifically within organizational role theory were considered.

Organizational Role Theory

Organizational role theory was developed in the 1960s and offers insight into the processes that affect individuals and their behavior in organizations such as the workplace (Kahn et al., 1964). According to organizational role theory, work roles must be thoughtfully and clearly presented by the organization for implementation by each employee for an organization to function as an effective social entity (Wickham & Parker, 2007). The expectations of the role should align with the established norms and vision of the organization as well as be appropriately communicated to the individual for understanding and acceptance in a way that benefits the organization as well as the employee (Katz & Kahn, 1978). According to Gesualdi (2017), “Organizational Role

Theory provides a framework to study roles within organizations by focusing on individual behaviors, organizational context, and interaction between defined roles.

Organizational role theory has been used to identify various ways that explain how roles interact” (p. 13). Extensive work and research have been conducted within the framework of organizational role theory and throughout this body of work; various assumptions exist that are related to the various roles within an organization.

The assumptions embedded within the theoretical framework of organizational role theory include role taking, role consensus, role ambiguity, and role conflict. Role taking indicates the role is immediately assumed by an individual upon employment, while the notion of role consensus indicates that for an organization to function at its best, there needs to be a consensus about the expectations of the role for the individual. A specific set of behaviors for the role should be well defined. Clarity for achieving the objectives of the role should exist and ambiguity should be avoided (Parker & Wickham, 2005). Also embedded within organizational role theory is the notion of role conflict which will arise when role expectations oppose the expectations associated with another role of the individual (Miles & Perreault, 1976).

Role Taking. One notion of this theory regarding roles is the idea that an individual within an organization will take on a role given to them by their employer when employment is accepted. The roles are learned through instruction, feedback, and socialization with others within the organization (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Role taking indicates boundaries are rigid and prescribed once the role is assumed. An individual essentially becomes the role with acceptance of its responsibilities through an employment agreement. The role of the individual exists so the other roles may exist

within the same organization (Berger, 2009).

In many ways, role taking is a passive process where the one occupying the role simply adheres to the role as designed without any adjustments. There are five factors identified in driving role taking behaviors. These factors include how self is defined by the individual, the attitude about the role and the person assigning the role, the anticipated reaction of the role assigner, the individual's associations with the role assigner, and lack of self-reflection in conjunction with feedback or suggestions from the role assigner (Heimer & Matsueda, 1994).

Influences on whether an individual would be willing to accept the role include organizational, personal, and interpersonal factors. Organizational influences could be formal or informal structures for rewarding or penalizing behaviors that are in existence within the organization. Personal influences on an individual's willingness to accept the assigned role include the values, motives, and beliefs of the individual in relation to the role. The interpersonal influences on role taking include the relationships between the individual and colleagues who establish their role sets (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

It is worth noting that the background of the role taker is influential in the individual's beliefs, emotions, and values. A perceived similarity between the role taker and the role assigner yields improved communication, higher rates of social integration, and increased positive relational experiences. This occurs because of increased trust and common associations between the individual and role assigner (Bond, 1983). In situations of high trust, we see the development of role making. The concept of role making indicates the role is assumed but created with less rigidity and with more individual influence (Berger, 2009). Role making involves a relationship of equal commitment and

high-quality interactions that encourage reflection on actions and outcomes to determine which behavioral exchanges should continue. Fluidity of role duties exists, and a sharing of responsibilities through effective delegation is established (Barber, 1983).

In organizations, depending on the socialization tactics employed, individuals will be more likely to role take or role make. Institutionalized processes considered to be collective, formal, serial, and investiture are more likely to yield the acceptance of roles in role taking efforts. In contrast, individual, informal, random, and divestiture social processes tend to lend themselves to the allowance for more role making. There is an increase in individual influence on duties and roles (Ashforth et al., 2007).

Role Consensus. A closer look at role consensus concludes that it is used by role theorists to indicate that individuals need to know what they should do for the organization and all persons in the system should be able to be counted on to support the norms of the organization. There is an assumption of consensus on behalf of the organization when an employment relationship with an individual is established where organizational roles are predefined and agreed upon. Role consensus is the assumption that through an employment contract, employees are informed of the behavior that is expected from them in order to complete their tasks. Role consensus maintains consistency in behavior and facilitates adherence to the culture of the organization (Biddle, 1986). This assumption asserts that employees and employers hold common values, beliefs, and norms for behavior, thus yielding consistency in expectations and behaviors (Smithson & Stokoe, 2005).

The notions behind role consensus indicate that work roles should be predetermined, unchanging, and decided upon before consensus can be achieved (Kerr,

1978). When examining roles, a lack of consensus of role expectations between organizational members can lead to conflict and affect the organization's productivity (Katz & Kahn, 1978). To support role consensus, supervisors must work to reinforce behaviors through rewards and incentives. To eliminate hurdles in reaching role consensus, supervisors must use sanctions and penalties to extinguish behaviors that contradict role expectations (Biddle, 1986).

Role Ambiguity. Organizational role theory suggests that a person will know how to behave when an awareness of role expectations exists (Biddle, 1986). On the contrary, role ambiguity exists when there is an "uncertainty about what the occupant of a particular office is supposed to do" (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p. 206). When tasks and expectations are clear, the duties of the role can be performed. Without clarity, the duties are difficult to fulfill appropriately. When duties that are expected of the individual are ambiguous in nature, negative impacts on the ability of the person to fulfill the duties exist. The inability to fulfill the duties will often lead to negative interactions with others within the organization and the adverse effects are not just limited to the individual assigned to the role. As a result, the performance and productivity of the organization suffer (Gesualdi, 2017).

To avoid role ambiguity and obtain role clarity, several influences should exist within organizations. There needs to be a thoughtful process of those within the organization transmitting information to the newcomers effectively. Institutionalized socialization tactics exist and control the type of information and the source of the information being provided to the new employees. Detailed feedback should also be offered to those taking on new roles. Praise or punishment specific to the behaviors of the

role furthers understanding of the expectations. Lastly, participation in decision-making can assist in preventing role ambiguity. Being a participant in the decision-making process furthers the individual's understanding of work roles and expectations (Bauer et al., 2007).

When role ambiguity exists, the work environment lacks structure and predictability. Individuals are unable to cognitively master the structures required of them in their assigned roles (Sujan, 1986). As a result of the ambiguity, there is an increase in the individual's dissatisfaction with their role. A hesitation over decisions can exist and overall anxiety and confusion may be felt (Kahn et al., 1964). On the contrary, Babin and Boles (1996) revealed that role clarity influences job performance, organizational commitment, and self-efficacy. In their review of workers in various service settings, over 250 surveys were completed by employees. Role satisfaction, role clarity, job performance, and self-efficacy were considered in the questions asked of the participants. The survey results indicated that work environments significantly impact employee performance. Employees who stated they had clear objectives, goals, and responsibilities related to their job roles responded more favorably to questions that indicated positive influence on their job performance and satisfaction. The surveyed workers often dealt with having little training or explanations of their job duties which made them feel incapable of performing their duties appropriately, thus the research of Babin and Boles (1996) spoke to the importance of role clarity in the workplace.

Role Conflict. Role conflict is “the simultaneous occurrence of two or more role expectations such that compliance with one would make compliance with the other more difficult” (Katz & Kahn, 1978, p. 204). Role conflict occurs “when one person is asked to

complete a task within the requirements of one role but completing that task would make another expected task within the same role difficult to complete” (Gesualdi, 2017, p. 14). As defined, role conflict exists when an individual must manage competing expectations from an additional role. These expectations can be from the structures of the organization or the job description of the role. The conflict can also arise from the superior enforcing the expectations of the job (Biddle, 1986).

Noor (2004) suggested role conflict can occur in the workplace because of three possible conditions. The first circumstance is if the time needed to fulfill the duties of the role prevents sufficient time for other assigned roles. The second condition is if the stress of one role affects the fulfillment of another role. The last influential condition on role conflict is specific behaviors associated with one role make it challenging to meet the expectations of another role. Regardless of the source, role conflict has been associated with poor job performance. Often, there is also a decreased commitment to the organization. Higher rates of negative incidents are also experienced (Gesualdi, 2017).

Elementary SROs and Role Theory

Role theory is a thorough body of scholarly work that considers the concept of roles in a variety of settings with many varied influences. Among the five main branches of role theory is the organizational role theory, with its emphasis on roles within a systematic organization. Within this research are considerations to positive influences on role fulfillment within an organization through the exploration of role taking and role consensus. In contrast, this theoretical work also assesses the impact of role ambiguity and role conflict in negatively impacting role fulfillment within an organization.

As I conducted research to benefit elementary SRO programs with a clarified

understanding of roles, duties, and the partnerships between school districts and law enforcement agencies, organizational role theory was applicable to my work. Framing my work through this lens assisted me in further investigating the roles of SROs and how the systems in which these individuals operate are benefited by a clear understanding of the roles held in the organization. I utilized research within this theoretical framework to further understand how clear MOUs can support role taking and role consensus while overcoming role ambiguity or role conflict to benefit elementary SRO programs.

With an increased presence of SROs in elementary school, the thoughtful consideration of the qualifications, duties, responsibilities, and expectations for the program as indicated in the MOUs through the lens of organizational role theory offers guidance for protocols to aid the success of the program.

Duties and Responsibilities

While SROs were originally intended for community building, their role later shifted to maintaining safety or assisting school personnel with behavioral or discipline concerns (Pigott et al., 2018). The role of SROs is ever evolving. NASRO is an organization for law enforcement officers, school security and safety professionals who work as partners to protect schools, their students and faculty. The organization offers insight pertaining to the duties and responsibilities of SROs. Although SRO programs have been around since the 1950s, it was not until 1991 that NASRO was established. NASRO recommends a triad approach to the role of SROs in schools. In this model, the roles taken on by an SRO include that of teacher, law enforcement officer, and informal counselors (Robeson 2020). Serving in these capacities, SROs in schools may offer a variety of benefits. A 2018 study by Duxbury and Bennell is referenced on NASRO's

webpage and identifies possible advantages of an SRO program. These benefits include

- Prevention or minimization of property damage in the school and surrounding areas.
- Prevention of student injuries and even death due to violence, drug overdose, etc.
- Reduction of the need for schools to call 911.
- Reduction of the likelihood that a student will get a criminal record.
- Increase of the likelihood that students (particularly those with mental health issues) will get the help they need from the social service and health care systems.
- Increase in feelings of safety among students and staff (NASRO, n.d.b).

With consideration of these benefits, identifying the roles and responsibilities of the SROs to support the fulfillment of these advantageous efforts is essential.

According to Ryan et al. (2018), one of the most critical issues right now with SROs is there is a lack of policies regarding their roles and responsibilities. Without this guidance, there is no wonder that clarity is missing in the understanding of the role of SROs in schools. If a state provides defined roles for SROs, SROs can still vary tremendously across districts which leads to confusion and misunderstanding among school leaders, teachers, and the students with whom they interact daily. Adding to the complex nature of this position, an SRO is an employee of a law enforcement agency executing duties and responsibilities within a school (Pigott et al., 2018). According to Barnes (2016), “Since SROs are employees of the sheriff’s offices or municipal police departments, officers reported conflicts between the officer and the school administration

regarding authority on school security matters” (p. 199). The presence of SROs is becoming so common that there is a less distinct understanding of their roles as officers of the law versus those of a school employee (Pigott et al., 2018). Adding to the ambiguity pertaining to roles and duties, some SROs believe school personnel do not understand their roles, and some believe their position is utilized improperly, especially in relation to school procedures (Barnes, 2016).

The State of Ohio sample MOU (Ohio School Resource Officers Association, 2018) offers a sampling of possible duties and responsibilities for SROs in a section entitled “Duties.” These include handling criminal activity and protecting students, staff members, and the public from criminal offenses. SROs should also foster mutually respectful relationships with students and staff and provide information concerning law-related questions. Classroom instruction can be a responsibility of SROs, with topics including public safety, leadership, and life skills. SROs coordinate investigative procedures and handle initial reports of violent crimes on campus. Additionally, SROs attend school events and keep records on SRO activity (Ohio School Resource Officers Association, 2018).

Glenn et al. (2019) explored results from a 2018 survey from SROs. This survey from the North Carolina Center for Safer Schools collected responses from over 450 SROs in the state regarding issues related to their work in schools. Glenn et al. focused their analysis on the open-ended response portion of the survey results. A common theme within the open-ended responses was an agreement among SROs that supported a need for state regulations on the standardization of responsibilities for all SROs and the clarification of their duties in schools to be understood by all. In the responses, you will

find consistent advocacy for clarity of duties involving searches, participation in staff meetings, interactions with students and staff, and teaching valuable courses to students.

One open-ended response on how to improve the SRO program stated, “Make it very clear to administration what SROs are and are not expected to do. It is very different depending on what school we are assigned” (Glenn et al., 2019, p.137).

Recommendations for improving SRO programs start with dissecting their roles within the lenses of three areas of the school context that include school climate, safety in schools, and discipline on school campuses. Then the work lies with standardizing the expectations for the duties and responsibilities of the SRO position for all involved in the implementation of the SRO program (Glenn et al., 2019).

Discipline

As the role of SRO has changed over time, more SROs find themselves taking on the responsibility of enforcing compliance in schools across the United States of America. Some schools have taken a zero tolerance approach to infractions of behaviors and consequently involving SROs more to respond to discipline incidents. The use of SROs in schools for behavior management has significant implications for students. There is evidence that students in schools with officers are five times more likely to be arrested for disorderly conduct. Great efforts must be made to examine the best way to utilize the officers in the school setting as not to lead to negative effects (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). Additionally, Monson (2019) indicated that the increase in the number of SROs employed at a school was a significant indicator of school-based arrests. The mere presence of SROs in schools creates the opportunity for the misuse of their authority to manage behavior with an unfortunate direct correlation between

criminalizing behavior in schools and adult incarceration (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). The frequently referenced term “school to prison pipeline” sheds light on the belief that children experiencing interactions with SROs in schools are more likely to be in the justice system as adults (Cole, 2019).

Chan et al. (2019) further examined litigation involving SROs in schools. Of 44 cases that were examined, most violations in these cases involved the Fourth, Fifth, and 14th Amendments. Fourth Amendment-related cases involve situations of unreasonable searches and the rights of students against unreasonable searches and seizures. Cases involving the Fifth Amendment consider the rights of students to remain silent and not self-incriminate in interrogations or investigations of school incidents. Cases related to 14th Amendment rights involve most often the fundamental right to equal access to schooling and this access is without discrimination as related to the equal protection clause and the due process clause. Parents won in 17% of the cases, and 83% of the cases revealed the officer and the school were found to have been acting in an acceptable manner; however, it is noted that in 61% of the cases, students were arrested, and the students involved in these cases were disproportionately minority students and students with disabilities.

School leaders must be particularly mindful of the ramifications of involving SROs in the handling of students with disabilities to avoid violations of their rights as indicated in their Individual Education Plans and Behavior Intervention Plans (Meade, 2019). According to Viano et al. (2021), students with disabilities are a protected class in schools, and police are not generally trained to interact differently with people based on possible intellectual, emotional, or physical differences. Law enforcement officers are

accustomed to responding to incidents involving adults without being influenced by factors such as IQ, developmental delays, social deficits, or other disabilities, whereas in a school setting, these factors can influence a student's behavior significantly. It is essential for SROs to understand best practices in their interactions with these students in the school setting (Viano et al., 2021).

While there is growing concern with the impact of SROs in the school setting because of taking a more punitive approach to students as opposed to a more preventative and instructive approach, there are ways to support a more appropriate response (Chan et al., 2019). Kelly (2017) pointed to research involving SROs in four states that were surveyed, and responses indicated that how an officer sees themselves in relation to the triad model indicated correlation with their response to discipline situations. The triad model is NASRO's notion that school-based policing is divided into three main roles. The first is the concept of an SRO as a teacher of information. The second idea is that SROs are enforcers of the law. Lastly, the triad model indicates that SROs are informed counselors in incidents involving students. Kelly explained that those who viewed themselves more as law enforcers would take a more serious approach to school situations in their response or enforcement of consequences. This may include school arrests, teen court, or restraint. SROs who see themselves as more of an educator often have a less severe response to student conduct, thus building the case for SROs to understand their role as educators more fully. In this capacity, they would work to educate the student to understand the relation of their behavior to laws that exist to educate students in better decision-making. A perception of themselves as more of a counselor role was associated with more reporting of serious school incidents for outside

support to include community resources or therapeutic referrals. Again, this builds the case for a more restorative response to student discipline as being possible (Kelly, 2017).

Relationships with Stakeholders

Parents. Based on research from Cook (2019), there are several trends among parents regarding their perceptions of SROs. For this study, parents with students from public schools in Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. were interviewed. Analysis of the responses from the open-ended questions revealed several themes. These themes were a relationship, safety, responsibility, security, lack of knowledge and understanding, and SROs not having proper training. Regarding relationships, 35% of parents stated they had no relationship with the SRO, but 60% believed a relationship with the SRO was vital. They believed the SROs should initiate this relationship and the school should initiate the communication between the SRO and parents.

Regarding responses related to school safety and security, it was discovered that most parents lacked an understanding of the safety procedures in schools and the roles the SROs had in these safety procedures. Most parents surveyed also indicated not knowing the responsibilities of SROs in a school. Of those responses, however, 45% believed SROs should be responsible for school safety, and 55% believed more should be done to improve school safety. Many felt as though more security cameras, metal detectors, and SROs could improve school safety (Cook, 2019).

Of those interviewed in the research, 45% of the parents were uncertain of all the SRO programs involved in their children's schools. Most of the parents were unable to speak to the mission or the goals of the SRO program. Within these open-ended responses, the theme of believing the SRO was a negative one also emerged. Thirty

percent of the parents felt as though the program lacked benefits. Many responses revealed the belief by parents that not all SROs were created equal, and their satisfaction with this role was dependent on the individual serving in this capacity. In responses related to training, 15% of parents believed SROs need more education and training to serve in their roles (Cook, 2019).

Regarding an SRO's involvement in school affairs, the research showed that most parents believed the specific expectations of SRO involvement in school situations should be established and mandatory for the SRO to follow. Parents generally indicated a lack of comfort with an SRO being able to use discretion in school situations, and of great interest was the finding that only one parent from the sample indicated being okay without any reservation with an SRO's involvement in a situation involving their child. In interviews of South Carolina principals, the administrators echoed the belief that communicating the SRO responsibilities to parents and maintaining positive relationships with parents are vital. Establishing a positive rapport with clear understandings of the SRO program with parents leads to positive public support, greater satisfaction with the programs on behalf of stakeholders, and improved beliefs in the effectiveness of law enforcement. Additionally, trust in police is enhanced among parents and guardians (Wolfe et al., 2017).

Students. Theriot and Cuellar (2016) examined the impact of interacting with SROs on students' feelings about law enforcement and their perceived connection to the school. Approximately, 2,000 students enrolled in a Southeastern United States school district with full-time SROs were surveyed with 60 questions asking about their feelings about schools, school safety, school violence, SROs, and contact with SROs. Results

revealed students who were more connected to school and generally had a more positive attitude about school also indicated feeling safer with SROs than students who had been victims of negative school situations. Students who had attended a class presentation by an SRO also had more positive attitudes about SROs. Many students who experienced isolated interactions with SROs where those interactions were negative generally viewed SROs less favorably. Students with experiences involving more school violence overall reported more negative beliefs about the SROs.

The results, however, revealed there is not always a correlation between the feelings and actual interactions between the students and SROs, yet the findings did indicate that positive attitudes towards SROs appear to improve when the number of overall interactions increases, opening the door for pursuing clarification on SRO visibility on campus, interactions with students, and relationships created between the SROs and students (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). Being seen more in hallways, parking lots, and before and after school activities to interact with students more consistently and more frequently helps students feel safer and view SROs as a positive addition to the school environment and allows opportunities for students to feel positive about SROs (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016).

Research by Farmer (2016) further considered the impact of SROs on students. She explored the impacts of community partnerships on students through an analysis of existing interviews, surveys, and literature pertaining to SROs and students. She then explored responses from individuals within the community to determine the positive effects of SROs on students. Her findings reported that the community plays a vital role in encouraging youth to have a positive relationship with figures of authority and that

SROs are often the one authority figure from the community who has the most interaction with youth. The research concluded that students need positive interactions to counteract negative experiences with figures of authority and that community support is essential in reinforcing positive student behavior.

In the data analysis stage of Farmer's (2016) research, it was determined youth needed positive interactions and encouragement from authority figures. Through the lens of social learning theory, Farmer indicated that positive behavior could be learned despite the challenges of the environment in which youth may live. Through a community-based participatory approach, Farmer explained that more positive relationships between students and SROs can increase the probability that students will make wiser choices in their future. Viano et al. (2021) asserted similar beliefs in stating that the building of relationships with children assists them in learning to trust law enforcement and see them as a public good.

Safety

Violence at schools has increased, thus school leadership should continue to analyze and improve plans to make sure effective safety measures are in place (Cornell, 2006). Madfis (2017) found that increased concerns about school violence prompted decision makers to take on additional security measures like SROs with the belief that any effort to save a life in school would be worth any potential costs. Viano et al. (2021) asserted,

This idea that safety concerns are urgent regardless of actual risk was clearly connected to the deep core belief that humans are flawed individuals as there is a looming threat of someone to a school to do harm. Along the same line of

reasoning, SROs helped to keep schools safe by acting as a deterrent for those seeking to do harm in the school. The implication being that there are those who seek to disrupt the school will be dissuaded from doing so because of the presence of an SRO. (p. 266)

After the Parkland school shooting in 2018, the North Carolina General Assembly allocated \$35 million to address school safety measures, which included hiring SROs, and Governor Roy Cooper's Special Committee on School Shootings recommended SROs in every public school (Doran, 2018).

Statistically, most schools will never experience an active shooter, but situations across the nation have led to concerns among students and staff that must be addressed (Gewertz, 2018). SROs who are visible and present in student areas help create safer school environments. "SROs can partner with teachers and school staff to provide better coverage of the school grounds and presumably deter more violence" (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016, p. 374). SROs can also be vital in the creation of required safety plans regarding emergency and crisis responses. These plans include procedures for lockdowns, evacuations, reunifications, and emergency communications; and these plans must be communicated to all pertinent stakeholders (Trump, 2017).

The role of SROs in the creation and review of safety plans is vital because they can work with school staff to identify areas of vulnerabilities through conducting a needs assessment and offering a different perspective than school staff. Their experiences lend themselves to being able to identify areas of need that otherwise school officials may neglect to consider (Gewertz, 2018). Ineffective emergency plans generally are the result of a lack of appropriate training of affected individuals or collaboration among all safety

partners; therefore, safety drills should be practiced regularly, and school staff should work with SROs to identify staging areas for media, parents, students, and other medical personnel (Trump, 2017). Research by Olhausen-Kaylor (2019) revealed in interviews with principals and SROs that both parties believed training and drills help make the schools much safer. They also agreed that solid communication among administrators, resource officers, and parents led to a safer school environment and was key in increasing safety. The district's security efforts were believed to have been enhanced by having SROs on school campuses (Olhausen-Kaylor, 2019).

Trainings and Education

Concerning the duties and responsibilities of SROs, consideration is also made to the training and education that prepare the individuals for fulfilling their job assignments appropriately. Shaver and Decker (2017) detailed information regarding job preparation and education of SROs and indicated that 23 states and the District of Columbia require SROs to be trained or certified through state statutes. The curriculum or training that is recommended for these school-based officers is typically not specified by most states. Official SROs are to have more training than hired security officers, but the training is inconsistent and greatly dependent on the context in which they work, even though adequate training of the individuals is imperative to the success of the SRO program (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016).

According to Bolger et al. (2019), there is a direct correlation between the training or experience of the SROs and their effectiveness. This effectiveness is measured by feedback from stakeholders, incidents involving the SROs on school campuses, and the overall impact of the SRO program. According to the United States Department of

Justice's (2010) Assigning Police Officers to Schools Report from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, the success of an SRO program is contingent on selecting officers who have the skills necessary to succeed in the school environment. They should understand child development and child psychology. The officers should be able to collaborate with students, parents, and school leadership. They should have experience with public speaking and general teaching skills (O'Murphy, 2013).

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Education recommended SROs receive trainings on topics such as student rights, child development and psychology, behavioral interventions, and conflict resolution. Trainings on students with special needs, cultural competence, and knowledge about community resources are also suggested (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Many state requirements for approved SRO training certification can be met through a nationally recognized training of NASRO. Within this 40-hour course, many topics are covered in the time allotted for the training. Individuals spend time learning the foundations of school-based law enforcement, ethical considerations involved, and school law that may influence their decision-making (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). Trainees also receive education on students with special needs, understanding the teen brain, and best practices for mentoring students. The coursework also covers school safety protocols, components of school emergency plans, procedures involved in threat responses, and efforts that can yield student crime prevention. Other topics impacting youth such as social media, drugs, and sex trafficking are also covered in this 40-hour course (U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

Despite a correlation with training and effectiveness of SROs and current recommendations for these individuals, no national standards for training requirements

exist, and only 11 states have established specific training requirements in place. A 2011 survey by the International Association of Chiefs of Police found that 76% of respondents stated they did not receive juvenile justice training beyond basic training. It is worth noting that police academies reported less than 1% of their basic training covers juvenile issues (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). The content covered emphasizes, in most cases, legal issues rather than topics that would benefit those working with children as SROs (Ryan et al., 2018). In North Carolina specifically, SRO certification is not required by law. The basic SRO training is 40 hours and has been mandated by the North Carolina Criminal Education and Standards Commission, whereas the SRO certification course offered through the North Carolina Justice Academy requires a total of 80 hours of core courses and 320 elective hours. Most SROs in North Carolina have not gone through this advanced training (Glenn et al., 2019).

Counts et al. (2018) further examined training practices for SROs across different states. Thirty-two states have some legislation related to the topic of SROs. Eighteen states have no laws on SRO certification requirements. There are only nine states that require SROs to be certified law enforcement officers. Legislation is provided that specifies training requirements to work in schools in 30% of states. There are only six states that specify the number of hours required for this training. Some states specifically define recommended training for SROs, and only one state requires training for working with students with disabilities. The New York Department of Education considers topics that more directly relate to student conduct. They recommend that SROs receive training in de-escalation strategies as well as nonviolent conflict resolution tactics to include peer mediation. They also recommend training in youth courts, extended day programs, and

other school safety-related courses. State leaders in Wisconsin intentionally consider topics directly related to serving in schools and advocate for training in school values and mission, child development, and cultural competency. They also recommend training in student disabilities with an emphasis on the appropriate use of seclusion and restraints with these students. Their recommendations also include an emphasis on restorative justice, trauma-informed care, and mental health issues (Counts et al., 2018). To understand that these considerations for training topics are beneficial to SRO programs, particularly elementary programs, and support the need for specialized training for those working with students in an educational setting, one can simply reference “the highly publicized social media events depicting the handcuffing and arrest of very young elementary students for throwing tantrums or the physical manhandling of students for non-compliant behaviors” (Counts et al., 2018, p. 425).

When examining trainings that would be of benefit for SROs, consideration should be given to working with student misbehavior. There is a need for training for SROs in adequate behavioral intervention strategies in order to equip the officers with ways to respond to situations they may become involved in simply by being employees in a school (Klotz, 2016). Trainings offered to SROs for these situations prepare these individuals in the use of more proactive, resolving strategies as opposed to more reactive and consequential responses. The research indicates that SROs with higher education and training will favor responses to incidents that may be more informal and less punitive rather than requiring stronger disciplinary actions and referrals to juvenile authorities (Bolger et al., 2019). Theriot and Cueller (2016) advocated for training in this area, indicating, “Additional training in adolescent development as well as training focused on

effective classroom management strategies and the development of collaborative partnerships between SROs and teachers may be particularly beneficial” (p. 363).

When further considering the training of SROs, Espelage et al. (2021) discussed that most perpetrators of school violence from 2008 through 2017 had experienced adverse childhood experiences, but most states do not require that SROs receive training to understand the impact of childhood trauma and how it affects student behavior. The focus of their study examined professional development in trauma-informed care. When SROs were given the opportunity for this training through an online module platform, the results indicated increased knowledge in trauma-informed practices. Although the study did not assess if the new knowledge was applied to practice, the participants benefited from gaining an understanding of trauma-informed concepts and strategies. Understanding the context of trauma in relation to behavior and through the lenses of culture and identity is important for those involved in school security (Espelage et al., 2021). The implication of their research is captured in the following:

Many professionals in K-12 settings, including social workers and teachers, are required to participate in professional development and complete assessments that measure their competencies on improving student outcomes. This is not the typical experience of SROs. The lack of information, consistency, and transparency regarding SROs’ experiences and their training requirements has significant implications for school safety and social justice. (Espelage et al., 2021, p. 51)

Glenn et al. (2019) reviewed responses from a survey collected by the North Carolina Center for Safer Schools, and the findings echo the value of training and

education to improve SRO programs across the state. One major theme that appeared in the open-ended section of the survey regarding how to improve the programs was the belief by SROs that they needed more training opportunities. SROs recommended being permitted to attend regional and national conferences that specifically focused on school-based policing. In addition, SROs wanted training opportunities that would allow school personnel to train with the SROs to ensure everyone was on the same page with expectations and protocols. SROs also suggested receiving training related to topics such as mental health, exceptional children, mentoring, and student diversity.

MOUs

To move from theory to action in the training, education, duties, and responsibilities of SROs, MOUs should be created to communicate the expectations of this role to all involved parties. The MOU needs to be utilized as a living document that dictates the day-to-day activities of SROs on school campuses. The preferred approach for the use of MOUs is for the school district and the law enforcement agency to work with a common understanding that the MOU outlines the expected roles and duties of the SROs (Shaver & Decker, 2017). Shaver and Decker (2017) shared that in the results of a 2009 survey of SROs and their police chiefs across 16 school districts in Massachusetts by Thureau and Wald (2010) that for most, an MOU is not a document the districts rely on, and most SROs were not even aware if they existed. Their interviews indicated a strong preference for details of their position not to be in official documents. Responses shared a fear that too much detailing of the agreement between schools and law enforcement agencies would lead to them being constrained in their operations and would yield them ineffective. Despite this belief, NASRO Executive Director Richard Caster

thought that “joint school administrator/police development of MOUs ‘word for word’ is critical” (Thurau & Wald, 2010, p. 991); however, it is worth noting that currently, only 13 states require MOUs (Counts et al., 2018).

Robeson’s (2020) research focused on MOUs aligned with multiple criteria for the SRO program with an understanding of involved employees of a law enforcement agency executing the MOU in a school setting. Included in these criteria are details about roles and responsibilities, duty hours, the chain of command to be executed, guidelines for transporting students, and information pertaining to access to student records. Providing thorough expectations for these aspects of the role of SROs is important for successful execution. Also included in the recommendations is a consideration of the SRO in the triad model of law enforcement, educator, and law-related counselor. Other factors explored by Robeson include working on maintaining successful partnerships with all stakeholders, how to educate others on law-related information, and how to maintain visibility in the learning community. MOUs should also include ways to support national training and a commitment to a collaborative effort in the creation of the MOU with a yearly review of the publicized and shared document. The MOUs of midwestern districts explored by Robeson and compared with these criteria indicated that most MOUs lacked information that detailed specific responses to emergencies and investigations. There was a lack of ways to be involved in the community while maintaining positive relationships with parents, staff, and students. Most MOUs also neglected including how the SROs would share safety information with stakeholders (Robeson, 2020).

Work by Theriot and Cuellar (2016) also offered insight into additional

components MOU documents should include. The MOU needs to reflect the values of the schools, the district, and the law enforcement agencies involved. The variance in these parties across the nation exists, and differing training standards being in operation means it is unlikely that MOUs will always indicate common responsibilities and duties. There are also significant variations in funding sources of these programs. Despite these challenges, the MOUs should intentionally speak to respect for student rights. Guidelines should be provided in the ways in which SROs should give students appropriate notifications and offer fair hearings with an appropriate appeal process. There should be an apparent distinction in what school disciplinary situations should require law enforcement involvement. Without these clear guidelines, SRO interventions could potentially escalate and create negative impacts on students and staff. Formal MOUs should be created to address responsibilities and how they are divided among school personnel. The MOUs should speak to times in which SROs and school leaders would formally and informally discuss the assignments within the SRO program (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016).

A thorough MOU clarifies roles and responsibilities between school districts, local law enforcement, and other critical stakeholders. Detailed MOUs help schools avoid using SROs inappropriately. It is essential that school personnel properly utilize the SRO to ensure the success of the program. Given the significance of this role, school staff would benefit from a yearly orientation to the SRO program with an explanation of all governing policies and procedures that are within the MOU (Barnes, 2016; Counts et al., 2018; Ryan et al., 2018).

SROs in Elementary Schools

From 2005 to 2015, SROs in elementary schools increased from 19% to 30%, yet schools have experienced the largest increase in SRO presence in recent years. The SROs in elementary schools have significantly different roles than in a high school setting. The expectations for the job and interaction with students and staff differ greatly, yet the research regarding SROs in elementary schools is limited while much needed (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018).

Research by Viano et al. (2021) described two school districts in one suburban county in the southern part of the U.S. where SROs from the sheriff's department were placed in all elementary schools following the tragic shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Prior to the increase in SROs in elementary schools, there was an existing priority of both law enforcement and school district leadership to place SROs in elementary schools, but the Sandy Hook shooting acted as a window of opportunity to address that goal (Viano et al., 2021). In interviews conducted in research by Viano et al. (2021), leadership among the sheriff's department, school district, and schools agreed that police were a positive force and could assist in being a part of the school safety solution. The school district and law enforcement leadership had a shared belief that SROs help make schools safer. The findings of this research indicated that to support school safety in the elementary setting, the roles and activities of SROs focused on building security by checking external doors and walking around campus as a visible deterrence to threats. At the elementary level, aggressive parents and those involved in heated custody disputes are often experienced by school staff, and SROs are available to address any incidents that may escalate (Viano et al., 2021).

Overall, SROs in elementary schools are less likely to address threats or issues of crime, thus most of their time is spent on relationship building. Those interviewed believed SROs in the elementary schools serve as goodwill ambassadors to students and families and considered their presence to be advantageous to the school community. The sheriff indicated that the initial training for SROs going into their elementary schools included the clear message that a valuable part of the SRO's job was to build relationships and emphasized the need for positive interactions among SROs and staff and students. Doing so demonstrates law enforcement can be trusted (Viano et al., 2021).

Summary

Twenty children and six adults were tragically shot at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut in 2014, triggering a renewed focus on SROs in school to improve school safety. In President Barack Obama's response to this tragedy, he requested that schools add up to 1,000 more SROs across the United States, many of whom ended up being placed in elementary schools. Years later, a high level of federal support continues to be given for SRO programs, indicating that SROs will continue to be a part of American schools for many years to come (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016). It is important to note that while the initial presence of SROs in schools was for community building and educating students on topics such as road safety and avoiding substance abuse, the position continues to evolve with the increased prevalence of these individuals on school campuses, especially elementary schools. It is essential that district and school leadership work toward a consistent, appropriate, and beneficial approach to the SRO programs (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018).

In a review of the 2018 North Carolina School Resource Officer Survey by the

North Carolina Center for Safer Schools, we are given insight into recent data pertaining to SROs in North Carolina (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019). The survey results detailed the findings of 456 respondent answers to questions regarding the 1,200 held SRO positions in the state. Similar trends emerged that align with the research presented in this chapter regarding SRO duties, training and education, and MOUs. Of those surveyed for this research, 77% were male and 23% female; 65% were employed by the sheriff's department and 31% by the police department; 50% work in high schools, 48% in middle schools, and 43% in elementary schools, with many working in multiple locations; while 75% indicated having an MOU between the district and their law enforcement agencies (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2019).

Of those surveyed for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (2019) report, 74% requested to be SROs, while 26% were placed in their positions. Most respondents were involved in safety-related tasks on their school campuses with 95% helping their schools conduct lockdown drills yearly and 89% updated emergency plans, while 42% worked with staff in round table discussions about critical incidents. Outside of regular duties, 37% indicated being involved in extracurricular school activities. For some, this meant they coached a sport. Others helped with clubs, with some driving activity buses for school events.

The training and education of the participants in the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (2019) survey varied. All respondents in the survey had a high school diploma, with 22% holding a 4-year degree and 5% holding a master's degree. Most of the survey respondents, 86%, attended basic SRO training and only 26% attended North Carolina Justice Academy Advanced SRO Training. Of the SROs who

responded, 27% had attended an NCASRO national conference. Of those surveyed, 23% attended training in mental health and 66% received training in crisis intervention.

Survey responses on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (2019) report about how to improve SRO performance give us a more in-depth picture of the needs for improvement to SRO programs as determined by the SROs themselves. When asked how to improve the job of SROs school-wide, almost 30% indicated more or improved training for SROs as the most prevalent need. Most SROs across the state indicated in open-ended responses specific trainings and professional development they wanted to receive. Topics requested for additional learning included social media and law-based knowledge of when officers can intervene, particularly in the elementary school setting. Other responses indicated a desire for more mental health training, learning regarding student psychology or development, cultural understanding, and student mentorship. SROs recognized that their training and education did not always mirror their experiences in the school setting as well as clarity on their duties and responsibilities.

Additional open-ended responses on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's (2019) survey indicated that SROs believed there existed confusion among all stakeholders regarding their duties and responsibilities. Many responses suggested that administrators, school staff, and SROs work together to clarify and detail specific duties for SROs to avoid further confusion. Many responses shared that some respondents felt as though they were asked to do things outside of the expectations for their roles, and many believed clarity was needed for all impacted by their presence in schools.

In consideration of the current research regarding SROs that is primarily focused

on high crime urban areas and in secondary schools, it is essential that continued work be done to address gaps in the research pertaining to SROs in elementary schools. Standards regarding SRO duties and responsibilities remain ambiguous as does the training and preparation offered that would be beneficial to individuals serving in these roles. In seeking clarity in these areas, best practices for MOUs between the school districts and law enforcement agencies can be considered and implemented (Curran et al., 2021). Decisions regarding the qualifications, responsibilities, training, and utilization of SRO roles are determined at the local level because most states are identified as local control states. This points even more to the value of leadership in school districts and law enforcement agencies gaining a greater understanding of best practices for elementary SRO programs to guide decision-making for the benefit of staff, students, and the community (Counts et al., 2018).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter introduces the methods that were used to collect and analyze data related to the purpose of this study. The goal of my research was to reduce the ambiguity of the role of SROs in elementary schools by determining best practices regarding trainings and preparation of the officers, understanding the assigned duties and responsibilities of these positions, and clarifying what informs MOUs between the school districts and law enforcement agencies overseeing the elementary school SRO programs. While there is a growing body of research exploring the impact of SROs in schools, most of this research focuses on SROs assigned to serve in middle and high schools. There is a lack of research focused specifically on the increasingly more common elementary school SRO programs. The aim of my research was to offer recommendations and insight for improving these programs within school districts by answering the following research questions:

1. What trainings or skills of SROs hired for placement in elementary schools are considered beneficial in fulfilling the goals of their role?
2. What duties and responsibilities should be assigned to SROs in elementary schools?
3. What components of MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies benefit elementary SRO programs?

Research Design

A mixed methods research design was chosen for my research study. A mixed methods research design combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection to obtain an extensive and all-encompassing understanding and substantiation

of findings (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). According to Creswell (2013), using a mixed methods approach integrates two forms of data collected through two distinct designs which allows the researcher to have a more complex understanding of the findings. As a result, the researcher can fulfill the research objectives and answer the research questions.

In agreement with Creswell's (2013) claims, Doyle et al. (2009) identified several benefits to mixed methods research asserting that this approach offers significant completeness to the research in which potential weaknesses in utilizing just one form of research are offset by using the other method to compliment the focus of the study. The mixed methods approach allows the researcher to make strong inferences during the evaluation of the data thus allowing the study to address multiple research questions through systems of data collection. Additionally, researchers often find that a mixed methods approach allows for a more thorough explanation and presentation of findings through a more comprehensive illustration of data (Doyle et al., 2009).

Four types of mixed methods research designs are typically used most often by researchers. These designs include triangulation, transformative, explanatory, and exploratory (Creswell, 2013). The explanatory design utilizes quantitative data and analysis to inform the qualitative data and analysis before the final interpretation of the data. In the exploratory design, the opposite occurs, and qualitative data and analysis inform the quantitative data and analysis for the final data analysis. In the transformative design, a four-phase project involves two data collection series of qualitative data and analysis informing the quantitative data for interpretation and analysis and then quantitative data and analysis informing the qualitative data and analysis for

interpretation (Creswell, 2013). For my research study, the mixed methods research design of triangulation was utilized.

According to Creswell (2013), triangulation is the most common and most well-known mixed methods design utilized by researchers. In this approach, qualitative and quantitative data are collected at the same time and the data analysis is conducted separately. By utilizing this research design, my research questions were “investigated from different angles” (Kvale, 1996, p. 219) to determine “precise meaning and validity” (Kvale, 1996, p. 219). I collected qualitative data through participant responses to open-ended survey questions. Quantitative data were collected at the end of the survey when respondents responded to Likert scale response items. I ensured that both sections of the survey included response items that aligned with the goals of my research and the literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Upon completion of the surveys, the qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed simultaneously. I sought to determine meaning in the open-ended and closed-ended responses to best determine answers to my three research questions. Having both qualitative and quantitative data for analysis was beneficial to my study. As declared by Bryman (2007), “Bringing quantitative and qualitative findings together has the potential to offer insights that could not otherwise be gleaned” (p. 9). The utilization of this approach allowed me to determine the opinions, ideas, and experiences of the participants as related to the research focus. These determinations assisted in drawing conclusions regarding my research questions and providing suggestions applicable to the purpose of this study.

Participants

The participants in this research were purposefully selected to aid in answering the research questions for this study. Participants were from three school districts in North Carolina. All three school districts have SRO programs in their elementary schools. The first district utilized in the research is in the foothills of North Carolina. The district serves approximately 9,300 students in Pre-K through 12th grade. The district is comprised of 13 elementary schools. The second district is in southwestern North Carolina, approximately 20 miles west of Charlotte. The district serves over 30,000 students in Pre-K through 12th grade. The district consists of 29 elementary schools. The third district is in the northern part of the state with approximately 6,000 students and 11 elementary schools. All three districts utilize law enforcement officers to serve in elementary schools.

From these three districts, participants for this study were identified. Included in the research were the three district-level leaders who oversaw the SRO programs in the three school districts. The individuals who oversaw the SROs on behalf of the law enforcement agencies also participated in the research. Additionally, the participants included the SROs employed within the district who served at the elementary level. The sample size for this mixed methods research was created to have a minimum of 12 participants. This size was large enough to represent the population of interest while allowing for sufficient data collection to support the work of this research and small enough to extensively analyze their responses from the survey to gain significant insight to benefit the work of the study (Nastasi et al., 2021).

Procedures

Prior to moving into the data collection portion of this research study, the self-created open-ended and Likert scale response items for the participant survey were validated by five individuals not participating in the study or employed in the three districts involved in the study. Two elementary SROs, one law enforcement leader who works with the SRO program, one elementary principal, and one employee of the sheriff's department who once served as an elementary SRO were involved in the instrument validation. This panel of individuals was responsible for determining the validity of the data tool prepared to be utilized in the research study.

To complete the validation process, each survey item was emailed to the five-person panel through a Google Form. The Lawshe method of content validity was used to determine the validity of each survey item. Using this method ensured each item of the data collection instrument was of critical value. Each panelist anonymously rated each survey item as “not necessary,” “useful, but not essential,” or “essential” to determine which items should be included in the survey. The panelists also responded to seven open-ended questions pertaining to the clarity, acceptability, length and flow, technical quality, introduction, and consent form portions of the survey. The input of the panelists was utilized to ensure the participants of the research study would be presented with a high-quality instrument that would benefit the successful compilation of responses (Fisher, 2020).

Following this instrument validation and prior to beginning the data collection, I obtained permission (Appendix A) for the research from the involved districts, involved law enforcement agencies, and the Gardner-Webb Institutional Review Board. Upon

approval, I emailed an invitation (Appendix B) to each participant inviting them to participate in the study. This invitation explained the purpose and extent of the research prior to obtaining informed consent from each of the participants. It was made clear that participation was voluntary and their involvement could be terminated at any time. Following the invitation, the survey used for this research was emailed to the participants through a Qualtrics link.

Instrumentation

For my data collection, a self-created survey (Appendix C) aligned with the three research questions was utilized. The survey included a mix of open-ended questions and closed-ended Likert scale response times. According to Butin (2010), survey research is a very common tool for gathering data. With the improvements in technology, surveys are easily created and distributed. Responses are easily collected and organized for analysis as well.

While surveys are commonly used in research, it is imperative that researchers are mindful of standard protocols when utilizing surveys in data collection. Butin (2010) detailed that effective surveys are designed to intentionally align with your research questions and the research literature included in your study. Questions cannot be asked just because it is considered a quality question; instead, any question included in the survey needs to be grounded in your own literature review. Ensuring this is the case in your research study ensures responses obtained in your data collection answer the research questions of your study. “Having this specific thread will make your data analysis simple, logical, and powerful” (Butin, 2010, p. 94).

The survey utilized in my research inquired about SRO training and preparation,

SRO duties and responsibilities, and the MOUs between the law enforcement agencies and school districts. Participants accessed the survey online through Qualtrics. This commonly used platform was easily accessible and allowed for anonymous responses to the survey questions. Participants had 2 weeks to complete the survey. A reminder for completion was sent following the first week of the survey window and on the day before the survey window was closed to participants.

Included with the survey was a brief introduction of the study and directions for completing the three sections of the survey instrument. The first portion of the survey collected background information regarding the participant's job title and years of experience in the current position. The second section of the instrument included 10 open-ended items with three items related to each of the three research questions followed by a question inquiring about any additional information desired to be shared. This question format allowed the participants to provide responses in their own words. The respondents were able to include more detail within their responses and had the opportunity to provide justifications and insight to the responses they provided. This was different than what would have been possible with a strictly closed-question structure. This qualitative approach allowed me to take a comprehensive look at the research findings when considering conclusions to my research questions.

The third section of the data instrument included 15 Likert scale response items with five questions related to each of the three research questions. The Likert scale is one of the most frequently used tools in educational research and asks respondents to show their level of agreement with a given statement (Joshi et al., 2015). This practical and accessible method of collecting data allows researchers to break down topics into

recordable findings while providing insight into perceptions and opinions related to the research topic. The 15 questions of my survey asked participants to rate each response item on a 5-point scale. Respondents indicated “very important,” “important,” “fairly important,” “slightly important,” and “not important” to each of the statements included in this portion of the survey.

Upon completion of the survey, participants submitted the survey electronically. Once finished, the participants received a confirmation of their responses being submitted. Submission of their responses made their answers immediately accessible to me within the electronic platform. I had the option to view the responses organized individually or collectively. I was also able to view the responses as a bar graph or table.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the responses of the participants were analyzed to determine significant findings related to each of the three research questions. Table 1 indicates which response items correlated with each research question.

Table 1

Research Questions and Survey Alignment

	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
Qualitative open-ended survey questions	Questions 1, 7, 9	Questions 2, 3, 5	Questions 4, 6, 8
Quantitative close-ended Likert scale responses	Questions 6-10	Questions 1-5	Questions 11-15

Once all responses were collected, the open-ended answers were reviewed to determine common themes in the responses. I engaged in the process of manual coding of

participant responses to determine recurring groupings among the responses for each item. Where necessary, codes were simplified or combined to best organize the responses in relation to the research questions.

The second section of the survey involved the Likert scale responses. Responses to these items were assigned numbers to the scale of 1 to 5. Responses were analyzed as ordinal data, and the mean for each question was determined. Through simple frequency charting, trends in responses intended to answer each of the three research questions were analyzed. The qualitative and quantitative data were integrated to determine meaning related to the research purpose in preparation for organizing research conclusions.

Summary

The goal of this study was to address a growing gap in research pertaining to elementary school SROs. In alignment with the purpose of this study, research was conducted to identify best practices for the training and preparation, job duties and responsibility assignments, and MOUs pertaining to elementary SROs. Participants directly related to elementary SRO programs in three North Carolina school districts were selected to respond to open-ended and Likert scale response items in this mixed methods research. Their responses were analyzed to identify and compile best practices regarding the utilization of SROs in the elementary school setting.

The findings of this research are beneficial to school districts across the state. In answering the three research questions, district leadership, law enforcement agencies, and SROs gain valuable insight pertaining to best practices of elementary school SRO programs. The research is meaningful to strengthening these programs for the benefit of students, schools, and the surrounding communities.

Chapter 4 takes an in-depth look at the findings of this research and connects the work to the three research questions of this study. Chapter 5 summarizes the work and connects the findings to other studies discussed in the literature review of Chapter 2.

Chapter 4: Findings

Over time, there has been a steady increase in the presence of SROs in all schools, particularly elementary schools. Unfortunately, the lack of clarity in expectations and protocols for the elementary SRO program can be problematic for schools, districts, regions, and states. This research study sought to provide a clearer understanding of the considerations to be made regarding best practices for SRO programs in the elementary school setting.

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to reduce existing ambiguity pertaining to the role of SROs in elementary schools. The goal of the research was to identify best practices regarding the training and professional development of elementary SROs, protocols related to the assigned duties and responsibilities of these individuals, and considerations to be made in the creation of MOUs between law enforcement agencies and the school districts in which the elementary SRO programs operate.

This chapter provides an overview of the research conducted for this study and discusses the data collected. The qualitative and quantitative data analysis are discussed within the framework of the three research questions that guided the study.

Research Questions

Considering there is a lack of research focused specifically on the growing number of elementary school SRO programs, this study was designed to answer three guiding questions pertaining to the role of the SRO in elementary schools. With the goal of offering clarity and reducing ambiguity that may exist within these programs that serve school districts, the research conducted was executed through the lens of the following

research questions.

1. What trainings or skills of SROs hired for placement in elementary schools are considered beneficial in fulfilling the goals of their role?
2. What duties and responsibilities should be assigned to SROs in elementary schools?
3. What components of MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies benefit elementary SRO programs?

Participants and Response Rate

This research study involved the participation of individuals associated with the elementary SRO programs in three North Carolina school districts. The first district utilized in the research is in the foothills of North Carolina. The district serves approximately 9,300 students in Pre-K through 12th grade. The district is comprised of 13 elementary schools. The second district is in southwestern North Carolina, approximately 20 miles west of Charlotte. The district serves over 30,000 students in Pre-K through 12th grade. The district consists of 29 elementary schools. The third district is in the northern part of the state with approximately 6,000 students and 11 elementary schools. All three districts utilize law enforcement officers to serve in elementary schools.

From these three districts, participants for this study included district-level leaders who oversaw the SRO programs and served as the points of contact for the programs in the three school districts. The individuals who oversaw the SROs on behalf of the law enforcement agencies also participated in the research study. Additionally, the participants in this research included the SROs employed within the districts who served at the elementary school level.

While completing the research survey, the participants identified themselves as school district administration if they served in the school district as the leader who oversaw the SRO program for the district. Participants identified themselves as law enforcement administration if they oversaw the SROs for their law enforcement agency. The individuals who served as officers in the elementary schools identified themselves as SROs. The results of the participant profile indicated three school district administrators, four law enforcement administrators, and 11 SROs participated in the study. Without a role description included in the survey, it is assumed that one individual who served as an SRO identified themselves as a law enforcement administrator. This may have occurred if this individual served as a leader among the SROs. The participants also identified the number of years they served in their current roles when completing the initial portion of the research survey. Due to maintaining the confidentiality of the participants, demographic data related to where the individuals worked were not collected, and no other identifying information was requested from the participants.

Table 2*Participant Profiles*

Participant	Years in current position
District Administrator 1	0-4 years
District Administrator 2	5-9 years
District Administrator 3	0-4 years
Law Enforcement Administrator 1	20 or more years
Law Enforcement Administrator 2	20 or more years
Law Enforcement Administrator 3	0-4 years
Law Enforcement Administrator 4	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 1	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 2	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 3	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 4	20 or more years
School Resource Officer 5	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 6	10-14 years
School Resource Officer 7	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 8	5-9 years
School Resource Officer 9	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 10	0-4 years
School Resource Officer 11	5-9 years

The goal of the study was to have a minimum of 12 participants. In the end, 18 participants were involved in the research. While all data presented throughout this chapter reflect responses from all 18 participants, those involved in the study were informed that they could skip any questions they preferred not to answer without penalty. As a result, not all questions received a 100% response rate, but all responses provided among the 18 participants were included in the data analysis.

Data Collection

To begin the research process, the superintendents of the three school districts were contacted with information regarding the purpose and structure of the study. Permission to conduct the study with the participation of district leadership was requested

and granted by the three superintendents. The law enforcement administrators were also contacted and provided information about my research. Permission to conduct the study with the participation of their employees was also requested. Once permission was obtained by the two agencies for the participation of their employees in my research and approval obtained by the Gardner-Webb Institutional Review Board committee, I began the data collection process.

The secure platform, Qualtrics, was utilized to input the survey response items. The self-created survey had been validated previously through an evaluation panel's review of the response items. The Lawshe method was utilized to measure the content validity ratio of each item and to secure the content validity index for the survey validation process. The survey was determined to be a valid tool for research.

The first portion of the survey was structured to obtain information pertaining to the positions and years in the current roles of the participants. The second section of the survey included 10 open-ended response items. The third and final section of the survey included fifteen 5-point Likert scale response items. The responses of the participants offered qualitative and quantitative data related to the three guiding research questions of this study. The alignment of the response items to the research questions is identified in Table 3.

Table 3*Data Analysis and Research Question Alignment*

	Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3
Qualitative open-ended survey questions	Questions 1, 7, 9	Questions 2, 3, 5	Questions 4, 6, 8
Quantitative closed-ended Likert scale responses	Questions 6-10	Questions 1-5	Questions 11-15

Following the creation of the survey in Qualtrics, a link for distribution was obtained and emailed to the participants with a time frame of 2 weeks for survey completion. A week after the initial email, a reminder email was sent to the participants. The window for survey completion closed on February 11, 2022, at 6:00 pm. With the collection of responses complete, Qualtrics was accessed to review and analyze survey responses. The collected qualitative data were analyzed through manual coding to determine recurring groupings among the responses for each item. The obtained quantitative data were analyzed as ordinal data, and the mean for each response item was determined. The trends in the responses intended to answer each of the three research questions were analyzed and merged to determine meaning related to the purpose of my research.

Overview of Research Responses

Research participants provided open-ended responses to 10 questions that corresponded with the research questions. The responses were reviewed in relation to the research questions and organized accordingly with the use of Microsoft Excel. The first set of questions were examined for insight pertaining to the first research question, “What

trainings or skills of SROs hired for placement in elementary schools are considered beneficial in fulfilling the goals of their role?” The next set of questions were analyzed for their correspondence to the second research question, “What duties and responsibilities should be assigned to SROs in elementary schools?” The last set of open-ended question responses were analyzed for their relation to the last research question, “What components of MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies benefit elementary SRO programs?” Themes among the responses for each question were identified and coded before determining the frequency of the themes among the responses.

Participants were also asked to use a 5-point Likert scale to determine the importance of 15 response items to an elementary SRO program. Likert scale options for response included not important, slightly important, fairly important, important, and very important. For each of the items, the lowest rating is noted as the minimum, and the highest rating is noted as the maximum. The mean of the data set is the sum of all values divided by the total number of values. The mean, average response, was also calculated for each of the 15 statements. The standard deviation (SD) was identified and indicates how far each value is from the mean of the data set. A high SD means the values are far from the mean. High SDs indicate a wide range of scores. The lower the SD, the more closely aligned to the mean the scores fell. Lower SDs indicate a greater consensus for response items among those participating in the research. The variance measures the average degree to which each data point differs from the mean. Data with low variance are dominated by the mean, whereas data with high variance are more spread out in relation to the mean.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Research Question 1: What Trainings or Skills of SROs Hired for Placement in Elementary Schools Are Considered Beneficial in Fulfilling the Goals of Their Role?

Responses from the open-ended questions that aligned with the first research question asked participants to provide their thoughts on matters related to trainings and experiences that would be beneficial to an elementary SRO. The first question asked what training an individual serving as an elementary SRO should have. Table 4 identifies the recurring themes among the short answer responses.

Table 4

Question 1 Responses (Identify the areas of professional development or training an SRO serving in this role at an elementary school should have. n=14)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Communication	2	14%
Safety	5	36%
Understanding juveniles	5	36%
De-escalation	5	36%
Required SRO training	5	36%
Mental health	3	21%

As evidenced in the themes above, participants indicated that the trainings related to school safety were essential for an elementary SRO. Responses included topics such as crisis intervention, active shooter responses, and emergency safety plans. Participants also indicated that elementary SROs should have training or professional development related to understanding children and working with juveniles. Research participants acknowledged that dealing with younger children can be new to some officers and provided juvenile training examples that would benefit SROs such as professional

development in “juvenile questioning” or “juvenile law.”

Another theme among the responses was de-escalation strategies for students struggling with behaviors in the school setting. It was noted that training in these strategies for elementary students would be beneficial to the officers. Additionally, several responses indicated mental health training would also be necessary for elementary SROs. A few of the open-ended responses for this question indicated professional development regarding how to maintain effective communication with stakeholders and public speaking would be helpful. Several participants also solely referenced the required SRO training as being the essential professional development for elementary SROs.

The next open-ended response item that supported the first research question asked participants to detail their thoughts on what should be included in the new hire trainings for elementary SROs. Six themes were identified from the responses provided by the participants.

Table 5

Question 2 Responses (What should be included in the induction training for new hires in the elementary SRO program? n=12)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Mandated training	4	33%
School procedures and operations	5	42%
Safety	6	50%
Resources for stakeholders	2	17%
Mental health	4	33%
Field training	2	17%

Responses to this question emphasized the importance of school safety to the training of new hires in the elementary SRO programs. Forty-two percent of the

responses also emphasized the importance of new hires in an elementary SRO program being trained on the procedures and operations of the school they are serving. Similar in occurrence was the emphasis on induction training related to the mental health needs of students being served by the SRO. Responses also highlighted the importance of the state-required SRO training. Participants also indicated the benefit of new SROs understanding what resources are available for those within the community they serve. Specifically, participants indicated induction training that allowed the SROs to gain an understanding and knowledge of what social service supports, youth programs, and mental health resources within the community existed would be beneficial. A few responses also indicated the value of being mentored by an established elementary SRO and spending time working alongside other officers to learn about the duties of the job.

The last question related to the first research question requested information about the areas where an elementary SRO may feel less prepared than other components of their roles when serving in their roles. Response analysis contributes to an understanding of what specific areas within the elementary SRO program would benefit from increased training or professional development for these individuals.

Table 6

Question 3 Responses (What aspects of serving in an elementary school do you believe SROs feel less prepared for than other areas? n=12)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Mental health	3	25%
Age of students	6	50%
Procedures	4	33%
Backgrounds of stakeholders	2	17%

Responses of the participants indicated the age of elementary students to be an area someone in this role may feel less prepared for than other aspects of their job role. The challenges of relating to juveniles as opposed to the more familiar adult age were noted in one participant's response as a potential area where the SROs were less prepared. Additionally, understanding how to bond and build relationships with younger children may present itself as a challenge. Similarly learning how to communicate with this age was an additional insight provided by the participants as an issue SROs face related to the age of students. Also significant among several responses was the lack of preparation for understanding the procedures and protocols regarding the operations of the school setting. Other themes among these responses included the mental health-related incidents in the elementary setting as well as being able to build a thorough understanding of the backgrounds and experiences of those the SROs serve in their school community.

Research Question 2: What Duties and Responsibilities Are Assigned to SROs in Elementary Schools?

Three questions requiring an open-ended response aligned with the second

research question of this study. This research question sought to determine what duties and responsibilities should be expected of elementary SROs. Four themes were identified among the participant responses when asked specifically what duties and responsibilities should exist for these individuals.

Table 7

Question 4 Responses (What duties and responsibilities should be required of an elementary SRO? n=14)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Safety plans and procedures	12	86%
Relationships with stakeholders	8	57%
Law enforcement	3	21%
Visibility and presence	5	36%

With 86% of participants in agreement, being responsible for safety plans and safety procedures was identified as an expected duty and responsibility of the elementary SRO. Also identified as an expected responsibility and duty was the expectation that SROs would build relationships with the various stakeholders of the school community to include staff, students, and parents. Also noted in responses to this question was the importance of elementary SROs being visible and maintaining a significant presence around the campus at varying locations throughout the day. Noted as an expected duty for elementary SROs in 21% of the responses was the expectation that elementary SROs would be enforcers of the law throughout the school community.

In consideration of the duties and responsibilities for an elementary SRO, participants in the research study were asked in the next question related to this research question for their responses regarding any possible challenges or hurdles faced when

fulfilling their responsibilities. From their provided responses, five themes emerged.

Table 8

Question 5 Responses (What challenges obstruct the ability of the elementary SROs to carry out the duties and responsibilities of their roles? n=10)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Staffing concerns	3	30%
Negative view of law enforcement	3	30%
Confusion on duties and role	3	30%
Relationship with administration or school staff	4	40%
Requests outside of responsibilities	3	30%

Four of the themes identified in the responses for this question were noted in 30% of the participants' responses. Participants noted staffing challenges for elementary schools due to a shortage of hired employees or due to the hired employees needing to be utilized for a stronger presence at the middle and high schools. Additionally, participants revealed that confusion about what SROs can and should do often results in being asked to do things outside of their jurisdiction for their position. Several participants also noted that stakeholders in the school community may have negative views or opinions of law enforcement due to the media or because of experiences in their personal lives. Participants noted that these views can contribute to hurdles in successfully fulfilling the duties of their position. The most frequent response among the participants for this question indicated that the relationship with the administrators or with other staff can be difficult, thus making the fulfillment of their duties more challenging.

As evident in the previous responses, confusion can exist in the duties and responsibilities of the elementary SRO. Participants were asked to share what these

individuals serving in this role should not be asked to do while serving the elementary schools. Five themes emerged from their responses.

Table 9

Question 6 Responses (What duties and responsibilities should school staff not expect an elementary SRO to fulfill? n=13)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Discipline	10	77%
Predictable duties	5	38%
Coverage	5	38%
Transporting/escorting of students	3	23%
Hindrances to enforcing safety protocols	4	31%

An overwhelming 77% of responses revealed that elementary SROs should not be asked to handle school-based discipline matters that do not involve criminal activity. Also revealed in the responses was the need to not place elementary SROs on duties that place them in the same location daily. Examples of such duties included traffic duty, cafeteria duty, arrival duty, and administrative duties. Explained in the responses was the fact that predictable duties leave other areas as possible targets for unsafe situations or criminal activity. Additionally, it was identified that asking SROs to cover classrooms in need of an adult, subbing for a class without a teacher, covering front office duties, or stepping in for other coverage needs is not to be expected of elementary SROs. Several responses also simply indicated that anything asked of the SROs that takes away from the focus of safety should be avoided.

Research Question 3: What Components of MOUs Between School Districts and Law Enforcement Agencies Benefit Elementary SRO Programs?

The third research question for this research study focused on best practices for MOUs between the law enforcement agencies and school districts. To determine what should be included in the document, a series of questions were asked of the participants to gain an understanding of the best protocols for MOUs for the elementary SRO program.

The first question asked for the participants to detail the goals and objectives of the elementary SRO program. Three themes were revealed in the collection of their responses. The two most frequent responses indicated safety and relationships as goals and objectives of the SRO program. Responses also spoke to the role SROs have in providing education of law-related matters to school stakeholders including students and staff. Additionally, providing resources to stakeholders is a goal of the program.

Table 10

Question 7 Responses (What are the goals and objectives of the elementary SRO program? n=11)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Safety	9	82%
Relationships with stakeholders	9	82%
Provide education and resources	4	36%

Participants were also asked to provide information related to communication among the district, school, law enforcement, and elementary SRO program staff.

Descriptions of what should exist regarding the communication procedures are shared in

Table 11.

Table 11

Question 8 Responses (Describe the communication procedures that should exist between the district and school staff, law enforcement staff, and elementary SROs. n=12)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Clear understanding of role	7	58%
Meetings among stakeholders	2	17%
Frequent	3	25%
Open	5	42%
Protocols for concern resolution	2	17%

Respondents shared in 58% of the responses that a clear understanding of the role should be a major piece of communication procedures. Additionally, “open” communication was often quoted as being of utmost importance. An “open door policy” was recommended. Participants also responded that communication should flow freely among the stakeholders throughout the year. Of significant importance, frequent communication was emphasized. Communication should happen often among all directly impacted by the elementary SRO program. Responses also revealed that it is helpful if opportunities for stakeholders to hold meetings throughout the year exist to ensure all parties remain on the same page. Lastly, a few responses indicated the need for a “chain of command” if issues arise between staff and SRO or SRO and happenings within the school. It was stated that this communication chain was vital to communication protocols.

Looking further into what might be included in an MOU between districts and law enforcement agencies, participants were asked to discuss expectations regarding the partnerships of SROs with their elementary school communities. From these responses,

five themes were present.

Table 12

Question 9 Responses (How should elementary SROs build partnerships with students, staff, and parents within their school communities? n=11)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Build trust	4	36%
Be visible	6	55%
Build relationships	6	55%
Attend activities/events	2	18%
Communicate with stakeholders	6	55%

Respondents revealed in 55% of all responses the value of visibility, relationships, and communications in building partnerships with the school community. Additionally, working to build trust through positive interactions and attending school activities and events outside of the regular day can contribute to strong partnerships with those the SROs serve within the school community.

Additional Insight

At the conclusion of the open-ended response items, in order to ensure all information the participants wanted to share for the study was provided, one question asked them to provide anything they may not have had the opportunity to provide in the other open-ended responses. Emerging from these responses were themes also evident in the other responses but reemphasized by the participants.

Table 13

Question 10 Responses (What additional information or insight can you provide about the elementary SRO program? n=9)

Themes	Number of responses	Percentage of responses
Support to stakeholders	4	44%
Can build positive view of officers	4	44%
Relationship-building opportunities	4	44%
Duties need to be clear	1	11%
Staffing challenges exist	1	11%

In 44% of the responses, participants emphasized the support SROs can offer to their stakeholders through assistance to the staff, students, or administrative teams of their schools. Through this support, relationships are built that can positively impact the school community. Revealed in these responses was also the fact that these positive interactions can have a significant impact on building a positive view of officers that may not be initially held by some stakeholders based on what may have been viewed in the media or experienced in their personal lives. Respondents also reemphasized the importance of duties being clear and an understanding that, similar to other professions currently, staffing challenges do exist and can be an obstacle for elementary SRO programs to overcome.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data were collected from the participants through their completion of 15 Likert scale responses. Each research question aligns with five of the Likert scale response items. An overview of these data is presented prior to an examination of the responses in relation to these three research questions.

Overview of Likert Scale Data

Each of the 15 response items was rated as 1=not important, 2=slightly important, 3=fairly important, 4=important, and 5=very important. The responses were analyzed to determine the minimum and maximum score, the mean, the SD, and the variance.

Table 14*Ranking of Importance for an Elementary SRO Program*

Statement regarding elementary SRO program	Mi	Ma	M	SD	V
The responsibilities and duties of an elementary SRO are agreed upon and understood by all school stakeholders.	3	5	4.64	.72	.52
Elementary SROs serve as an informal counselor to students.	1	5	3.86	1.06	1.12
Elementary SROs enforce the law and safety protocols on school campus.	4	5	4.86	.35	.12
Elementary SROs teach lessons to students throughout the school year.	1	5	3.57	1.24	1.53
Elementary SROs serve as a liaison for support services for troubled students.	1	5	4.14	1.06	1.12
Elementary SROs participate in ongoing in-service professional learning.	1	5	4.57	1.05	1.10
Elementary SROs have experience or training specific to working with elementary school aged children prior to serving in an elementary SRO position.	1	5	3.64	1.23	1.52
Each duty and responsibility of the elementary SRO align with previous or upcoming training and professional development.	1	5	3.79	1.26	1.60
Elementary SROs are trained on topics related to the rights of students.	3	5	4.43	.73	.53
Elementary SROs are assessed for their understanding of the skill sets necessary to fulfill the goals and objectives of the elementary SRO program.	3	5	4.29	.80	.63
Elementary SRO programs are evaluated annually by representatives from the district and the law enforcement agencies.	1	5	3.93	1.22	1.49
The elementary SRO program's goals and objectives support the values and beliefs of the school district.	1	5	4.07	1.03	1.07
There are established guidelines for an elementary SRO's response to discipline incidents.	3	5	4.36	.81	.66
There are established guidelines for an elementary SRO's involvement in school safety.	3	5	4.57	.73	.53
There are established expectations for an elementary SRO's visibility on campus before, during, and after the school day.	1	5	4.50	1.05	1.11

Note. Mi = minimum scores, Ma = maximum score, M = mean score, SD = standard deviation, and V = variance.

As evidenced in the responses from the participants, the highest average score was for the response item that indicated “Elementary SROs enforce the law and safety protocols on school campus,” with a mean of 4.86. “The responsibilities and duties of an elementary SRO are agreed upon and understood by all school stakeholders,” with a mean of 4.64, was second in the highest average score. Two items both received an average score of 4.57. These items included “Elementary SROs participate in ongoing in-service professional learning” and “There are established guidelines for an elementary SRO’s involvement in school safety.”

While most items had a mean of 4 or higher, five items received a mean score of 3.99 or lower. The lowest average score for an item’s importance to an elementary SRO program was “Elementary SROs teach lessons to students throughout the school year,” with a mean of 3.57. With a mean of 3.64, “Elementary SROs have experience or training specific to working with elementary aged children prior to serving in an elementary SRO position” was the second-lowest average score. The remaining items receiving an average score lower than 3.99 were “Each duty and responsibility of the elementary SRO align with previous or upcoming training and professional development,” with a mean of 3.79; “Elementary SROs serve as an informal counselor to students,” with a mean of 3.86; and “Elementary SRO programs are evaluated annually by representatives from the district and the law enforcement agencies,” with a mean of 3.93. Nine response items had a minimum score of 1, while all items had a maximum score of 5. While no item had a 100% score of 5, “Elementary SROs enforce the law and safety protocols on school campus” had no lower score than 4, or “important.”

The item ranked with the highest percentage of “very important” was

“Elementary SROs enforce the law and safety protocols on school campus,” with 85.71% of the responses being “very important.” In fact, this item received the highest favorable responses indicating “important” or “very important,” with 100% of respondents in agreement. “The responsibilities and duties of an elementary SRO are agreed upon and understood by all school stakeholders” and “Elementary SROs participate in ongoing in-service professional learning” were second highest with 78.57% of participant responses indicating these elements of an elementary SRO program being “very important,” while SROs participating in in-service professional learning did obtain a higher percentage of “important” and “very important,” with 92.86% indicating these responses. “There are established expectations for an elementary SRO’s visibility on campus before, during, and after the school day” also shared this high favorable respondent percentage.

Three items received the lowest percentage of participants indicating the statements as being “very important” to elementary SRO programs. With a percentage of only 28.57, these items were “Elementary SROs serve as informal counselor to students,” “Elementary SROs teach lessons to students throughout the school year,” and Elementary SROs have experience or training specific to working with elementary school aged children prior to serving in an elementary SRO position.”

Of the statements to evaluate for importance to elementary SRO programs, three items had the highest percentage of participants ranking the items as “not important” or “slightly important.” With 21.34% of respondents ranking these items with no or slight importance, “Elementary SROs teach lessons to students throughout the school year,” “Elementary SROs have experience or training specific to working with elementary school aged children prior to serving in an elementary SRO position,” and “Each duty

and responsibility of the elementary SRO align with previous or upcoming training and professional development” were ranked the least favorable for important elements to an elementary SRO program.

Elements with the greatest percentage of neutral responses for “fairly important” included the items that discussed SROs serving as informal counselors, teaching lessons throughout the year to students, being assessed for their understanding of the skill sets necessary to fulfill the goals and objectives of the SRO program, and having established guidelines for the SROs involvement in discipline incidents. While all these response items had 21.4% of responses indicating neutrality, it is worth noting that “Elementary SROs teach lessons to students throughout the school year” had a greater percentage of “not important” or “slightly important” than all the other items that had more favorable responses for those response items.

The item that indicated the greatest consensus with the lowest SD was “Elementary SROs enforce the law and safety protocols on school campus,” with an SD of .35. Also with the highest mean, this item stands out as a heavily agreed-upon item of significant importance to elementary SRO programs. In close second for the lowest SD was “The responsibilities and duties of an elementary SRO are agreed upon and understood by all school stakeholders,” with an SD of .72. With the second highest mean, this also indicates a high consensus of the importance of this item to these programs. Two response items, “Elementary SROs are trained on topics related to the rights of students” and “There are established guidelines for an elementary SRO’s involvement in school safety,” had SD scores of .73. Both items, while not the highest, had mean scores above 4.4, also indicating a strong agreement among participants of the importance of these

elements to the elementary SRO program.

In review of items with lower average scores, the greatest consensus as evident through the lowest SD was for “Elementary SROs serve as an informal counselor to students,” with a mean of 3.86 and an SD of 1.06. There was also strong consensus in elementary SROs not needing experience or training specific to working with elementary school aged children prior to serving in an elementary school, with an SD of 1.23 and a mean of 3.64.

The items with the least variation from the mean were the items that spoke to the responsibilities and duties of elementary SROs being known by all stakeholders, the SROs enforcing the law and safety protocols on campus, having established guidelines regarding school safety, and the SROs being trained on topics related to the rights of students. The greatest variation from the mean as indicated with a high variance score was 1.60 for the duties and responsibilities of the SRO aligning with previous training and professional development. With a mean of 3.64, responses ranged from not important to very important. With a variance score of 1.52, “Elementary SROs have experience or training specific to working with elementary school aged children prior to serving in an elementary SRO position” also revealed the greatest deviations from the mean of 3.64 with rankings of “not important” to “very important.”

Correlation Between Research Questions and Qualitative Data

Research Question 1: What Trainings or Skills of SROs Hired for Placement in Elementary Schools Are Considered Beneficial in Fulfilling the Goals of Their Role? Items 6-10 on the Likert scale were included to gain insight regarding the professional development and training of elementary SROs. The item with the highest

average score of 4.57 indicates that elementary SROs should continue to participate in ongoing training. With a score of 4.43, knowing the rights of elementary students is seen as important to an elementary SRO program. While not as high of a mean score, there was general agreement that SROs should be assessed on having the skills necessary to fulfill the goals of the SRO program. Within this subset of response items, participants found elementary SROs having experience and training with elementary students and the duties of the SROs aligning with professional development or trainings to be of lesser importance.

Research Question 2: What Duties and Responsibilities Are Assigned to SROs in Elementary Schools? Items 1-5 were included in the research survey to learn more about the duties and responsibilities that should exist for elementary SROs. Of these items, the highest mean score and strongest consensus indicated that SROs are to enforce the law and maintain safety on their school campuses. Also, with a high mean score and lower SD, was the response item that indicated that the roles and duties of the elementary SRO are known and understood by all stakeholders. Of lesser importance in relation to duties and responsibilities according to participants was elementary SROs serving as informal counselors or teaching lessons to students. Only slightly higher in its importance rating was elementary SROs serving as liaisons for troubled students.

Research Question 3: What Components of MOUs Between School Districts and Law Enforcement Agencies Benefit Elementary SRO programs? The last five response items on the Likert scale were statements related to best practices for MOUs for elementary SRO programs. From these responses, it was believed, with the highest mean score and lowest SD and variance, that there should be established guidelines for SRO

involvement in school safety. Similarly in responses, it was also agreed that there should be expectations for an SRO's visibility at various times during the workday. There was also a consensus on the value of having established guidelines for an elementary SRO's response to discipline procedures and protocols. Of lesser importance is the need for the programs to be evaluated annually or for the program's goals and objectives to align with the beliefs of the school district.

Trends Across Qualitative and Quantitative Data

The qualitative data collected from the open-ended responses were analyzed for themes in the groupings of response items for each research question. The Likert scale response items were analyzed to determine the importance of each statement to an elementary SRO program as indicated by the participants. The items were then analyzed in relation to the three research questions. In analyzing the findings, I identified the prominent themes in the responses across the two sets of data in relation to the three research questions.

Table 15*Correlation of Research Questions and Themes*

Research questions	Emerging themes
Research Question 1: What trainings or skills of SROs hired for placement in elementary schools are considered beneficial in fulfilling the goals of their role?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety procedures and protocols • Working with elementary aged juveniles • Mental health strategies • De-escalation strategies • Background knowledge of school, stakeholders, and community • Effective communication • Formal training
Research Question 2: What duties and responsibilities should be assigned to SROs in elementary schools?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safety plans and procedures • Relationships with stakeholders • Law enforcer • Campus visibility
Research Question 3: What components of MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies benefit elementary SRO programs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program goals—safety, relationships, law education, resources • Maintain partnerships through campus visibility, community participation, communication with stakeholders, trusting relationships • Clear roles and responsibilities • Chain of command for communication

As seen in Table 14, responses to Research Question 1 emphasize trainings that benefit individuals serving in the role of elementary SROs. Aside from the required training for all SROs, the findings of this research emphasize the need for professional development that pertains to safety procedures and protocols. Working with juveniles is also emphasized across the data sets, as is the need for professional development in mental health and de-escalation strategies. Elementary SROs are also in need of training

that offers them the opportunity to learn about the school, the stakeholders, and the communities in which they will serve. Lastly, SROs in the elementary setting need training on communication protocols.

In analyzing the findings from the qualitative and quantitative data collections, the study indicated responses that detail the duties and responsibilities an elementary SRO should have. An SRO in this setting should be responsible for safety procedures and safety plans and maintaining safety at the school. SROs in this setting should maintain relationships with the parents, students, and staff. They should be responsible for being visible on the school campus in various locations throughout the day. Additionally, elementary SROs are responsible for being enforcers of the law.

In response to the last research question, the findings of this study across the data collected indicate several components for the MOUs between the law enforcement agencies and school districts. The program goals of the elementary SRO program include safety, relationships, and providing law education and resource offerings. Partnerships should be maintained by the elementary SRO through visibility, community participation, communication throughout the school community, and the building of positive and trusting relationships with stakeholders. As determined from the responses of the participants, it is important that the roles and responsibilities of the SROs are clearly understood and that a chain of command for effective communication is maintained.

Summary of Findings

Chapter 4 has provided a detailed description of the research findings of this mixed methods study. District leadership, law enforcement leadership, and SROs who serve elementary schools were surveyed; and through the collection of qualitative and

quantitative data from the open-ended response items and Likert scale response items, information was obtained from the participants that correlates with the research questions for this study. This mixed methods study reveals information pertinent to understanding the roles and responsibilities of elementary SROs, the training and professional development of these individuals, and the best practices for MOUs that guide the school districts and law enforcement agencies in their partnership with these programs.

Chapter 5 provides an additional analysis of the research from this study. I offer my conclusions and recommendations through the lens of the previous research discussed in Chapter 2. Additional research recommendations are also presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to reduce ambiguous expectations for elementary SROs and create a compilation of best practices for elementary SRO programs. This study surveyed a group of individuals involved with elementary SRO programs from three school districts in North Carolina. The research participants included school district leaders, law enforcement leaders, and resource officers who patrol elementary schools. This study revealed trainings and professional development topics that are beneficial to elementary SROs as determined by the research participants. From this research, a collection of best practices regarding the duties and responsibilities of the role of an elementary SRO was also identified. Additionally, survey responses from the participants of this study provided information to guide decisions regarding the establishment of a clear and precise MOU between school districts and law enforcement agencies.

This study was framed by three research questions that guided the response items asked of the research participants:

1. What trainings or skills of SROs hired for placement in elementary schools are considered beneficial in fulfilling the goals of their role?
2. What duties and responsibilities should be assigned to SROs in elementary schools?
3. What components of MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies benefit elementary SRO programs?

Data were collected during this research through a three-part survey. The first portion of the survey was structured to obtain information pertaining to the positions and years in

the current role of the participants. The second section of the survey included 10 open-ended questions in which participants responded in short answer responses. The third and final section of the survey included fifteen 5-point Likert scale response items. The responses of the participants offered qualitative and quantitative data related to the three guiding research questions of this study.

Chapter 5 includes a discussion of organizational role theory that was introduced previously in the research as well as a summary of this study's findings in relation to research and literature reviewed in Chapter 2. This chapter also includes implications for practice based on the research findings of this study. Also detailed in this chapter are delimitations and limitations of the study and recommendations for further research regarding this topic.

Summary of Findings and Supporting Theory

Through this research study, best practices regarding the role of an elementary SRO were examined in relation to duties, responsibilities, trainings, and professional development. This research also explored best practices regarding MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies for elementary SRO programs. Organizational role theory, which falls within the larger body of theoretical research, role theory, is a theoretical framework that aligns with the research questions of this study and serves as the lens through which the findings are explored. Role theory is a theory that examines how roles are created and executed by individuals, and organizational role theory focuses specifically on work roles within an organization. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to this study's exploration of best practices for the role of elementary SROs in consideration of the notion that organizations that clearly present work roles for

execution by each employee are more successful in function (Wickham & Parker, 2007).

Embedded within the theoretical framework of organizational role theory are several assumptions that correlate to the work of this research study. These assumptions assert that role taking, role consensus, role ambiguity, and role conflict directly impact the role's impact on an organization. Role taking and role consensus are considered positive influences on role fulfillment within an organization. Role taking indicates that a role is immediately assumed by an individual upon employment. Role consensus indicates that for an organization to function effectively, there needs to be a consensus on the expectations of the role for the individual.

In contrast to these positive influences on the operations of an organization, role ambiguity and role conflict can negatively impact role fulfillment. Role ambiguity exists when behaviors and expectations for a role are not clearly defined (Parker & Wickham, 2005). Role conflict can arise when role expectations oppose the expectations associated with another role of the individual or there are other hindrances to the execution of the duties of the role (Miles & Perreault, 1976). Both role ambiguity and role conflict negatively impact the success of the role within the organization.

The four assumptions of role taking, role consensus, role ambiguity, and role conflict within organizational role theory are relevant to my research on reducing the ambiguity for the position of an elementary SRO through defining consistent expectations for this position. The first assumption of role taking indicates that an elementary SRO accepts the role within the school district at the time employment occurs. Through instruction and feedback regarding the position, the role within the organization is learned (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Rigidity of the job duties and clearly

prescribed responsibilities established by the organization contribute to the ease of role taking. Taking on the role assigned and fulfilling its responsibilities and duties allows the SRO's role to be complementary to the other roles within the school community (Berger, 2009).

The participants of my research support the notion of clearly defined expectations being needed for successful role taking. Responses regarding the importance of specific procedures or protocols for duties aligned with an elementary SRO program were rated favorably in importance. Establishing guidelines for discipline with a mean score of 4.36, guidelines for school safety with a mean score of 4.57, and established expectations for campus visibility with a mean score of 4.50 emphasize the value of having clearly defined job role duties. With this clarity, elementary SROs are better equipped to do their jobs successfully.

When considering role taking, there are several factors that can influence the motivation to take on the role as assigned. Individuals will be influenced by the perception of their organizational identity, their attitude about their own role, and their associations with those assigning the role (Heimer & Matsueda, 1994). Relationships with others in the organization can also influence role taking (Katz & Kahn, 1978). My research echoes the significance of these relationships. Participants were asked to identify hurdles elementary SROs overcome in fulfilling their duties, and the majority of short answer responses indicated a theme of negative relationships with school administration or school staff. As revealed in the work of Bond (1983), positive relationships with the role assigners have positive implications for the organization. An SRO with a positive rapport with leadership within the law enforcement agency and the school district would

have improved communication, created greater social integration within the community, and increased positive relational experiences.

When the relationships the SROs have with others flourish, the high trust within these interactions creates a situation where role taking can develop into role making. As Berger (2009) explained, the concept of role making indicates the role is assumed as prescribed and while this preciseness and clarity are necessary initially, less rigidity is needed over time and the high-quality interaction with others is matched with an equal commitment to the organization. My research similarly identifies the value of SROs building high trust relationships with others within the organization. When participants were asked how elementary SROs could build partnerships within the community, having positive relationships with stakeholders and building trust among stakeholders were indicated in the majority of short answer responses. With positive relational experiences, the SRO would not only accept the assigned duties and responsibilities of the role but would also become more self-directed in their functioning within the organization (Berger, 2009).

The next assertion of organizational role theory indicates the positive influence of role consensus on an organization when roles are predefined and agreed upon among those within the organization. Role consensus maintains consistency in behavior and supports the adherence to organizational norms (Biddle, 1986). My research study supports the value of role consensus. Two of the most common themes among participant short answer responses when asked about challenges elementary SROs face when fulfilling their duties were stakeholder confusion on SRO duties and being asked to do tasks outside of the responsibilities of the SROs. When participants were asked for

insight regarding communication among stakeholders, the majority of the participants indicated (seven of the 12 responses) that there should be a clear understanding among school stakeholders on the role of the elementary SRO. With the Likert scale responses, the second highest mean score for importance to an elementary SRO program was “The responsibilities and duties of an elementary SRO are agreed upon and understood by all stakeholders,” with a score of 4.64. When an elementary SRO program is clear in its expectations, the assumption is it will, as determined by Smithson & Stokoe’s (2005) work on role theory, yield consistency in behavior and contribute to the effectiveness of the organization.

On the contrary, when role ambiguity exists, the work environment lacks structure and predictability, and individuals are unable to master the tasks required of them in their assigned roles (Sujan, 1986). A hesitation over decisions can exist and overall anxiety and confusion may be felt, which ultimately leads to dissatisfaction with the job (Kahn et al., 1964). Participants in my research, as evidenced by a common theme among short answer responses regarding challenges elementary SROs face, believed that role ambiguity was an obstruction faced by elementary SROs. To avoid role ambiguity, several influences should exist within organizations. There needs to be a thoughtful process regarding new employee induction processes. Detailed feedback should also be offered to those taking on new roles. The individual should also be a participant in the decision-making process to further the individual’s understanding of work roles and expectations (Bauer et al., 2007).

The findings of my study indicate alignment with these influences would reduce role ambiguity. Several major themes for training during a thoughtful induction process

for elementary SROs were identified. Covering topics such as school procedures and operations, school safety, available resources for stakeholders, and mental health issues would help reduce role ambiguity. Responses from participants in my study also revealed that maintaining open and frequent communication among stakeholders assists in fulfilling their job roles. Meetings and opportunities for collaboration are also beneficial and valued among research participants. According to Babin and Boles (1996), when role ambiguity can be avoided, job performance, organizational commitment, and self-efficacy are positively affected.

When considering the notion of role conflict within organizational role theory, we contemplate its negative impact on an organization. According to Biddle (1986), role conflict can occur when there are opposing expectations for a role due to the structures of the organization or the job description of the role. Noor (2004) suggested role conflict can occur in the workplace because of three possible conditions. The first circumstance is when there is not sufficient time to fulfill the duties of the role. The second condition is if the stress of one role affects the fulfillment of another role. The last influential condition on role conflict is specific behaviors associated with one role make it challenging to meet the expectations of another role.

When asked for insight regarding beneficial trainings for new elementary SROs, the value of field training with other SROs to assist law enforcement officers in the transition from patrolling outside of a school to being within an elementary school to avoid role conflict was noted by two of the 12 respondents in my study. As mentioned previously, many participants also indicated that being asked to do things outside of the assigned duties can obstruct fulfilling the duties of the elementary SRO, thus potentially

creating role conflict. Role conflict can also occur when an SRO is asked to do duties that are those of school staff but not responsibilities of an SRO. When asked what duties elementary SROs should not be asked to do, 77% of respondents indicated elementary SROs should not be asked to do discipline. Other common themes in the short answer responses for this question included SROs being asked to cover school staff duties or being in a predictable daily duty as a potential cause for role conflict. My study also reveals that any duty that takes away from enforcing safety protocols such as walking students back to class or transporting them home pulls them away from the responsibilities of the elementary SRO. As law enforcement officers in a school setting, it is wise for school districts and law enforcement agencies to reach role consensus to avoid expectations of one organization creating role conflict with the other system's expectations (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

The need for well-established and effective elementary SRO programs emphasizes the value of these programs having clearly defined expectations regarding the training, professional development, duties, and responsibilities of elementary SROs. Expectations for the elementary SRO program should be intentionally and precisely defined in the MOU between the district and law enforcement agency. This research study proves the assumptions of organizational role theory to be valid since research participant responses supported the notion that role ambiguity and role conflict should be avoided in elementary SRO programs, while efforts to support role taking, role consensus, and role clarity should be established and maintained.

Implications for Practice

This research study informs the decisions of school districts and law enforcement

agencies pertaining to the role of an elementary SRO and the structures of the system that fulfill the goals of the program. The findings reveal the need for agreed-upon and well-defined duties and responsibilities of the role as well as trainings and professional development offerings that contribute to the successful execution of the job duties. A precise MOU document to guide the program in which these individuals operate is also considered in this research, and implications for practice are revealed. Implications provided in this section are based on both the literature from Chapter 2 and, most notably, data collected from the participants from my study.

Trainings and Skills

The findings of this research indicate several trainings and skills that are beneficial to SROs working in elementary schools. It is mandated in North Carolina for all SROs to have the basic SRO training. This is a 40-hour training that covers a variety of topics related to the position. A more advanced training, SRO certification is not required but available. This program offers 80 hours of core training and 320 hours of elective course training. As discussed in Chapter 2, a 2018 North Carolina School Resource Officer Survey indicated that 86% of the officers surveyed had completed the basic SRO training and 26% had completed the North Carolina Justice Academy Advanced SRO Certification Training. My research indicates respondents agree that formal training, including the basic SRO training and the SRO certification training, would benefit elementary SROs. With a mean score of 4.57 on the Likert scale responses, many respondents also agree that ongoing professional learning is essential to the role of an elementary SRO.

Participants in my research study were asked to identify training topics that would

benefit elementary SROs. A common theme in responses among participants was safety training, and the respondents further indicated safety training should be part of the induction training for all new elementary SROs. Safety topics recommended by participants included procedures to follow during active shooter incidents, suspicious individuals on campus, evacuation plans, crisis response, and disruptive or aggressive adults on campus. As shared in Chapter 2, SROs should have more training than hired security officers, and the adequate training of these individuals determines the success of the SRO programs (Theriot & Cuellar, 2016).

My research also indicates that SROs serving in the elementary school setting would benefit from mental health training. Participants not only indicated mental health training as one of the most common themes in responses regarding what professional development should be offered to elementary SROs, but it was also a common response for what should be part of the induction training for new employees. These professional learning opportunities would provide elementary SROs the opportunity to better understand indicators of mental illness and the best resources for students struggling with mental health. Trainings on topics such as adverse childhood experiences, resiliency training, and trauma-informed practice were all shared by participants as being beneficial to these individuals who may be working directly with students affected by trauma or adverse childhood experiences. As referenced in earlier research by Espelage et al (2021), most perpetrators of school violence had experienced adverse childhood experiences, while only 23% of the SROs in their study had received training in mental health-related topics. It is worth noting that the SROs in this research study who completed online modules related to the topic of mental health demonstrated increased knowledge on the

impact of these experiences as well as appropriate responses to the manifestation of these experiences in others (Espelage et al., 2021).

The findings of my study also indicate that SROs serving in the elementary setting would benefit from being trained in working with juveniles. A 2011 SRO survey by the International Association of Chiefs of Police revealed that 76% of those surveyed had only received the basic training, and just 1% of the basic training covered juvenile justice (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011). My research revealed that participants felt understanding juveniles should be included in elementary SRO trainings, as evidenced in it being included as one of the most mentioned responses. The age of students with whom elementary SROs work was most frequently identified as the one area for which they were the least prepared. It is worth noting, however, that my research revealed one of the lowest mean scores for importance to an elementary SRO program as “Elementary SROs have experience or training specific to working with elementary school aged children prior to serving in an elementary SRO position.” One might speculate that this may be due to interpretation of the statement and indicate the belief that the training can occur concurrently while serving in the role. Nonetheless, my research also aligns with previously shared research from a 2012 Strategies for Youth study where 80% of SROs surveyed indicated they had no training in juvenile justice, child behavior, or adolescent psychology despite its benefits to these individuals (Thurau, 2019). Understanding procedures regarding interviewing these individuals, de-escalating issues experienced with this age group, searching the students or their belongings, and the rights of the juveniles in investigations would all benefit an SRO placed in an elementary setting and were shared by participants in my study as training suggestions.

As presented in Chapter 2, Counts et al. (2018) examined practices for SROs in different states and identified that the New York Department of Education recommends that SROs receive training directly related to student conduct to include de-escalation strategies, nonviolent conflict resolution, and peer mediation as topics in which SROs should also receive professional development. My research also indicated, with a mean score of 4.36 for importance, that elementary SRO programs should have established guidelines for how SROs should respond to discipline incidents, and respondents identified de-escalation strategies as one of the most common responses as an area where elementary SROs need training, aligning with the discussion by Counts et al. (2018) on the value of this professional learning.

Duties and Responsibilities

My research study emphasizes important considerations to the duties and responsibilities of elementary SROs. Glenn et al. (2019) explored the results of a 2018 North Carolina School Resource Officer Survey by the North Carolina Center for Safer Schools, as discussed in Chapter 2. This work revealed that SROs indicated in short answer responses that role clarity was often lacking in their experiences. With a high mean score of 4.64, it was agreed among participants in my research that elementary SRO responsibilities and duties should be agreed upon and understood by all stakeholders. Glenn et al. echoed this finding by stating that standardizing the expectations for duties and responsibilities is necessary within a successful elementary SRO program.

Much research exists about the importance of school safety to the role of an elementary SRO. According to Theriot and Cuellar (2016), SROs are a deterrent to

unsafe situations at school. Participants in my research agreed that safety was the primary duty of elementary SROs, with 86% in agreement of this being an essential duty of an SRO. A 2018 North Carolina Survey of SROs indicated that 95% of those surveyed had helped with lockdown drills, 89% updated emergency plans, and 42% participated in safety roundtable discussions. Similar short answer responses from my research participants included these tasks as essential for the elementary SRO to be involved with.

Another essential responsibility of elementary SROs is to maintain positive relationships with stakeholders. As discussed in Chapter 2, Cook (2019) revealed that when parents from Maryland, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. were surveyed, 35% indicated no relationship with SROs, but 60% believed this was important. Further supporting the value of relationships with stakeholders, research of Theriot and Orme (2016) indicated a correlation between how students feel about SROs and the frequency of positive interactions. These research findings highlight a similar agreement among my participants in the value of the positive relationships with stakeholders, with 57% of participants indicating this as an essential responsibility of SROs.

MOUs

Previous research reviewed in Chapter 2 indicates that there are several elements, when included in clear and precise MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies, that benefit elementary SRO programs. It is imperative that these documents provide a detailed description of the expectations for the position and the program that is understood by all stakeholders. Without a clear MOU in operation for elementary SRO programs, the program and the organization's productivity and effectiveness are negatively impacted because of the possibility for role ambiguity (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

As evidenced in the work of Robeson (2020), a review of the MOUs of several midwestern districts revealed the MOUs lacked specific information related to duties, responses to emergencies and investigations, and how to be involved in the community while maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders. Robeson indicated that MOUs should include details about the roles and responsibilities of an SRO as well as protocols to follow regarding transporting students, accessing student information, and a chain of commands to follow. My research supports these findings as one of the most common themes in responses regarding duties elementary SROs should not be asked to do was to be asked to transport students. The responses of participants regarding insights about communication among stakeholders, like Robeson's findings, indicated the need for protocols regarding a chain of command to follow, particularly when resolving conflicts or issues. With a mean score of 4.43, respondents also agreed that elementary SROs should have training regarding student rights, including accessing their personal information.

Robeson (2020) also encouraged MOUs to include how to maintain positive relationships in the community and to maintain visibility on school campuses. My research indicates 82% of respondents agreed that relationships are a goal of the elementary SRO program and maintaining relationships with stakeholders should be a required responsibility according to the majority of participant responses regarding SRO duties. Additionally, with a mean score of 4.50 agreeing that there should be established expectations for how to maintain visibility on campus throughout the day, my research supports Robeson's emphasis on clarifying these expectations in the MOU. In contrast to Robeson's research that includes the recommendation to consider the SRO in the triad

model of law enforcement, educator, and law-related counselor, participants in my research only strongly agreed with enforcement of laws (4.86) as an essential role expectation. Teaching lessons and serving in a counselor role both received scores below 4, with scores of 3.57 and 3.86 respectively. Neither of these duties was mentioned in short answer responses that inquired about the duties of elementary SROs.

Theriot and Cuellar (2016) emphasized the value of MOUs being detailed in SRO responses to discipline matters and school safety. My research also revealed, with scores of 4.57 for guidelines for safety and 4.36 for discipline procedures being needed, an agreement of the importance of having established guidelines pertaining to these duties in the elementary setting. Theriot and Cuellar also believed the MOUs should reflect the values of the school and district for the elementary SRO program. Although not among the highest mean scores, with a mean score of 4.07, many participants in my research also agreed that supporting district values is important to an elementary SRO program.

Summary of Implications for Practice

The research findings of my study provided insights and information that can be beneficial to school districts and law enforcement agencies with current elementary SRO programs or plans for establishing these programs in the future. A summary of the implications for practice include the following:

- The specific duties and responsibilities of the elementary SRO should be identified to clearly explain what should and should not be expected of the elementary SRO.
- District leadership, law enforcement leadership, school administration, school staff, parents, and SROs should be aware of the duties and responsibilities of

the elementary SRO.

- Elementary SROs should be responsible for
 - Maintaining and enforcing safety plans and procedures
 - Creating and maintaining positive relationships with stakeholders
 - Enforcing the law
 - Maintaining campus visibility
- Law enforcement agencies should ensure SROs who are placed in an elementary setting are properly trained and prepared to fulfill the duties of their role.
- Trainings for SROs should include
 - Safety procedures and protocols
 - Working with elementary aged juveniles
 - Mental health
 - De-escalation strategies
 - Background knowledge of school, stakeholders, and community
 - Communication protocols
 - Basic SRO training and SRO certification
- MOU documents should be living documents that clearly articulate pertinent information related to the elementary SRO program.
- It is important for the MOU regarding an elementary SRO program to clearly detail the goals of the program. Goals of these programs include
 - Maintain a safe school environment through the creation, implementation, and supervision of school safety protocols and procedures.

- Create and maintain positive relationships with school stakeholders
- Provide education and information pertaining to law-related matters to school stakeholders
- Facilitate the access to community resources
- MOUs should include ways in which SROs can maintain partnerships with stakeholders through
 - Campus visibility
 - Community participation
 - Communication
 - Trusting relationships
- A chain of command for communication within the elementary SRO program should be included in the MOU.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study were influenced by choices I made as the researcher as well as elements of influence outside of my control. One delimitation of the study to consider is the sample size. The study had a small sample size of only 18 participants. Another limiting element of this research is participant responses only reflect the three school districts I selected for participation in the study. An additional boundary set within the study was the participant profiles. For my research, I chose to only include district and law enforcement leaders as well as elementary SROs. Other individuals who serve in different capacities but are knowledgeable of elementary SRO programs were not invited for participation.

Additional influences on the study are the three research questions I selected to

guide the research. The survey response items were created with the research questions as the framework, thus impacting responses that may have been obtained regarding this topic had different or additional research questions guided the study. Additionally, my choice to include 10 open-ended responses and fifteen 5-point Likert scale response items should be considered for possible influence on the research findings. Some participants may have found it challenging to complete the survey items with narrative responses to the first 10 questions compared to responding in a different format. Using a 5-point Likert scale also may have influenced responses if participants opted to select a neutral response rather than indicating low or high importance.

The decision to utilize an online platform for the survey distribution also may have influenced the findings of this study because of possible variations in participant comfort levels with technology. The use of the online platform also limited my ability to control any influences on the participants during their survey completion. I was not able to control the presence and influence of other individuals during the survey completion or any possible distractions in the environment during survey completion.

A limitation to this research to consider is the potential for inaccurate responses from the participants. The response items may have been interpreted differently by the participants thus creating variations in responses. It is also possible that those participating in the study may have a limited perspective on the role of an elementary SRO due to other demands within the role they serve. Due to the small sample size, some consideration should be made to the fact that while the survey was anonymous, some individuals may have been influenced by the possibility that their responses would be identifiable by those in leadership positions. It is also possible that the variation in years

of experience in their current role influenced the responses of the participants.

Despite the delimitations and limitations of the study, this research has the potential to affect future decisions regarding elementary SRO programs in school districts. Considerations regarding the assigned duties and responsibilities of the elementary SROs as well as the training and professional development of these individuals can be influenced by this research. MOUs between school districts and law enforcement agencies regarding elementary SRO programs can also be impacted by the findings of this research. Future research on this topic could also be compared to the findings of this study.

Further Research

This research study provides opportunities for the possibility of future research associated with elementary SRO programs. In consideration of the findings of this study, future research related to the topic of elementary SRO programs would allow for comparisons to the data collected in this study and the opportunity to further explore the ideas revealed in this study.

Larger Participation

One opportunity for future research exists in the replication of this study with a larger sample size. Since only three districts were used in this study, using more school districts would allow for a comparison to the findings and conclusions of my research. Additionally, only the district leaders and law enforcement leaders who oversaw the elementary SRO programs were asked to participate in the study. Future research that included other stakeholders affected by the elementary SRO program would help determine if the results of this study were only reflective of the participants of this

research or if the results would be comparable with more variation in the participants. Future research could include teachers, administrators, or parents of students in the elementary setting.

Focus on Training and Professional Development Impact

Another opportunity for further research would be to explore the impact of specific professional development opportunities on the SROs' execution of their duties. Studies might look at the impacts of resilience training, trauma-informed practice, mental health trainings, or juvenile law on how elementary SROs or other elementary stakeholders perceive their job performance.

Within this study, the formal trainings and certifications often were referenced by the participants. In North Carolina, the basic training is 40 hours and is mandated for all SROs. The SRO certification course requires 80 hours of core courses and 320 elective hours but is not required. The majority of North Carolina SROs have not gone through the advanced training through certification (Glenn et al., 2019). Further research related to this study could study the impact of SRO certification on elementary SROs compared to those with basic training.

Challenges of Law Enforcement in the School Setting

According to participant responses from this research study, a trend of negative views of law enforcement is a challenge elementary SROs may have to navigate. This study, however, emphasized in responses that there is a potential for elementary SRO programs to significantly shift negative views to much more positive ones from parents, students, and staff. An opportunity exists for further research on the ways in which elementary SRO programs can change perspectives of law enforcement among those

directly impacted by these programs.

Along similar lines, participant responses in this study indicated that negative relationships with administration or school staff can be a challenge to overcome to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of an elementary SRO. There is an opportunity for future research to investigate contributing factors to negativity within these relationships as well as factors that contribute to this relationship being positive and more productive among those involved.

As elementary SRO programs continue to grow in prevalence in our school districts, more research pertaining to these programs would benefit the law enforcement officers and stakeholders within the school community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this mixed methods research study was to determine best practices for elementary SRO programs through an analysis of responses from participants with experiences related to these programs to eliminate role ambiguity that may exist with this position. Three research questions were posed and answered throughout this study. This was accomplished through 10 open-ended and fifteen 5-point Likert scale response items. An analysis of the responses from the research provided insight regarding best practices for elementary SRO duties, responsibilities, and professional development. Responses also provided key insight into what should be included in the MOUs regarding these programs.

Through data analysis of the research study's findings, I have been afforded the opportunity to carefully consider the role of an elementary SRO and the programs in which they serve in school districts. It is the intention of this research to positively impact

the valuable efforts of these programs and solidify the partnership between educators and law enforcement officers in a commitment to serving all students, all staff, and all communities effectively. With more elementary schools becoming accustomed to having a law enforcement officer on campus daily, it would be advantageous for districts and law enforcement agencies to eliminate ambiguity within the elementary SRO programs and strengthen these programs with consideration of the findings of this research.

NASRO said it best in its declaration of goals for an SRO program:

The goal of NASRO and SRO programs is to provide safe learning environments, provide valuable resources to school staff members, foster a positive relationship with students and develop strategies to resolve problems that affect our youth with the goal of protecting all children, so they can reach their fullest potential.

(NASRO, n.d.a, para. 5)

This research sought to contribute to significantly shaping elementary SRO programs to fulfill these goals and strengthen the partnership of law enforcement officers and educators in serving our children successfully.

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Appendix A
Participant Letter

Greetings,

I am requesting your help with my doctoral study through Gardner-Webb University, which focuses on best practices for School Resource Officer (SRO) programs in elementary schools. To conduct the study, I am asking leadership within law enforcement agencies and school districts as well as elementary SROs to complete a 25-item survey about elementary SRO programs. The anticipated time to complete the survey is 45 minutes.

Joining this research study is voluntary. All data will remain confidential and kept secured for three years at which time they will be destroyed.

Please read the attached Informed Consents. Your consent to participate is indicated upon completion of the online survey.

Sincerely,

Lisa Duffey

Appendix B
Informed Consent

Gardner-Webb University
Informed Consent Form for Online Survey

Title of Research Study: School Resource Officers and Elementary School Patrol: A Study of Best Practices for Training, Duties, and Memorandums of Understanding

The purpose of this research is to reduce ambiguity pertaining to the role of School Resource Officers (SRO) in elementary schools. As a participant in the study, you will be asked to complete a 25-item survey about elementary SRO programs. It is anticipated that the study will require about 45 minutes of your time. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) for any reason without penalty. The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data. Because of the nature of the data, it may be possible to determine your identity; however, there will be no attempt to do so, and your data will be reported in a way that will not identify you. There are no anticipated risks in this study. You will receive no payment for participating in the study. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by exiting the survey.

If you have questions about the study, contact:

Researcher's name: Lisa Duffey

Researcher telephone number: XXXXXX

Researcher email address: XXXXXX

Faculty Advisor name: Stephen Laws

Faculty Advisor telephone number: 704-406-4403

Faculty Advisor email address: slaws@gardner-webb.edu

Dr. Sydney K. Brown

IRB Institutional Administrator

Telephone: 704-406-3019

Email: skbrown@gardner-webb.edu

Clicking the link below to continue on to the survey indicates your consent to participate in the study:

If you are not 18 years of age or older or you do not consent to participate, please close this window.

Appendix C
Survey Instrument

Survey

Part 1-Introduction

1. Describe your current job role.
2. How many years have you served in this position?

Part 2-Open-Ended Response

1. Identify the areas of professional development or training an SRO serving in this role at an elementary school should have.
2. What duties and responsibilities should be required of an elementary SRO?
3. What challenges obstruct the ability of the elementary SROs to carry out the duties and responsibilities of their roles?
4. What are the goals and objectives of the elementary SRO program?
5. What duties and responsibilities should school staff not expect an elementary SRO to fulfill?
6. Describe the communication procedures that should exist between the district and school staff, law enforcement staff, and elementary SROs.
7. What should be included in the induction training for new hires in the elementary SRO program?
8. How should elementary SROs build partnerships with students, staff, and parents within their school communities?
9. What aspects of serving in an elementary school do you believe SROs feel less prepared for than other areas?
10. What additional information or insight can you provide about the elementary SRO program?

Part 3-Likert Rating Scales

Use the following 5-point Likert scale for the following statements

- 1-very important*
2-important
3-fairly important
4-slightly important
5-not important

How important are the following statements to an elementary SRO program?

1. The responsibilities and duties of an elementary SRO are agreed upon and understood by all school stakeholders.
2. Elementary SROs serve as an informal counselor to students.
3. Elementary SROs enforce the law and safety protocols on school campus.
4. Elementary SROs teach lessons to students throughout the school year.
5. Elementary SROs serve as a liaison for support services for troubled students.
6. Elementary SROs participate in ongoing in-service professional learning.

7. Elementary SROs have experience or training specific to working with elementary school aged children prior to serving in an elementary SRO position.
8. Each duty and responsibility of the elementary SRO align with previous or upcoming training and professional development.
9. Elementary SROs are trained on topics related to the rights of students.
10. Elementary SROs are assessed for their understanding of the skill sets necessary to fulfill the goals and objectives of the elementary SRO program.
11. Elementary SRO programs are evaluated annually by representatives from the district and the law enforcement agencies.
12. The elementary SRO program's goal and objectives support the values and beliefs of the school district.
13. There are established guidelines for an elementary SRO's response to discipline incidents.
14. There are established guidelines for an elementary SRO's involvement in school safety.
15. There are established expectations for an elementary SRO's visibility on campus before, during, and after the school day.