Fall 2018

Dragonfly's Toolkit: An Innovative Curriculum Framework to Facilitate Socio-Emotional and Character Development Skills in Preschoolers

Celeste Finn
Hamline University

DRAGONFLY'S TOOLKIT: AN INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK TO FACILITATE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT SKILLS IN PRESCHOOLERS

by

Celeste Amara Finn

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

Saint Paul, MN

December 2018

Capstone Project Facilitator: Trish Harvey
Content Reviewer: Molly Harney

To my family and friends who have supported me throughout this journey, particularly my husband, James. To my son, Kurt, for motivating me to reimagine the potential of early childhood and to strive to create something impactful. Thank you Julia Williams for inspiring me to become an educator. Finally, thank you Molly Harney for introducing me to the magic of a child's cognitive development in the early years. Your wisdom and guidance has been instrumental.

"Every child is potentially the light of the world"
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The primary motive for me to become a preschool teacher is the ability it gives me to teach social and emotional skills when children need it the most - between the ages of three and five. Although social emotional learning (SEL) has remained a core learning objective in my classroom and I have developed strategies to teach it, I continue to question the best way to promote the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers. Successfully teaching character development and problem-solving skills to preschoolers is elusive and challenging. Its successful implementation is contingent on high-quality, holistic programming and curriculum. Learning SEL skills requires young children to engage in abstract reasoning and complex concepts. Therefore, teaching SEL skills requires caregivers and teachers to understand the cognitive and emotional needs of children, build secure relationships, and model strong SEL skills.

To align these pieces, my capstone project attempts to answer the question: *How can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?* More specifically, I am wondering how improved problem-solving skills and the ability to demonstrate the virtues can expand a preschoolers' social-emotional functioning and enhance classroom culture and relationships. To do this, I will develop a child-centered curriculum model to teach SEL and character development.

Chapter One will outline the path that led me to conclude that teaching SEL is of paramount importance, though it is frequently misunderstood or missing in the early childhood landscape. It will begin with how my educational philosophy was constructed through teacher training and highlight how theory and research in the fields of educational psychology and cognitive development have been fundamental to deepening my personal beliefs about the importance of teaching virtues and problem-solving skills. The chapter will continue with an overview of my professional and personal investigation into SEL, including how I created a dragon puppet to teach the virtues to preschoolers. Although useful, the puppet was insufficient as a systematic curriculum to develop the social emotional awareness of preschoolers effectively. It left me wanting to continue exploring ways to promote the social emotional functioning of preschoolers.

Virtues and Problem-Solving as Essential Life Skills

Before I underwent any teacher training, I strongly believed that classrooms were a community of learners; a place where a microculture was created by the careful intention and guidance of the teacher. Under the right conditions, the teacher could create a vibrant culture that embraced intellectual challenges, perseverance, encouragement, and kindness. These were essential, I reasoned, for learning to flourish, especially if student life outside of the classroom was difficult or adverse. For this culture to become imbedded, a set of values is needed, such as kindness, patience, perseverance, and respect.

During my teacher training, my pedagogy was further solidified and enriched by multiple educational theories. Foremost among them were Vygotsky's theory of social learning, Dewey's democratic classroom, Ainsworth's attachment theory, Banduras' bobo doll experiment, and Rousseau's social contract theory and his belief in humanity's innate curiosity and infinite potential. It became clear to me that relationships are the foundation for learning. Therefore, social skills are a requirement for relationships to form and learning to take place. Moreover, I learned that children are social creators who depend on their observations of others to develop their identity, moral compass, and social skills. The collective forms the individual and vice-versa. Every classroom has unique rules and expectations, with the individual and the collective together reinforcing or challenging the established behavioral expectations, values, and norms. Through experience and my teacher training, I grew to believe it is indispensable to explicitly teach the values and expectations of a classroom *and* the social and problem-solving skills needed to uphold them.

Experience has made me certain that there are two foundational SEL skill-sets that should be explicitly taught to students in order for classroom expectations to be successfully met. First, the expression of virtues (such as kindness, respect, courage, perseverance, and honesty); and second, the ability to solve social and cognitive problems with creativity and mindfulness. Thankfully, these two SEL skills are mutually beneficial and supportive. In a preschool setting, the ability to share emerges as a social expectation. A student's capacity to problem-solve and negotiate social play is essential, as well as the

virtuous expressions of patience and generosity, for successful sharing to take place. In elementary and middle school, the virtues students cultivated in preschool will be further deepened to navigate class projects and cultivate meaningful interpersonal relationships.

I have grown to believe, through my teacher training and experience, that explicitly teaching the virtues and problem-solving skills will help students to become pro-social, resilient, and ready to learn in school and beyond. As learning is sparked through meaningful relationships, SEL skills are prerequisite skills for learning to flourish.

Birth to Five: The Foundational Years

In addition to gaining an understanding of the social nature of education and the need for SEL skills to accompany learning, I grew to have a profound appreciation for the cognitive growth that occurs from birth to age five. A Cognitive Development undergraduate course changed the trajectory of my career from a high school teacher to a preschool teacher. In this class, information about child development changed my outlook on the importance of early childhood education and even on what it means to be human. I learned that a young child's brain has twice as many neurological synapses as an adult. I also discovered that ages birth to five is when the brain's foundation is constructed, and is the foundation required to support all future learning and development.

Although the brain is malleable and has plasticity, it is highly desirable to develop healthy neurological systems from the start. Any consistent levels of stress can lead to

higher cortisol levels and potential life-long health consequences (Lapsley & Carlo, 2014, p. 4). Preschool can be a place for students to develop crucial secure and nurturing relationships that they may not have in other spaces. Secure relationships are essential to help a young child's brain develop neurological connections that lead to healthy assumptions and beliefs about oneself and the world (Center on the Developing Child, N.D.).

Through the course, I also grew to understand the capacity of quality preschools to have a profoundly positive effect on the long-term cognitive development of children. Unfortunately, most US preschools are poorly run, have insufficient resources, and/or have inadequately trained staff (The National Institute for Early Education Research, 2017). This results in a substantial number of preschools having a negligible or even a negative effect on a child's cognitive development and brain architecture. The lost opportunities each generation faces due to a poorly run, under-regulated, and under-funded early education system is incalculable. For these reasons, learning the cognitive, social and health consequences of early childhood education in that undergraduate class inspired me to become a preschool teacher.

After becoming a teacher, I have learned in greater detail about the brain's prefrontal cortex and the need for executive function skills through experience and professional development. The prefrontal cortex is unique to humans and is the region of the brain where executive function skills are expressed. Executive function is essential for success and well-being throughout life. These essential skills include the ability to

focus, to be self-regulated, have mental flexibility, endure delayed gratification, set and achieve goals, and overcome distraction, among many others.

There are two key periods of growth to develop executive function skills: the first is between three and five years and the second is late adolescence (Center on the Developing Child, N.D.). Naturally, learning this further solidified my belief in the importance of high-quality preschools that included social emotional learning to further develop executive function skills. My quest to find ways to develop systematic and effective strategies to teach the virtues and problem-solving skills was intensified.

Creating a Virtue Dragon Puppet

As a teacher, one of my favorite moments is introducing "Dragonfly" to my students for the first time. Dragonfly is a 6-foot-long, green, plush dragon I purchased from Ikea. He has small wings and a felt flame drooping from his mouth. I started to incorporate him into my lessons during my first year as a preschool teacher. He would do yoga, sing songs, and read stories. The kids loved him, and he quickly became a teaching staple, sparking magic and laughter in the classroom. The following year, I left that preschool to volunteer as a teacher in a Romanian village. I was disappointed that Dragonfly could not accompany me, given what a great teaching resource he had become. Other plush toys did not spark the same delight, wonder, and awe that this large, malleable, and mystical beast did.

While in Romania, I was given great liberty in creating the curriculum and structure of my classroom. With this freedom, I started to introduce SEL, beginning with

teaching the virtue of kindness. The children loved learning about kindness because it is meaningful to their lives and development. Learning about kindness helped build their identities and it was a joy for them to see it in themselves and in their peers. Given the success of my teaching pedagogy, I wanted to teach additional virtues but was unsure how to proceed. Patience, respect, and perseverance are concepts that are difficult to grasp for young minds that still lack abstract reasoning and essential vocabulary.

It was at this juncture in my development of teaching SEL, that I happened to see the exact same Ikea dragon I had previously used hanging in the window of a secondhand shop. Delighted, I purchased the plush dragon and spent a few evenings modifying him with needle and thread to make into him a puppet. I equipped him with 10 two-inch hand sewn virtue pillows that went in his 'heart,' a little pouch in his chest that was accessible by a zipper. Shortly after, I used him to introduce a number of virtues at once, using a short story I had written about how Dragonfly developed the virtues within his heart. Being able to take the dragon's virtues out of his heart and give the children a chance to hold the virtue pillows, made the abstract tangible.

Once again, Dragonfly became an everyday teaching tool in my classroom, especially to introduce the idea that we have multiple virtues within us that we can choose to express at any time. Despite having created this storytelling virtue puppet, I still questioned how to develop the moral character and social problem-solving skills of preschoolers systematically and effectively. Although Dragonfly was beloved in my classroom, I needed a research-driven curriculum and behavior plan to successfully teach

SEL skills. The goal of this project was to discover what such a curriculum would look like.

Conclusion

The purpose of my capstone project is to find ways to effectively develop the moral character and social problem-solving skills of preschoolers at my school in the state of Massachusetts. Classrooms are their own ecosystems, where a culture of learning can be carefully cultivated by the teacher but will bloom only with student buy-in and engagement. Explicitly teaching the expectations and values within a classroom is vital, as is teaching the skills needed for students to express the classroom's values and expectations. Skills that are essential to a student's ability to thrive in a classroom include expression of the virtues and the ability to solve problems creatively. We also know that humans are social beings and the development of our schema and identity hinges on the behaviors we observe in others. Moreover, we know that we learn new skills and generate our own knowledge through social collaboration. Social collaboration and learning require flexibility of thought, problem-solving and exhibiting virtues.

The science of cognitive development has taught me a lot about how our minds are developed. The brain's foundational architecture is developed between birth to five-years-old. Our identities, beliefs, and neurological health are created during these early years when the brain is the most active in creating new neurological connections. The impact of relationships and quality learning experiences on the development of young minds cannot be overstated. High-quality preschool curriculum that meets the

cognitive and social needs of students is imperative to foster the essential executive function skills necessary for children to become adults who will contribute to society.

My goal for this project was to create a curriculum to teach preschoolers the virtues and help them develop problem-solving skills to independently remedy conflict, increase their executive function skills, and enhance their emotional literacy. Within this curriculum, concepts will evolve from one other and can be mindfully reviewed and practiced throughout the year. By doing this, I was able to answer the question: *how can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?*

Chapter two will review the current literature of character development and social emotional learning. Through this investigation, I learned what best practices are in SEL and its impact on developing a cohesive, healthy classroom culture. I also learned what to SEL essential skills demonstrate a positive impact on student learning and development. By doing this research, I was able to incorporate what is most effective and essential, while meeting student, parent, and teachers' needs in the curriculum I developed. Chapter three will include the theories and methods used to develop a SECD program.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

My research question is: *How can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?* By asking this question, I hope to increase my effectiveness as a teacher to develop the character, problem-solving skills and executive function skills of preschool students. This is especially important in preschool because, between the ages of three to five, mental capacity increases dramatically and foundational beliefs and core cognitive concepts are developing. The two major categories within this literature review include preschool curriculum and the components and strategies of socio-emotional and character development (SECD).

Preschool Curriculum

Research has repeatedly shown that high-quality early education can have a positive impact on student achievement in kindergarten and beyond (Knitzer & Klein, 2006). An integral part of high-quality early childhood programs is developmentally appropriate curriculum (NAEYC, 2003). This section of the literature review will start by looking at the potential impacts of high-quality programming and curriculum, and provide a brief overview of what we have learned in the past 60 years. Next, it will outline essential components of curriculum as outlined by a national early childhood organization and proceed to outline the state standards for the social-emotional domain.

Finally, it will investigate the impact of teacher beliefs and self-efficacy on a curriculum's effectiveness and sustainability.

Understanding Curriculum's Potential Impact

Curriculum models refer to the conceptual framework that outlines the organizational structure for decision making, policies, teaching methods, and educational values an early childhood center would adopt. Curriculum model examples include the Montessori method, Creative Curriculum, and High/Scope Curriculum (ERIC Digest, 2000). Curriculum models differ from subject area curriculum, which is more frequently tailored to outline goals and activities for learning different skills and concepts within a specific timeframe.

Systematic differences of early childhood programming began in the mid-20th century with the birth of experimental preschool intervention programs. Research ramped up in the 1960's with the advent of two federally funded early intervention programs for preschool-aged children: Head Start and Project Follow Through. This propelled a nation-wide search for curriculum that would help children from low-income backgrounds achieve academically. After feverish searching, research showed only a minimal difference between curriculum models, causing interest to drop off in the late 1970's (ERIC Digest, 2000).

Intrigue into the effectiveness of curriculum models resurfaced near the end of the 1990's. Four movements within the early childhood field are credited for creating greater concern over curriculum model's potential outcomes: 1) the rise of pre-kindergarten

programs funded by the state; 2) greater concern about the achievement gap between children of affluent and low-income families; 3) new discoveries in cognitive development research; and 4) widespread studies highlighting the prevalence of low-quality early childhood programs. In order to have a return on public investment in early childhood, a dependable curriculum model was needed (Scott-Little, 2003). Unlike the research in the 1980's, the newer comparative evaluations revealed discrepancies in how curriculum models effect student outcomes (ERIC Digest, 2000).

Variables impact programming. Today the debate about the effectiveness of curriculum continues, but it is guided by more sophisticated evaluation models and an increase in research. Despite better research, the search for effective curriculum and models remains no less important or conclusive today than it was a half century ago. Although our understanding of early childhood development has grown exponentially and early childhood research has "produced a cacophony of evaluations that seek to determine whether, and under what conditions, the experience of structured, publicly-supported education... helps to promote children's development" (The Pre-kindergarten Task Force, 2017, p. 3), we still do not know what it will take to create affordable, high-quality programming that is scalable. The Pre-Kindergarten Task Force (PKTF) was a consensus report issued in 2017 from early childhood scientists from across the United States and was supported by the Brookings Institution and Duke University. This landmark report went on to say that groundbreaking programs such as the Perry Preschool Project and the Abecedarian Project were able to demonstrate that

well-funded, researched-based programs can have a positive impact on a small number of children from low-income families. Although these two programs demonstrated fantastic results, replicating the success of those programs has not been achieved at a scalable level. Consistent impact across programs has proven challenging in-part because each preschool center differs greatly from the next. There is no single monolithic preschool policy strategy that can be duplicated across the board. The discussion about what should be the preferred curriculum model is inconclusive in part because the landscape of early childhood education across the country is highly variable. Centers are impacted by divergent state standards, funding streams, curriculum models, teacher experience and beliefs, and student needs. The effectiveness of a curriculum will be positively or negatively impacted by these variables.

Large numbers of low quality preschools. As a result of a highly variable landscape, unsuccessful scaling of high-quality programing, lack of adequate funding, and incongruent understanding on the part of policy makers and teachers on the cognitive and emotional needs of children, there exists an exorbitant amount of low-quality early childhood centers. Of the 43 states that provide funding for the 1.5 million children in state-funded preschools, only three states funded preschool programs that met all quality standards, while ten met fewer than half of the standards outline by The National Institute for Early Education Research (The National Institute for Early Education Research., 2017). The National Center for Children in Poverty issued a comprehensive brief in 2006 that stated:

> A large scale study of child care found the overall quality so poor that 11 percent of all centers could actually harm children and another 64 percent had quality lower than the recommended level that the early childhood profession recognizes as necessary to promote achievement (p. 12).

Similarly, PKTF has stated:

> Convincing evidence on the longer-term impacts of scaled-up pre-k programs on academic outcomes and school progress is sparse, precluding broad conclusions. The evidence that does exist often shows that pre-k-induced improvements in learning are detectable during elementary school, but studies also reveal null or negative longer-term impacts for some programs" (2017, p. 1).

Equally notable, other studies suggest that highly structured, academic preschool programs are associated with negative consequences (ERIC, 2000).

Growth in numbers. Despite not being able to find a uniform method of preschool effectiveness, the impact of preschool and curriculum continues to grow as the number of children in early childhood centers rise. According to PKTF, the number of children in preschool has grown 200%; from less than one-half million children in 1964 to 4.7 million three and four-year-olds in preschool in 2014 (2017, p. 5). In 2015, 70% of four-year-olds were in preschool, with 29% in state-funded preschools (p. 7). Given its national impact, finding curriculum that is effective in diverse settings is of paramount importance.

Effective Curriculum

As we can see, not all preschool programs are equally effective and developmentally appropriate. We do know through experimental evidence that high-quality early childhood programs during a child's earliest years help them to learn and succeed (Knitzer & Klein, 2006). Several studies highlight the capacity of preschool to have a positive impact on pre-reading, pre-writing, and pre-math skills in multiple states and localities (Gormley et al., 2011, p. 1).

Several effectiveness factors are at play to create successful programs, but one especially noteworthy aspect of a high-quality program is evidence-based, intentional curriculum (PKTF, 2017). The National Center for Children in Poverty recognizes the importance of curriculum to increase the achievements of children in poverty (2006, p. 14). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is recognized as the national leader in preschool standards and policy. According to the NAEYC, the implementation of curriculum that promotes development in social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive domains is an essential component of a high-quality preschool (National Association for the Education of Young [NAEYC], 2005, p. 1). In 2003, a position statement published by NAEYC and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments (NAECS/SDE) outlined a collective belief in the importance of curriculum. The position document stated:

> NAEYC and NAECS/SDE take the position that policy makers, the early childhood profession, and other stakeholders in young children's lives have a

> shared responsibility to construct comprehensive systems of curriculum, assessment, and program evaluation….[and to] implement curriculum that is thoughtfully planned, challenging, engaging and developmentally appropriate, culturally and linguistically responsive, comprehensive and likely to promote positive outcomes in children. (p. 1)

An effective curriculum draws on best-practice and research to assist teachers to implement methods to teach important concepts in a sequential, developmentally appropriate manner (NAEYC, 2005). The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) published a brief titled *Effective Preschool Curricula and Teaching Strategie*s, that identified curriculum as one of two key strategies for improving early childhood education for children in poverty (Knitzer & Klein, 2006). This brief will be further examined later in this chapter.

Criteria of high-quality curriculum. According to the joint position statement from NAEYC and NAECS/SDE, there are eight indicators of effectiveness present in high-quality curriculum. First, children are active and engaged in their learning. Second, goals are clearly defined and shared by all stakeholders. Third, curriculum is research-driven and evidence-based. Fourth, the curriculum includes principles of child development and is culturally and linguistically relevant to children. Fifth, valued content is learned through play, investigation, and intentional teaching. Sixth, knowledge is built on existing knowledge and experiences. Moreover, the content taught is comprehensive, including motor development, social and emotional learning, language development,

cognition and general knowledge of science, math, language, literacy, social studies, and the arts. The seventh component - subject matter content - is validated by standards set by professional organizations (i.e. the National Council of Teachers of English). Finally, research on the curriculum will indicate it is likely to benefit children. If research is unavailable, plans are made to obtain evidence of effectiveness. It is easy to see why the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE have made these core principles indicators of curriculum effectiveness.

The aforementioned NCCP brief written by Knitzer and Klein (2006) investigated the eight indicators of effective curriculum outlined by NAEYC and NAECS/SDE and further expounded on them. The brief identifies six core aspects of high-quality curriculum. The first characteristic is for the curriculum to be research-based and to incorporate explicit strategies to build on existing skills. The second characteristic is that teachers are actively engaged with children; this is a pedagogical approach where the teacher's challenge is to assist children to talk, explore, and contemplate concepts and practice emergent skills. Thirdly, the curriculum attends to the social and regulatory skills in addition to academic content areas (2006, p. 15-17). Fourth, content taught is developmentally appropriate. Fifth, the curriculum takes into account the unique needs of English language learners and is responsive to cultural diversity.

Notably, NCCP could not identify any existing curriculum that met their requirements. Curriculum that is not teacher-proof was the final characteristic. To not be teacher-proof means interactions between children and teacher are focused, direct, and

intentional with an ongoing feedback loop on student performance. As curriculum can never be teacher-proof, teaching strategies to help teachers effectively hone the curriculum to meet student needs is necessary. It is recognized that competent teachers can make up for a poor curriculum, while poor implementation will greatly reduce the effectiveness of even the best curriculum (Knitzer & Klein, 2006, p. 17).

The sixth and final characteristic of an intentional curriculum is to have classroom quality, teacher effectiveness, and student progress defined and measured using new measurement parameters. “Quality” is an oft-repeated word in early childhood programming to describe the structural components of a program. Such structural components frequently consist of the more visible aspects of preschool, such as adult to child ratios, group size, and the physical environment itself. Structural variables are impactful and are often mandated by the state regulations and accreditation systems. Unfortunately, research on preschool effectiveness has often used structural variables as the sole standard of effectiveness, thereby ignoring the process quality of a program. We have failed to scale the most effective preschool programs because we have not properly taken into consideration that impact of process quality.

Process quality, according to the NCCP brief, are teacher practices, child activities, teacher-child engagement, the socio-emotional climate and classroom management. Thankfully, the importance of process quality is starting to be recognized and measured well. Initial studies that measure quality and structural variables indicated that structural standards alone do not ensure quality or effectiveness in early childhood

programs. These program assessments will lead to a better understanding of what actually helps children to learn, grow, and develop and how these should be incorporated into curriculums and programming (Knitzer & Klein, 2005, p. 17-19).

Together, the NAEYC and NAECS/SDE components of effective curriculum and the NCCP brief on aspects of intentional curriculum provide a sound framework from which to build curriculum models. Developmentally appropriate practices provide additional considerations to take into account when developing curriculum.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). In addition to the indicators and characteristics of effective curriculum outlined by NCCP and NAEYC, DAP is important to consider when designing and measuring the quality of early childhood curriculum. DAP refers to early childhood programs serving children from birth to eight years (Nutbrown, 2005, p. 2).

According to NAEYC, there are 12 principles of child development used to guide developmentally appropriate practice (2006). Developmentally appropriate practice should have physical, social, emotional, and cognitive domains closely related and development should occur sequentially, with ability building from preexisting knowledge and skills. Practitioners are mindful that the level of growth and the time required to develop skills varies from child to child (NAEYC, 2006). They know early experiences have a cumulative effect on development and there are optimal periods for certain kinds of development. NAEYC goes on to say that development advances predictably toward increased internalization and organization (2006). In developmentally appropriate

practice, learning takes place within social and cultural contexts as children actively construct knowledge through physical and social experiences. Play and reflection with peers and scaffolded assistance from teachers leads to social, emotional, and cognitive development and the practice of new skills slightly out of a student's current skill set. Along with different methods of learning, children have different ways of demonstrating learning as well. The final principle of DAP is development is best produced when a child feels safe and valued, and physical needs are meet (NAEYC, 2006). These developmental principles make it "possible to identify ways in which supporting children's learning can be informed and appropriate to their stage of learning" (Nutbrown, 2005, p. 3). When developing and implementing curriculum, maintaining DAP will help ensure effectiveness.

We know now that the capacity of children to learn complex skills is greater than previously believed. The consistent rally cry across national organizations is that the needs of children have not changed, but their capacity to learn language, skills, and complex concepts is greater than previously thought possible (NAEYC, 2003). There is a need to develop a curriculum that reflects the emergent needs and capacities of preschool programs and their young students. The following portion of this section of the literature review will look at the potential benefits of a social and emotional curriculum in preschool.

Effectiveness of Socio-Emotional Curriculum

There has been a significant uptick in interest regarding social-emotional development for over two decades, leading to a monumental rise in social-emotional curriculum and programming available. Unlike the breadth of research outlining the impact of preschool on cognitive development, much less is known about the potential impact of social-emotional learning on a child's development (Gormley et al., 2011, p. 1). Despite the gap in knowledge, there are now numerous studies demonstrating social, emotional, and/or behavioral (SEB) programs as effective across multiple domains, including emotional skills, conduct, and academic achievement (Snyder, 2015).

A 2012 meta-analytical review of 75 published studies found that SEB interventions resulted in beneficial effects in a wide variety of outcomes: social skills, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, positive self-image, academic achievement, mental illness, and pro-social behavior. The effects were the strongest immediately following an SEB program, except for substance abuse, which demonstrated a delayed positive effect (Sklad, Diekstra, De Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteijn,. 2012).

Another study, *The effects of exposure to enhanced preschool program on the social-emotional functioning of at-risk children,* found that extending a child's enrollment in an enhanced preschool program led to the development of their social-emotional competence according to their teachers. A greater level of emotional knowledge in kindergarten was also documented in this study. (Moore, et al., 2015). Notably, it also highlighted a significant difference in outcomes between children who attended preschool

for one or two years; the two-year cohort of children showed significantly greater social-emotional competence. This study demonstrated how quality social-emotional learning (SEL) programming and additional time enrolled can improve outcomes (Moore et al., 2015, p. 136).

These are compelling factors for policymakers and administrators to consider when deciding how to allocate funding and resources to early childhood. Given the demonstrated positive impact of social-emotional learning (SEL), it is a worthy endeavor to investigate ways socio-emotional curriculum can be enhanced to increase the effectiveness of preschool outcomes.

Standards of Effective SEL Curriculum

The SEL learning domain has unique characteristics and standards. Early childhood developmental standards vary greatly from state to state. The article, *Basic Concepts in Early Childhood Educational Standards: A 50-State Review* used the Bracken Concept List to identify universal concepts taught in early childhood education (Bracken & Crawford, 2009). With this concept list as a framework, the researchers outlined the commonalities and discrepancies between state standards (Bracken & Crawford, 2009). Not surprisingly, Bracken and Crawford found that the foundational knowledge needed for language development and concept awareness was not equally outlined across the states, instead, it was a "virtual patchwork of concepts, skills, abilities" that was different from state to state (2009, p. 429). This is especially true for state standards related to self and social-awareness. Feelings are outlined in every state,

but not comprehensively. Arizona, for example, includes sad, happy, and mad, but neglects to include several basic affective states such as angry and curious (Bracken & Crawford, 2009, p. 427). Given the discrepancies and missing links within the state standards, I believe they can be used as guideposts for developing curriculum; however, pulling evidence and research from additional sources is also necessary if SEL is to be comprehensive and systematic.

Massachusetts SEL Standards. Massachusetts SEL Standards provide a coherent set of objectives specifically for SEL curriculum. Although designed for use in Massachusetts, they are comprehensive enough to be utilized elsewhere. In 2015, Massachusetts performed an overhaul of its Standards for Social and Emotional Learning. Previously it had some SEL standards that were embedded into other domains but lacked stand-alone socio-emotional standards. Prompted by an independent study recommendation, the Department of Early Education and Care and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education collaborated with a team of early childhood experts to develop SEL standards for the state (The Department of Early Education and Care & The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Given the collaboration between universities and experts, as well as input from research and evidence-based practice to create its state standards, I have selected Massachusetts Standards for SEL to be a milepost in guiding this project. Massachusetts SEL standards provide objectives in five areas:

1. Self-awareness (emotional expression, self-perception, self-efficacy)

2. Self-Management (impulse control and self-management)
3. Social Awareness (empathy, respect for diversity and for others)
4. Relationship Skills (communication, conflict management, relationship building, seeking help)
5. Responsible Decision Making (ethical responsibility and reflection).

In addition to the five SEL Standards, Massachusetts has eight SEL areas outlined in the Standards for Approaches to Play and Learning: Initiative, Curiosity, Persistence and Engagement, Creativity, Cooperation, Problem-solving, Organization Skills, and Memory (The Department of Early Education and Care & The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2015). Together, these learning objectives provide comprehensive benchmarks to guide curriculum development and programming. The MA SEL State Standards and Standards for Approaches to Play and Learning have been included as Appendix A.

The Teacher Effect

As demonstrated above, there is mounting research outlining what is required for preschool curricula to be effective. Far less is known about what will inhibit or improve a curriculum's effectiveness during its implementation in the classroom (Lieber et al., 2010). Knowing what leads to greater effectiveness during the implementation of a curriculum is important because research consistently highlights the critical effect of teachers and teaching strategies on the usefulness of a curriculum. Teachers translate the practices and standards within a curriculum to make learning meaningful and rich.

Moreover, curriculum can never be teacher-proof or removed from the effects of a teacher's knowledge, theories, or belief systems and how these aspects influence instructional plans, choices, and actions (Knitzer & Klein, 2006, p. 19).

The importance of teacher training. The NCCP brief gave two foundational strategies to improve the benefits of early childhood education for children in poverty in their aforementioned brief. The first was high-quality and intentional curriculum, which has been summarized above. The second strategy is providing teacher support and professional development. By making this position statement, the brief acknowledged the prominent role of teachers. The report stated that teachers are frequently under-supported and underpaid; causing the early education field to have fewer teacher entrants, lower-qualifications, and a high turnover rate. These negative characteristics have been entrenched in the field for over two decades and have become an industry standard. If curriculum and early childhood education are to achieve their role in lessening the achievement gap and having a beneficial effect on the lives of children across the nation, the support and value of preschool teachers needs to increase. For teachers to be most effective, research "strongly suggests that the best results are found when teachers have a bachelor's degree and specialized early childhood training at the college level" (Knitzer & Klein, 2006, pp. 19-20).

Teacher beliefs. It has been said that teacher beliefs lie at the heart of teaching. Kagan (1992) argued that teachers act more on the basis of their beliefs than their knowledge to cope with the unpredictable nature of the teaching profession. If teacher

beliefs act as the foundation for teaching, then it is important to consider how they impact the implementation of curriculum. A 2015 study by Cobanoglu and Capa-Aydin investigated the impact of both teacher beliefs and self-efficacy on top-down, innovative curriculum. The findings were significant. Curriculum was taught with the most fidelity when teachers' beliefs aligned with the curriculum. In this case, if the teacher's beliefs aligned with the constructivist values within the curriculum, teachers reported high fidelity and success in implementing the curriculum (Cobanoglu & Capa-Aydin, 2015). This study is in conjunction with multiple other studies whose findings suggested the "pivotal role of teacher beliefs in educational practice" (Cobanoglu & Capa-Aydin, 2015, p. 84) and in curriculum implementation (Cobanoglu & Capa-Aydin, 2015, p. 85). In fact, teacher beliefs had a substantially larger impact on fidelity than school related factors such as class size.

It can be concluded that teacher's beliefs should be congruent with the values and beliefs latent within the curriculum for optimal effectiveness and fidelity. Teacher training may be necessary to unify the pedagogy and values between teacher and curriculum. Existing teacher beliefs may also be taken into consideration when selecting a curriculum to use.

Curriculum sustainability. A teacher's fidelity to curriculum is influenced by a wide variety of factors in addition to teachers' beliefs. A study published in 2010 looked at the self-reported fidelity of 43 Head Start and prekindergarten teachers to the Children's School Success (CSS) curriculum after a year of implementation. Consistent

use of this curriculum was low, “11.6% maintained full use of the CSS curriculum in the follow-up year, 60.4% used portions of the curriculum, and the remainder had discontinued using the curriculum” (Lieber et al., 2010, p. 225). Given the importance of curriculum in implementing best-practice, these numbers are troubling. Through teacher interviews, the researchers identified several factors that contributed to teacher fidelity: the content and structure of the CSS curriculum, teacher selection of curriculum, access to resources, and the level of support and quality of the relationship with program administrators (Lieber et al., 2010). Teacher training, beliefs, preferences, and relationships with administrators must all be taken into account if the curriculum is to be sustainable and successfully implemented.

In terms of socio-emotional learning and character development, it is important to note that most teachers understand and endorse the implementation of SEL curriculums (Snyder, 2014). Aligning teacher beliefs to the behavior management, ethics, and constructivist pedagogy within the curriculum, (Lieber et al., 2010, Goodman, 2000) and selecting evidence-based curricula remain major challenges in SEL programming in schools today (Snyder, 2014).

Preschool Curriculum Conclusion

We have learned through this section of the literature review that in order for preschools to be most effective, an intentional, research-driven curriculum should be implemented. Such a curriculum must be carefully chosen so that it is developmentally appropriate, highly engaging, sequential in nature, and builds off previous knowledge

with content that is comprehensive and guided by national and/or state standards. The curriculum should include play, exploration, and intentional teaching strategies and be culturally competent and appropriate for English language learners. Finally, teacher training, beliefs, and preferences should be carefully considered to ensure that the curriculum is successfully implemented with fidelity.

Socio-Emotional and Character Development

This section of the literature review will investigate the theories and beliefs currently evolving about social-emotional learning and character development. It will discuss how these theories can answer my research question: *how can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?* It will start by briefly sharing the growth of SEL and character development and consider the elements of social-emotional and character development (SECD). With a common language and background established, this section of the literature review will discuss developmental limitations, compatible teaching pedagogies, core influencers of character, essential SECD skills, and effective SECD strategies to guide a SECD curriculum model.

Morality is the investigation of what it means to be human. It is not surprising then, that the study of morality has captured the attention of researchers for centuries and across multiple disciplines. The development of one's morality has numerous catalysts: temperament, biological tendencies, instincts evolution, neurodevelopment, culture, and sociology (Lapsley & Carlo, 2014). These different forces act and build off each other to

create an individualized morality and character. A review of moral development theory from Piaget to Kohlberg is larger than the scope of this literature review. In addition to time and space limitations, I am focused more on the complex interplay of socialization, cognitive development, and personality and their influence on behavior and learning than moral reasoning and moral judgments in preschoolers.

The study of SECD has grown rapidly and is interdisciplinary in nature. Creating, at times, a lack of consistency in language and terminology. To minimize confusion and create a common language, I am including a glossary of vocabulary words as Appendix B.

The Maturation of the Socio-Emotional and Character Development Field

The study of SECD is a field that has been evolving since the inception of civilization. Initial developments in the field were made by Socrates in the West and Confucius in the East (as cited in Snyder, 2014). In more recent times, we have seen exponential growth in research and interest in character development. The national character education movement has possibly been the fastest growing school reform movement in recent history (Lickona, 1998). Interest in SECD has intensified because there is a demonstrated need and a growing public concern (Lickona, 1998). Moreover, interest has been sparked by success. We are learning that SECD programs "have the potential to positively effect multiple behavior domains such as conduct-related problems, social and emotional skills, and academic achievement" (Snyder, 2014, p. 107). Despite the documented benefits of SECD and growing support and funding from

national organizations, establishing SECD in schools can be challenging due to time and funding constraints, the need for training, and the feverish culture of standards-based curriculum and standardized testing of math and reading (Snyder, 2014). With greater research, reform, and advocacy, it can be anticipated that the present challenges will be overcome due to greater awareness of the potential benefits of high-quality SECD programming.

What is Socio-Emotional and Character Development?

SECD has many names and several terms are used synonymously with it. These include social emotional learning, character education, moral education, character strengths, ethical education, prosocial behavior, and skills for successful living and learning (Snyder, 2014, p. 3). Within this review, SECD is viewed broadly as programming or curriculum that enhances the character development of students. SECD programs and classes teach specific skills aimed at increasing social-emotional competencies, the development of a moral identity, and prosocial behavior.

SECD has a growing team of advocates in researchers, policy-makers, theorists and the public-at-large, as it has demonstrated an increase in positive behaviors and academic skills. It also enters the realm of public health and safety, as SECD is linked to the prevention of health-compromising behaviors, violence, and risky sexual activity (Snyder, 2014).

Creating a SECD Framework

Creating a cohesive framework for SECD is essential for the practice to be systematic and effective. A review of the literature reveals that the development of a SECD model would require: 1) looking at what instigates moral functioning, 2) the capacity and limitations of moral thinking in early childhood, 3) identifying age-appropriate and compatible pedagogy, 4) essential skills, and 5) effective SECD strategies. These five components of a SECD Framework are further discussed below.

Influencers of Character

A current challenge for SECD research is to further "identify the crucial ontogenetic and contextual variables that recruit these tendencies for sustained moral functioning in later childhood and beyond" (Lapsley & Carlo, 2014, p. 3). How can early childhood settings help children to develop a coherent moral framework; including the development of moral cognition, emotions and behaviors to become an internal moral compass throughout school and adulthood? The task is a formidable one. A pertinent initial step to achieve this objective would be outlining the numerous interwoven factors that influence an individual's character and moral reasoning in order to better understand how an individual's moral identity is created and what motivates behavior.

Bandura's (1971) social learning theory explained that humans develop morality by learning what is acceptable through external forces. For example, we are taught that stealing is wrong and there are laws in place to prevent and punish stealing (Bandura, 1971). Internal forces, such as human intuition, personality, and temperament also

influence the development of moral reasoning. Snyder argues in "Socio-emotional and Character Development: A Theoretical Orientation," that creating a sufficiently complex and comprehensive theoretical framework on which to build effective interventions would include both internal and external forces. His theory of triadic influence (TTI) models this (Snyder, 2015). A diagram of Snyder's TTI model has been included as Appendix C.

TTI's roots come from health behavior theory that was developed by social psychologists to understand behavior through the perspectives of stimulus-response theory and cognitive theory. TTI provides three 'levels of influence' and three 'streams of influence' to categorize the different variables that predict or influence behavior (Snyder, 2015).

The three levels of influence are the ultimate, distal, and proximal levels. At the ultimate level, variables are large, encompassing, and relatively uncontrollable. Due to its scope, ultimate level variables are fairly consistent and influential. Examples of ultimate level variables include the cultural environment, politics, religion, and mass media; there are also large internal influences such as race, age, and personality.

Distal-level variables are influences that a person has greater control over because they are at the socio-personal nexus, including self-control, religious participation, role models, and parent interaction. A subset of distil-level variables include an individual's own cognitive influence, such as personal expectations and how one evaluates personal

behavior. For example, the expectation to be thin, beautiful, and attractive would influence one's attitudes, beliefs, identity, and actions (Snyder, 2015).

According to Snyder's model, immediate precursors to specific behavior that an individual can control are at the proximal-level and include variables such as decisions, will power, and intentions (2015). Although still influenced by the distal and ultimate levels, these are variables the individual has the power to influence and are highly predictive of behavior.

Snyder (2015) has categorized three additional sets of influences called streams of influence. They are intrapersonal, interpersonal, social, and cultural-environmental. These streams coincide and connect with the three levels on influence to guide behavior.

The intrapersonal stream starts at the ultimate level of influence, and includes all-encompassing influences such as one's biological predispositions. Predispositions include hormone levels and personality characteristics, such as openness to experiences, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism, conscientiousness, etc. As the stream moves down from the ultimate level, we can see a correlation between the effects of intrapersonal and ultimate level influences at the distal and proximal levels to effect self-esteem and a sense of control. The stream highlights how this amalgamation of variables down the stream of intrapersonal influences form "one's sense of self-efficacy about a particular behavior, such as completing homework after school" (Snyder, 2015, p. 8).

The second stream, the social influences stream, also begins at the ultimate level. Influential variables here include immediate social surroundings that are beyond an individual's influence such as parenting practices, school quality, and teacher behavior. The social influences stream continues through the social/personal, nexus to the distal level. One has more control of the social influences here, such as the connection and strength of bonds to role models, teachers, and parents. The stream flows down and variables include motivation to "comply with various role models… and perceptions of what behaviors those role models are encouraging" (Snyder, 2015, p. 9). The stream concludes at the proximal level, where social influences form social normative beliefs and "perceptions of social pressures to engage in a particular behavior" (Snyder, 2015, p. 9).

The final stream in TTI is the cultural-environmental influences which begin at the ultimate level like the other two streams. Sweeping cultural influences, mostly beyond an individual's control, are the variables here. This includes economic, political, media, and religious influences. As the stream flows down to the distal level, influences include the nature of interactions with cultural institutions and the information and values they take from the established cultural influences. At the proximal level, this stream consists of more personal variables that are derived in part from the influences above, such as how one evaluates their behavior and the consequences they expect from their behavior, for example, the belief that going to college would prove beneficial. At this

level, attitudes are formed about specific behavior. An example Snyder provided is the attitude one forms about civic engagement (2015, p. 9).

Snyder's TTI model is complex, but complexity is needed to comprehensively map how one's beliefs, attitudes, and self-efficacy is motivated and formed from diverse influencers. It highlights the three levels of influence that create character and beliefs. Snyder argued that this model can be used as a framework for designing SECD programs that intend to be comprehensive in nature (2015, p. 11). It can also be useful when trying to understand student beliefs and motivations while implementing an SECD program and as a tool when reflecting on teaching strategies and methods.

If our aim is to be a positive influence in a student's creation of their beliefs and attitudes, we need to understand the layers of influence and the interplay of variables in the creation of human thought and behavior. The TTI model provides an integrated theoretical approach to guide SECD programming to be more effective and systematic, acknowledging the influence of teacher relations, the school-wide climate, peer influences, parental involvement, as well as culture-wide influences within and outside of school. When viewed in this light, it is easy to see why a handful of intentional SECD lessons will not have a long-term impact on a student's character development, which is often the goal of a program's evaluation and measurement. If we wish to be a substantial influence on the long-term development of students, we need to become a key influencer who works in harmony with others.

Capacity and Limitations of Moral Thinking in Early Childhood

Research is providing a greater understanding of children's capacity to demonstrate moral reasoning and altruism at young ages. Awareness of capacity is significant for instruction to be developmentally appropriate and in alignment with student capacities.

Lapsley and Carlo (2014) shared the results of several studies on infants and young children in their article, "Moral Development at the Crossroads." They stated, "some of this research is already showing astonishing proto-moral capacities in quite early life, leading to speculation about the existence of an innate moral core or a natural propensity for altruism" (p. 3, 2014). The article shares that in infancy, development is linked to a mutual responsive orientation and effortful control which later leads to internalization of behavioral standards. Lapsley and Carlo's research (2014) illustrated the complex interaction between "infant temperament and qualities of early caregiving that carves out distinctive pathways to conscience" (p. 3). A conscience that leads to our moral development, beliefs, motivation, and behavior. These findings highlight the impact of caregiving in forming a child's moral development even in infancy.

Moral development is further developed following infancy. By the time a child is two, they can share, comfort a sibling, cooperate, and be of assistance to others. In early childhood, children have been able to demonstrate perspective-taking and moral reasoning. The more a child has social cognitive capacities, the greater their ability to think about the personal and situational characteristics of moral events simultaneously.

SECD development starts at birth through responsive caretaking and advances as children learn and gain social cognitive capacities. Recent moral development studies show that a child's potential to learn and demonstrate a moral character is greater than previously thought, in part because SECD skills have been intentionally nurtured and developed (Lapsley & Carlo, 2014).

Compatible Pedagogy

A young child's ability to show moral considerations in their behavior and thinking can be greater than adults perceive, but a child's moral cognition is not without limitations. Piaget's developmental stages were groundbreaking in their contribution to this field of study. Knowing the nuances and limits of a child's developing moral framework is essential when developing an SECD model and curriculum.

The conflicting pedagogical theories of traditional and constructivist beliefs highlight our need for an investigation into the limits of a preschool's moral cognition and development to create a sound, effective practice. In the article, "Moral Education in Early Childhood: Limits of Constructivism," Goodman (2000) shared her arguments for the need to blend traditional and constructivist (sometimes called progressive) viewpoints.

Traditionalists believe moral values are universal and eternal, and that they are needed to overcome and resist our natural temptations to do wrong. To achieve this, virtues that may be considered hard, such as persistence, courage, self-control, diligence, and restraint, must be vigorously taught through "early habit training and directive

behavioral instruction with meaningful consequences for rule-following and rule-breaking" (Goodman, 2000, p. 38). The viewpoint on the other side of the spectrum is constructivism, which believes that morality is specific to its context and that perspectives on morality will change over time. Unlike traditionalists, constructivists believe "children are primed to be moral, much as we are primed to talk, practicing morality is not an arduous task, it is congruent with our nature" (Goodman, 2000, p. 39). This primal urge for morality can be seen in our early signs of empathy, like when an infant cries out when another child is crying. The virtues taught by progressives are soft virtues such as kindness, respect, sympathy, generosity, and charity. Within the constructivist pedagogy, children are believed to construct their own values through socialization in a nurturing school environment and by solving real-life social problems. Therefore, values and morality are not taught explicitly and a teacher will appeal to a child's cooperation rather than enforce obedience and respect for authority (Goodman, 2000, p. 38). The "constructivist teacher encourages children to be self-regulating - that is, to act autonomously" (Goodman, 2000, p. 48). Many national programs, such as NAEYC, adopt a constructivist pedagogy (Goodman, 2000, p. 39).

According to Goodman, both viewpoints have logical merit and drawbacks. Goodman says the current strong version of constructivism present in preschool moral education requires adaptation to be most effective, and "the precise blend of traditional and constructivist methods should be determined by the moral objectives at stake as well as the children's developmental status" (2000, p. 38). She argued for a blend of both

pedagogies because a child can be insensitive and self-centered, and, at the same time, intrinsically caring and prosocial due to the cognitive restraints present in early childhood. Showing morality means considering the interests of others as equal to our own interests, which young children are incapable of. Therefore, young children cannot construct sufficient moral beliefs to be able to self-regulate and consistently behave in a prosocial and fair manner at school. Children can show self-regulation and fairness sometimes, but due to a child's egocentricity, moral realism, and romancing of reality, they will not be consistent in their display of moral justifications (Goodman, 2000, p. 37). Sometimes empathy will override a child's self-serving responses, other times a child will assert their perceived right to have more raisins or trains than another child for reasons that a child makes up (Goodman, 2000, p. 46).

Both viewpoints acknowledge the need for democratic classrooms and the need for the teacher to demonstrate authority to maintain an environment that is healthy and safe. Without clear lines about what is acceptable, vagueness over the teacher's authority results in confusion for children about what the "fundamental rules are that they must accept" (Goodman, 2000, p. 39). Part of this vagueness occurs because the constructivist approach oversteps the cognitive limitations of young children, leading to ineffective approaches and teaching methods and the need for more traditional methods of behavior management. The problem with the constructivist method of asking young children to be self-regulated and to construct their own morality is that it transcends their cognitive stage.

To overcome this dilemma, we must combine and modify both approaches to allow teachers to capitalize on a child's capacity for empathy, respect their moral realism, and provide behavior interventions that are developmentally appropriate. Having teachers use "directive teaching of moral fundamentals and selective habit building, does not negate the constructivist point that moral issues should stem from children's cooperative social experiences and should be resolved through reflection, discussion and negotiation." (Goodman, 2000, p. 50). Bottom-line values and non-negotiables are moral values that must be outlined and enforced by adults. Other, non-negotiable instances can be decided on by the child. For example, a snack needs to be shared equally, but how it is distributed can be decided by the group. A child cannot hit another, but she can choose who she would like to play with.

Having firm beliefs and pedagogies that are not developmentally appropriate or consistent with best practice will lead to ineffective teaching. The impact and importance of teacher beliefs have already been highlighted above. By exploring traditional and conservative beliefs of SECD, we see the degree to which beliefs and pedagogy influence SECD teaching and programming. I agree with Goodman's argument that constructivists and traditional views should be intentionally combined. Constructivist values are worthy in this arena because a child must buy in to a self-chosen belief system in order to form their own moral identities (Goodman, 2000, p. 52). Encouraging a moral identity, the "desire and capacity to live a moral life," can be cultivated through constructivist ideals of classroom discussions and problem-solving within a nurturing classroom environment,

engaging their feelings, goals, and imagination. Traditional perspectives should be practiced to prevent and teach non-negotiable behavior and ensure discussions and expectations are not beyond what is developmentally possible for a preschooler.

So far within the SECD Framework section, we have investigated various pieces of background knowledge required for SECD programing to be effective in order to answer the question: *how can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?* The SECD framework components we have thus far explored include the growth of SECD, levels of influences on the development of belief, action, and morality, a child's ability to express morality, and the role and impact of traditional and constructivist pedagogies on teaching SECD. The final two components of an SECD framework we will explore are essential SECD skills and effective SECD teaching strategies.

SECD Core Competencies

Research shows that social and emotional development contributes to physical, cognitive and communication development in children; growth within this area will lead to growth in others (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki & Taylor, 2011). Much of the literature outlines three core competencies as essential to a student's development of their social-emotional awareness and character (McClelland, Tominey, Schmitt, & Duncan, 2017). Although sometimes called by other names, crucial competencies are emotional processes, cognitive development, and social skills. A child's developmental domains are interrelated and, naturally, the SECD domain is as well. Therefore, SECD skills are

naturally interdependent and placing them into separate categories can be artificial, but assists in this paper's organization. The specifics and rationale of the three competencies are explained below.

Emotional Processes

Developing emotional process skills is an important objective of early childhood education. Emotional process skills include emotion recognition and being able to accurately name emotions in oneself and in others (McClelland, et al., 2017, p. 34). Other important components include the ability to empathize, perceive others' perspectives, and express emotions.

Throughout preschool, children begin to recognize their own and other's emotions. This is called emotion knowledge. With emotion recognition comes the ability to understand where emotions come from, their causes, consequences, and originations. This knowledge "allows children to communicate their own emotional experiences and respond appropriately to the emotional signals of other people" (Blankson, Weaver, Leerkes, O'Brien, Calkins, & Marcovitch, 2017, p. 4). The ability to read facial expressions leads to greater friendships and higher social competencies. Emotion knowledge is linked to both a child's ability to solve and negotiate challenges better in the classroom as well as greater academic competency. This may be in part because children who can more easily express their feelings can better cope with frustration and manage to ask for assistance (Blandson et al., 2017). When feelings are ill-managed, impaired thinking can result (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Emotional knowledge is central to the development of empathy and perspective-taking, central skills for developing ethical, morally-driven behaviors, moral reasoning, and enriched social skills (McClellan et al., 2017).

Emotional regulation is another significant component to developing emotional processing skills. Emotional regulation is a person's automatic or intentional response to modify or alter their reaction to an emotion. Recognizing emotions and understanding the causes of emotions can lead to better context- and emotion-specific regulatory strategies (Blankson et al., 2017).

Cognitive Development

How does cognitive function intersect with a positive character in a preschooler? A person's brain will grow and develop the fastest in their first five years of life. Preschool is "a developmental period generally dominated by dynamic and robust progressive processes, with an emphasis on growth, expansion, 'construction', and 'blossoming' that will later be pruned and tuned with continued maturation and experience" (Brown & Jernigan, 2012, p. 313). During this time of dynamic growth, "more than 1 million new neural connections are formed every second" (Center on the Developing Child, N.D). The neural connections that are built around relationships and early life experiences become the "brain architecture – the foundation upon which all later learning, behavior, and health depend" (Center on the Developing Child, 2012).

The surge in brain development found during the early years is not only for language and academic learning. Major cognitive loads are spent on building empathy

and a sense of security, as well as developing social and emotional competencies (Knitzer & Klein, 2006). Many SECD skills are formed during early childhood because of this dramatic cognitive growth. Preschool naturally becomes the ideal time to learn and develop these essential life skills (McClelland et al., 2017).

Executive function. Central SECD skills that involve cognitive processing are often referred to as executive function. Executive function is located in the brain's prefrontal cortex and is a mechanism that makes humans fundamentally unique from other animals. (McClelland, 2017, p. 34). Executive functions are mental processes used for self-regulation, problem-solving, goal achievement, prioritization of tasks, the control of impulses, and much more. The Center on the Developing Child, a school of Harvard University, says executive function skills "are essential for school achievement, for the preparation and adaptability of our future workforce, and for avoiding a wide range of population health problems" (2012). Executive function is built from three primal cognitive processes: self-control, working memory, and mental flexibility. Although necessary for happiness or success, we are not born with these skills. Early childhood relationships and experiences unlock the opportunities to develop them. According to the Center on the Developing Child (2012), "children's relationships, the activities they have opportunities to engage in, and the places in which they live, learn, and play" are how these essential skills are developed. Executive function skills grow dramatically until the age of six, with ages three to five "a window of opportunity for dramatic growth in these skills" (Center on the Developing Child, 2012).

Self-regulation. The growth of executive function skills allows a child to increase their ability to self-regulate, an essential skill for social competency. The cognitive skill of self-regulation promotes prosocial behavior because it assists children with adaptability, teamwork, leadership, and emotional awareness of themselves and others (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.). It is the development of emotional processing and executive function skills that enables a child to achieve greater self-regulation. From three to seven-years-old, there is a qualitative shift in a child's ability to self-regulate; they move from reactive behaviors to more developed, cognitive-behavioral forms of self-regulation (Diamond, 2002; Montroy, Skibbe, McClelland, & Morrison, 2016). As a child develops the ability to inhibit impulses, make intentional decisions regarding their behavior, understand their emotions, and communicate their needs, they are furthering their ability to self-regulate, make and sustain meaningful relationships (Diamond, 2002; Montroy, Skibbe, McClelland, & Morrison, 2016). Research from studies cited by Montroy, Skibbe, McClelland, and Morrison, showed children's "growth accelerated across preschool" and "demonstrated faster gains early in preschool, with gains slowing in early elementary school" (2016, pp. 7). Given these findings, the importance of developing self-regulation skills in preschool is self-evident.

Given the unique mental growth that occurs between the ages of three and five, preschool is primed to make a significant lifelong contribution to the development of one's executive function. Cognitive development studies on children have shown that participation in SEL interventions not only change behavior but also brain structure and

function (McClelland et al., 2017). At this crucial time in a child's growth, sufficient attention must be placed on helping children mature their executive function capacities, for executive function is nothing less than a group of research-proven skills essential for behavior regulation, healthy choices, and overall well-being in childhood and through adulthood (Center on the Developing Child, 2012).

Social Skills

The expression of social skills are the behavioral manifestations of the emotional and cognitive skills that children have developed in their minds. Attitudes, language, and emotional and mental processes are prerequisite social skills that should be scaffolded and intentionally taught to allow children to master their ability to make mutually fulfilling friendships. Social skills can be defined as "behaviors that help children and adults interact positively and effectively with others. For example, social/interpersonal skills include recognizing and understanding social cues, effectively interpreting others behaviors, and having positive interactions with others" (McClelland et al., 2017, p. 34).

The ability to recognize a friend develops in early childhood. Despite a child's desire, not all children are able to make and maintain friendships, which can negatively impact their stability, health, and wellness into adulthood (Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000). The heart of teaching social skills is through relationships, followed by self-awareness, meaningful activities, and play. This section will briefly discuss three key ingredients for fostering social competence: relationships, problem solving, and virtue knowledge.

Relationships. Certain human needs are universal and transcend cultural norms. This includes the yearning for friendship, playmates, and a loved one. We all desire to be a part of a community, group or family (Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000). Through relationships, knowledge is given meaning and importance. Vygotsky (1978) said that relationships and social interactions are at the crux of learning and the foundation of cognition. It is not surprising then that one's character is also developed through relationships (Clement & Bollinger, 2017). In regards to the significance of relationships in a child's development, NAEYC has said, "young children benefit from opportunities to develop ongoing, trusting relationships with adults outside the family and with other children. Notably, positive teacher-child relationships promote children's learning and achievement, as well as social competence and emotional development" (2009). It is primarily through proper adult guidance that is warm and connected that social skills are developed and strengthened. Through such support, children increase the likelihood of having positive relationships and playmates (Lawhon & Lawhon, 2000).

Problem-solving. Interpersonal problem-solving is a vital social skill and life-long competency that should be assisted and encouraged in early childhood (Şahin, 2010). Social problem-solving is a cognitive and behavioral process in which an individual finds effective solutions to everyday problems encountered in the real world. (Dereli-Iman, 2014). Education researcher, Dereli-Iman (2014), explained why properly teaching problem-solving is imperative:

> Children tend to solve problems they encounter in their daily lives in ineffective ways and then turn these into habits by using them repeatedly. One of the most significant causes of recurrent ineffective problem-solving behaviors is thought to be mislearning and, even if only used occasionally, this provides reinforcement for the acquired behavior. For example, a child using strength or force as a behavior to get a friend's toy may sometimes achieve their goal. Therefore, using strength or force can become a reinforced behavior. The general aim of the social skills education program is to provide children with prosocial solutions instead of ineffective antisocial solutions to deal with the problems they encounter in their daily lives which can lead them to find an alternative way to act when faced with a social problem. (p. 263)

As children experience success with social and emotional problem-solving, they become better at self-regulating and identifying emotions (MA Department of Early Education and Care, 2015).

Although social problem-solving is not a stand-alone standard in the Massachusetts Preschool Standards, the need to develop this skill is included within numerous standards:

- SEL10: The child will demonstrate the ability to seek help and offer help.
- APL6: The child will seek multiple solutions to a question, task, or problem.
- SEL9: The child will demonstrate the ability to manage conflict.

- SEL7: The child will demonstrate the ability to communicate with others in a variety of ways (MA Department of Early Education and Care, n.d.).

The numerous areas in which social problem-solving is expected to be learned or will assist in achieving a state SEL standard is an indication of the importance of developing this central social skill.

Virtue knowledge. Theodore Roosevelt famously remarked: "To educate a man in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society" (as cited in Baehr, 2014). According to Aristotle, character is comprised of moral and civic virtue (as cited by Ostwald in 1999). Virtues are needed for healthy, reciprocal relationships. They are powerful positive qualities we all have the propensity to express, but sometimes require intention or practice to display successfully. Virtues, like norms, are not seen; they are engaged when one's character is expressed through external behavior. The word 'virtue' is used in this paper, but the same concept has other titles, such as values, traits, and character strengths. Esra Dereli-Iman (2014) uses the word 'value' in her research, but is expressing the same intention. She says, "being peaceful, friendship, being respectful, love… cooperation, responsibility, being happy, being patient, courage, kindness" are her goals for teaching values (p. 264). To her, social skills "can be provided to children in the preschool period with basic values such as sharing, being respectful, and being patient, which are supportive for establishing and maintaining interaction with other individuals" (p. 264). Dereli-Iman argues that values education would allow young students to learn

positive social behaviors and that preschool is the time to learn them because it is the age when value judgments begin to form.

Character development researchers, such as Baehr and Lickona, agree that teaching virtues is central to teaching social skills. According to Lickona, virtues outline and define a good character. He also argues that character education is intentionally striving to teach and cultivate virtues in students (1996). To Lickona, character education benefits students in multiple ways; "character education isn't just about helping students become kind, honest, and fair. It's also about teaching them to work hard, develop their talents, and strive for excellence so that they are equipped to make a positive difference in the world" (2014, p. 11).

Baehr argues specifically in favor of intellectual virtues. He says, "intellectual virtues are the character strengths of a good thinker or learner. They include qualities like curiosity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, and intellectual thoroughness" (Baehr, 2017, p. 1153).

I agree with Dereli-Iman, Baehr, and Lickona that teaching virtues to preschoolers will lead to the development of a variety of skills and character traits; such as open-mindedness, perseverance, and social skills. Similar to emotion knowledge, I believe that developing a knowledge of the virtues creates greater self-awareness. With virtue knowledge comes greater self-efficacy, an individual's development of a moral identity, and, subsequently, the building of character.

Emotional processing, cognitive development (specifically executive function), social skills, and virtue knowledge are essential SECD skills. Teaching these life skills leads to prosocial tendencies, improved behavior, and increased academic achievement in childhood and beyond (Snyder, 2014). How can these components of an SECD curriculum be effectively taught? The following section outlines effective instructional strategies to teach SECB in preschool.

Effective Strategies

A longitudinal study of prosocial tendencies found "prosocial moral reasoning, sympathy, perspective taking and prosocial and aggressive behavior " from preschool to 32 years of age to be stable across time (Lapsley & Carlo, 2014, p. 4). Given that SECD skills are enduring and predictive of future outcomes, finding effective strategies to teach them to young children is of great significance to policy makers, families, and educators.

How can preschools and caregivers comprehensively and effectively teach emotional processing, social competence, and executive function skills? The total number of strategies to teach SECD is beyond the scope of this paper. I have selected nine strategies to assist in the instruction of core SECD competencies. They are:

1. Promote problem-solving
2. Incorporate service learning
3. Use play based learning methods
4. Scaffold learning and skills sequentially
5. Model SECD skills

6. Nurture relationships
7. Promote family involvement
8. Create a common culture
9. Assess and observe

Incorporating these eight strategies into an SECD curriculum model that teaches the three core SECD competencies of emotional processing, executive function skills, and social skills will result in comprehensive, meaningful learning that is guided by best-practice.

Conclusion

The trajectory of a child's success in life can be predicted by their first few years of school. From a child's early life experiences and preschool years, we can predict "continued academic problems; school dropout, drug and alcohol use, and juvenile delinquency; and lifelong employment difficulties and mental health problems" (Blankson et al., 2017). We know the need for high-quality SECD curriculum is great; but do we know how effectively implement SECD curriculum? The goal of this capstone project is to learn how preschools can best promote and scaffold the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health and wellbeing.

As the final outcome of this project will be curriculum, I began my review of the literature by investigating components of high-quality curriculum. Through this investigation, I learned about necessary components of a high-quality, intentional

curriculum according to the NAEYC and the NCCP. To achieve best-practice, curriculum must be engaging, challenging, developmentally appropriate, culturally relevant, and comprehensive in nature. The need for standards to systematically guide the curriculum to be built sequentially was also highlighted.

The second section of the literature review developed an SECD framework, which utilized the theories and research of multiple sources to be thorough and complete. It began by providing an overview of the growth and development of the SECD field, as well as its impact and need. It continued by providing an overview of the influences of character development and behavior, as understanding the influences of social-emotional learning and character development provide an understanding of what should be taught and how. Next, the review briefly delineated the capacity of young children to express empathy and morality. With children's capacities and influences in mind, a critique of traditional and constructivist pedagogies was provided, for teacher beliefs and pedagogies are essential for successful and effective curriculum implementation. With that information as a foundation, the final two components of the literature review explored essential SECD competencies for children to develop and effective teaching strategies.

Early childhood education as a whole needs a facelift, with 75% of centers below the recommended level of quality needed to help children achieve (Knitzer & Klein, 2006, p. 12). Preschool teachers, the main instigator of motivation and development in any classroom, are frequently underpaid, undereducated, and overworked leading to high turnover and burnout (Knitzer & Klein, 2006). Achieving universally high-quality early

childhood care in the United States will require more than instituting great curriculum. Yet, as this chapter attempts to assert, high-quality, comprehensive, and research-driven SECD curriculum models are a key component of attaining preschools of excellence nationwide.

A quality SECD curriculum can help unleash the full potential our children. If Rousseau was right and children are endowed with infinite potential, wouldn't it be a marvelous challenge to explore the extent of that potential? The following chapter takes this exploration further, to answer this paper's central question: *how can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?* It provides an analysis of the theories and methods applied when developing a SECD curriculum.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

The goal of my capstone project was to answer the question: *how can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?* I answered this question by creating a high-quality preschool social-emotional and character development (SECD) curriculum model.

This chapter contains two sections. The first section is the bulk of this chapter, including a program description and the theoretical frameworks used to guide design. The second section will discuss who should implement and who should be the recipient of the program, and the intended setting and program duration. Additionally, it will discuss how the program will measure learning outcomes to gauge effectiveness. These components have been included to provide a greater context for the SECD program outlined in chapter four.

Project Description

As a preschool teacher, I am regularly confronted with distressed children who are unable to successfully navigate play situations, solve social problems, regulate emotions, or make and sustain friendships. Parents are frequently distressed in equal measure, due to the behaviors their children are exhibiting. Teachers also become overwhelmed and uncertain about how to create an environment that will bring out the best in their students. Teachers strive to change their chaotic classrooms into

communities of warmth, growth, and trust so that their students can develop essential life skills and thrive. All too often, preschool teachers lack the tools, training, or programming to do this most effectively. I knew research had outlined the importance of SECD, but I have not experienced all the various pieces arranged within a single framework to create the most effective setting to assist preschoolers to develop SECD skills and habits.

The curriculum model I developed, called Dragonfly's Toolkit, will be sufficiently comprehensive to teach SECD. A holistic SECD curriculum model necessitates including strategies beyond lesson plans. According to the principles of best-practice, the curriculum, classroom relationships, behavior management, and family involvement should be collectively harnessed to teach SECD (Knitzer & Klein, 2006, MA Department of Early Education and Care, 2015, Snyder, 2014). To meet this aim, my project includes lesson plans, a teacher behavior management guide, and a parent guide.

Dragonfly's Toolkit will be conducted in early childhood classrooms for children three to five years of age. Through my professional experience and review of high-quality curriculum components and SECD research, I have identified five core components: 1) whole classroom, whole child approach, 2) parent empowerment and involvement, 3) mindful incorporation of the virtues, 4) flexibility so curriculum is easily adaptable in diverse settings and with existing programming, and 5) behavior principles to employ a cohesive approach that reinforces social emotional skills and character development beyond the lessons.

Theoretical Frameworks

Dragonfly's Toolkit is guided by four frameworks. First, it is fundamentally constructivist and oriented to create engaging experiences and meaningful relationships to spur inquiry. The program uses the Understanding by Design curriculum planning process, National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) lesson plan guidelines, and Massachusetts State Standards as theoretical frameworks to guide design.

Constructivism. Although constructivism has roots that go as far back as the early Greek scholars, the constructivist approach to learning still remains pivotal in the current age. In 1935, Miller, Courtis, & Watters stated the following:

> There is today a need on the part of many...for a complete reversal of viewpoint in regard to the aims and methods of teaching... Under the old education the teachers taught subject matter; today they are expected to teach children. The products of the old education were reckoned in terms of subject matter...scores made, levels of development attained...the appropriate method of teaching was direction of performance of set tasks... The products of the new education are reckoned in terms of... purposes formed and achieved, attitudes and ideals engendered, pleasures and joys experienced… The teacher's work...should be measured by its contribution to the development of individuals able to live successfully in a democracy... To change the goal from acquisition to growth, the teacher must change the work from task to opportunity, must shift the responsibility from

> teacher to children… the teacher's function is to help children teach themselves. (as cited by Harris and Graham, 1994, p. 233).

As this quote highlights, the need to orient places of learning towards growth, purpose, and ideas and to make them spaces to experience joy and pleasure, is as true today as it was eight decades ago. Remaining mindful of this conviction will be an ongoing guidepost throughout the creation of my SECD curriculum model.

The constructivist reform of education has been long and influential, inspired by the great works of Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and others. Modern educational strategies with constructivist grounding include cognitively guided instruction, scaffolded instruction, literacy-based instruction, and directed discovery (Harris & Graham, 1994, p. 233). Although constructivist approaches are as varied as its definitions, the theory's central principles are the theoretical underpinnings of this project.

At the heart of constructivism is the notion that all learners actively construct their own knowledge. Constructivists reject the idea that learning is done through the passive internalization of information received by others. Instead, it is believed that knowledge is self-constructed through active, self-regulated inquiry and interaction with the world. Prior knowledge is used to build new learning, but understanding is not always generated linearly. Personal knowledge and self-generated concepts about the world only happen when students are given the opportunity to investigate and explore new concepts, as the construction of knowledge is inherently personal and meaningful. If knowledge is

acquired in this way, it will generate a richer understanding and allow for broader applications of what has been learned (Harris & Graham, 1994).

In addition to the belief that knowledge is constructed through active engagement, social constructivists believe that knowledge is generated in social contexts. Relationships within the classroom greatly influence both the social-emotional wellbeing of students, as well as the cognitive experiences in the classroom. Teachers are active agents within a classroom community by generating active discussions and meaningful learning experiences, as they help coach students to create new understandings within their collaborative learning community (Brophy, 2006).

To ensure Dragonfly's Toolkit was created in alignment with the constructivist and social constructivist methodology, it has students actively engaged throughout every learning process. Student collaboration, play, conversation, and inquiry are the dominant modes of instruction. Lessons explicitly explain new concepts during circle time, but the bulk of understanding is learned and practiced through student-led, teacher-guided play, problem-solving, exploration, and meaningful discussion to deepen the relationships and knowledge constructed.

Curriculum Frameworks

I chose to use the Understanding by Design framework to be a central guide of my curriculum development. Guidance for lesson planning also included the NAEYC accreditation criteria and the Massachusett State Standards for social emotional learning.

Understanding by Design. The Understanding by Design (UbD) framework was created by Wiggins and McTighe to be a touchstone for designing curriculum, assessments, and instruction (2012). UbD has three stages of 'backward design': outlining desired results, determining assessment evidence, and planning lessons and instruction. It is pivotal for all three stages to be in alignment with the learning objectives and with each other. It is called 'backward design' because the curriculum's end product, the desired learning outcomes, are considered first. Once the learning goals are identified, the curriculum writers work backward to write curricula. In the first stage, the goals, standards, and expectations are considered to clarify learning priorities. This stage identifies how goals can be transferred and utilized in other areas of life and what essential questions students are asked to explore.

The second stage develops ways to measure to what depth the learning priorities were achieved. Curriculum writers ask, "what evidence will be accepted to demonstrate understanding and the ability to transfer new understandings?" Knowledge can be demonstrated through six facets: explanation, interpretation, application, perspective-taking, empathy expression, and self-knowledge. Not all facets must be utilized, but combinations can be useful when assessing understanding.

Stage three is the learning plan, where the activities, experiences, and lessons are developed to achieve a comprehensive understanding of learning priorities that can be demonstrated through the determined forms of assessment. In this stage, it is asked, "how

will the learning plan help students with acquisition, meaning-making, and transfer [of knowledge]?" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2012, p. 12).

Working backward from the long-term, desired results through UbD's three-stage design process results in effective curriculum by avoiding the overuse of textbooks or activity-oriented teaching that has no clear end-goal or learning priorities. It also assisted me to create a curriculum in which teachers are coaches of understanding (and not mere peddlers of knowledge) and ensured that learning target skills and concepts are truly happening and not hopeful speculation (Wiggins & McTighe, 2012, p. 1-2).

NAEYC lesson plan guidelines. For a lesson plan template, I utilized the lesson components required by NAEYC, a leading national accreditation organization for early childhood centers. According to NAEYC, a lesson plan is broadly defined "as a guide for teaching staff to implement learning activities and opportunities. Lesson plans should include learning goal(s), methods/procedures for reaching the learning goals, and a method for evaluating how well the learning goal(s) were achieved. (2017). These guidelines provided greater structure and guidance specific to the preschool setting but were flexible enough to meet the unique goals and settings of my curriculum model.

Massachusetts preschool standards. The curriculum's framework employed the Massachusetts Preschool Standards for Social Emotional Learning to guide lesson objectives. The MA SEL Standards were used as a safeguard to ensure the curriculum is teaching essential skills and core competencies that are developmentally appropriate for preschoolers (Massachusetts Standards for Preschool and Kindergarten, 2015). The MA

SEL Standards have been outlined in chapter two and are utilized to develop lesson objectives.

Dragonfly's Toolkit is an SECD curriculum model that was developed within the rich theory of constructivism and three research-driven curriculum frameworks. With constructivism as an umbrella pedagogy and UbD, NAEYC guidelines, and Massachusetts State Standards as guideposts, I was able to build an SECD program that incorporates best-practice.

The Audience, Setting, and Timeline

For whom, where, and when is this program intended to be implemented? This section will answer that question. The audience, setting, and timeline provided greater context into how this program was designed.

Audience. I work at a university-affiliated early childhood center in a preschool classroom for three to five-year-olds. The classroom is culturally diverse, with many students having moved from abroad so their parents could attend or work for the university. Nearly half are English Language Learners and the majority come from financially privileged homes. Although I worked to ensure my SECD program would be suitable at my childhood center, I have designed it so that it is appropriate for a wide variety of early childhood settings. It was created to be culturally responsive and to be easily differentiated to be appropriate for mixed abilities, English language learners, and students from all cultures and economic backgrounds. The parent resource portion was consciously written to be mindful of the fact that parents have diverse reading levels.

Setting. Dragonfly's Toolkit was designed to be implemented in an early childhood center, within a classroom of preschoolers who are between three to five years of age. The program was designed to capitalize on the learning that can be generated from the meaningful relationships that are formed between teacher-to-child, child-to-child, child-to-parent, and parent-to-teacher. As relationship building is a core goal, this curriculum is best implemented in a setting with a trained early childhood educator in groups of 8-21 children. Moreover, the classroom should have access to a variety of resources, including art supplies, children's books, and manipulatives.

Timeline. The curriculum's duration is flexible, based on the needs of the students and program. The curriculum consists of four units, each with five 20-45 minute lessons. The 20 lessons are to be taught in consecutive order, but teachers can elect to implement one to three lessons per week. This creates a varied timeline, with curriculum completion ranging anywhere from two to five months.

A classroom management and behavior guide that the teacher can implement every day has also been written. It includes strategies that teachers can elect to implement when most appropriate and fitting for the classroom at any point during the year. The behavior management guide was designed to be a whole-classroom, everyday approach, as SECD skills are something preschoolers are always developing, both implicitly and explicitly. The curriculum was written to be flexible to the unique needs of the classroom, lessons being easily adaptable to work during center times or during small group, or

whole class activities. It is created with the intention of allowing teachers to implement it in a way that is adaptable to existing programs, routines, and student demographics.

Additionally, parents will be given a resource guide to extend learning from the classroom to home that covers the central themes of the curriculum. For each unit, parents receive a handout highlighting the learning objectives and vocabulary, as well as strategies and activities parents can do to extend the learning at home.

Evidence of Effectiveness

All good programming must measure student growth and the ability to transfer knowledge to a novel setting to show program effectiveness. In my curriculum, students demonstrate an enduring understanding and knowledge transfer through the use of a Virtue Heart Wall. The key enduring understanding of this assessment is the capacity of students to identify virtues when expressed. By the end of the whole curriculum, each child should have identified at least two to three virtues being expressed by another child. Formative assessments take place during each lesson. These assessments are done frequently through group discussion during circle time.

Conclusion

As the goal of my project is the development of SECD skills in preschool, best-practice dictates that curriculum, teacher-student communication, behavior management, and family involvement should all be utilized. Therefore, my project includes lesson plans, a behavior management plan, and a parent guide. This program is

comprehensive enough to effectively teach SECD skills, which requires a variety of strategies that go beyond explicit teaching and lesson plans.

To ensure the program is written with the child in mind, it follows the fundamentals of constructivist pedagogy. Every lesson gives students the opportunity to construct their own knowledge through discussion, storytelling, and/or meaningful play. Moreover, the program is written to the standards of best-practice by following the guidelines of UbD curriculum planning, NAEYC lesson plans, and MA preschool standards for socio-emotional development. The setting, audience, and program duration remained front-of-mind during development to make certain the unique needs and abilities of teachers, children, and parents are taken into account and the advantages of a preschool classroom setting and home life are utilized to their full potential.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

The goal of my capstone project was to answer the question: *How can teachers scaffold development of the social-emotional functioning of preschoolers to improve their emotional health?* Specifically, I wanted to better understand how increasing children's problem-solving skills and understanding of the virtues can expand their social-emotional functioning and improve the culture and relationships within their classroom. To achieve this goal, I developed a curriculum to teach social emotional learning and character development for preschoolers aged three to five.

Chapter four is a reflective piece about what I have learned while completing my capstone, including what I gleaned from writing the literature review and developing the curriculum, Dragonfly's Toolkit. It provides a brief description of Dragonfly's Toolkit, the project's limitations and planned implementation. Finally, this chapter will share next steps for extending the curriculum and ways it can benefit early childhood education.

Key Understandings

Completing my capstone project has been the most in-depth and lengthy project of my academic career. On a personal level, this experience taught me what it takes to write a significant paper and develop a comprehensive curriculum guided by research. Unexpectedly, I learned I could create something meaningful with pivotal motivation from deadlines, guidelines, and input from collaborators. I found these to be essential for

me to complete something rigorous and creative. The following section will outline key learning from the literature review and capstone project.

Literature Review. One of the most challenging aspects of this project was completing the literature review. I wanted to be well-versed in social emotional learning in early education. As there is no shortage of amazing research in this field of study, I dove into an ocean of study. Although I read through plenty that was not particularly helpful, others were highly fruitful in guiding the trajectory of my project. First, I read current studies on essential components of high quality curriculum to understand what my own curriculum should look like. I also researched character development, children's morality, and ways social emotional learning and character development (SECD) impact outcomes. Two areas of research most insightful to me were the demonstrated positive impact of social-emotional learning in early childhood and the essential skills and strategies to guide an SECD curriculum.

As mentioned in chapter one, a compelling motivator for me to enter the field of early childhood was learning about the cognitive development of young children and the lifelong outcomes that result. I was aware of the importance of early childhood and social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum before starting my literature research. Greater knowledge of the positive consequences of high-quality SEL curriculum, however, significantly bolstered my sense of purpose and inspiration to continue and contribute to this work. Snyder's research (2015) in particular highlighted the impact of SEL

programming to positively effect multiple domains, including emotional skills, behavior, mental and physical health, and academic achievement.

The research of Lapsley and Carlo also provided compelling grounds for the need for SEL in early childhood. They cite a longitudinal study that found "prosocial moral reasoning, sympathy, perspective taking and prosocial and aggressive behavior" from preschool to 31-32 years of age to be stable across time (2014, p. 4). In an era of high-stakes testing and emphasis on academic achievement at younger ages, being able to demonstrate the unequivocal benefit and need for early childhood SECD programming is integral for promoting SECD in schools.

The second area of research that most influenced my work was on SECD skills and SECD strategies. I learned that crucial competencies and skills of SECD included emotional processing, cognitive development, and social skills. Gaining a greater understanding of the meaning of these goals, and what specific skills would contribute to a child's social emotional development, contributed to my curriculum objectives and development.

In particular, Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child provided excellent articles on the importance of cognitive development. Most striking to me was the Center's research on the importance of strengthening the executive function and self-regulation skill of children ages three to five. As a result, self-regulation strategies and executive function skills have been built into the entire curriculum, but most notably within the unit that studies patience.

A significant source of inspiration that guided how social skills are taught includes the research of Dereli-Imani. Dereli-Iman highlights the value of including character development to teach social skills. She says social skills "can be provided to children in the preschool period with basic values such as sharing, being respectful, and being patient, which are supportive for establishing and maintaining interaction with other individuals" (p. 264). According to Dereli-Iman, a values-based education is important during preschool as it is an age when value judgments begin to form (2014). Her work provides a sound rationale to teach the social skills through the virtues of kindness, patience, respect, and perseverance in my curriculum.

Project Development. Developing SECD curriculum enhanced my understanding of the SECD programming on innumerable fronts. Three areas of growth stand out the most: the various and, sometimes, competing needs of students and teachers, the complexity of curriculum development, and the urgency for better SECD programming and training in early childhood programs.

Developing curriculum requires the writer to think of student learning objectives and needs, as well as how to promote and encourage teacher fidelity to the curriculum. If a teacher's needs, existing beliefs, and potential pain points are not taken into consideration, it is reasonable to believe that the curriculum will be challenging for them to successfully implement and fidelity to the curriculum will be compromised. Although I developed the curriculum with the needs of students in mind, it was important for me to think systematically about the needs and capacities of teachers as well. Teacher feedback

and collaboration will be integral to outlining areas of improvement for future iterations of my project.

The second area of meaningful learning while developing my project was the insight and research required to develop an SECD curriculum that met all of my objectives and aligned with the theoretical frameworks outlined in chapter three. I experienced the rich complexity of thought required to write preschool curriculum, something I previously thought would be relatively simple and straightforward in nature. Thinking about student motivated, developmentally appropriate, and culturally inclusive instruction that can be differentiated for diverse learners, while systematically addressing core SECD competencies in a linear manner that is constructivist in nature, and meets teacher and classroom needs is no small feat.

A final piece of core learning derived from developing Dragonfly's Toolkit is witnessing the stark contrast between the needs of children to have comprehensive SECD programming and the ability of early childhood centers to deliver such programming. Having written the curriculum, I can see how challenging it is to effectively develop and teach core SECD skills in systematic and meaningful ways. To teach core SECD skills effectively requires two critical facets: preschool teachers to be highly trained professionals, and high-quality, comprehensive SECD curriculum and behavior management plans to be implemented. Neither teacher training of effective SECD skills and strategies nor behavior management principles are given the attention, research, or funding they deserve. I now see this as a weighty deficit in the field of early childhood

education that has widespread ramifications in education and beyond. According to Dereli-Iman, "children who adopt the values at an early age have self-confidence, can make their own decisions, solve their problems well, and this condition improves their happinest" (2014, p. 263). Moreover, we know a child's prosocial or antisocial tendency tends to remain constant from preschool to adulthood (Snyder, 2014). The ramifications of failing to establish a firm foundation of prosocial behavior during childhood has a lifetime of impact.

Central takeaways from research and curriculum development include greater understanding of the importance of SECD and how it can be implemented, as well as the importance for systematic programming to exist in preschool classrooms that meet children's diverse needs while taking into account teacher restraints and limitations. The immense need for better SECD teacher training, funding, and policy for schools to successfully meet the needs of students in the twenty-first century is my single greatest piece of learning from my capstone project and will guide future goals within my career as an early childhood educator and leader.

Project Limitations and Implications

My capstone project, Dragonfly's Toolkit, includes 20 lessons spread across four units. Each unit covers a virtue I have identified as being essential for student well-being and for advancing a rigorous and nurturing classroom culture. The virtues taught are kindness, patience, respect, and perseverance. Each virtue is explicitly taught through five lessons that range from 20-45 minutes in length. For SEL to be integrated and made

habitual in children, it must be repeatedly practiced and implicitly encouraged and reinforced throughout the day. To encourage this, a guide to cohesive behavior management principles is included for teachers to integrate expectations that are in alignment with the curriculum, while modeling appropriate behavior and nurturing healthy relationships, peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student. Recognizing the important role parents play in developing a child's norms and beliefs, a parent guide has also been developed for the learning to be extended at home.

Limitations. Given the time constraints to develop and roll out Dragonfly's Toolkit, there are numerous components of SECD skill building that I was unable to include in the curriculum. Currently, I think my curriculum lacks certain qualities and goals of anti-bias curriculum, a large enough emphasis on emotional literacy, and essential strategies to develop executive functioning in children. It is hoped that subsequent iterations of the curriculum can include these lacking components while extending the number of virtues taught.

In addition to the curriculum being unable to provide sufficient content to teach SECD skills comprehensively, the current assessment lacks the ability to measure impact and demonstrate students' growth before, during, and after exposure to the curriculum. I would like to improve the curriculum assessment to effectively measure growth in students and the classroom as a whole.

Implications. A key piece of learning I derived from developing an SECD curriculum is the need for better curriculum and teacher training. Excellent preschool

curriculum is crucial for SECD learning to be comprehensive and systematic, yet I was only able to find a handful of curriculums that were consistently able to demonstrate statistically significant improvement in student behavior and knowledge of SEL, and none that I would consider to be holistic or comprehensive in nature. We know that well-researched SECD curriculum is desperately needed but is in scarce supply.

The second need I discovered through this process was the grave need for better teacher training and funding. To meet the cognitive and emotional needs of young children requires preschool teachers to be highly trained professionals. Unfortunately, preschool teachers in most states are not required to have a university degree in the field and, consequently, are not well trained. Creating policy requiring additional training and the funding to make essential training possible, will elevate teacher core competencies to capably teach SECD.

Dragonfly's Toolkit addresses a gap in SECD curriculum available. It also includes a teacher training guide and a behavior management guide with the hopes of increasing a preschool teacher's skills as well as the ability to implement the curriculum thus creating a nurturing classroom where SECD skills can grow and develop.

Implementation

The curriculum will be introduced to the preschool teachers at my school in Massachusetts. Teachers can elect to implement the curriculum if they desire, but it will not be enforced. As the education coordinator at my preschool, I will be an available resource for teachers to answer questions and provide one-on-one training as needed.

Teacher training would be individualized and could include going through the Teacher Training Guide and modeling how lessons can be implemented in the classroom for interested teachers.

Next Steps

Thinking beyond immediate implementation of Dragonfly's Toolkit, I would like to test the curriculum by collecting assessment data and user feedback to guide a second iteration. Subsequent iterations of the curriculum would be made available to other preschools within Massachusetts by inviting them to collaborate with me. If implemented at other schools and feedback is positive, units would be developed to teach additional SECD skills and strategies through the virtues of truthfulness, honesty, justice, curiosity, and forgiveness. If Dragonfly's Toolkit is utilized at diverse schools and is able to demonstrate a statistical impact on student outcomes, it is possible that the curriculum could guide policy and programming within Massachusetts schools.

Conclusion

Researching curriculum development and SECD programming and then developing Dragonfly's Toolkit expanded my awareness of SECD and my professional skills as an educator and leader in early childhood education. I am appreciative of my background and education that led me to see the importance of SECD curriculum and I look forward to the learning and growth that will follow this Capstone experience. It is my hope that Dragonfly's Toolkit can help provide some of the structure and guidance

needed to adequately bring SECD skills and strategies into preschools so young children can learn and thrive in spaces that are rich with nurturing relationships.

REFERENCES

Baehr, J. (2017). The varieties of character and some implications for character education. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 46*(6), 1153-1161.

Bandura, A. (1971). *Social Learning Theory*. Retrieved from http://www.asecib.ase.ro/mps/Bandura_SocialLearningTheory.pdf

Blankson, A., Weaver, J., Leerkes, E., O'brien, M., Calkins, S., & Marcovitch, S. (2017). Cognitive and emotional processes as predictors of a successful transition into school. *Early Education and Development, 28*(1), 1-20.

Bracken, B., & Crawford, E. (2010). Basic concepts in early childhood educational standards: A 50-State Review. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 37*(5), 421-430

Brookings Institution. (2017, April). *The current state of scientific knowledge on preschools*. Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf

Brophy, J. (2006). Graham Nuthall and social constructivist teaching: Research-based cautions and qualifications. *Teaching & Teacher Education: An International Journal of Research and Studies,22*(5), 529-537.

Brown, T., & Jernigan, T. (2012). Brain development during the preschool years. *Neuropsychology Review, 22*(4), 313-333.

Center on the Developing Child. (2012). *Executive Function* (InBrief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu

Center on the Developing Child. (n.d.). Executive Function & Self-Regulation. Retrieved, from https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function

Clement, S., & Bollinger, R. (2017). Accelerating progress: A new era of research on character development. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 46*(6), 1240-1245.

Cobanoglu, R., & Capa-Aydin, Y. (2015). When early childhood teachers close the door: Self-reported fidelity to a mandated curriculum and teacher beliefs. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 33*, 77-86. doi:10.1016/j.ecresq.2015.07.001

Dereli-Iman, E. (2014). The effect of the values education programme on 5.5-6 year old children's social development: Social skills, psycho-social development and social problem solving skills. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 14*(1), 262-268.

Durlak, A., Weissberg, P., Dymnicki, A., Taylor, R., & Schellinger, B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405-432.

Goodman, J. (2000). Moral education in early childhood: The limits of

Constructivism. *Early Education and Development, 11*(1), 37-54.

Goffin, S. (2000, August). The role of curriculum models in early childhood education. ERIC Digest. Retrieved from https://www.ericdigests.org/2001-2/curriculum.html

Harris, K., & Graham, S. (1994). Constructivism: Principles, paradigms, and integration. *The Journal of Special Education, 28*(3), 233-247.

Kagan, D. (1992). Implications of research on teacher belief. *Educational Psychologist, 27*(1), 65-90.

Knitzer, J., & Klein, L. (2006). *Effective Preschool Curricula and Teaching Strategies. Issue brief No. 2*. Retrieved from: http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_668.html

Lapsley, D., & Carlo, G. (2014). Moral development at the crossroads: New trends and possible futures. *Developmental Psychology*, 50(1), 1-7.

Lickona, T. (1998). Character education: Seven crucial issues. *Action in Teacher Education, 20*(4), 77-84.

Lickona, T. (2014). My 45-year journey as a moral and character educator: Some of what I think I've learned [Lecture Notes]. Retrieved from https://www2.cortland.edu/dotAsset/03dcdba1-2787-4166-83e6-5fb1ae8ba855.pdf

Lieber, J., Butera, G., Hanson, M., Palmer, S., Horn, E., & Czaja, C. (2010).

Sustainability of a preschool curriculum: What encourages continued use among teachers? *NHSA Dialog, 13*(4), 225-242.

MA Department of Early Education and Care. (2015, June) *Building Supportive Environments*. Retrieved from https://www.mass.gov/service-details/guidelines-for-preschool-learning-experiences

McClelland, M., Tominey, S., Schmitt, Sara A., & Duncan, R. (2017). SEL Interventions in early childhood. *Future of Children, 27*(1), 33-47.

McTighe, J. & Wiggins, G. (2012) Understanding by design framework. Retrieved from: www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/publications/UbD_WhitePaper0312.pdf

Montroy, J., Bowles, R., Skibbe, L., McClelland, M., & Morrison, F. (2016). The development of self-regulation across early childhood. *Developmental Psychology*, 52(11), 1744-1762.

Moore, Cooper, Domitrovich, Morgan, Cleveland, Shah, Greenberg. (2015). The effects of exposure to an enhanced preschool program on the social-emotional functioning of at-risk children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 32*, 127-138.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1996). *Guidelines for Decisions about Developmentally Appropriate Practice*. Retrieved from: http://www.naeyc.org/about/position/dap4.htm

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2002). *Early learning*

standards: Creating the conditions for success. Retrieved from: https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/position_statement.pdf

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2003, November). *Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation*. Retrieved from: https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/pscape.pdf

National Association for the Education of Young Children (2005). *Early Childhood Program Standards*. Retrieved from: www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/resources/position-statements/Position%20Statement%20EC%20Standards.pdf

National Association for the Education of Young Children (2017). *NAEYC Program Standards and Accreditation Assessment Items Standard 3: Teaching* Retrieved from www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/globally-shared/downloads/PDFs/accreditation/early-learning/Standard%203_Sept%202017_0.pdf

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2004). *Children's Emotional Development Is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains: Working Paper No. 2*. Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Nucci, L., Narváez, L., & Narváez, D. (2008). *Handbook of moral and character*

education /edited by Larry P. Nucci, Darcia Narvaez. (Educational Psychology Handbook). New York: Routledge.

Nutbrown, C. (2006). *Key concepts in early childhood education & care / Cathy Nutbrown.* (SAGE Key Concepts series). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Ostwald, M. (1999). *Nicomachean ethics / Aristotle ; translated, with an introduction and notes, by Martin Ostwald.* (Library of liberal arts; 75). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Şahin, D. (2010) Pre-schoolers, pre-school teachers, and interpersonal problem-solving skills: a comparative study in Turkey and Belgium, Education 3-13, 39:3,305-316, DOI: 10.1080/03004270903514338

Sklad, M., Diekstra, R., De Ritter, M., Ben, J., & Gravesteijn, N. (2012). Effectiveness of school-based universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students' development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment? *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(9), 892-909.

Snyder, F. (2014). Socio-emotional and character development: A theoretical orientation. *Journal of Research in Character Education, 10*(2), 107-127.

The Department of Early Education and Care & The Department of Elementary and

Secondary Education. (2015). *Preschool and Kindergarten Standards in Social-Emotional Development and Approaches to Play and Learning.* Retrieved from: https://www.mass.gov/service-details/preschool-and-kindergarten-standards-in-social-emotional-development-and-approaches

The National Institute for Early Education Research. (2017). State of preschool 2017 Retrieved from http://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks/yearbook2017

Vygotskiĭ, C., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society : The development of higher psychological processes / L. S. Vygotsky; edited by Michael Cole, et al.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Appendix A

Massachusetts SEL State Standards:

Social and Emotional Learning Standards

Self-Awareness

Standard SEL1: The child will be able to recognize, identify, and express his/her emotions.

Standard SEL2: The child will demonstrate accurate self-perception.

Standard SEL3: The child will demonstrate self-efficacy (confidence/competence).

Self-Management

Standard SEL4: The child will demonstrate impulse control and stress management.

Social Awareness

Standard SEL5: The child will display empathetic characteristics.

Standard SEL6: The child will recognize diversity and demonstrate respect for others.

Relationship Skills

Standard SEL7: The child will demonstrate the ability to communicate with others in a variety of ways.

Standard SEL8: The child will engage socially, and build relationships with other children and with adults.

Standard SEL9: The child will demonstrate the ability to manage conflict.

Standard SEL10: The child will demonstrate the ability to seek help and offer help.

Responsible Decision Making

Standard SEL11: The child will demonstrate beginning personal, social, and ethical responsibility.

Standard SEL12: The child will demonstrate the ability to reflect on and evaluate the results of his or her actions and decisions.

Approaches to Play and Learning Standards

Standard APL1: The child will demonstrate initiative, self-direction, and independence.

Standard APL2: The child will demonstrate eagerness and curiosity as a learner.

Standard APL3: The child will be able to maintain focus and attention, and persist in efforts to complete a task.

Standard APL4: The child will demonstrate creativity in thinking and use of materials.

Standard APL5: The child will cooperate with others in play and learning.

Standard APL6: The child will seek multiple solutions to a question, task, or problem.

Standard APL7: The child will demonstrate organizational skills.

Standard APL8: The child will be able to retain and recall information.

Appendix B

Snyder's (2004) SECD Glossary:

Character development	Intended to promote student development
Character strengths	A family of positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings and behaviors [in this literature review I will use ['virtues']
Moral education	Cognitive-developmental approaches to moral education
Prosocial behaviour	Voluntary behavior intended to benefit another
Service learning	Curriculum-based community service that integrates classroom instruction with community service activities
Socio-emotional and character development (SECD)	Highlight(s) the formative role of emotion, the integrating role of character, that actualizing role of skills and the sustaining role of context
Social and emotional learning (SEL)	The ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development.

Appendix C:

Snyder's (2014) Triadic Influence (TTI) Model: