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Best Practices for Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood and Elementary Classrooms

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**Best Practices for Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood and Elementary
Classrooms**

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ED 590: Conducting Research and Completing the Capstone, Cohort 090

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Kevin: You unequivocally said “yes” when I said I wanted to pursue this, knowing it would mean added pressure on you with, at the time, two young children to care for. Your ear to listen and sometimes a shoulder to cry on as I navigated teaching three grade levels in distance learning and began this journey helped me get through some very stressful times. I love and appreciate you and cannot thank you enough for your support over the past two years.

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Abstract

Social-emotional learning has existed for many years and the body of research surrounding it increasingly shows its effectiveness. Although SEL curriculums are available, they are often too expensive for school districts to purchase. This paper analyzed SEL best practices so positive behavior and classroom engagement increase. Some elements commonly emerged through quantitative, qualitative and mixed-methods research for consideration as best practices. Included themes are a positive teacher-student relationship and positive student-student interactions. Once relationships were established, explicitly teaching a social skill then reinforcing with positive feedback and a game proved to be effective in increasing both behavior and classroom engagement. Research showed books and media were useful resources for supporting SEL standards. Finally, barriers to implementation are discussed and how to overcome such challenges. Evidence showed when these practices were implemented, positive behavior and classroom engagement increased.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, Tier 1, Tier 3

Best Practices for Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood and Elementary Classrooms

Chapter One: Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) existed for many years but increasingly came to the forefront since the COVID-19 pandemic changed education, including many students distance learning from home for an extended period. Young children sat at home learning through a screen, rather than interacting face-to-face with their peers. Things like solving a conflict at recess or during a game or listening appropriately to teachers and peers were not practiced as often, if at all. Children need socialization, they need social skills modeled to them, and they need to practice those skills if they are going to get better at them.

According to Yoder et al. (2020), 38 states included SEL as a top priority when re-opening schools after the pandemic, particularly in response to increased mental health needs of students. Social-emotional learning is especially important for students in early childhood and elementary classrooms as they are developing lifelong skills in communication, self-awareness, and conflict resolution; learning lost during the pandemic. Beginning from an early age, students need a caring educator to model SEL fundamentals, so all children can build positive relationships, resolve conflicts peacefully, and manage the frustrations of school and life. As children re-enter classrooms, teachers must be aware of practices they are putting in place in their classrooms so all students can receive high quality SEL instruction.

Importance of the Topic

When effective interventions are put in place class-wide, behavior and academic performance improves for both students and teachers alike. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2022), students who participate in SEL

programming are shown to have “improved classroom behavior, an increased ability to manage stress and depression, and better attitudes about themselves, others, and school” (“What Does the Research Say?”). When students are better able to regulate their behavior and emotions, academic performance can be addressed; students are more engaged in their learning and teachers spend less time managing behaviors and more time on academics. Social-emotional learning interventions improved academic performance by 11% compared to students not participating (CASEL, 2022). This shows SEL is not only important for the mental well-being of the child but is beneficial for their academic success.

Social-emotional learning is especially important for students who struggle emotionally and behaviorally. In a study focused on universal SEL programming of Australian elementary students, Carroll et al. (2020) found children with the highest behavioral problems at the start of the study, increased their social-emotional competencies more than their peers over the course of the program. McCormick et al. (2015) also found a universal SEL program benefitted high-maintenance temperament children more than the attention-control group. When the teacher has more positive responses and is more attentive to the needs of the students, it benefits the entire classroom community because the whole environment is more encouraging. This shows teachers who effectively implement SEL instruction will positively benefit all their students, especially those with higher behavioral needs.

Social-emotional learning can also have a positive impact on teacher well-being. According to Poulou (2017), teachers who rate themselves high in SEL competence also rate themselves high in positive teacher-student relationships and job satisfaction. Teachers with close student relationships are less likely to report on high-need behaviors like emotional, conduct and hyperactivity difficulties (Poulou, 2017). One key component of effective SEL is a

strong teacher-student relationship. When educators demonstrate such relationships, they are more likely to manage high-need behaviors and positively respond to students' needs over teachers who do not understand or implement SEL instruction.

When teachers fail to address social-emotional learning, high-need behaviors can increase over time. According to Tur-Porcar et al. (2021), students receiving SEL instruction started with higher levels of aggressive and emotional instability but decreased those levels over the course of the program; the control group, who did not receive SEL instruction, increased aggressive and emotional instability behaviors over the same period. Thus, it benefits teachers and students to address SEL early on so teachers can build on positive relationships and help minimize disruptive behaviors.

Scope of Research

This paper covers several areas of research about best practices for social-emotional learning through qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. The first two themes which emerged were about relationships: a positive teacher-student relationship and positive student-student interactions. The next themes covered are about explicitly teaching social skills, then reinforcing those skills with positive feedback and a game. Skills are also reinforced with class discussions using books or media tools for support. Lastly, several studies identified barriers to implementation, which will be discussed in further detail, as well as how to overcome those barriers. While this paper covers many themes for best practice, it does not verify any specific SEL curriculum or program. When districts are choosing a curriculum, the themes discussed below should be taken into consideration as part of a well-rounded, effective SEL program. If districts cannot purchase a specific program, this paper outlines how educators can

begin to provide successful SEL instruction to their students. Student behavior and classroom engagement increases when educators understand quality SEL elements.

Research Question

In light of what is known about differentiated instruction, how shall professional educators effectively teach every student? Differentiated instruction is most often considered for academic requirements but should be considered for social needs as well. All students benefit from universal SEL; however, some students need differentiated support for social skills. Educators must understand best practices for Tier 1 instruction, but also understand what next steps may be for students who need differentiated support. Strong SEL can also benefit academic differentiation because students who receive SEL instruction perform higher than students who do not (CASEL, 2022). When SEL instruction is properly implemented, student behavior improves, meaning teachers have more time and can give more attention to differentiated academic needs. This paper begins to answer the question: in light of what is known about differentiated instruction, what are best practices for teaching social-emotional learning in early childhood and elementary classrooms so positive behavior and classroom engagement increase?

Definition of Terms

Social-Emotional Learning is “the processes through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (Yoder et al., 2020, p. 6).

Tier 1 is social skills instruction given to all students (Jolstead et al., 2017). These strategies are intended to “promote strengths and prevent risks” (Yoder et al., 2020, p. 6)

Tier 3 is intense interventions which students who do not respond to targeted instruction may need (Jolstead et al., 2017).

Summary

Social-emotional learning is important for all students to understand and practice. It teaches children better awareness of their emotions and how to manage those emotions. It helps students learn appropriate interactions with one another and learn how to resolve conflict peacefully. When students receive strong SEL instruction, they have more positive behavior and are on-task more often in class. Thus, academics can be improved when strong SEL instruction is in place.

The literature review in chapter two further examines best practices for Tier 1 SEL instruction, including positive teacher-student relationships, positive student-student interactions, explicit skills teaching and support through games, books, and media resources. It will also examine barriers educators face when implementing SEL and how to overcome those barriers. Chapter three discusses insights gained from the research, how educators can apply this information in their classrooms, and documents suggestions for future study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a critical part of student success, both academically and behaviorally. When reviewing the literature, several high-quality SEL instruction components arose. This literature review analyzed SEL components and barriers through multiple quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies. The following research showed how these elements led to an increase in positive behavior and classroom engagement.

The first theme the research showed was the importance of a positive teacher-student relationship. McCormick et al. (2015) and Tur-Porcar et al. (2021) found students who received

SEL instruction increased overall behavior as well as the teacher-student relationship. Educators were trained to focus on positive behaviors and teach, rather than punish, when negative behaviors arose. This led to improved teacher-student relationships and overall positive behaviors. Poulou (2017) studied educator views and found teachers who understood and believed in teaching SEL instruction had more positive relationships with their students and reported less disruptive behaviors. All three studies show SEL instruction benefits both teachers and students, and their relationships improved because of it.

The second theme this literature review will discuss is positive student to student interactions. Abry et al. (2017) and Dyson et al. (2021) found modeling and practicing are essential to building student relationships and positive student to student interactions. Students need to be taught when and how to speak, and to listen, to their peers. When these skills are learned in the classroom, students have an easier time transferring them outside of the classroom as well. Garnett et al. (2022) found daily practice improved student interactions, but cautioned these practices often rely heavily on verbal speaking, thus educators must find ways for students who may not be able to verbalize the same way as their peers to participate equally in those activities. This research showed for students to have positive interactions with each other, teachers must model and practice those behaviors first.

The third theme from the research is explicitly teaching a social skill, then reinforcing the skill with positive feedback and a game. Jolstead et al. (2017) and Martinez (2016) found when staff were trained to identify a skill or standard, teach the skills, provide positive feedback, and use a game to reinforce the skill, classroom engagement improved, and teachers continued to provide positive feedback to students. Meredith Murphy et al. (2020) found comparable results; students with significant behavior challenges improved their classroom engagement with

continual reinforcement of social skills taught by a class game. In all three studies, student behavior and classroom engagement improved after students were explicitly taught the skill. Positive reinforcement and games helped students practice and master those skills throughout the year.

The fourth theme discussed is the use of books and media tools for SEL reinforcement. Bergman Deitcher et al. (2021) and Fettig et al. (2018) both studied the use of books to reinforce SEL, including students' ability to identify emotions and solve problems. Educators used questions throughout the reading to reinforce concepts and help children make SEL connections with the characters. In both studies, students improved their understanding of SEL concepts. Another resource often used for SEL support is media tools like video clips or web-based games and apps. Oades-Sese et al. (2021) found digital media tools were effective in helping children make and retain SEL connections, including understanding their emotions and solving problems. Craig et al. (2016) found a web-based game called *Zoo U* effectively helped children improve areas of SEL, and students were able to transfer the skills learned through the game into real life. Whether using books or media tools, these studies showed students can implement learned skills beyond the classroom, which is especially important when considering which support resources to utilize.

The final theme discussed are barriers educators faced when implementing SEL instruction. Silveira-Zaldivar and Curtis (2019) found educators believed lack of training and time were the biggest challenges. Professional development is critical when beginning SEL programming to ensure all teachers are on the same page. Wood (2020) discovered educators needed more training, including in cultural competency, to effectively implement SEL. Teachers who did not understand the cultures of their students tried to use SEL for compliance rather than

helping students identify and understand their emotions. Garnett et al. (2022) observed training is essential as well, but staff buy-in is just as important. Educators were trained but did not implement the program authentically because they did not believe in what they were doing. Ways to overcome these barriers are also discussed in the following sections. Before discussing challenges, it is wise to begin with what works well, and a good place to start is with positive relationships.

Positive Teacher-Student Relationship

The teacher-student relationship is one key piece to improving positive behavior in the classroom. When teachers are trained to help students regulate their emotions, educators are more focused on helping the student solve what caused the problem rather than reprimanding the negative behavior. This leads to a more constructive relationship as students learn the teacher is there to help them with their big emotions, rather than there to punish those same emotions.

McCormick et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study including 435 kindergarten and first grade children in 22 low-income, urban schools. Eleven of the schools were randomly selected to implement the INSIGHTS into Children's Temperament (INSIGHTS) SEL curriculum and 11 selected to implement a supplemental reading curriculum as the attention-control group. High-maintenance temperament children were identified through parent surveys. Results showed classrooms which implemented the INSIGHTS curriculum demonstrated a decrease in disruptive and off-task behaviors and an increase over the attention-control group in student engagement, especially for high-maintenance temperament children (McCormick et al., 2015). Another area of improvement was the quality of the teacher-child relationship. One reason for this may be the intervention program encouraged teachers to view intense reactions to small conflicts as a time to gently teach the student new ways to deal with a situation, rather than

negatively punish the response (McCormick et al., 2015). When teachers viewed negative student reactions more positively, the children also felt more positivity, improving the overall relationship.

Similarly, Tur-Porcar et al. (2021) examined the use of a SEL curriculum through a quantitative study in metropolitan Valencia, Spain. Three hundred and twelve children were placed in an experimental group, receiving SEL curriculum. Two hundred and thirty-eight children in the control group received no additional SEL instruction. Teachers in both groups filled out two scales, one rating physical aggression and the other emotional instability in the classroom. Tur-Porcar et al. (2021) found at the beginning of the year, the experimental group rated higher in both physical aggression and emotional instability than the control group. However, at the end of the year, the experimental group showed significant decreases in both areas while the control group showed slight increases (Tur-Porcar et al., 2021). Like McCormick et al. (2015), the use of the SEL curriculum in the experimental group improved positive behaviors while decreasing physical aggression and emotional instability. Training teachers in the curriculum was key as educators were better able to provide specific SEL coaching to students which helped them understand their emotions and respond appropriately (Tur-Porcar et al., 2021). The teacher-child relationship improved because the teacher nurtured the student's emotional response, rather than punishing a negative reaction.

One factor to improve the teacher-student relationship is the *teacher's* ability to regulate their emotions and comfortableness with SEL instruction. Poulou (2017) conducted a quantitative study using questionnaires to assess 98 Greek teachers' emotional intelligence, SEL beliefs, teacher-student relationships, and student emotional and behavioral difficulties. The results showed teachers who were committed to SEL instruction reported better teacher-student

relationships (Poulou, 2017). Teachers who reported close relationships with their students also reported less behavior problems like hyperactivity and behavior difficulties (Poulou, 2017). This supports what McCormick et al. (2015) and Tur-Porcar et al. (2021) found in their research; teachers who strongly implement SEL instruction report closer relationships with their students and are less likely to focus on negative behaviors. The combination of SEL awareness in both teachers and students creates an environment which is more conducive to positive relationships.

A positive teacher-student relationship leads to increased positive behavior as teachers focus on improving behavior and relationships, rather than punishing negative responses. When disruptive behaviors decrease, classroom engagement increases since teacher and student can give more time and energy to academics. Students are more likely to put forth strong academic effort when they have a positive teacher relationship.

Positive Student to Student Interactions

Positive teacher-student relationships are one component for effective SEL, but it is not the only factor. Another essential element is how students interact with each other. “Helping students to recognize the value of their voices alongside the voices of their peers and teachers was a noteworthy practice that promoted SEL” (Dyson et al., 2021, p. 265). Modeling and practicing active listening between students are important parts of strong SEL instruction.

Giving students opportunities to practice speaking and listening to each other is important in building positive interactions. Dyson et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative study of 18 teachers in New Zealand elementary schools using interviews, audio recordings, and classroom observations. One theme emerging from the research was the value of helping students recognize the importance in each other’s voice. Teachers promoted this concept through guided practice like one student presenting a paper or project they created while other students closely listen.

Teachers also noted how they emphasize to students if they expected to be listened to, they must also listen to their peers (Dyson et al., 2021). When students have opportunities to practice these skills in the classroom regularly, they are more likely to utilize the skills outside of the classroom.

Another time to practice speaking and listening every day is by including a greeting, share, group activity, and message during Morning Meeting. Abry et al. (2017) quantitatively studied 143 teachers' use of Responsive Classroom, a Tier 1 SEL program, to assess whether certain elements were more effective for improving classroom community than others. The research found implementing Morning Meeting aligned with higher levels of emotional support between students. Students began the morning practicing skills like eye contact and using a person's name during a greeting, taking turns speaking and listening during a share, and the group activity provided opportunity for working together and shared enjoyment. These elements not only taught students appropriate interactions with their peers, but also created a positive classroom climate (Abry et al., 2017). Educators must *teach* and *model* each part of Morning Meeting and how to have those positive interactions or else this program is not effective. The educators in both Abry et al. (2017) and Dyson et al. (2021) noted how regular practice of these skills was important for increasing positive student to student interactions.

One thing educators must be aware of when implementing elements of speaking and listening is not all students will participate or respond in the same way. Garnett et al. (2022) researched the use of Tier 1 restorative practices (RP) circles. This mixed-methods case study at a diverse, urban elementary school used teacher interviews and student questionnaires to assess the use and effectiveness of RP circles in this school's first year of implementation. Teachers implemented RP circles on average three times per week. Results showed teachers and students

felt teacher-student and student-student relationships were improved (Garnett et al., 2022). Like results from Abry et al. (2017), students felt more connected to other students because it “makes kids feel included and also it is a time to share your important ideas or feelings” (Garnett et al., 2022, p. 117). Unlike other research, Garnett et al. (2022) cautioned the use of RP circles, like Morning Meeting, rely heavily on verbal speaking, which can be difficult for students who use English as a Second Language or who have a disability that effects their verbal skills. Educators must be aware of this to create ways for students who are differently abled than their peers to still participate and feel part of their community.

When students interact well with each other, positive behavior, and classroom engagement increases. Students are better able to communicate appropriately with their peers, which improves behavior and the overall classroom community. Classroom engagement also increases since students independently solve problems, giving the teacher more time to focus on academic needs rather than mediating conflicts.

Explicit Social Skills Teaching with Positive Reinforcement Through Games

Relationships are key in any social-emotional learning program or curriculum. Teachers must develop positive relationships with their students and teach positive student-student interactions in their classrooms. However, relationships can only go so far for developing social skills. Educators must also explicitly teach social skills like raising a hand to ask a question, looking at the teacher to show you are listening, or sitting in a seat for an expected period. One effective way to accomplish this is for teachers to explicitly teach the skill, then positively reinforce it through the use of a game.

Jolstead et al. (2017) conducted an exploratory mixed-methods study with 55 preschoolers in suburban Utah, all from low socio-economic, academically at-risk backgrounds,

to evaluate the effectiveness of explicit skills teaching during Tier 1 instruction. Teachers were asked to identify the most challenging parts of their day. They were then trained and guided on how to teach the skills needed to improve difficult instructional times, as well as how to praise appropriate behavior rather than reinforce unwanted behavior through reprimands (Jolstead et al., 2017). Once the skill was taught, teachers played a game with teams and a timer. When the timer went off, teams earned a point if they were doing the targeted skill, and a reward if they earned enough points in the chosen time (Jolstead et al., 2017). After the intervention period, on-task behaviors and positive reinforcements continued; teachers found the program easy to implement, and students found the game enjoyable and engaging (Jolstead et al., 2017). This study, although limited in size, shows when social skills were explicitly taught to students, positive behavior improved with increased on-task time and students responded well to increased levels of praise.

Similarly, Meredith Murphy et al. (2020) conducted a study combining explicit social skills training with a reinforcing game called the Good Behavior Game (GBG). This quantitative study was conducted in a Tier 3 setting in an alternative school for students identified with intense academic or behavior support needs. The participants included 22 students in kindergarten through sixth grade all with an Individualized Education Plan for emotional or behavioral disorder. Baseline data was collected, and one social skill was taught per week, combined with the GBG. Teachers tracked points for teams in class, praising appropriate behavior or giving the team a violation and stating the infraction (Meredith Murphy et al., 2020). Like Jolstead et al. (2017), Meredith Murphy et al. (2020) found student engagement increased and disruptive behavior decreased with the combination of social skills instruction and the GBG. Teachers and students preferred the combination of the social skills lessons and GBG as being more effective than the GBG alone (Meredith Murphy et al., 2020). Although limited in its

scope, this study shows such strategies can be effective in a Tier 3 setting with students with severe behavior needs.

Martinez (2016) conducted a qualitative study including 20 staff at a small charter school in urban California serving students in kindergarten through sixth grade. The researcher led the staff through the phases of Action Research, which included identifying SEL standards that needed teaching, then implemented a two-week cycle to teach the standard. This cycle included explicitly teaching the skill, guided practice of it through literature connections, role play and games, and reinforcement through a problem of the week exercise and practice with a buddy classroom. Martinez (2016) used focus group interviews, journal reflections, artifacts, and teacher actions for analysis. At the end of the study, teachers felt student conflict resolution skills, self-management skills, and emotional literacy all increased using Tier 1 instruction (Martinez, 2016). Educators in this study felt they understood the SEL standards better and were better able to reinforce positive behaviors since they already explicitly taught that standard (Martinez, 2016). Although limited in its scale, this study showed when teachers were knowledgeable about SEL standards, they were better able to teach the associated skills and praise their students for performing expected outcomes.

These studies show whether in a Tier 1 or Tier 3 setting, educators must explicitly teach expected skills in the classroom. Using a game and positive reinforcement to strengthen those skills is an effective way to increase overall student behavior. Classroom engagement will increase as reductions in negative behavior keep students on-task more often.

Additional Resources for Reinforcement

Games and positive reinforcement are helpful for teaching social skills, but other resources can also support SEL. Books are an effective tool when teaching SEL as they give

students characters or situations to which they can relate. Teachers then use how the character is feeling and how the problem was solved in the book to help students connect with their own life. Media use, like video clips or apps, can also support SEL instruction. Videos give students the opportunity to experience situations and talk through how to react and solve problems that may arise at home or at school. Web-based games or apps are also effective in increasing SEL competencies.

Books

Books effectively support SEL and academic goals alike. They give students characters and situations to relate to and give educators opportunities for dialogue about situations, emotions, and problem solving. “Children’s books depict social events and promote discourse about them, providing an opportunity to discuss these situations without the emotionality of real situations” (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2021, p. 511). Books are an important part of the school day whether they are read to the whole class or to small groups and are valuable support tools.

Books can help bolster students’ use of emotion terms, and help define, and solve problems. Bergman Deitcher et al. (2021) studied 116 Arab-Israeli preschool children on the effectiveness of a shared book-reading intervention in helping advance emotional and social understanding. This quantitative study divided students into intervention and control groups; the intervention group received shared book-reading focused on the plot and characters’ mental and emotional state, while the control group focused on describing the character and their actions. The research found students in the intervention group were better able to name emotion terms, define social problems, and offer solutions to them (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2021). Although this intervention was done in small groups, this same procedure could be used with books in a

whole class setting. This research, again small in scale, showed books are useful tools in helping promote SEL language and problem-solving skills.

Using questions to further strengthen SEL is key when applying books as a support tool. Fettig et al. (2018) researched a dialogic reading strategy to assess its effectiveness on the SEL skills of providing positive peer feedback, taking turns, and problem solving. In this exploratory mixed-methods case study, four kindergarten and first grade students were provided the dialogic reading strategy during a six-month after-school program. After students read a book using the reading strategy, they participated in an SEL extension activity, then had free-play time. At the end of the program, positive peer feedback, turn-taking, and problem solving all increased (Fettig et al., 2018). Semi-structured parent interviews indicated growth at home in the areas of communication, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills (Fettig et al., 2018). While the sample size is exceedingly small in this case study, the results were positive for using books to support a child's SEL skills. Like research from Bergman Deitcher et al. (2021), the importance of focusing on SEL skills like character emotions and problem-solving, and using questions while reading to reinforce the connections between the characters and real life, is key to making books an effective support tool.

Media

Media, such as video clips, games, and apps, are also effective tools for supporting SEL instruction in the classroom. Video clips, like books, can help students relate to real-life situations at school or home, and guide conversations about how to identify emotions, problems, and ultimately, generate solutions. Web-based games and apps developed to support SEL are also tools students can use to enhance their SEL competencies. Although used in different contexts in the classroom, both can be successful resources for students and teachers.

Many SEL curriculums incorporate media clips as part of the program to support the particular social skill being taught and further conversation in the classroom. Oades-Sese et al. (2021) quantitatively studied the effectiveness of one curriculum developed by Sesame Street, in 766 San Diego, CA preschool children. Researchers pre- and post-tested children on their response to challenging social situations, as well as their emotion vocabulary. Teachers completed behavioral rating questionnaires on participating students. Students were randomly assigned to the Sesame Workshop's Little Children, Big Challenges: General Resilience SEL program or the control group, Sesame Workshop's Healthy Habits program. Researchers found a significant increase in how much children talked about emotions and feelings outside of the program, as well as constructive problem-solving by those who participated in Little Children, Big Challenges compared to the control group (Oades-Sese et al., 2021). Teachers in this study found the digital toolkit in the program useful and appealing (Oades-Sese et al., 2021). Many children can relate to Sesame Street characters as they are familiar from early childhood. This character relatability in the video clips helps children internalize and retain the information, and was shown in improved emotion regulation, decreased attention problems, and lowered teacher-student conflict (Oades-Sese et al., 2021).

Children of all ages enjoy playing educational web-based games or apps, especially when these apps are fun and engaging. Craig et al. (2016) quantitatively researched the effectiveness of one such SEL game, *Zoo U*. It was designed as a social skills training program to improve impulse control, communication, cooperation, social initiation, empathy, and emotion regulation. Forty-seven children aged 7 to 11 were randomly assigned to either participate in the *Zoo U* program or not have access to it for a ten-week period. Parents and children completed pre- and post-program behavior questionnaires. The game is designed to initially assess what areas in

which the child needs improvement. It then works to increase those behaviors through repeated practice towards mastery (Craig et al., 2016). Results showed children who participated in *Zoo U* significantly increased their social-emotional skills and behavior over the control group (Craig et al., 2016). This research demonstrated web-based games can be effective in increasing social skills and may translate into the classroom as more positive behavior. Although the sample size is small in this study, it showed these games may be a useful and engaging tool, especially for schools who are struggling to implement other SEL curriculum.

Books and media are both effective resources to support SEL instruction. When students are better able to identify their emotions, positive behavior increases because they are better equipped to manage those emotions. Classroom engagement also increases because students are more connected to learning when they relate to characters or situations in the book or game.

Barriers to Implementation

While there are many useful curriculums, programs, and tools available to educators to implement social-emotional learning, there are also challenges. Teachers struggle to implement SEL instruction because of a lack of training and a lack of time to prepare lessons and materials. Other teachers implement SEL but do so ineffectively because of a lack of cultural competency. SEL within schools is often unsuccessful because it is not done completely and with whole staff buy-in. When some teachers implement SEL and others do not, children develop differing levels of skills, making it difficult to transfer those skills outside of the classroom.

Two of the biggest barriers sites confront are training and a lack of planning time. Silveira-Zaldivar and Curtis (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study to examine the barriers in implementing Evidence-Based Practices (EBP) into inclusive classrooms in a large, public, urban district with students with High-Functioning Autism. After an initial survey, respondents

were asked to participate in focus groups to better understand the answers given in the survey, of which 12 agreed. From the survey results and focus group answers, themes were identified; the top two barriers which emerged from the study were training and time (Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019). Educators who participated felt they were either not trained enough in EBPs for inclusion students in their settings, or that support staff assigned to help with inclusion were not trained in EBPs for social skills (Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019). This made implementation difficult because staff could not effectively execute the strategies needed for student success. Across the survey and focus groups, educators also relayed the need for time to prepare materials and lessons that align with EBPs for students in their classes (Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019). Lack of time led teachers to not implement the necessary strategies, even when they knew it would be beneficial for students.

Similarly, Martinez (2016) found educators believed teaching SEL standards was effective but did not feel there was enough time to plan both SEL and academic curriculum. Training was another theme both teachers and school leaders believed were necessary to continue the growth of the students and staff after participation in the study was completed. Although teachers spent a year intensely working on learning and implementing SEL standards, many acknowledged more professional development and collaboration with other staff could have deepened their understanding and bettered implementation (Martinez, 2016). If time is not explicitly allotted to focus on SEL, the academic demands on teachers take priority, and SEL does not receive the attention it should. Continual training so staff constantly learn new skills and strategies is essential for successful SEL implementation.

Wood (2020) found another area of training school staff needed to properly implement SEL education was in cultural competency. A survey of staff views on emotional intelligence

and the use of SEL curriculum in four English primary schools was conducted. Two schools were from more affluent parts of town and two had higher rates of students who qualified for free or reduced lunch, including one with a large population of Bangladeshi and Pakistani immigrants. After the survey, Wood (2020) used qualitative methods with focus groups and individual interviews to analyze emergent themes throughout the study. The biggest theme was staff often targeted students from low socioeconomic or diverse cultural backgrounds as being more difficult behaviorally, and therefore needing SEL education. Wood (2020) found the views of many were SEL curriculum should be used for student compliance, rather than students' understanding of their own emotions. Like Martinez (2016) and Silveira-Zaldivar and Curtis (2019), Wood (2020) agreed further training was needed for all school staff to improve the use of SEL implementation including putting emotions, rather than obedience, at the center of those efforts. Added cultural competency professional development was also necessary so staff can better relate their cultural norms to others. Social-emotional learning education must embrace aspects from other cultures instead of being used to enforce western cultural beliefs (Wood, 2020). Although SEL instruction was being delivered at these schools, it was not implemented appropriately because the students' cultures were not considered. When teachers can better understand culturally where their students are coming from, positive behavior and relationships can improve.

For some schools, even with whole-staff training, implementation does not work as well because some staff do not accept the tenets of SEL. Garnett et al. (2022) found restorative practices (RP) circles increased SEL competencies. The research also showed many staff said they bought in to the principles of RP circles, although those staff failed to authentically implement them. School-wide programs give teachers and students throughout the building a

common language when solving problems, but if that program is not implemented by all staff, students will suffer. According to Garnett et al. (2022), teachers “must believe that this way of being in a school community has merit and authentically practice a restorative approach” (p. 122). Educators must understand the fundamentals of any SEL program, as well as the benefits, or else they will not employ it to the best of their abilities. If educators do not believe in the program they are teaching, implementation is ineffective.

Although there are barriers to implementing SEL, overcoming them is possible when barriers are identified. A school must assess their staff’s background knowledge, cultural biases, and views on SEL before implementing a program or curriculum. Once evaluated, the school will know what areas and what amount of training staff need to effectively implement SEL. When educators know the areas where they need improvement, they are more likely to address those areas and ultimately increase positive relationships and classroom engagement.

Review of the Proposed Problem

Social-emotional learning is an essential part of all students’ education, but what are best practices for teaching social-emotional learning to increase positive behavior and classroom engagement? According to Yoder et al. (2020), SEL encompasses a child’s ability to identify and manage emotions, build and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Positive teacher-student relationships and student-student interactions are building blocks for SEL. Once quality relationships are established, educators must teach expected social skills and use positive feedback through games, books, and media to support those skills. Educators have the responsibility to know and understand best practices for implementing SEL in their classroom so children can effectively identify and manage their emotions and solve problems respectfully with their peers.

Review of the Importance of the Topic

Social-emotional learning has many benefits, both behaviorally and academically. When teachers effectively implement SEL, it leads to better relationships between teachers and students, as well as between students and their peers. Children are better able to identify their emotions, and successfully manage those emotions, and they can communicate with a peer when problems occur and solve the conflict peacefully. This leads to improved behavior and classroom engagement. When children learn these skills at an early age, they carry it with them throughout their life.

Summary of Findings

The research mentioned above showed when teachers are trained to effectively implement SEL, they are also trained to identify positive behaviors in students and help children work through negative behaviors (McCormick et al., 2015; Tur-Porcar et al., 2021). These constructive interactions led to more positive behaviors, not only for the child acting out, but for the entire class (McCormick et al., 2015). This increased relationship benefits the teacher and student alike by allowing the teacher to focus on all children in the class, not just those with high behavior needs. Positive behavior increased because the teacher was trained to look for it.

Social-emotional learning improved classroom engagement as well. Martinez (2016) found teachers in the study reported students were better able to solve conflicts on their own during independent work time, and teachers had a common language with students to discuss and solve those problems when conflicts did arise. When children can resolve issues without teacher involvement, it allows the teacher time to focus more on academic needs, while students solve the problem and return to work.

Teaching children to identify their emotions also led to increased classroom engagement. The research above proved SEL instruction increased the child's emotional intelligence (Bergman Deitcher et al., 2021; Oades-Sese et al., 2021). When a child understands what emotion is driving their behavior, it is easier for the educator to help teach strategies to handle those emotions. If children can effectively manage their own emotions using skills taught, it will increase classroom engagement because the educator is able to continue teaching while the child independently calms down.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the research shows a positive teacher-student relationship and student-student interactions leads to increased student behavior. Explicitly teaching a social skill, then reinforcing the skill with feedback and games leads to improved behavior and classroom engagement. Books and media tools are beneficial resources to support SEL instruction and should be used to help children make deeper connections to SEL concepts. While teacher training, preparation time, cultural competency, and staff buy-in are barriers to effective SEL implementation, schools effectively lift the barriers when they are aware of them.

The research is now presented, so how should educators use this information to better meet the needs of their students? The following chapter of this paper addresses insights gained from the research and how to use those insights to better inform instruction in the future. The chapter also discusses suggestions for future studies.

Chapter Three: Discussion and Application

Insights Gained from the Research

From the research discussed above, three insights were gained; educators must build positive relationships with their students, must teach and reinforce social skills, and must

understand barriers to social-emotional learning. The first thing educators need to develop are positive relationships with their students and inter-student relationships. The research showed when teachers focus on reinforcing positive, rather than reprimanding negative behaviors, the teacher-student relationship improved (McCormick et al., 2015; Tur-Porcar et al., 2021).

Educators must also model and practice how students should interact with each other to improve student-student relationships (Dyson et al., 2021). Student well-being and academic performance improves when there are positive relationships with the teacher and other students in their class. Students are more motivated to do well when they feel connected to their teacher and peers, but this connection does not just happen; it must be developed over time and deepened throughout the year. When children feel comfortable in their classroom community, they are more likely to ask for help from teachers and peers, both socially and academically, therefore increasing behavior and classroom engagement.

Second, teachers must understand effective strategies for teaching social skills in the classroom. One strategy is explicitly teaching the social skill, then reinforcing it with a class game. Sitting in an assigned spot, raising a hand when asking a question, or looking at the speaker are all social skills which may need explicit instruction. Once a skill is taught, the key is to reinforce behaviors students are doing well (Jolstead et al., 2017; Meredith Murphy et al., 2020). When teachers focus on the positive, students begin to internalize the behavior and put it into practice more often. Use of books and media tools also reinforce SEL skills. These resources provide real-life experiences for students to connect with and helps support the social skill being taught.

Lastly, educators, schools, and districts must know the barriers faced when implementing SEL curriculum and overcome those obstacles right from the start. The biggest barriers for

teachers implementing social skills instruction are training and lack of planning time (Silveira-Zaldivar & Curtis, 2019). Educators are faced with meeting the academic and social needs of their students, which is very time-consuming. When educators are effectively trained and supported, there is better understanding how to incorporate SEL throughout the day, making it easier to implement alongside academic standards. Training and staff buy-in are essential for effective SEL implementation (Garnett et al., 2022). If staff know and understand the benefits of SEL instruction, they are far more likely to teach it to their students. So, once educators understand to build relationships, teach and reinforce social skills, and recognize barriers to effective results, what else must be done to effectively incorporate SEL instruction?

Application

Teachers must first look within themselves to understand their own feelings and SEL competencies; when teachers understand their own emotions, they are better able to recognize the emotions of their students (Poulou, 2017). Teachers are less likely to punish negative behaviors when they know where the child is coming from. They can help a child work through those feelings, which leads to an improved teacher-student relationship. Educators should also implement daily activities such as restorative practices circles or morning meetings to help build positive rapport and give students opportunities to appropriately interact with each other (Abry et al., 2017; Garnett et al., 2022). This helps build a classroom community where students feel comfortable sharing their feelings with their teacher and classmates, an integral part of building positive relationships.

Next, educators should examine their students' weakest skills to identify what to explicitly teach and reinforce. Some students need more practice looking and listening to whomever is speaking, while others need training in how to solve a conflict peacefully with a

classmate. Once a teacher identifies areas which need improvement, the skills should be modeled and taught, then reinforced. For whole-group reinforcement of skills such as sitting and listening, a class game is most effective. In other cases, books or media tools are useful. If a teacher is trying to reinforce students solving a problem with their peers, using a book or video where two characters are working through a conflict, then discussing how the characters communicate effectively in that situation gives students real-life examples to connect to.

Finally, training so teachers understand what SEL education is and how to execute it is critical for effective implementation. Wood (2020) noted cultural competency and SEL training is necessary for *all* staff in the school, including management, teachers, support, and custodial staff. The school is a community to support students, and because of this, all staff need to be on the same page about the goals and strategies used to implement SEL education. Once staff is trained, allowing them time and resources to navigate what their students need socially and emotionally is essential for staff buy-in and successful implementation. Although much is known about SEL instruction, future studies can further the field.

Future Studies

One area lacking in research is the student perspective on the impact of a quality relationship. While there is much research on the teacher's perspective of the teacher-student relationship (McCormick et al., 2015; Poulou, 2017; Tur-Porcar et al., 2021), research on the child's perspective of this relationship is more limited. At the early childhood and elementary level, some of this is due to the immature nature and lack of understanding for young children. Garnett et al. (2022) attempted to conduct surveys on the effectiveness of RP circles with third to fifth grade students and found it especially challenging due to the modifications needed to make scientifically proven scales accessible and understandable to students. Individual interviews are

effective at young ages for a student perspective, but these methods are time-consuming for large-scale research. Additional time and resources should be put into creating scales which effectively analyze student perspective of a quality teacher-student relationship. Understanding the student viewpoint can help teachers know what areas may need additional attention.

The second area requiring further research are large-scale studies on the effective use of books to support SEL instruction. Bergman Deitcher et al. (2021) and Fetting et al. (2018) showed promising data on the success of using questioning during a read aloud to support SEL concepts, however both these studies are very limited in size. Large scale research about which books to use and what questions to ask would be beneficial. SEL curriculums can be expensive, but books are easily accessible resources at all schools. Understanding how to effectively use the tools already available will greatly benefit schools, especially those who cannot afford a complete SEL curriculum.

Third, Wood (2020) noted how staff surveyed were not appropriately using SEL because it was being used for student control, rather than understanding emotions through a cultural lens. Many schools focus on SEL, but do not consider the cultural background of their students. More research is required on how a staff's cultural views effect SEL instruction. Similarly, research whether additional cultural training helps improve SEL outcomes for students of varying cultures would be beneficial, particularly for schools with diverse populations. Teachers must understand their own cultural biases before they can appropriately help their students' social-emotional needs.

Conclusion

This paper identified four ways educators can implement SEL instruction with their students: build positive teacher-student relationships, practice positive student-student

interactions, explicitly teach social skills and reinforce with a game, and use books and media tools as resources for reinforcement. It also acknowledged there are barriers many educators face when attempting to implement SEL instruction which makes it more challenging for some. While these barriers can make SEL implementation difficult, they are simple to remedy when identified and addressed early.

Student mental health is a priority for many schools after the COVID-19 pandemic (Yoder et al., 2020), so what should schools do to meet those social-emotional learning needs? Relationships and modeling are the foundation for overall student well-being and academic performance, beginning on the first day of school. As soon as children walk in the door, teachers begin practicing SEL by focusing on positive behaviors and teaching social skills as expectations for the classroom. Educators must teach their students to recognize what emotion is at the root of a behavior and demonstrate how to calmly manage the emotion. Teachers should also model how students interact with each other to build positive relationships within the classroom community, not just with the teacher alone. Students must feel welcome in the classroom to succeed emotionally and academically.

Training and time are also critical for *all* staff before the implementation of any curriculum, as every adult must know the expectations and outcomes from SEL instruction, so it can be reinforced in all areas of the school. Quality training also leads to staff buy-in, which is critical for effective implementation. When there is a well-trained, nurturing staff supporting students' social-emotional needs, positive behavior increases, and students are more engaged in their learning.

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Appendix

Article Tracking Matrix

Articles: Author(s) name and year of publication	Method: Qualitative/ Quantitative/ Mixed- Methods	Positive Teacher- Student Relationship	Positive Student to Student Interactions	Explicit Social Skills Teaching	Additional Resources for Reinforcement		Barriers
					Books	Media	
Abry et al. (2017)	Quantitative		X				
Bergman Deitcher et al. (2021)	Quantitative				X		
Craig et al. (2016)	Quantitative					X	
Dyson et al. (2021)	Qualitative Case Study		X				
Fettig et al. (2018)	Exploratory Mixed- Methods Case Study				X		
Garnett et al. (2022)	Mixed- Methods Case Study		X				X
Jolstead et al. (2017)	Exploratory Mixed- Methods			X			
Martinez (2016)	Qualitative			X			X
McCormick et al. (2015)	Quantitative	X					
Meredith Murphy et al. (2020)	Quantitative			X			
Oades-Sese et al. (2021)	Quantitative					X	
Poulou (2017)	Quantitative	X					
Silveira- Zaldivar & Curtis (2019)	Mixed- Methods						X

Tur-Porcar et al. (2021)	Quantitative	X					
Wood (2020)	Qualitative Case Study						X