A STUDY ON THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL TRAINING LEARNING ON STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

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Abstract
Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) involves explicit instruction in five distinct social-emotional skill sets: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making, as outlined by Yoder in 2014. This research paper in action seeks to elucidate social-emotional competence and explore the correlation between social-emotional learning and factors like well-being, academic achievement, and attendance. The findings indicate that the cultivation of positive student-teacher relationships and the implementation of teacher-guided SEL curricula have a favourable impact on overall student well-being.
The primary objective of education is to facilitate the holistic development of students, fostering cognitive, personal, and social competencies. Consequently, schools should not solely prioritize the academic advancement of students but also their personal growth. Various globally recognized organizations, such as the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the World Health Organization (WHO), underscore the significance of social competence and social-emotional well-being in the development of children and adolescents.

Keywords: Social-emotional learning, Social-emotional competence, Social-emotional well-being, Academic achievement, Student-teacher relationships, Student-teacher connectedness

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching and learning process in schools encompasses significant social, emotional, and academic elements, according to research by Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg (2004). Typically, students do not learn in isolation; instead, they learn in collaboration with teachers, alongside their peers, and with support from their families. Emotions can either boost or hinder a child's academic involvement, work ethic, commitment, and eventual success in school. As a result, it is crucial for both schools and families to effectively address these aspects of education for the benefit of all students, as emphasized by Elias et al. (1997).

A major challenge for 21st-century schools involves catering to culturally diverse students with varying abilities and motivations for learning, as pointed out by the Learning First Alliance in 2001. Regrettably, many students lack social-emotional skills, and as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, they tend to feel less connected to the school environment. This disconnect adversely affects their academic performance, behavior, and overall well-being, as indicated by Blum & Libbey (2004). In a national survey of 148,189 students from sixth to twelfth grades, only 29%–45% of respondents reported possessing social competencies such as empathy, decision-making, and conflict resolution skills. Additionally, only 29% felt that their schools provided a caring and supportive atmosphere, according to Benson (2006). By the time high school is reached, as many as 40%–60% of students become persistently disengaged from school, as reported by Klem & Connell (2004). Furthermore, roughly 30% of high school students engage in multiple high-risk behaviors (e.g., substance use, sex, violence, depression, attempted suicide), which negatively impact their academic performance and jeopardize their future prospects, as documented by Dryfoos (1997) and Eaton et al. (2008).

There is a consensus among educators, policymakers, and the general public that educational systems should graduate students who excel in core academic subjects, possess social and emotional skills to collaborate effectively with diverse peers, practice healthy behaviors, and exhibit responsible and respectful conduct. In essence, schools have a significant role in nurturing not only the cognitive but also the social and emotional development of healthy children. However, schools face resource constraints and immense pressure to improve academic performance. Given these challenges, educators must prioritize and effectively implement evidence-based approaches that yield multiple benefits.

It has been suggested that implementing universal school-based programs to promote students' social and emotional learning (SEL) represents a promising strategy to enhance children's success in both their educational journeys and in life, as argued by Elias et al. (1997) and Zins & Elias (2006). Extensive developmental research shows that mastering social-emotional competencies correlates with increased well-

being and improved school performance. Conversely, the failure to develop competence in these areas can lead to various personal, social, and academic difficulties, as indicated by Eisenberg (2006), Guerra & Bradshaw (2008), Masten & Coatsworth (1998), and Weissberg & Greenberg (1998). Numerous school-based interventions have been developed specifically to promote SEL among young people, stimulated by findings from clinical, prevention, and youth development studies, as noted by Greenberg et al. (2003). Nevertheless, some researchers have raised questions about the extent to which enhancing children's social and emotional skills will directly translate into improved behavioral and academic outcomes, as discussed by Duncan et al. (2007) and Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews (2002).

2. EMOTIONAL AND CULTURAL ASPECTS OF TEACHING

The role of emotions in teaching has been a well-explored topic in research, but ongoing debates persist regarding its impact on early childhood education (ECE) practices. While some argue that the best teachers incorporate love, care, and intimacy into their methods (Page, 2018), there are implicit assumptions within ECE about professionalism that suggest a need for emotional detachment (Madrid, Fernie, & Kantor, 2015). As a result, ECE professionals are often evaluated based on their ability to meet predefined standards and perform tasks, leading to what can be described as a "technicist" approach to practice, characterized by emotional neutrality (Taggert, 2011).

This perspective, which places less importance on emotions compared to neoliberal principles of standards and performance, has been consistently reinforced in both policy and practice. Those working in early childhood education often face low pay and a low status within the field (Shin, 2015). Despite these challenges, many ECE professionals acknowledge and value the central role of emotions, love, care, and intimacy in their interactions with young children.

ECE professionals are constantly engaged in regulating their emotions and displaying specific behaviors as part of their role. This capacity to manage emotions is crucial for meeting the emotional demands of their profession. Some argue that this aspect of "emotional labor" (Hochschild, 1983) should be at the forefront of redefining professionalism in ECE (Osgood, 2010). This would involve recognizing and legitimizing the perspectives of practitioners who draw upon their own emotions and feelings to inform their work (see Recchia, Shin, & Snaider, 2018).

The identity of an ECE professional is heavily influenced by the personal relationships they form with the children in their care. This cannot be achieved in an emotionally detached manner, as such interactions require a high level of emotional engagement (Elfer, Goldschmied, & Selleck, 2003). Recent research has shown that the effective use of emotions significantly impacts the quality of adult-child interactions. Teachers who are skilled in mediating and understanding their own emotions tend to have better relationships with the children they teach, which can enhance the likelihood of academic success (Torres, Domitrovich, & Bierman, 2015).

However, it's important to exercise caution and avoid overemphasizing these teacher-student relationships, as young children are influenced by various factors beyond their teacher's emotions. Additionally, due to the power imbalances in the classroom, with adults holding more power, teachers must be aware of the unequal nature of the adult-child relationship (Page, 2018). This awareness is crucial as it positions teachers to either endorse dominant emotional norms or embrace a more inclusive and culturally responsive approach to pedagogy (White, 2016).

Education and curriculum are identified as powerful tools that can both maintain and challenge dominant cultural values. While education can enlighten, it can also act as a form of social and cultural reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984). Some argue that education can shape individuals to conform to dominant cultural values (Boler & Zembylas, 2012). In this context, the need for more critically reflective teaching guided by emotions and care (Page, 2018) becomes significant, particularly in light of contemporary research that suggests ECE settings often adhere to Western norms (Massing, 2018). Therefore, calls for research that explores the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) models in diverse cultural contexts, paying attention to ethnic differences and experiences, are justified (Gershon and Pelliteri, 2018).

3. SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is typically defined as "the process of acquiring fundamental skills to recognize and effectively manage emotions, establish and achieve goals, empathize with others, cultivate and maintain positive relationships, make responsible choices, and handle interpersonal situations constructively." In recent times, SEL has gained recognition as an effective method for developing the essential skills, attitudes, competencies, and knowledge necessary for both learning and achieving personal well-being and success. Research has demonstrated that SEL is most successful when it is integrated into everyday routines, with specific learning objectives pursued through structured, active approaches. These competencies contribute to the creation of a supportive environment for individuals to learn together and mature into understanding and empathetic adults. Individuals with strong socio-emotional skills are better equipped to navigate daily challenges, establish positive relationships, and make informed decisions.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), "Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is an integral component of education and human development. SEL involves the process through which individuals of all ages acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to develop healthy self-identities, effectively manage emotions, accomplish personal and collective objectives, demonstrate and experience empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive connections, and make responsible and compassionate choices. These skills can be taught and learned from early childhood through adulthood. This is particularly important because individuals are not inherently equipped with the ability to manage emotions, solve problems, and engage positively with others.

CASEL's primary mission is to promote the integration of evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) into the entire spectrum of education, from preschool to high school. CASEL provides support to educators and policymakers while enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes for all students in grades PreK-12. With an increasing number of students worldwide reporting heightened levels of anxiety and depression, particularly exacerbated by the pandemic and school closures, educational communities have leveraged technology to reach out to students and alleviate feelings of isolation. A report titled "New Vision for Education: Fostering Social and Emotional Learning through Technology" by the World Economic Forum and the Boston Consulting Group concludes that technology can assist students in developing crucial social and emotional skills and character traits. In India, there has also been a significant shift in the educational approach, with a focus on nurturing individuals capable of rational thinking and action, as well as possessing compassion and empathy.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is an instructional approach that aids individuals of various age groups in gaining a deeper understanding of their emotions, fully experiencing those emotions, and demonstrating empathy towards others. These acquired skills are then applied to help students make positive, responsible choices; establish frameworks for achieving their objectives, and cultivate positive relationships with others. As stated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), an organization dedicated to enhancing positive outcomes for PreK-12 students and educators, social-emotional learning (SEL) encompasses five fundamental competencies that can be applied in educational settings, at home, and within students' communities. These five core competencies include:

Self-awareness: This involves recognizing one's own emotions and understanding how they influence behavior. It also entails acknowledging personal strengths and weaknesses to foster greater self-confidence.
Self-management: This competency encompasses the ability to handle stress, control impulses, and self-motivate to set and accomplish goals effectively. As students transition to middle school, they face increased academic demands and peer interactions, necessitating effective self-management to cope with the associated stress and responsibilities.
Social awareness: Social awareness entails the capacity to consider various perspectives, demonstrate empathy, appreciate diversity, and show respect for others. This skill is vital for facilitating effective collaboration and interactions in group or social settings. When coupled with empathy, social awareness can contribute to reduced aggressive behavior among students, fostering a sense of community and trust in the classroom environment while enabling a focus on academic achievement.
Relationship skills: Relationship skills involve building and maintaining healthy connections with individuals from diverse backgrounds. This competency emphasizes effective communication, active listening, peaceful conflict resolution, and the ability to discern when to seek or offer assistance.
Making responsible decisions: This competency centers on the ability to make ethical, safe, and considerate decisions in various situations. It involves weighing consequences not only for oneself but also for others, reflecting a commitment to the well-being of individuals and the broader community.

CASEL's framework underscores the significance of these core competencies in nurturing well-rounded individuals who can navigate the complexities of life while fostering positive relationships and making informed, responsible choices.

4. CASEL FRAMEWORK

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) as an essential component of both education and human development. SEL represents the process through which individuals of all ages, including young people and adults, acquire and utilize knowledge, skills, and attitudes to foster healthy self-identities, effectively manage their emotions, attain personal and collective goals, demonstrate and experience empathy for others, establish and sustain supportive relationships, and make responsible and compassionate decisions. CASEL's overarching mission is to facilitate the integration of evidence-based social and emotional learning into the entire spectrum of education, spanning from preschool through high school. To achieve this mission, CASEL provides support to educators and policymakers while enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of all PreK-12 students.

CASEL has put forth a comprehensive framework for systemic social and emotional learning, emphasizing five SEL competencies that are promoted across various contexts. This framework is widely adopted by researchers, educators, and policymakers to establish systematic, equitable, and evidence-based social and emotional learning programs for all students, from preschool to high school. It serves as a guide for designing, implementing, and continually enhancing school-family-community partnerships aimed at improving the social, emotional, and academic competencies of young individuals. The framework addresses five broad and interconnected competency areas that can be taught and applied at different developmental stages, spanning from childhood to adulthood and encompassing diverse cultural contexts. These competencies articulate what students should understand and be capable of to achieve success in academics, engage effectively in school and civic activities, maintain their health and well-being, and pursue fulfilling careers.

5. SEL APPROACH

Although social-emotional learning (SEL) is not a formally designated subject akin to history or mathematics, it can be seamlessly integrated into a school's overall curriculum. When educators infuse academic lessons with a personal and relatable touch, students are more likely to engage actively and less prone to mentally disengage during their coursework. By fostering empathy, self-awareness, and a sense of safety and inclusivity within the classroom, SEL can exert a profoundly positive influence that endures throughout a person's life.

There are various approaches to implementing SEL in education. Some teachers allocate a distinct portion of the school day to SEL instruction, sometimes in a homeroom setting. These lessons then serve as a recurring theme throughout the rest of the school day to make SEL competencies more tangible and applicable for students.

Educators may also encourage students to journal or express their thoughts and feelings in response to specific SEL lessons. Additionally, they might facilitate interactions between younger and older students, creating "buddy classrooms" to foster connections and mutual understanding across different age levels.

Another approach involves seamlessly integrating SEL-related lessons into traditional subjects such as mathematics, history, or reading. For instance, educators may assign group projects where students collaborate and self-assign roles for the collective benefit, engage in role-playing activities as historical figures to gain insights into their actions, or conduct formal interviews to explore current events.

Teachers can also work closely with students to establish goals in areas where improvement is needed, helping them track their progress and providing a quantifiable way to showcase their achievements and sense of accomplishment.

The literature strongly suggests that social-emotional competence is closely linked to academic success in students. The ability to regulate emotions, attention, and behavior is associated with academic accomplishments. Strong social-emotional skills contribute to cognitive development, facilitate the acquisition of academic knowledge, and enable its practical application. In fact, social and emotional competence can be just as predictive of academic and career achievements as IQ. Students with robust social-emotional competencies exhibit greater motivation to learn, a deeper commitment to school, increased dedication to schoolwork, and improved classroom behavior.

Research also demonstrates that students with enhanced social-emotional competence are more likely to remain in school, graduate, and excel in their adult lives. Multiple studies and data support the connection between social-emotional competence and academic success. A meta-analysis of school-based SEL programs, involving over 270,000 students, revealed an 11% enhancement in academic scores, alongside improved attitudes, behavior, and increased social-emotional competencies.

Middle school students confront a multitude of challenges associated with biological and social changes during this developmental stage. These challenges can hinder both social and academic adjustment, impacting academic success. Acquiring social-emotional skills is crucial for all students, but it holds particular importance for middle school students due to ongoing brain development. Neuroimaging studies have shown that the amygdala, a brain region responsible for emotional reactivity, can be modulated through successful emotional regulation. Therefore, it is recommended that the developmental needs of middle-school students be supported through a combination of academic and personal development, including the cultivation of social and emotional competence.

6. BENEFITS OF SEL

Social-emotional learning (SEL) offers significant advantages to both children and adults, enhancing self-awareness, academic performance, and positive behaviors within and outside the classroom. From an academic perspective, students who have participated in SEL programs have exhibited an 11 percentile improvement in their overall grades, as well as enhanced attendance records. On a more personal level, the skills acquired through SEL programs have demonstrated their effectiveness in helping students better cope with emotional stress, resolve problems, and resist peer pressure to engage in detrimental activities.

Equipping students with the ability to address personal challenges empowers them to navigate the pressures of adulthood more effectively. According to a report by the AEI/Brookings Working Group on Poverty and Opportunity, educational and social reforms in the K-12 system have, in recent decades, insufficiently emphasized the socio-emotional factors essential for effective learning.

A study published in the American Journal of Public Health utilized data from the non intervention subsample of the Fast Track Project, an intervention initiative designed to reduce aggression among children at high risk for long-term behavioral issues and conduct disorders.

Identifying students who may struggle with the fundamental aspects of SEL enables educators to provide targeted support from an early age. This assistance can aid students in developing improved self-control, empathy, and other positive qualities. Learning positive behaviors that extend beyond mere academic achievement equips these students with the "soft skills" required in various professions, such as teamwork, the ability to understand others, and problem-solving. This, in turn, sets these students on a path to success throughout their academic journey and beyond.

Stephanie Jones, a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education with expertise in social-emotional learning and childhood development, simplifies the concept by stating that SEL encompasses the foundational skills inherent in learning within any classroom setting. When students raise their hands instead of shouting out answers, listen attentively to their teacher's instructions, and collaborate effectively with their peers, they are applying SEL skills. Emotions and social interactions are integral aspects of children's daily lives, both within and outside the school environment. This is why many educators contend that teaching students how to manage these aspects is valuable, even if terms like "self-awareness" may initially appear unrelated to what is traditionally viewed as core classroom material.

7. TEACHER PRACTICES THAT IMPROVE SEL

Educators have the opportunity to seamlessly integrate academic content and social-emotional learning (SEL) into their teaching approaches. This integration enables students to gain a deeper understanding of their emotions, cultivate empathy, build trust in relationships, develop problem-solving skills, and make thoughtful decisions (CASEL, 2015; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; Zins et al., 2007). Teachers should employ curricula and instructional methods that merge academic content with SEL competencies (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Yoder and Gurke (2017) proposed instructional strategies that teachers can employ in their classrooms to promote SEL. When educators utilize these teaching techniques and focal points, both students and teachers can enhance their SEL skill sets and foster more positive classroom environments (Yoder & Gurke, 2017). To support teachers in implementing these classroom actions effectively, coaching is essential. Coaching is geared towards assisting teachers in adapting and implementing new practices to suit the needs of their current students. Effective coaching centers on acknowledging the human aspect of teaching, creating safe spaces for teachers to experiment with new approaches, and figuring out what works best within their classrooms for their students (Yoder & Gurke, 2017). If school administrators wish to encourage teachers in supporting SEL for their students, they must also back the process.

When implementing an SEL program, it is crucial to provide staff with comprehensive training in SEL curriculum and instruction as a form of professional development (Weissberg & Cascario, 2013). With appropriate training, classroom teachers can effectively administer SEL programming to students (Durlak et al., 2011; Mahoney et al., 2018). Well-trained staff can systematically teach, model, and facilitate social-emotional competencies, enabling students to apply them in their daily lives (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). When students witness these strategies being employed by adults in various situations throughout their day, they are more likely to emulate the behaviors and enhance their competencies.

School-based strategies designed to promote student SEL are most successful when seamlessly integrated into the school's daily curriculum (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013) and consistently applied across other school activities (Greenberg et al., 2003; Zins & Elias, 2007). Students require opportunities throughout their school day to practice SEL skills (Zins et al., 2007). Teachers can incorporate practices such as mindfulness and deep breathing into their daily classroom routines. Effective SEL instruction and curriculum should commence in preschool and continue consistently through a student's educational journey to graduation (CASEL, 2015; Greenberg et al., 2003; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this action research project was to investigate the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in the classroom, with a focus on cultivating positive relationships with students and supporting their social-emotional well-being. The central research question addressed was: What are the effects of SEL integration and improved teacher-student relationships on enhancing student well-being and academic achievement within a middle school environment?

Upon an in-depth analysis of the data generated through this action research study, our findings indicate that the deliberate inclusion of SEL curriculum in conjunction with the enhancement of teacher-student

relationships has had a positive impact on the academic success of middle school students in our classrooms. The data and results demonstrate an increase in students' perceived social-emotional competence, and academic performance indicators such as grade book records and attendance data reflect positive outcomes. It is essential to acknowledge the presence of various confounding factors that can influence both social-emotional well-being and student success in the classroom. While this study primarily focused on the intentional integration of SEL curriculum along with the promotion of positive teacher-student relationships and interactions, there exist additional variables that should be taken into consideration. These other factors may have also played a role in fostering student success and academic achievement.

Regarding the implementation of SEL in instruction, teachers have the opportunity to incorporate academic content with SEL skills, allowing students to gain an understanding of their emotions, develop empathy for others, establish trusting relationships, engage in problem-solving, and make thoughtful decisions. To achieve this, educators should utilize curriculum and instructional practices that seamlessly integrate academic content with social-emotional learning skills.

When selecting an SEL curriculum model, it is advisable to consider CASEL's model, which places a strong emphasis on the five core competencies. CASEL's five competencies serve as the foundation for improved academic performance, encompassing factors such as higher grades, enhanced test scores, positive social behaviors, reduced negative behaviors, and decreased emotional distress.

Efforts aimed at fostering positive teacher-student relationships within the classroom have proven effective in enhancing feelings of connectedness. Throughout our research, we observed that teachers can establish positive relationships with students through the use of praise. Positive and effective teacher praise can lead to the development of strong, positive relationships, the teaching of desired classroom behaviors, and an increase in the frequency of desired behaviors. Effective teacher praise should be specific, immediate, initiated by the teacher, focused on effort, conveyed sincerely with an appropriate tone, and devoid of comparisons. Additionally, teachers can further nurture positive relationships by engaging in one-on-one conversations with students on a daily basis or as frequently as possible.

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