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Efficacy of Early Childhood Education Social Emotional Curricula that Include Sensory Integration Strategies

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**Efficacy of Early Childhood Education Social Emotional Curricula that Include
Sensory Integration Strategies**

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ED 590 Research and Complete Capstone

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Abstract

The primary concentration at any early learning center must be the promotion of healthy development and learning in a safe and nurturing environment. Research has shown that in order for educators to meet criterion standards for healthy and safe learning environments, ongoing evaluation and assessment of teaching strategies that target the child's development are needed. Further, if there is any one area to be emphasized over any other as holding paramount importance or influence in early learning, it must be identified and fully supported (Nix, et al., 2016). Research now points early childhood practitioners toward intensive focus on social/emotional development, as social/emotional competency including sustained attention and inhibition control is now thought to be the greatest predictor of long-term success in both academic and non-academic areas of development (Rabiner, et al., 2016). Literature pertaining to the use of specific social emotional curriculum that embed sensory integration strategies to meet developmental learning objectives in this area was examined. This paper inquired as to the efficacy of such curricula, by analyzing research based on existing curricula and from related studies involving sensory integration strategies and the behavior of children. This research indicated that only limited Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curricula implemented sensory integration techniques learned from the discipline of occupational therapy. However, those that did conveyed children benefitted from the use of such curricula by increasing self-regulatory abilities (Mac Cobb, et al., 2014). To best support the holistic development of their students, early childhood educators may benefit from accessing tools for teaching SEL that consider the sensory profiles of the children teachers work with.

Keywords: Social Emotional Curriculum, Sensory Processing, Sensory Integration, Self-regulation

Chapter 1: Introduction

Teachers have had the unique privilege of profoundly impacting a child's social and emotional learning trajectory. The influence teachers hold is, for many children, secondary only to the influence of parents (Blewitt, 2021). These teachers often spend more minutes of the preschool day caregiving for young children than they do offering direct instruction, and the lessons learned by the children through the close interactions they share are formative of a child's social and emotional learning domain (Blewitt, 2021). While these interactions help children to develop healthy social and emotional skills such as sharing, developing friendships, showing empathy, building patience, and regulating emotion, some children require additional support. All young children experience emotional dysregulation at times. However, some exhibit such dysregulation with increased frequency and intensity that these issues may lead to social problems and contribute to cognitive learning deficits (Gourley, et al., 2012). Research indicated that by offering educators a curriculum that acknowledges social and emotional wellness as central, and not peripheral to a child's learning experience can improve outcomes for students, teachers, and families.

While some curricula existed that included clear strategies for teaching emotional self-regulation, few of them viewed maladaptive behaviors from a sensory processing perspective, and instead, centered the teaching strategies on psychosocial theory (Blewitt, et al., 2021). Research indicated omission of sensory integration strategies in supportive social/emotional learning (SEL) curricula is a missed opportunity for supporting a child's education from a developmental perspective (Mac Cobb, et al., 2017).

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Definition of Terms

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)- In early childhood teaching, those practices that are based in the learning potential play has to offer and build upon the abilities of each child to promote optimal success and achievement. DAP should be experiential and pleasing to the child engaged in learning.

Self-regulation is an individual's capability of controlling one's own behaviors and emotions, especially within the context of maintaining attention and exhibiting impulse control.

Sensory Processing/Sensory Integration is the incorporation of environmental input as filtered through the senses, and into the brain. Sensory processing describes how sensory input is organized by the brain through the senses of the body, how an individual responds to such input, and the degree to which the input is interpreted and used in a functional way.

Social/Emotional Learning is an area of development in which knowledge is acquired to develop healthy relationships, show caring and empathy, understand the self to develop one's own identify, to create an awareness of emotions and manage those emotions effectively.

Vestibular Input is sensory input that contributes to one's sense of balance and movement, largely affected by functions of the inner ear

Proprioceptive Input or proprioception is input sensed by the joints and muscles that communicate information about our movements and body position. Pressure impacts proprioceptive input.

Auditory Input is sensory input relating to sound frequencies. Individuals with auditory sensitivity may process sounds more intensely than neurotypical people, causing discomfort.

Tactile Input is environmental input that activates the sense of touch. Tactile sensitivity, including the ability to distinguish between different textures vary between individuals. Tactile

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input also includes pain and temperature sensitivity. Tactile input, like other sensory input, can evoke a wide range of emotional responsiveness, depending on the person.

Visual Input is sight related input. Visual stimuli may be perceived differently in individuals with sensory processing disorder, and perceptions of light and motion may especially be affected. This dysfunction is not sourced from the technical function of the eye, but from the integration of visual information in the brain.

Importance of Research

Quality early learning programs aimed to allow all children to access experiences that promoted learning. Children who exhibited difficult behaviors or suffered from extreme and persistent periods of emotional dysregulation including tantrums, injurious behaviors to self and others, and oppositional defiance, were less likely to fully access these quality learning experiences (Nix et al., 2016). The long-term trajectory for children with social/emotional difficulty in early childhood indicated deficits in academic achievement, economic outcomes, and stability in their personal lives as adults (Nix et al., 2016).

Many educators are inspired to help children who have difficulty handling their own feelings and having appropriate interactions with peers and adults. Few programs offered extensive training for teachers to support the social/emotional lives of children who may be most in need. In the absence of curricula that offered research-based strategies for managing difficult behavior, many well-meaning teachers may have reverted to the experiences of their own childhood, often rooted in behavioristic philosophy (Masaki, 2021). The sum of their “disciplinary toolkits” may have consisted of rewards and punishments. While there is some evidence that behavioral strategies such as reward charts and time outs can improve immediate behavior (Masaki, 2021), these strategies rarely targeted the underlying cause of behaviors.

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Additionally, punitive measures may have caused emotional distress to a child exhibiting a behavior beyond their control, causing emotional stress and exacerbating the problem (Masaki, 2021).

Identifying the reasons children may have struggled with social relationships and emotional wellness is an investigation worth undertaking. Teachers have had the opportunity to spend significant time with children and develop close relationships with them and their families. Centers that promoted good communication practices with parents and caregivers developed more insight about the causes of social/emotional difficulty at home and at school (CASEL, 2005). The effects of trauma, stress, and developmental and cognitive delays on social/emotional learning were familiar to many teachers and caregivers. Less familiar were the very real impacts of each individual child's sensory profile on how they experienced the world, and thus on their ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors. When teachers and families viewed troubling behaviors from both a sensory and psychological perspective, they were better equipped with the tools required to sufficiently address a child's needs (Gourley, et al., 2012). Families and educators who experienced even subtle transformations within a child's emotional self-regulatory abilities were more likely to give care in healthier and happier ways (Gourley, et al., 2012). This in turn promoted emotional health, contributing to further acceptance of a SEL program and greater success rates.

Scope of Research

This study was designed to learn of the efficacy of sensory integration strategies in the early learning environment and within the context of social emotional learning. This was done through the examination of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method research. The scope of inquiry was based in several branches of research. First, the importance of social emotional

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learning was established. It was prudent that research emphasizing social emotional learning was connected to the highest standards of healthy child development. The relevance of a set social/emotional curricula was used as a guide for research (Mac Cobb, et al., 2014). Research did not convey that the less formal approaches to teaching social/emotional curriculum created better outcomes and justified the further inquiry of the specific sensory-based strategies that offer self-regulatory improvements for young children. Finally, the research evaluated those current SEL curricula that embedded some elements of sensory processing strategies.

Research Question

Teachers today enter the field of early childhood education with initial trainings that familiarize them with holistic development, including the requirement to support healthy social/emotional development. Without sufficient tools and support, however, even experienced teachers can become disheartened when working with children who exhibit serious behavioral dysregulation. Research indicated that by providing teachers with adequate training and structured tools for teaching children emotional regulatory skills that consider the full need of the child by accessing sensory integration strategies, early learning centers can promote better teaching and create optimistic outcomes for all children (Little, et al., 2017). The question central to this research was this: “In light of early childhood theories, philosophies, and current research in the field regarding best practice, are social/emotional curricula that imbed sensory integration strategies effective? If so, how should these curricula be integrated into the fabric of early learning curricula in future programming? The following review of literature was an evaluation of current research and served as verification of sensory based SEL in the early childhood setting as one component of Developmentally Appropriate Practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The body of literature that existed to learn about the efficacy of sensory strategies in the early childhood curriculum to assist with social/emotional learning was largely dependent upon the work from the discipline of occupational therapy, with limited contributions coming from known social emotional curricula that accesses sensory strategies. Occupational therapists were professionals who had been trained in sensory integration therapy. Their training developed a deep understanding of the various sensory profiles of children, and occupational therapists have created sensory experiences with the aim of allowing children to self-regulate using various techniques (Roley, et al., 2009).

The practice of looking into current models of social emotional curricula for young children established the importance of such programs, indicated the efficacy of current practices and guided research toward the next steps in the use of best practices. These current models of SEL were examined for evidence of DAP and were also evaluated to learn about what sensory integration strategies were already in use in these curricula and how effective those specific models were.

Rationale for Social Emotional Learning Curricula

To embark upon a review of literature with the intent of evaluating the benefit of sensory processing strategies in SEL curricula for young children, the review first established the importance of social/emotional learning. A study called “The Role of Emotion Regulation in Children’s Early Academic Success” investigated the role of emotional regulation in 325 kindergarteners (Graziano, 2007). Results found that there was relationship between regulatory processing ability and early academic success. Children were more productive in the classroom, and their emerging math and reading skills were more on target. The quality of teacher and

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student relationships were predictive of academic outcomes. These qualities were even of greater impact than measurement of intelligence quotient (IQ). When children have difficulty with regulating their emotions, they were less likely to access the academic elements of programs, limiting their experiences and chances to learn. This cycle was made worse by teachers becoming frustrated with these students, and their relationships deteriorating further, causing less potential for learning in the social/emotional realm (Graziano, 2007).

Findings about the importance of emotional competency by studies that focused on causal relationship between regulation and academic achievement were supported by studies that came to similar conclusions, but were rooted in neuroscience (Housman, 2017). In “The Importance of Emotional Competence and Self-Regulation from Birth: A Case for the Evidence-Based Emotional Cognitive Social Early Learning Approach,” Houseman relayed that the physical structure of the brain was found to be impacted by the experiences young children had that were rooted in interpersonal exchanges with their primary caregiver. The consistency of the routines of daily living, including responsiveness of care, proved to be an essential element of physical brain development.

Practices With set SEL Curriculum Omitting Sensory Strategies

An assessment of the current teaching practices in the social/emotional domain was made. Findings were that across early learning centers, a wide range of curriculum guides were used and to varying degrees. Reports of classroom practices that were based in SEL theory, but without guidance or structure of implementation were common. Social emotional curricula that derived basis for practice from more traditional psychological research was found to be moderately effective. Researchers in the study “Improving Young Children’s Social and

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Emotional Competence: A Randomized Trial of the Preschool ‘PATHS’ Curriculum” aimed to assess the PATHS or *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies Curriculum* (Domitrovich & Greenberg, 2007). Twenty classrooms of Pennsylvania Head Start participants were studied across nine months. Children learned about feelings and strategies for self-regulation in an attempt to see a reduction of externalizing behaviors such as aggression and emotional outbursts. The study did not produce profound results, and the researchers concluded that the low baseline of children who required such an intervention, coupled with low perception of behavior change by parents was the cause of this outcome. Researchers also concluded that because there was no parenting component PATHS or extension into the home environment, and that SEL learning in the school setting alone was not enough to produce results. PATHS is a program that does not generally embed sensory profile awareness or integration strategies and was a valuable juxtaposition to those curricula that do.

Another study based upon the PATHS SEL curriculum provided more promise in terms of efficacy. The study *The Randomized Controlled Trial of Head Start REDI: Sustained Effects on Developmental Trajectories of Social-Emotional Functioning* examined the long-term effects of REDI (research-based, developmentally informed) which was a program aimed at preventing mental health disorders (Nix, et al, 2016). Forty-four Head Start classrooms were randomly assigned either typical Head Start curriculum or Head Start with REDI. Those with REDI were administered preschool PATHS. PATHS, a social/emotional program that familiarized children with emotional literacy and taught strategies for positive problem solving and self-regulation was found to have positive lasting impact on the participants. To fully support what learning the children were getting through PATHS, REDI teachers were trained and coached in the skills of language expansion, positive guidance, specific compliments, and scaffolding. The program was

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found to be moderately successful in improving measures of self-regulation. Although PATHS did not typically embed sensory integration strategies into their SEL curriculum, it was unknown if the teacher training that was offered contained components of sensory therapy.

Consistent with findings that SEL curriculum based in psychosocial theory provided moderate improvement in emotional regulation, the study, “Promoting Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool Students: A Study of Strong Start Pre-K,” found that some improvements through the use of concrete strategies in SEL were possible within the preschool setting. The curriculum, Strong Start Pre-K, was administered to 52 preschool students using a quasi-experimental design over the course of six weeks. The teachers administering the lessons were the sole indicators of efficacy and reported about the children’s behaviors including externalizing behaviors and adult/child relationship by using a scaled questionnaire. The questionnaire was given before and after the term. Primary findings from the study were minor improvements in self-regulation but the program was of greatest benefit to the student-teacher relationship. An analysis of the outcome of this study leads to the hypothesis that improved strategies by the teachers themselves likely played some part in the improvement of relationship. This research pointed toward social emotional curricula rooted in psychology and sociology as an area of research in development with likely benefits to most children. However, because gains made were modest, other theoretical perspectives of human development and how to best support SEL efforts should be evaluated.

Practices Without set SEL Curriculum

Research showed that the delivery systems social and emotional learning used in early childhood settings were varied and inconsistent. Many teachers relied on extensions of natural

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teacher to child interactions to dictate how to manage behaviors (Blewitt, et al., 2021). This had the consequence of SEL and behavior management being reliant on general interpersonal skills and ability by teachers to access theoretical foundations in an unstructured manner. In “It’s Embedded in What We Do for Every Child: A Qualitative Exploration of Early Childhood Educators’ Perspectives on Supporting Children’s Social and Emotional Learning,” the researchers created focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with early education care professionals in Australia (Blewitt, et al., 2021). Findings were that there were perceived benefits and known hurdles to using SEL in a preschool setting. Subjects talked about using many approaches to support this learning and that much of it was an extension of natural teacher to child interactions. Subjects did reflect upon four distinct areas of social/emotional support in the classroom, and these were: nurturing and caring teacher to child relationships, using the physical environment to support SEL, interactions and practice, and creating partnerships with caregivers (families). As an assessment of the current practices within classrooms, the elements of a SEL learning that were described were common to teachers within the United States as well. Each school and individual teacher emphasized one or more of these areas over the others, reinforcing the common theme of inconsistency of teaching within the field. Because the strategies described were assessed as somewhat effective in supporting mental health for children, they were a good baseline for understanding and evaluating the current practices in many early childhood education settings. In order to evaluate set social emotional learning curriculum for efficacy, it was important to have data on general practices, or those that do not use a set curriculum.

The inconsistency of social/emotional learning strategies in early childhood was also exemplified by Ferreira, et al., (2021) in “Social and Emotional Learning in Preschool Education

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- A Qualitative Study with Preschool Teachers.” This study found that within a population of Portuguese preschool teachers, the knowledge of SEL was sound and largely in alignment with CASEL (2005). The subjects, who were interviewed in a long interview format, largely understood that SEL goals pertained to self-regulation, social responsibility, and relationships. The teachers also understood that early intervention was key in developing a healthy sense of self and saw themselves as important to that teaching, secondary to the influence of the family. The deficit seemed to lie in the gap between theory and practice. With regards to practice, the same teachers conveyed limited knowledge of strategies that are most beneficial to supporting social and emotional learning for children. They determined that their most accessed strategy was dialogue in the midst of conflict and reported mixed efficacy of this strategy. Despite the emphasis the teachers placed on the collaborating between school and home, no teachers reported utilizing a collaborative approach to SEL with families as a strategy in practice. This indicated that teachers may have benefitted from predetermined SEL curricula with practical tools for teaching so that they may best apply the theories of learning in real time.

To emphasize the justification of predetermined SEL curricula, a review of current research provided by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) indicated that early childhood professionals are to provide children with curriculum to support their learning across multiple learning domains (NAEYC, 2020). In the NAEYC Position Statement titled *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, under “Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Action: Using Knowledge of Child Development and Learning in Context” the following statement to indicate quality practice was found:

Educators effectively implement a comprehensive curriculum so that each child attains individualized goals across all domains (physical, social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and

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general learning competencies) and across all subject areas (language and literacy, including second language acquisition mathematics, social studies, science art, music, physical education and health (NAEYC, 2020 p. 22).

The research on programs that do not access a cohesive curriculum for social/emotional learning indicated that the result of teaching practices was inconsistent and produced high variability in learning outcomes. By evaluating programs that do not use established SEL curricula, and in conjunction with NAEYC standards that recommend curricula development as best practices, it was established that increased use of social emotional curriculum was warranted across early learning programs.

Rationale for the Integration of Sensory Strategies in Early Learning

With the understanding that there was value in implementing social emotional learning curricula in the early learning setting, the next area of research regarded the content of said curriculum. The disciplines of psychology and sociology set the theoretical precedent for research-based social/emotional curricula (Blewitt, et al., 2021). While many of these programs have proven to be beneficial (Nix, et al, 2016), research from the discipline of occupational therapy also contributed to various behavioral interventions within the school setting. To know how these strategies were expected to impact social emotional curriculum, the research examined whether or not sensory integration theory is a known and valid.

Some research had been gathered that found correlation between the prevalence of behavioral issues in early childhood with sensory processing dysfunction. The quantitative study, “Sensory Processing Difficulties, Behavioral Problems, and Parental Stress in a Clinical Population of Young Children” evaluated the relationship between children with behavioral issues and children with sensory integration issues (Gourley et al., 2012). The study began with

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the hypotheses that children who had sensory processing difficulties would also have a high rate of misbehavior. They studied 59 children from the ages of two-to-five years of age from a low income, urban community. There was a high rate of sensory processing dysfunction with 55.9 percent of children demonstrating these issues.

The families reported a high rate of parental stress, and this stress rate was much higher than those children found to be without sensory difficulties. The hypothesis of the researchers was that if mental health consultants who treat children with behavior issues were versed in sensory regulatory strategies, the outcomes for families would be better. Findings indicated rationale for the use of sensory processing integration strategies to address behaviors within social emotional curricula in the preschool setting. Ideally this type of curriculum would have imbedded a parenting component, an omission that was addressed by the authors this article.

Known Sensory Strategies from Occupational Therapy

The use of sensory integration therapy was commonly used when working with children who had autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disorders (Schaaf, et al., 2018). The theory behind the therapy involved activities that were specifically tailored to the needs of the child and their perceived sensory motor deficits. The activities were play-based and aimed to elicit a response to stimuli that helped the child reach a state of regulation to be able to access greater functionality (Schaaf, et al., 2018).

Research indicated that sensory integration strategies may have been effective for self-regulation across a neurodiverse population, including neurotypical people within the general population. The article, “Classifying Sensory Profiles of Children in the General Population” acknowledged that addressing sensory profiles and needs are not only important for children with pronounced sensory processing disabilities (Little, Tomchek & Dunn, 2017). The

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quantitative study examined children without developmental disorders and found that there are five groups that emerged and varied by intensity and specific sensory features. Interestingly, the same subtypes identified in the general population were the same subtypes found in children with autism spectrum disorder. This indicated that many people have sensory differences, and that within the category of people with autism, sensory disorders are characterized by the intensity and prevalence of any of these differences. This research supported the use of sensory based strategies for children in the general learning environment, not only for children with special needs. Identifying that there are five basic patterns of sensory profiles alluded to specific applications of strategies for use to benefit these subtypes.

This topic of research, in which various sensory profiles were examined within 51 children aged six to eleven years to predict behavior patterns for children and appropriate interventions in the classroom, was extended by the study, *Sensory Processing in the General Population: Adaptability, Resiliency, and Challenging Behavior* (Dean, et al., 2018). This quantitative research demonstrated that when considering sensory needs of children there are different sensory profiles that tend to correlate with different mental health outcomes. The authors of the study sought to learn of the relationships between sensory profiles and those positive psychological attributes such as resiliency (Dean, et al., 2018).

Protective traits like resiliency had not previously been examined from a sensory lens. The findings were that sensory seekers, or those who are under responsive tend toward both depression and resiliency, and those with sensory sensitivity or those who are over responsive tend toward externalizing behaviors. This reinforced the theory that many of the behaviors we encountered in early childhood education were sensory based and that unless social emotional curricula were found that embeds sensory strategies, the correct source of the behavior would not

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be treated. It also conveyed those different sensory profiles should be responded to through the use of different, tailored strategies.

As an aide to that process, the article, “Sensory Integration Dysfunction: Implications for Counselors Working with Children,” (Withrow, 2007) provided guidance for evaluating groups to learn of their sensory needs and apply the appropriate strategies. Withrow provided a peer reviewed academic paper that intended to inform counselors who work with children about sensory integration disorder. Most mental health workers were not fully trained in sensory processing needs, as an occupational therapist would have been, and the author purported that therapists’ knowledge of this condition, which was thought to effect up to fifteen percent of children, would impact the approach to mental health. The article outlined and compiled all the sensory profiles across the most impacted senses: visual, auditory, gustatory, tactile, vestibular, and proprioceptive. Winslow then created recommendations for recognizing the various profiles and also appropriate basic interventions to support children with these profiles. The article indicated that through the knowledge of general patterns of behaviors, adults with basic training in sensory integration therapy could learn to apply the correct strategies to grant children greatest access to positive social/emotional learning outcomes.

Other research questioned and subsequently confirmed the use of sensory integration theory to address children’s ability to appropriately access and function withing the school setting. “Providing Occupational Therapy Using Sensory Integration Theory and Methods in School-Based Practices” used measurable goals to learn of the ability of children to participate in their educational environment (Roley, et al., 2019). Researchers closely monitored progress based on the therapies administered and found that sensory integration therapy was effective and warranted for the children with sensory-related deficits. In doing so, the research further affirmed

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that sensory integration therapy is an accepted form of therapy within the occupational therapy community. This mixed-method research validated the use of sensory integration strategies within a social emotional curriculum and communicated that the fundamental science of the therapy was accepted by the community that most frequently used it to treat children with sensory differences. With the confirmation that therapies rooted in sensory integration were effective, inquiry turned toward the investigation of which specific strategies might best be used in a classroom.

Deep pressure sensory input was determined to have a soothing effect to some people, depending on their sensory profile. The quantitative study, “The use of a Weighted Vest to Increase On-Task Behavior in Children with Attention Difficulties” (VandenBerg, 2001) evaluated the impact of wearing weighted vests to help children with ADHD to focus. The children were observed for six 15-minute intervals without the vest and for six 15-minute intervals with the vest on. All 4 of the children under observation were able to operate at a more functional level with the vests on. While weighted vests are not a component of a sensory based social/emotional curriculum, strategies that access deep pressure for self-regulation such as getting a hug or taking a “crash” break on a bean bag or carrying a heavy backpack from one side of the room to the other, could benefit children and offer a soothing effect. This article encouraged the use of sensory strategies and the inclusion of the strategies into a social emotional curriculum to mitigate maladaptive behaviors in early childhood.

Efforts were made to learn of which strategies might be most conveniently used in the classroom setting. One mixed-method study sought to isolate the effects of vestibular and proprioceptive input on attention engagement in the preschool classroom. In “The Effects of

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Inflated Seating, Seifert and Metz (2017), provided inflatable rubberized cushions to preschool classrooms for use during circle time. Video was taken of fifty-two children in four classrooms who alternated periods of using the cushions, and not using the cushions on a daily basis for a four-week term. The researchers observed for cues of on-task attention, responsiveness to the material presented at circle time, and ability to remain in circle time for an extended time and scored the children using the five-point Child Behavior Rating Scale. Teachers reported findings that the wiggle cushions to be more effective for some children than others. This was consistent with understandings of a range of sensory needs within a population of neurotypical students, within which a group of children may have been sensory avoidant as opposed to seeking, and an intervention like this may have been more distracting than facilitating.

Another sensory strategy that was typically utilized in sensory integration therapy was deep breathing (Withrow, 2017.) The study called, “The Effects of Slow Breathing Exercise on Heart Rate Dynamics and Cardiorespiratory Coherence in Preschool Children: A Prospective Clinical Study” determined that children who practiced slow, controlled breathing over the course of eight weeks were able to modify their heart rate to create a more favorable state of baseline cognitive executive functioning through quantitative analysis. (Cruz, et al., 2020). The 42 five and six-year-old children in the experimental group were instructed to breathe in and out for equal counts with four second of inhalation and four seconds of exhalation. They did this for approximately ten minutes of a daily twenty-minute meeting which occurred Monday through Friday. The researchers evaluated cardiorespiratory coherence as a measure of relaxation. Data showed that children improved their potential to enter into this relaxation state over the course of the 8 weeks, as the data that was gathered at multiple points in the study indicated progression of ability. The outcome of the study pointed to the children’s capability to self-engage in this

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relaxation strategy and receive the benefits of the practice. The practice had the effect of modulating the children's heart rates to a status that promoted best conditions for cognitive and social/emotional learning and general reduction of stress. The findings were promising in the future use of deep breathing as a physiological and sensory based strategy within the early learning classroom.

Current SEL Curricula and Presence of Sensory Strategies.

There were some existing social emotional curricula that already utilized several sensory integration strategies. One study, "A Cluster Randomized-Controlled Trial of the Impact of the Tools of the Mind Curriculum on Self-Regulation in Canadian Preschoolers" aimed to learn about the efficacy of the Tools of the Mind curriculum in preschoolers (Solomon, et al., 2017). Specifically, the researchers were seeking to learn about the potential of the curriculum to promote self-regulation. One focus of the study accounted for the need for curricula that promoted self-regulation, as this factor was identified as the greatest predictor of long-term academic success and quality of life (Solomon, et al., 2017).

The study examined children who were administered one of two programs, either Tools of the Mind or Play to Learn, which was another play-based curriculum, but one that did not specifically seek to support self-regulation. The findings were that the children who received Tools of the Mind curriculum were found to have improved self-regulatory skills, but only for those children who were rated by their parents as having a low baseline for attention and high prevalence of hyperactivity. This mixed-method study supported the idea that executive function could be influenced by a social-emotional curricula including components of sensory integration strategies like Tools of the Mind. Some of the concerns about the study were that the Tools

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curriculum was meant to be utilized in all areas of curriculum throughout the full day and it was unknown how accurately the teachers implemented the curriculum in full.

The study called “Effect of the Tools of the Mind Kindergarten Program on Children’s Social and Emotional Development” examined a research project involving the same preschool curriculum, Tools of the Mind (Blair, et al., 2018). This research also asserted that the curriculum supported social/emotional competence and self-regulatory skills, and elements of the program were considered to be a social/emotional curriculum. Teachers who used this program for a year reported on the children’s social/emotional competence at the end of kindergarten. Those children who engaged with the Tools of the Mind program were reported as having fewer behavior problems and better relationships with teachers and peers than those who were not selected to partake in the program. When a follow up check-in of this mixed-method study was conducted when the children were in first grade, the positive effects were found to be residual. Review of the study supported the potential of social emotional curricula with focus on self-regulatory strategies. Tools of the Mind, while not specifically embedding a sensory integration approach, did include strategies that aimed to executive functioning through programming that accessed mind-body connections (Blair, et al., 2018) Language lessons that aimed to improve function of memory and inhibition control included dynamic body movements. Tools of the Mind was acknowledged as a unique program that was derived from the work of Lev Vygotsky and was founded on principles of social constructivism (Blair, et al., 2018). However, the use of tactile, auditory, and visual input cues to promote executive functioning skills was viewed as accessing some components of sensory integration theory, though the authors did not explain their curriculum within that framework.

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One program focused its use of sensory integration for SEL on one strategy: breathing. The quantitative study called “Feasibility, Acceptability, and Preliminary Effectiveness of the OpenMind (OM) Program for Pre-School Children” evaluated a curriculum aimed at self-regulation through breathwork (Jackman et al., 2019). As opposed to a heavily play-based program such as Tools of the Mind, Open Mind (OM) integrated daily mindfulness through meditation for children in the classroom. Mindfulness practices often involve deep breathing, which was also a strategy used in sensory integration therapy. Children were also given training in emotional awareness and language to support communication of feelings. In particular, the teachers relayed that there were benefits for the children in terms of improved self-regulation including ability to calm down, ability to relate to the feelings of others, and body awareness. The research supported the previous findings that preschool aged children were able to access these strategies and that those techniques proved effective in calming.

The most data on the use of a set social emotional curriculum that heavily relied upon sensory integration strategy came from a study on older children. In “The Alert Program for Self-Management of Behaviour in Second Level Schools: Results of Phase 1 of a Pilot Study,” instruction for eighty-five children, ages twelve and thirteen, centered around the metaphor of an engine (Mac Cobb, et al., 2017). Occupational therapists entered the classroom and supported teachers who helped children to identify if each child’s “engine”, or arousal state of awareness, was in the high, low, or just right state for the task of learning.

The children then learned of various sensorimotor strategies to alter their “engine levels” based on what was needed to engage properly in a task. The strategies included putting something in their mouth such as food with a particular texture or beverage, movement of the body, touching something, looking at something with intent or diminishing visual input, and

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listening. The students explored for themselves how different sensory experiences increased or decreased their arousal and strategized about what might be needed to improve engagement during class time. Students were allowed to sit, stand, do push-ups, eat, listen to music, use fidget toys and more to regulate their “engine” state upwardly or downwardly. Those children who had previously been assessed as having the most problematic behavior improved the most over the course of either trial one, lasting five weeks, or trial two, lasting eight weeks. Of the most at-risk students, 100% of those participants determined that they would continue to utilize the strategies learned.

Challenges of Using Sensory Integration in Early Learning Classrooms.

Some research conveyed that using sensory integration techniques in the classroom presented with unique challenges to successful implementation. The study titled, “The use of Sensory Integration Therapy in Malaysia and Singapore by Special Education Teachers in Early Intervention Settings” was an example of a study that reviewed the use of sensory integration strategies in the school setting as intervention for problematic behaviors (Leong & Carter, 2014). Interestingly, the researchers stated that there was mixed evidence for sensory integration therapy in general. However, because they recognized its wide use within the field of occupational therapy, and the overflow of those methods into the school systems, they wanted to learn how the teachers were using these models and if they were effective.

The first finding of the mixed-method study was that teachers had a very limited and poor-quality understanding of sensory integration therapy but were highly interested, as teachers were hopeful that it would contribute to improved behavior. The teachers were reliant on other teachers to learn of sensory processing integration techniques and did not have a good foundation of theory to support the strategies. The recommendation from the researchers was that these

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strategies should not be used in the school setting unless children are highly and immediately responsive. This study indicated that in order for sensory integration to be effective as an intervention for problematic behavior, sufficient training of those administering the intervention was required. In lieu of all early childhood teachers receiving extensive training on sensory integration theory, this research alluded to the need for sensory integration SEL that was created by expert in sensory integration, and easily accessible for those working within the classroom.

Another quantitative study titled, “Effectiveness of Sensory Processing Strategies on Activity Level in Inclusive Preschool Classrooms” sought to assess the use of sensory processing strategies for children with integration dysfunction within a school setting (Lin, Chou, Lin, 2012). Specifically, researchers measured the activity level of foot swinging at a desk after given activities that offered vestibular, tactile, and proprioceptive input. While the amount of foot swinging, which was measured with an ankle monitor, did decrease after engaging with the sensory activities, the amount it reduced by was not significant enough for the research to be conclusive. Additionally, the treatment period was only eight weeks and not deemed long enough to see long term effect. Because the research was inconclusive and may have been limited due to the short period of observation, sensory-based regulatory SEL was assessed as needing a long-term data collection period to determine efficacy.

Summary of Research/Conclusion

Early childhood educators engaged in a wide variety of social emotional programming in their educational settings. Research indicated best outcomes for children when consistent predetermined curricula were utilized, as opposed to a free-form approach to teaching skills such as conflict resolution and self-regulation of emotions. Social/emotional curricula for use in early childhood education classrooms were successful, but most were based in psychosocial theory.

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Those curricula that did integrate sensory processing strategies either used limited strategies such as deep breathing, or the curricula heavily used sensory strategies but only within research on populations of older children. Some research relayed the difficulty of implementing sensory integration strategies within a learning environment. The predominant areas of difficulty were time constraints for administering interventions and the lack of trainings for teachers. An examination of strategies for promoting self-regulation of emotions from the discipline of occupational therapy indicated that these strategies could be accessed by young children and produced improvement in self-regulatory ability. The following chapter will further discuss findings, connect the findings to research-based standards of quality with regards to inclusive practices, and make recommendations for further study.

Chapter 3: Discussion

From the data it may be deduced that a fusion of knowledge from the work of occupational therapy, and specifically sensory integration therapy could profoundly and positively impact practices of SEL in the early learning setting. Social emotional curricula that do not embed sensory strategies start from the assumption that a child is already in a state of physiological regulation that will allow emotional learning to take place (Little, et al., 2017). Research has indicated that if practitioners were taught to consider the needs of children on a deeper level, that of the sensory nervous system, all other layers of learning are likely to be impacted positively. Sensory integration SEL was not researched as a replacement for traditional modalities of teaching children to self-regulated but based on this research it is suggested as the first consideration in layers of teaching (Little, et al., 2017)

Connection to Inclusion Practices

Practices that support children’s learning and development should do so for all children. All early education teachers should begin with a sound foundation of understanding normative developmental standards across all learning domains (NAEYC, 2020). Practitioners should also be able to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of individual students, while also supporting the overall health and spirit of inquiry unique to each classroom. When children lapse in any area of learning, it is the teacher’s responsibility to scaffold that learning just within the child’s ability (Blair, et al., 2018). This technique is effective in all areas of learning and should similarly be accessed when a child shows deficit in social emotional learning. Early childhood educators who are committed to teaching from a “whole child” perspective (Blair, et al., 2018) will include teaching children who have behavioral difficulty appropriate strategies for healthy socialization and self-regulation.

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Not all children with persistent behavioral challenges will be diagnosed with a sensory processing disorder. However, with known high prevalence of comorbidity of sensory dysfunction and behavioral problems, (Gourley, 2012) these integration strategies are important for frequently dysregulated children to gain access to. Additionally, many children with sensory integration dysfunction are likely to never receive a diagnosis or therapy. Research indicated that when a school's general education SEL curriculum included appropriate sensory strategies for self-regulation, students' learning trajectory would be positively influenced.

NAEYC Position Statement on Inclusion

The 2019 Position Statement by the National Association for Young Children titled, "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education" makes the ethical obligation of teachers and educational leaders clear. In the section titled "Creating a Caring, Equitable community of Engaged Learners" item number nine reads: "Recognize and be prepared to provide different levels of support to different children depending on what they need." This was interpreted to include a variety of strategies for teaching social/emotional skills and can include sensory integration techniques. Sensory integration SEL, like all other curricula, does not rely on universal techniques that suit all children equally. It was, however, a theory that was malleable and the use of sensory integration strategies can be modified greatly to meet the needs of the unique individuals in a learning community.

Future Studies

While research on sensory integration embedded SEL curricula existed, this research was incomplete. The curricula that most completely embraced sensory strategies for self-regulation, the ALERT program, has been mainly studied amongst populations of children with special needs or older children (Wagner, et al., 2019). More research should be conducted amongst

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young children in general education settings, with the aim of inclusivity across children with a wide range of special needs and including children without diagnoses but who may demonstrate behavioral difficulty. Additionally, those existing programs such as Tools of the Mind which access sensory strategies, but only partially, could be studied with sensory strategy enhancements to learn of improved outcomes. Alternatively, a novel curriculum could be developed for use by general education preschool teachers that accessed strategies for upwardly and downwardly regulating children's states of arousal, to achieve a "just right" state for learning. Such a program would rely upon visual cues, sources of vestibular and proprioceptive input, methods of altering auditory input, and provide a well-rounded sensory diet in the classroom environment. As stated in the literature review, extensive training for preschool teachers would be required in order for such a program to be effective.

Conclusion

When working with young children, teachers and family members are often eager to adopt strategies that will "work" to diminish the effects of problematic behavior. However, early childhood curriculum does not lend itself to full standardization, as the interest, backgrounds, and abilities of the families one works with will be ever evolving (NAEYC, 2020). Expert educators will recognize this and create responsive learning environments in which children can thrive. These environments will take a whole-child approach to learning and support physical, social/emotional and cognitive development through play-based experiences (NAEYC, 2020). This approach, along with strategies that support family engagement and inclusivity will contribute to greatest learning outcomes for all children. When practitioners adhere to recommended strategies that include differentiation of instruction across all domains, a wide array of strategies can be considered that may support that individual child (NAEYC, 2020).

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These strategies may include sensory integration strategies as a regular component of helping children by co-regulating their physiological needs so that children are then able to function as their best young selves. Then children might be taught a more complete version of social emotional learning to develop those skills that are central to building a child's concept of self and relation to others.

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FINAL CAPSTONE PAPER RUBRIC: (PASS OR FAIL)				
Criteria (Total points)	Exemplary 420-403	Proficient 402-361	Competent 360-319	Unsatisfactory 0
Cover Page; TOC, Abstract, Chapter One (50 points)				
<p>Cover Page; Table of Contents, Abstract, and Chapter One:</p> <p>Possible Points: ____/50</p> <p>Instructor Feedback:</p> <p>2nd Reader Feedback:</p>	<p>The writer has consistently utilized the capstone paper template and followed all guidelines for the development of the cover page, TOC and Abstract; the writer has developed a well-organized, succinctly written chapter one informing the reader of the following:</p> <p>the topic and scope of the research investigation;</p> <p>importance of the topic to the field of education;</p> <p>statement of interest to engage the reader; at least 3 sources cited with a clear connection to the research question; definition of terms; how the scope of the problem investigated will be organized in a logical sequence through the use of subtopics; the research question concludes the chapter connecting to the Essential Question;</p> <p>Chapter ends with a conclusion (chapter summary) paragraph that includes a transition to the following chapter.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">48-50 points</p>	<p>The writer has usually utilized the capstone paper template and followed most of the guidelines for the development of the cover page, TOC and Abstract; the writer has mostly developed chapter one informing the reader of the following:</p> <p>the topic and scope of the research investigation;</p> <p>importance of the topic to the field of education;</p> <p>statement of interest to engage the reader; at least 3 sources cited with a clear connection to the research question; definition of terms; how the scope of the problem investigated will be organized in a logical sequence through the use of subtopics; the research question concludes the chapter connecting to the Essential Question;</p> <p>Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph that includes a transition to the following chapter.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">43-47 points</p>	<p>The writer has sometimes utilized the capstone paper template and followed some of the guidelines for the development of the cover page, TOC and Abstract; the writer has partially developed chapter one informing the reader of the following:</p> <p>the topic and scope of the research investigation;</p> <p>importance of the topic to the field of education;</p> <p>statement of interest to engage the reader; at least 3 sources cited with a clear connection to the research question; definition of terms; how the scope of the problem investigated will be organized in a logical sequence through the use of subtopics; the research question concludes the chapter connecting to the Essential Question;</p> <p>Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph that includes a transition to the following chapter.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">38-42 points</p>	<p>The writer has rarely met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in "0" points.</p> <p>NOTE: Less than 319 points results in "0" for this assignment as it is a "pass or fail" paper representing the successful completion of the MAED program requirements competently.</p>
Chapter Two: Literature Review (210 points)				
<p>Chapter Two: Literature Review</p> <p>Possible Points: ____/210</p> <p>Instructor Feedback:</p>	<p>The writer has consistently provided a professionally written narrative which summarizes and synthesizes the information from the selected research studies in order to develop a response and answer to the research question proposed in Chapter One.</p>	<p>The writer has usually maintained a professionally written narrative which summarizes and synthesizes the information from the selected research studies in order to develop a response and answer to the research question proposed in Chapter One.</p>	<p>The writer has sometimes maintained a professionally written narrative which summarizes and synthesizes the information from the selected research studies in order to develop a response and answer to the research question proposed in Chapter One.</p>	<p>The writer has rarely met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in "0" points.</p> <p>NOTE: Less than 319 points results in "0" for this assignment as it is a "pass or fail" paper representing the successful completion of the</p>

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<p>2nd Reader Feedback:</p>	<p>The narrative fully answers the proposed research question. Includes a minimum of 15 scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative/quantitative/mixed-method original research studies.</p> <p>Chapter ends with a research finding summaries and conclusions</p> <p>The writer has consistently provided a succinct and precise summary of findings</p> <p>includes a review of the proposed problem that was investigated;</p> <p>the importance of this topic;</p> <p>and a paraphrased summary of the main points or themes of the literature review;</p> <p>Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph (chapter summary) that includes a transition to the following chapter.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">202-210 points</p>	<p>The narrative mostly answers the proposed research question. Includes a minimum of 15 scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative/quantitative/mixed-method original research studies.</p> <p>Chapter ends with a research finding summaries and conclusions</p> <p>The writer has usually provided a mostly developed summary of findings</p> <p>includes a review of the proposed problem that was investigated;</p> <p>the importance of this topic;</p> <p>and a paraphrased summary of the main points or themes of the literature review;</p> <p>Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph (chapter summary) that includes a transition to the following chapter.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">181-201 points</p>	<p>The narrative partially answers the proposed research question. Includes a minimum of 15 scholarly, peer-reviewed qualitative/quantitative/mixed-method original research studies.</p> <p>The writer has sometimes provided a partially developed summary of findings</p> <p>includes a review of the proposed problem that was investigated;</p> <p>the importance of this topic;</p> <p>and a paraphrased summary of the main points or themes of the literature review;</p> <p>Chapter ends with a conclusion paragraph (chapter summary) that includes a transition to the following chapter.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">160-180 points</p>	<p>MAED program requirements competently.</p>
<p>Chapter Three: Discussion / Application / Future Studies (75 points)</p>				
<p>Chapter Three: Discussion/ Application/ Future Studies</p> <p>Possible Points: ____/75</p> <p>Instructor Feedback:</p> <p>2nd Reader Feedback:</p>	<p>The writer has consistently developed a clear summary of insights gained from the research that leads to improved instructional practice.</p> <p>The writer provided a clear description with examples of how the research is applied to instructional or educational practice;</p> <p>has provided a minimum of three suggestions for possible future studies;</p> <p>and the chapter ends with a powerful conclusion that acts as a conclusion for the entire paper.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">72-75 points</p>	<p>The writer has usually developed a mostly clear summary of insights gained from the research that leads to improved instructional practice.</p> <p>The writer provided a mostly clear description with examples of how the research is applied to instructional or educational practice;</p> <p>has provided a minimum of three suggestions for possible future studies;</p> <p>and the chapter ends with a powerful conclusion that acts as a conclusion for the entire paper.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">65-71 points</p>	<p>The writer has sometimes developed a partially clear summary of insights gained from the research that leads to improved instructional practice.</p> <p>The writer provided a partially clear description with examples of how the research is applied to instructional practice;</p> <p>has provided a minimum of three suggestions for possible future studies;</p> <p>and the chapter ends with a powerful conclusion that acts as a conclusion for the entire paper.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">57-64 points</p>	<p>The writer has rarely met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in “0” points.</p> <p>NOTE: Less than 319 points results in “0” for this assignment as it is a “pass or fail” paper representing the successful completion of the MAED program requirements competently.</p>
<p>APA Format & Mechanics (85 points)</p>				

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<p>APA format & Mechanics</p> <p>Possible Points: ____/85</p> <p>Instructor Feedback:</p> <p>2nd Reader Feedback:</p>	<p>The writer has consistently met the criteria for the following requirements for this paper: APA formatted cover page; Table of Contents right/left justified; clear, half page Abstract – per APA formatting provided; in text citations per APA and included in References page; Reference page formatted per APA guidelines; Correct use of APA level headings; correct use of spelling, grammar, and punctuation; Higher level professional language; third person writing only; correct use of past tense.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">82-85 points</p>	<p>The writer has usually met most of the criteria for the following requirements for this paper: APA formatted cover page; Table of Contents right/left justified; clear, half page Abstract – per APA formatting provided; in text citations per APA and included in References page; Reference page formatted per APA guidelines; Correct use of APA level headings; correct use of spelling, grammar, and punctuation; Higher level professional language; third person writing only; correct use of past tense.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">73-81 points</p>	<p>The writer has sometimes met some of the criteria for the following requirements for this paper: APA formatted cover page; Table of Contents right/left justified; clear, half page Abstract – per APA formatting provided; in text citations per APA and included in References page; Reference page formatted per APA guidelines; Correct use of APA level headings; correct use of spelling, grammar, and punctuation; Higher level professional language; third person writing only; correct use of past tense.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">65-72 points</p>	<p>The writer has rarely met the required components for the criteria in this category resulting in “0” points.</p> <p>NOTE: Less than 319 points results in “0” for this assignment as it is a “pass or fail” paper representing the successful completion of the MAED program requirements competently.</p>
<p>TOTAL POINTS ____/420 Pass or Fail: 319 points are required to pass</p>				

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