

Strengthening and Supporting Social Emotional Development

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Abstract

Social-emotional learning (SEL) for students plays a crucial role in student success and well-being. This research investigates the challenges in social emotional development among students in the post-pandemic learning environment, specifically for a charter school in Southeast Los Angeles. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 87% of public schools have reported the negative impact distance learning had on social emotional development. The literature review discusses the already existing research supporting the idea that implementing SEL has positive benefits for students' well being and success. With schools now completing their second year back in person, the need to continue developing social-emotional skills is crucial. I used this research to create an intervention that incorporates weekly goals and daily reflections to address three targeted areas; problem-solving, relationship building, and empathy. Intervention methods focus on weekly goals through community meetings and role playing scenarios. Progress was measured through a series of qualitative and quantitative data collection tools, including self-reflection, personal goal setting, and the collection of reported classroom incidents. The data concludes that Universal Design within SEL is effective in developing social skills as it provides opportunities for self-regulation. Post intervention data indicated that students increased their understanding of empathy, yielding a drop in classroom incidents, which then optimized instructional time. However, ongoing support and multiple intervention rounds are needed to ensure sustained progress. The findings offer insight for educators, emphasizing the need for SEL practices that are relevant, consistent, and inclusive for all students in the post-pandemic learning environment.

Keywords: Distance Learning, SEL, Relationships, Intervention, Empathy

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Introduction

I am a third grade teacher in a charter school located in Southeast Los Angeles. One aspect of my job that I enjoy the most is being able to develop relationships with the students, and fostering those relationships between them as well. A dilemma I have encountered over the past couple of years working here is that the social emotional development and relationship building are not happening as much as expected. There is almost a resistance to trying to socialize with students outside of the friends they have already. There is also a noticeable difference in the way students interact with one another and problem solve situations in social settings such as recess or PE. Extreme cases involve behaviors such as immediately getting physical when someone upsets them rather than using words or other problem solving techniques. The goal of my research and implementation of intervention is to foster better relationship building and problem solving skills amongst peers. The goal of the literature review for me is to know what solutions research already suggests are available, and how can it be restructured to be both culturally sustaining and relevant to post pandemic learning.

A common theme found throughout the literature was that a Social Emotional Learning curriculum, when implemented with guidance and consistency, will yield positive school wide results. Because of this, I feel it justified to create a school wide professional development to share future findings with educators at my school site. Another common theme between the literature was that a strong SEL curriculum is directly linked to improved academic success amongst students. The literature also suggests that there is a need for adjustment and reframing in order to include more culturally sustaining practices for social-emotional learning.

Problem

I feel there is not enough Social Emotional support for students who were most affected by distance learning; they were more socially isolated during critical years needed for socialization skills. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 87% of public schools have reported the negative impact the pandemic had on social emotional development during distance learning. Zieher, Cipriano, Meyer, & Strambler (2021), among others, suggest that there are still details and statistics emerging as to what the full extent of the effects of COVID-19 have been on students' well-being. However, there is no doubt that there was a heavy impact on social, emotional, and academic growth. To gather more site specific data, I have engaged in family meetings to discuss these noticed behaviors, and families share that there is consistency with what they are seeing as far as social development and coping skills. There is a small group of students that are my main focus as I see this behavior more strongly in them, but this is something that has affected the majority of students. To better understand this issue, I have gathered data including rule talks and other disciplinary documentation taken throughout the year.

Social emotional development is important for both relationship building and problem solving. According to Gehlbach & Chuter, (2020), "before students can benefit from social relationships, they need to develop skills and adopt behaviors that will facilitate their social connections to others" (p. 5). However, one of the biggest challenges educators face when implementing a strong SEL curriculum is the lack of support or consistency in the way it is utilized. There is a need for SEL to be easily woven into existing routines while also providing aligned guidance from administration and school leaders. Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens (2020) suggest that in order to achieve this, there needs to be clear pre- and in-

service teacher training that outlines the goals and what that practice looks like. Reinforcing this idea, Chu & DeArmond, (2021), state, “A cohesive approach also makes it easier for the networks to support SEL implementation across schools” (p. 7). SEL should not be viewed as an “add on” but rather an existing part of school life. While this is an important aspect of making SEL implementation possible, there is also a need to create a more sustainable and relevant method of utilizing SEL in our post pandemic schooling. Tesar (2021) suggests that COVID-19 and distance learning offered an opportunity for educators and school leaders to rethink what policies and methodologies look like going forward.

Social-Emotional learning can be restructured in a way that is relevant and reflects students’ lived experiences. Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens (2020) discuss a study done at a school that serves mainly Native American students and the deficit thinking that was present amongst teachers when discussing students’ needs. Furthermore, the issue is compounded among students that are bilingual or identified as multilingual. “In the pursuit of educational equity, we believe biases must be acknowledged and inequitable practices must be eliminated; only then can school environments cultivate the interests and talents of students from diverse backgrounds” (Mahfouz & Anthony-Stevens, 2020, p. 61). A core aspect of social-emotional learning is the capacity to establish relationships with others. This is a skill that will benefit students both in and out of the academic setting. Researchers have posed the questions, “What if the goal of teaching and learning with youth of color was not ultimately to see how closely students could perform White middle-class norms, but rather was to explore, honor, extend, and, at times, problematize their cultural practices and investments?” (Alim & Paris, 2017, p. 3). Solutions to this issue also include the use of additive approaches when working with multilingual students. Flores & Rosa (2015), build on this idea by saying, “the goal of additive approaches is to valorize students’ diverse linguistic repertoires by positioning their skills in languages other than Standard English as valuable classroom assets to be built on rather than handicaps to be overcome” (p. 153). Utilizing this approach not just for language learning but SEL will positively impact the success of that curriculum.

Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey (2018) discusses the importance of whole child teaching and providing a positive learning environment which includes allowing students to learn social emotional skills as well as academics. Schools need to promote development in an academic setting as well as how it connects to the community. A universal design for learning (UDL) approach to SEL is also a key component of making goals and outcomes feel attainable for students. Relationships between students and teachers are crucial for SEL success, “for optimal student outcomes to occur, we hypothesize that students must feel a social bond with their teacher and (at least some) peers, they must be motivated to engage in learning tasks, and they must sufficiently self-regulate to remain motivated to pursue these tasks” (Gehlbach & Chuter, 2020, p. 4). Self-regulation increases the capacity students have for reflecting on choices and correcting as needed. How powerful would the SEL curriculum be if students had a say in what they need to work on? What would be the impact of a student creating a self-reflection guide for how well they feel they have reached their goals? This skill would be transferable in early childhood, elementary, and high school settings.

As mentioned above, research into how deeply the effects of COVID-19 and distance learning have had are still manifesting. However, the literature discussed above did offer insight into the solutions available. In order to combat deficit thinking as well as misalignment, teachers need specific pre- and in- service training. My solution to this would be implementing school wide professional development throughout the year. Utilizing research and data that manifests in my classroom, I would want to see how transferable this

would be into the whole school implementation. It could also be helpful to utilize different grade level findings. For example, what works for 3rd grade may look very different in kindergarten.

In building off of the UDL approach, the specific intervention I want to implement is having a specific, weekly goal introduced during community meetings. In researching possible interventions, the findings from Zieher, Cipriano, Meyer, & Strambler (2021) were helpful in implementing SEL with students. They found that having activities in which students were identifying emotions, labeling emotions, managing emotions, managing behaviors, social problem solving, empathy/perspective-taking independently, students were more likely to respond.

Intervention

From the findings mentioned above, I plan to have daily reflections for students to work on independently during the closing circle to share how they felt they did in maintaining our weekly goal. This can be as simple as asking “how well do you feel you did with our weekly goal?” Then, students will be allowed to use words or pictures to describe situations throughout the day while keeping the goal in mind. This allows for self-regulation and guidance on how we can turn it around for the next day.

Next steps for implementation involve utilizing the existing community meeting block for the introduction of our weekly goal. I want to target 3 specific areas for growth. They are ways to problem solve issues with peers, communication during recess, and how actions impact the way we make others feel. These three specific areas align with the issues I have seen manifesting within the classroom. My research question is as follows: What is the effect of specific, targeted weekly goals on student interactions as measured by how successful students feel when reflecting on their goal. Data will also include the frequency in which classroom incidents occur through the collection of rule talk and other disciplinary documentation. Further development and data tracking was as follows.

The intervention was a three week process, with one week dedicated to each identified area of need. Each week began with a Mindset Monday meeting in which students engaged in role playing scenarios. Students were able to discuss personal experiences related to the weekly goal and how they would have changed the outcome. The weekly mindset was projected every morning when students walked in as well as every afternoon during reflection time. Students filled out that reflection daily.

The following were the topics of our Mindset Monday meetings:

Week 1: How can we solve problems ourselves before asking the teacher for help?

Week 2: How can we work with friends we have not had a chance to work with this year, and how does that make us a good team?

Week 3: How do our words or actions make others feel?

Sentence stems for daily reflection included:

I was successful today when...

I want to work on...

I saw others...

Post intervention responses indicated that students made some growth in understanding certain skills and dealing with problems more independently. A positive result was that there were zero responses indicating that they needed help in the area of empathy and understanding how they make others feel. While there were responses indicating they were unsure about problem solving and relationship building, this data offered more insight into what skills needed more intervention.

Conclusion

The results of this intervention has led me to the conclusion that Universal Design within Social Emotional Learning is effective in helping students develop social goals. The purpose of providing agency and opportunities to self-regulate was to ensure goals felt attainable and relevant. The pre and post intervention data does support that this is an effective strategy in students developing social emotional goals. However, the data also indicates that there is a need to extend the amount of time spent on each skill, ensuring students have multiple opportunities to practice and reflect on their learning. Moving forward, the goal will be to provide earlier intervention for target skills, and allow for multiple rounds of intervention to ensure sustained progress.

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