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## Teaching Social Emotional Skills Through Literacy

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TEACHING SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS THROUGH LITERACY

By

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

Hamline University

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To my family and friends for your continued support and encouragement. Thank you to my Capstone Committee. Your keen guidance and incredible teaching knowledge helped me to complete this project. Special thanks to my own children who inspire me to be a better teacher and do what I do - they are why I know it is imperative to teach the whole child and create future leaders that will thrive in a beautiful and diverse community where they are well-equipped for success in school and in life.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is teaching the ability to understand and manage emotions, to set and achieve goals, to feel and show empathy, to develop and maintain healthy relationships, and to make responsible choices (CASEL, 2020). Social and emotional learning may increase students' ability to cope effectively with daily tasks and challenges through their skills, attitudes, and behaviors. Many students may come to school without these coping skills and often have a hard time in a general education classroom setting where they are expected to interact with each other in a positive manner. Social and emotional skills are critical to students' success in school and it is essential that educators have effective tools and strategies to teach these skills.

Many students begin kindergarten without a preschool experience or minimal experiences in socially interacting with other children their age. When these skills are not learned, the inability to cope may be carried through into the later grades with them. Teachers need to be equipped to explicitly teach SEL skills so that students are able to regulate their emotions, effectively set goals, develop healthy relationships, make positive choices, and learn to solve problems appropriately. In the current climate of education with heavy testing and academic pressure on teachers, students, and schools, the emphasis on demonstrating that students are making adequate academic progress is immense. This may then cause teachers to believe there is less time to devote to SEL teaching. However, there is a connection to academic success and positive behaviors skills which leads me to the question, *How can teachers effectively teach Social Emotional Learning skills through literacy in the primary grades?*

## **Overview**

This chapter provides a rationale for why this topic was chosen. I describe the significance of this research to me as an educator. I explain why this research and this project is essential to other educators. I share my personal and professional experiences that have led me to want to know more about social emotional learning in schools and make the teaching more authentic and relevant for educators in the primary grades. My personal and professional experiences include my first year of teaching, working as a special education paraprofessional, being a parent, and previous education and employment in the mental health field.

## **Rationale**

Social and emotional learning is increasingly important in schools in order for students to feel connected, safe, and secure as the key to successful student performance. During the current COVID-19 pandemic where students spent three or more months in school online at home, the recent racial tensions throughout the US, and so many unknowns in society, students may likely be returning to school ill-equipped to manage the stressors they are encountering on a regular basis (Walker, 2020). Along with the pressures to make up for lost time, teachers will need to have increased focus on teaching an integrated interdisciplinary curriculum where students' needs are met academically, emotionally, and socially – teaching the whole child. Because of the pandemic, added changes to the school year included a school year with changing hybrid learning, online learning, social distancing, and limited social interactions amongst students, in order to

keep students healthy. These changes have impacted the need for SEL teaching in the classroom in order to meet students' needs - socially, emotionally, and academically.

### **Project Goals**

Through my research, I hoped to determine the best SEL practices to support early elementary-aged students. My goal was to use a literacy lens to explore topics of self-awareness, problem-solving, coping skills development, yoga and meditation, mindfulness, self-regulation, and teaching/ practicing social skills that can lead to a positive classroom community. I identified explicit teaching to support social emotional learning in the classroom using literacy and children's picture books. This included providing supporting activities to achieve educational and emotional goals of students in the classroom to improve behaviors, increase positive social interactions, and contribute to a classroom community where students thrive. The project provides a SEL curriculum that teaches children to master specific skills concurrently with developing literacy comprehension strategies in the early primary grades.

### **First Teaching Experience**

In my first year of teaching, I taught kindergarten in a school where it was most students' first schooling experience. Many students stayed home with family before school and did not attend preschool; therefore, the students were not accustomed to navigating social situations on their own and most lacked basic social skills. In my classroom, there was one student in particular who would scream, yell, cry often, run out of the room, threaten others, and have a difficult time following the teacher's directions. While this was my teaching experience as a first year teacher, it is not an uncommon

situation in many U.S. classrooms. During group activities, this student would wander around the room and refuse participation in class instruction. Other students either followed his actions and repeated his negative behaviors, or they were fearful and afraid. There was little support from home in terms of redirecting negative behaviors, as the parents avoided phone calls and did not attend any meetings scheduled to confer about strategies to support the child. School-wide services were already stretched and being used by those students previously identified as needing behavioral support. It soon became apparent to me that I needed to innovate new and exciting ways to teach basic social and emotional skills to begin forming a classroom community of trust where students could grow and learn together. All students needed the basic skills to feel loved, safe, and secure in the school setting in order to experience success. I quickly found that this was important, not just for the student that struggled the most, but for all students in the classroom.

The classroom was where the focus of social emotional learning was taught that year. The curriculum provided, in my opinion, was lacking for social emotional teaching. It was scripted for the teacher and used pictures to discuss social situations where children tried to consider what was happening in the image and we would discuss possible solutions, teaching a new skill each week. However, the students often did not relate to the pictures and it was difficult for them to imagine what they would do, since their social situations were so limited. During the teacher-led discussions, the students were distracted and the conversations did not feel authentic, because the students could not relate. However, when I introduced social and emotional topics through picture books, the reaction was different. Students were engaged and interested. They had

healthy discussions with one another and they could relate to the characters. Based on what the characters did, they could come up with other options and solutions, putting themselves into the situation. Students that did not engage previously were interested and listened intently. They always loved to listen to stories, and not only was I strengthening their comprehension skills and meeting literacy learning targets, they could learn social and emotional skills, too. When we included this into literacy learning, the topics were smoothly integrated and genuine. We had follow-up activities and discussions for students to deepen their learning. I noticed this was more authentic learning for students and a more natural way to teach. The children were more engaged and, therefore, began to understand the concepts and carry them into our classroom community. I want to help other teachers by developing a curriculum with a list of key social emotional learning skills that can be introduced through reading children's picture books.

### **Special Education Paraprofessional**

Prior to teaching, I worked for several years as a special education paraprofessional in kindergarten and first grade. As I assisted students in the classroom, I was able to observe teaching from the student's perspective where I also noticed further engagement when book discussions focused on social emotional development. The students I directly supported also struggled with social skills, and they needed a way to learn about them within the general education classroom. In this school, they were often taught social skills in a pull-out special education small group, but often-times these lessons were skills that all students needed, too. When all students were taught together and they realized these skills were needed by everyone, it created a level playing field, where both everyone contributed and everyone gained a skill. This enhanced the

classroom community and contributed to social emotional and literacy growth by the students as a cohesive group.

### **Parent**

Another way this topic is personal to me, is that I am a parent. I have a 14-year-old daughter and a 16-year-old son who both serve as a daily reminder of why it is crucial that students have healthy emotional IQ and positive social skills. I stayed home with my children for several years where parenting was my main focus. When they were younger, I needed to ensure they had normal social experiences, learned to take risks, and developed problem-solving skills that would allow them the opportunity to grow to be independent children. Raising children with a healthy sense of self, teaching them coping skills at a young age, and helping them learn to express themselves was essential. Knowing the foundation is so important helped me to remember to incorporate these skills in our daily routines.

Now that I am raising teenagers, these skills are imperative for a healthy well-being. Having taken the time to address social and emotional learning when they were young, has paved the way for healthy conversations, positive friendships, and effective coping strategies. My hope is that these foundational skills will better prepare them and lead them on a healthy path as they become young adults and navigate their way through life.

### **Mental Health Field**

My interest in social and emotional health began even earlier, when upon graduating from high school, I attended the University of Minnesota where I received a

BA in Psychology with a minor in Family Sociology. I then worked in the mental health field for many years. I mostly worked with young adults with eating disorders and substance abuse at an in-patient treatment facility. It was interesting and challenging to help them identify why they struggled with such issues and what coping skills would help them learn to manage their disease. Much of the focus on healing was related to coping skills, problem solving, and emotional awareness. Learning to navigate social situations in a healthy way was a skill that many lacked. Seeing how this affected individuals as adults was eye-opening. This also has shaped the way I both teach and parent. Thus, this shaped my thinking in why it is critically important that students learn these skills at an early age to prepare them for life's challenges ahead.

Later, I continued to work in the mental health field, but with employers who provided essential mental health skills in the workplace. I coordinated health and wellness seminars with a focus on all kinds of home/work-life stressors. Mental health awareness, along with stress management, coping strategies, and relationship management were issues that continued to be a focus by employers to create positive work environments where their employees felt respected, had a healthy workplace, fostered positive relationships, and minimized stress. Employers found their employees could be more successful in their careers when they were feeling emotionally and socially well. This further emphasized to me that healthy SEL skills established at a young age would provide an essential and lifelong value for everyone.

## **Summary**

Social Emotional Learning is key to successful student performance, especially in the early elementary years. With an overwhelming focus on academics, educators need

to find a way to address these needs and embed SEL within their academics. As educators address the whole child in their teaching, they play a critical role in equipping children to meet the demands in the classroom, building a positive classroom community, especially after distance learning, the COVID-19 pandemic, racial tensions, and other building stressors in society. Addressing this through literacy may not only create authentic learning opportunities, but allow teachers to address literacy needs and build comprehension skills while students build the foundation to be better equipped to identify emotions, develop coping skills, learn how to interact with others, and make positive choices.

In the next chapter, current research on social emotional learning will be examined, along with a focus on elementary student success: socially, emotionally, and academically. Different teaching strategies that address social emotional learning, along with children's picture books to accompany each lesson, will be reviewed. Minnesota State Reading Standards will be examined to ensure the reading standards are met while embedding social emotional learning within the lessons. As current children's literature is considered, there will be an emphasis to ensure all students feel represented in a diverse selection of books where all populations are included.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Promoting social emotional learning through literacy education is an opportunity for students to develop necessary life skills and increase academic success. This chapter discusses the need for social and emotional learning strategies in schools and supports the research question: *How can teachers effectively teach Social Emotional Learning skills through literacy in the primary grades?*

In this review of the research literature, an important link is established connecting social emotional learning and student success. The various components of current social emotional learning teaching are discussed. Also, in order to consider how teachers can effectively teach SEL skills through literacy, it is important to look at how research shows the positive effects of the integration of literacy and social emotional learning. It is essential to consider how the language arts standards for teaching literacy address SEL skills, as well. The standards are examined to show the relationship of the two domains and the integration of the two are discussed. Furthermore, it is imperative to consider diversity in SEL and children's literature, in order to reach all children and ensure that not only do all students can feel represented, but they learn about others, too. These elements of SEL teaching and literacy are examined to provide research to support why the natural connection of the two areas can be effectively integrated in early elementary years.

## **Social Emotional Learning and Student Success**

The Collaborative for Academics, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social and emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” (2020, para. 1). CASEL’s framework identifies Five Core Competencies:

1. Self-awareness - the ability to accurately identify emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior;
2. Self-management - the ability to regulate emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations;
3. Social awareness - the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical behavior norms, and to recognize family, school, and community resources;
4. Relationship skills - the ability to establish and maintain healthy relationships with diverse individuals and groups; and
5. Responsible decision making - the ability to make constructive and respectful choices about personal behavior and social interactions (CASEL, 2020).

These skills are not only necessary for academic success, but serve as foundational and basic life skills. Part of functioning in a community is contributing positively to the greater good, part of which necessitates effective social emotional skills.

Over many years, the education community has considered the impact of SEL on the academic lives of students. Vygotsky (1978) taught that learning best takes place within a given socio-cultural environment while emphasizing the important factor that learning is social. When students learn within their zone of proximal development, their learning is socially constructed through the relationship of a child's emotion, desire to learn, and cognitive development. Students and teachers learn within the interactions they have amongst one another (Vygotsky, 1978).

Social emotional learning plays a critical role in improving children's academic growth and lifelong learning, according to Zins, et al. (2004). They linked SEL to improvement in school attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance stating the following:

Intrinsically, schools are social places and learning is a social process. Students do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the support of their families. Emotions can facilitate or hamper their learning and their ultimate success in school. Because social and emotional factors play such an important role, schools must attend to this aspect of the educational process for the benefit of all students. (p. 3)

Zins, et al. (2004), continued to implore that schools are the ideal settings in which to teach social emotional skills, in addition to academic growth, because virtually all children attend school and schools have an inherent expectation to educate children to become responsible, contributing citizens in society. Considering students' social and emotional development is an integral and essential element of students' success in school.

They suggested SEL programs should be centered on a framework of person-centered competencies that include the following: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management. In order to be effective, SEL teaching also must be provided within the constructs of a caring and safe learning environment where students are supported. They provided evidence and made a case that indicates SEL increases school success and fosters academic learning (Zins, et al., 2004). This provides additional reasoning why schools must incorporate SEL into their curriculum.

Students who receive explicit SEL instruction are considerably more able to manage their emotions, get along with others, and engage in their academic learning, than students who do not receive SEL instruction. Ashdown and Bernard (2011) studied explicit instruction in social and emotional learning skills and found that it is an effective way of improving the social and emotional competence of young children. When 1st grade students received SEL instruction, delivered by their teachers as part of the curriculum, they displayed significantly greater gains in their levels of social-emotional competency (measured in terms of items associated with positive self-orientation, positive other-orientation, and positive work-orientation) and social skills (measured in terms of items associated with co-operation, assertion, and self-control) than the students who did not receive the SEL instruction. Students that received the SEL instruction were considerably more able to manage their emotions, get along with others, and engage in their academic learning, than the students who did not receive the SEL instruction (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011). All of these elements are essential to academic success in students.

Researchers, Jones, et al. (2017), looked at social and emotional learning strategies embedded into classroom management to improve teaching and learning. They found that optimal student engagement and successful student learning depends upon effective classroom management where students are supported in their ability to manage themselves throughout the day's learning and activities. When teachers create an environment where students are able to manage their own behaviors with increasing independence, students can effectively interact with others and meet the social and academic demands at school. They also suggested that students who are strong in social emotional skills are better able to access classroom instruction. When teachers provide age-appropriate social emotional learning combined with classroom management, students learn to successfully manage their attention, feelings, and behaviors in order to enhance instruction in the classroom. SEL also increases students' on-task behaviors while significantly and positively affecting children's learning and behavior outcomes (Jones, et al. 2017). Not only does effective SEL in the classroom contribute to better academic performance, the learning environment is more engaging and students are better able to learn in school. Students can better relate to one another and interact in a positive way.

In his research, Dresser (2013) found that educators should integrate both the academic and social-emotional learning for best results. Dresser considered academic learning the language and content knowledge, while he defined social-emotional learning (SEL) as the process for connecting thinking, feeling, and behavior to important social tasks. He further stated that SEL is a way to guide students to meet personal and social needs while developing the necessary life skills to become productive, contributing

members of society. When studying how to best meet the needs of English Language Learners, he stated that when emotions and content are woven together in learning, research shows the same positive results cannot be found when taught separately or independently. Additionally, he stated that students who have a positive self-image are more likely to excel academically. Alternatively, children who lack confidence tend to become disengaged from school. Student centered teaching where student social-emotional learning is integrated into the academic curriculum increases students' interest, creates and fosters a safe and positive environment, offers deeper reading experiences, increases students' social-emotional and academic skills, and promotes healthy reflection. When schools integrate SEL across the curriculum for all grades, students can build the confidence needed to achieve high levels of academic learning (Dresser, 2013). This evidence further supports the necessity of SEL and why it should be integrated into literacy teaching for young students.

Children need to be socially, emotionally, and academically competent in order to succeed during their schooling and future careers. Students' social and emotional learning (SEL) competencies are developed when SEL teaching includes practices that enhance the capacity to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, understand and have empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. These SEL skills aid in better school adjustment and academic performance, as well as, more positive social interactions, fewer conduct concerns, less emotional distress, and better grades and test scores. Integrating SEL lessons with language arts, social studies, or science and math is an effective approach in promoting social emotional development. Also, it is important that education is relevant

and appropriate to students' cultural and linguistic context in order for learning to best occur for young students (Dusenbury & Weissberg (2017).

Social emotional learning is an integral part of education in schools. These skills are an essential foundation for children's development with lifelong implications. They are necessary for students to be successful not only in school, but in life. A focus on SEL in schools acknowledges inequities and empowers students to contribute to safe, healthy, and just learning communities in their schools. Social and emotional education nurtures children's academic success by teaching them to be self-aware, socially conscientious, able to make responsible decisions, and competent in self-management and relationship-management skills.

### **Current Social Emotional Learning Teaching**

Over 200 SEL programs exist in today's schools where they are found to increase prosocial behaviors, reduce behavioral problems, and improve academic performance to enhance students' behavioral adjustment (Durlak, et al. 2011). Research evaluated the influence of SEL programs on positive social behavior, problem behaviors, and academic performance. Students typically learn in collaboration with their teachers, peers, and families, rather than in isolation. Children's emotions can impact their learning and either facilitate or impede academic engagement, work ethic, commitment, and ultimate school success. Research showed that SEL programs yield significant positive effects on targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school. When SEL programs focus on emotion recognition, stress-management, empathy, problem solving, or decision-making skill, they result in better social emotional skill

development. SEL programming enhances students' academic performance when interventions are incorporated into routine educational practices (Durlak, et al. 2011). Implementation of SEL programs will support the healthy academic, social, and emotional development of children.

Approaches for improving students' behavioral and academic outcomes are most effective when they are schoolwide. However, challenges with implementation fidelity have caused many to argue that school social workers should be engaged to improve the integrity of the social emotional instruction. Anyon, et al. (2016) examined contextual influences on a whole-school intervention called Responsive Classroom (RC). RC uses the assets of teachers in the classroom setting to intervene with misbehaving students to improve social, emotional, literacy, and math outcomes. However, there are factors that constrain its implementation and diminish the quality of the program. They found that staff members' beliefs about behavior change and management, principal and teacher buy-in, and training/ technical assistance of the intervention support system influenced the fidelity of the implementation, therefore, impacting its efficacy. While some teachers felt RC's emphasis on the development of trust and feeling of community among students and teachers was a foundation for addressing the root causes of misbehavior, others believed that zero-tolerance policies and punishment were more effective as an extrinsic motivator for behavior change. Also, some teachers felt the RC strategies did not address the more serious behavior infractions and the logical consequences were inconsistent. Teacher buy-in also differed because some teachers felt that the implementation of RC strategies took teaching time away from academic skills. The lack of a consistent buy-in led to variations in its implementation and consequently, the fidelity of the program

(Anyon, et al. 2016). This further suggests that the implementation of SEL must be logistically appropriate for teachers and taught with fidelity. Teachers need to be invested in the process and interventions must be consistent in order to be effective. This also lends further credence to the integration of SEL with academic learning, such as during literacy instruction.

The role of schools in the development of healthy children is not only to foster their cognitive development, but also their social and emotional growth. However, with limited resources, the pressures of schools to make adequate academic progress often outweighs the SEL considerations. Educators find themselves having to choose among demands and effectively implement SEL curricula that is multi-faceted with proven results. Research indicates that competency in social emotional domains is associated with a child's healthy well-being and increased academic school performance. Durlak et al. (2011) explored the effects of SEL programming across several outcomes: social and emotional skills, attitudes toward self and others, positive social behavior, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance for the entire student body. They found that SEL programs are most successful in schools when they are incorporated into existing educational practices by teachers in the classroom. All SEL programs reviewed resulted in academic performance growth. Compared to students without SEL instruction, students in all the various programs demonstrated enhanced SEL skills, positive social behaviors, fewer conduct problems, less emotional stress, and improved academic performance. The highest growth in SEL competency was in programming that targeted specific SEL skills such as emotions recognition, stress-management, empathy, problem solving, and decision-making skills. SEL programs that followed a

sequenced step-by-step process, incorporated active learning forms, focused on skill development, and had explicit learning goals (considered SAFE practices), are likely to be the most effective (Durlak et al., 2011).

There are many SEL programs within schools today that seek to support students by influencing positive social behavior, address problem behaviors, reduce emotional stress, and increase academic performance. SEL competencies need to be taught with fidelity and integrity by teachers to support the healthy academic, social, and emotional development of children.

### **Integration of Literacy and Social Emotional Learning**

When the teaching of academic subjects is integrated with social-emotional learning strategies, students can further develop academic skills of analytical thinking while also using social skills such as handling disagreements and having constructive conversations (Blad, 2017). Students can use inquiry as structured and reflective conversations together where they have productive conversations to guide their peers and challenge their thinking. The process takes social-emotional learning skills they have learned, such as listening, relating to others' experiences, and providing feedback and leverages them to improve students' academic work when teachers integrate the strategies into their teaching of academic subjects, like reading and math (Blad, 2017).

Communication with others is an essential piece of literacy understanding, which makes literacy a natural fit for integration of SEL curriculum. Evidence suggests SEL is crucial for excelling in school and in life, as well as increasing success in academic learning. Research indicates that SEL skills should be embedded into core curriculum, with the most positive effects in SEL being demonstrated in literacy. Students can learn

more and be more likely to have a positive impact on others when they learn to effectively communicate with others through productive communication, consideration of other perspectives, and empathetic listening skills through direct SEL teaching integrated into core curriculum (Fisher, et al. 2019).

Reading books is a natural way for students to learn about others' experiences, perspectives, and emotions. Through reading, students learn to relate to others and deepen understanding of the text, but also their social and emotional skills. When students read and analyze texts, they can experience an interaction with the larger world through the characters in books. Teaching SEL through literature also is a way to incorporate new skills into already existing teaching routines. Teachers would not have an additional lesson to teach, increasing their workload, but rather it would be incorporated into learning standards already expected to be taught. Boyles proposed the integration of social-emotional learning to the reading curriculum by reading books and asking questions related to social and emotional problem solving (2018). This strategy would initiate discussions to raise students' emotional awareness and help them to develop strategies for problem solving challenging situations. Encouraging students to engage with text through discussions, role-playing, writing, and talking would result in more genuine responses and real-time decision-making skills. Further, when teachers are teaching literacy, they are already teaching students to make inferences and encouraging strategic thinking and reasoning. They are making connections to texts and characters and making connections to their personal values and the world around them. Applying basic SEL skills to beloved children's books, that serve as mentor texts, allows educators to select the SEL competencies desired and support students SEL growth through literacy

lessons. Boyles also used the five social-emotional skills identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL): self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Choosing literature for SEL teaching should include books with dynamic characters who face challenges, relatable characters who are heroes and role-models, strong characters who persevere to overcome difficulties, and characters that learn an important lesson along the way (Boyles, 2018). Using literature to teach social emotional skills in young students is an effective way to integrate learning and teach the whole child. Multi-disciplinary teaching gives teachers a way to dig deeper into curriculum and allow students to make connections with learning, construct their own knowledge, and strengthen their academic and SEL skills.

Blending literacy and social emotional learning helps prepare students for future school success by creating powerful learning experiences for children. Doyle & Bramwell (2006) studied dialogic reading to teach emergent literacy and social emotional skills where literacy instruction is provided through a shared reading experience in small groups of students with strategic questioning and responding to children while reading a book. In dialogic reading, a book is read several times, during which the teacher addresses new vocabulary, engages in discussion about the text, encourages students to make connections, and provides opportunities for students to construct meaning and make sense of text. When using dialogic reading strategies with books that have social emotional content, teachers can guide group discussions to focus on the development of key social emotional skills in students. Books often include adults and children solving challenges and interacting with others. This provides a healthy communication model for

children and helps them connect emotionally with characters. Also, engaging in book discussions relies on students learning to take turns speaking, listening to one another, and using socially appropriate language. Emotion vocabulary can also be incorporated into dialogic reading where students can be introduced to descriptive words for feelings, understand emotions through discussions, learn about emotions through book characters, and practice identifying their own feelings. Dialogic reading not only gives teachers the opportunity to increase comprehension and reading in emergent readers, but also provides a natural environment for social emotional learning simultaneously (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

### **Teaching with Text Sets and Read Alouds**

Teaching with text sets can be a way to provide students a variety of reading experiences where content standards can be learned, while students improve and expand their reading abilities. A text set is a group of sources of information that explore a shared topic or idea, including a variety of text types and forms. Building a multimodal, multi-genre text set includes using more than great books; it may include children's fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, as well as websites, government reports, and newspaper and magazine articles, including those written for children. Other text types may be primary sources and photographs. Diversity in text types might also include both print and digital texts. Teaching with text sets stimulates student interest and motivation through student choice and variety. When content is provided through text sets, students can be encouraged to generate questions that can guide their learning where they shape their own knowledge. Effective use of multimodal, multi-genre text sets captures interest and cultivates engagement, prompts inquiry, fosters multiple perspectives, activates prior

knowledge, encourages student writing, differentiates instruction, and supports vocabulary (Cappiello & Dawes, 2012). Aligning desired learning outcomes, such as SEL, with text sets, gives teachers and students opportunities to develop SEL skills while improving their reading.

Interactive read alouds (IRAs), teachers reading a book to students while modeling good reading and encouraging discussions, are important for emergent readers because teachers and peers can construct literacy meaning together. When teachers actively model and scaffold comprehension strategies, they can better engage readers and effectively build classroom community. The IRAs can give students opportunities for open-ended responses and give teachers opportunities to focus on specific literacy instruction such as text structure, reading comprehension, and literary understanding. Teachers can explicitly model how to read, understand, and analyze a story to engage and motivate children's involvement in the reading with a student-centered approach to learning. IRAs provide active ways that students can conceptualize their reading and literacy, with conversations that can confirm, model, extend, and build upon reading concepts. Selecting appropriate texts is important to encourage classroom responses and build on students' understanding in ways that are both relatable and engaging (Wiseman, 2010). Children's literature can also provide opportunities for student discussions about how students can relate to the world around them, while modeling skillful reading strategies. Used effectively, IRAs can help cultivate a positive and accepting classroom environment.

Children's literature can be helpful to students and teachers for teaching social skills, like friendships. Children's literature often incorporates other academic skills that

become meaningful to students through the stories, so that they may apply the learned skills outside of the classroom. DeGeorge (1998) suggested teaching friendship skills using children's literature including the use of the literature, direct step by step instruction, natural environment practice, and evaluation of the desired skill. Some benefits to reading a story to teach and introduce skills are that reading can increase their literacy, students enjoy stories and are motivated to learn, and the story can give practical examples of social skills and peer interactions. Children also need opportunities to practice skills in a natural environment. This could be applied for a multitude of SEL skills that could be incorporated in children's literature.

### **ELA Standards and Teaching Literacy**

The Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) provides guidance and assistance for Minnesota Educators on implementation of academic standards, best practices, intervention systems, and administration, in order to support language arts achievement for all learners (2020). English language arts (ELA) includes communication and language skills that students use routinely to send and receive information. The ability to understand language is an essential element of students' learning and career readiness. Language includes communication of information through listening, viewing, and reading, as well as speaking, nonverbal expression, and representation of auditory, visual, and written information. The standards have been designed to prepare students to become college and career ready.

As an essential element of the standards, students must have opportunities to participate in a variety of conversations – whole class, small groups, and with partners – structured around and within important academic content. Students need to be able to

contribute to rich conversations with others, in order to compare and contrast, and analyze and synthesize a variety of ideas. All high school graduates need the ability to listen attentively to others, as well as expressing their own ideas clearly. Students will need to be able to effectively communicate with diverse partners, integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse formats, and evaluate a speaker's point of view. These skills rely on a foundation of strong social emotional skills.

In order to ensure all students are college and career ready upon graduation of high school, the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects ("the Standards") were developed by states collectively. The standards were created to signify that students who meet the Standards will have established the necessary skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening that are the foundation for any expression of language, inside or outside the classroom. Minnesota participated in the development of these standards and there is a considerable alignment between the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy and the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards in Language Arts. However, when the Minnesota Standards Committee analyzed the Common Core Standards, it was determined that additional critical knowledge and skills should be included to better prepare students for success in college, careers, and everyday life. Therefore, the state of Minnesota holds teachers accountable to the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards (Minnesota Department of Education, 2020).

The Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards are cumulative in nature and students are expected to meet grade-level standards. There is the expectation of skills learned in preceding grades to be mastered, as the development of current and future grade level

skills evolves and expands their understanding of the essential concepts of literacy. The key features of the language arts standards are reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. In reading, some concepts that relate to SEL are understanding character development, considering others perspectives, looking at an author's point of view, comparing and contrasting, discussing main ideas with others, making inferences, considering the mood and tone of a story, and making personal connections to texts. In writing, students are expected to convey their opinions and be able to write about real and imagined experiences. The foundational SEL skills are necessary to be able to achieve these expectations. Most importantly, within the Minnesota K-12 Academic Standards, in speaking and listening, students should be able to "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (p. 31). As the foundation for future learning begins in kindergarten, it is essential that students have established these SEL communication skills early on in their schooling careers. Kindergarten grade level standards include the ability to follow discussion rules, like listening to each other and taking turns while speaking. They also should be able to hold a conversation where they contribute multiple times with one another. They should be able to listen to one another and use nonverbal cues and facial expression to identify emotions, as well. These literacy expectations keenly align with the CASEL Five Core Competencies of social emotional learning of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

Fisher, et al. (2019) concluded that evidence suggests SEL is crucial for excelling in school and in life, as well as increasing success in academic learning. Research

suggests that SEL skills should be embedded into core curriculum, with the most positive effects in SEL being demonstrated in literacy. Students can learn more when they learn to effectively communicate with others through positive communication, consideration of other perspectives, and empathetic listening skills through direct SEL teaching integrated into core curriculum (Fisher, et al, 2019). Effective SEL skills also help students to create positive relationships with others and be more likely to have a positive impact on others.

Therefore, the expectations of students in literacy standards rely on the ability of students to effectively communicate with each other. To best develop the necessary skills of communication and processing of information, it is essential that students have a strong foundation of SEL skills in their early academic years. Without proper SEL skills, they will not be able to develop the required literacy communication and language skills. Since these skills go hand in hand, it is a likely integration to teach them together, incorporating SEL into literacy instruction.

### **Diversity in SEL and Children's Literature**

It is essential that when social emotional learning is embedded in literacy instruction, that children's literature represents all people and cultures in a way that is culturally relevant for all students. Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture to help students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge (Billings, 1992). In order to learn through children's literature, all children need to see a variety of cultures, faiths, families, and perspectives represented

in order to learn about themselves and others and how they contribute to the classroom, school, and greater community together (Bishop, 1990).

At Ohio State in the 1990s, Rudine Sims Bishop famously coined the metaphor of books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors. She discussed children's literature as a tool of self-affirmation for all children. As windows, books show views of the world that can be real, imaginary, familiar, or different. When the windows open like a sliding glass door, readers can walk through to imagine being part of the world shown by the author. Further, when the light is reflected and the window becomes a mirror, children can see their own reflection and see their own lives as part of the greater human experience (Bishop, 1990). This metaphor continues to be cited in academic journals, textbooks, conference presentations and university classrooms. All children need that in books and they need to see a variety of cultures, faiths, families and perspectives represented. Children can learn to celebrate both differences and similarities, as that is what makes up society, and in schools where they are learning together in a community.

O'Donnell (2019) examined Rudine Sims Bishops' work and discussed how the metaphor has become a framework that can be applied to many identities and has grown over time. The view of books as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors will remain a relevant and useful image for advocating for an inclusive curriculum that applies to any group that may see itself underrepresented or falsely portrayed in literature. This timeless and evolving metaphor can serve as a literacy framework that can be applied to many different identities and meet all students' needs.

Research shows that when schools implement a culturally adapted SEL program, students developed resilience and acquired social and emotional competence skills

(Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2019). Many schools have implemented SEL programs, but do not address diversity of students. These universal interventions must be culturally responsive in order to adequately meet the needs of all students.

In a review of federal and state mandates, Gregory and Fergus (2017) found that in an effort to cut down on punishments that remove students from school, these mandates lead some school districts to embrace SEL teaching. However, when they noticed that large disparities among diverse students continued to persist, they looked at SEL practices that may reduce the disparities. They find when power, privilege, and cultural differences are not considered, the prevailing "colorblind" notions of SEL ignore beliefs and biases that educators may bring to their frame of reference and respond more harshly when behaviors are not within their personal cultural norm. Also, many SEL models neglect to address educators' own social and emotional competencies that may influence the school climate (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). Student culture and diversity needs to be integrated into SEL teaching. When SEL is equity oriented and acknowledges cultural and power dynamics in school discipline, the school culture is healthier while both students and educators have increased social and emotional competencies.

Desai et al. (2014) suggested that research indicates many educational institutions are implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) to foster social development. They looked at schools' SEL needs through a social justice framework, and found that much consideration needs to be made both in creating socially just SEL curricula and integrating SEL curricula in a socially just manner. They found that SEL programs within a social justice framework require that both the accessibility and the content of the

curriculum are considered by schools. They also suggested that SEL programs should be modified through a social justice lens to meet the needs of a wide range of students and families with contributions for the modifications from school staff, students, families, and community members (Desai, et al. 2014). When schools implement SEL programs through a social justice lens, access to SEL skills is more equitable for all students to develop key social, academic, interpersonal, and self-regulatory skills.

It is imperative that social justice and equity are considered in literacy and SEL teaching components in schools. Students need to be able to relate to what they are learning and learn about others. Ensuring that SEL programs are socially just and they are integrated into schools in a socially just manner will help ensure all students have access to learning and developing SEL skills. SEL teaching should be culturally responsive where all students can feel represented while they also learn about others and how they come together both in the classroom community and in the world as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter Two provided a deeper understanding of what is SEL teaching, as well as, the connection to literacy education. The research aimed to inform the guiding question: *How can teachers effectively teach Social Emotional Learning skills through literacy in the primary grades?* In this review of the research literature, social emotional learning and student success was further defined. Current social emotional learning teaching was examined. The integration of literacy and social emotional learning was discussed. Also, the connection between SEL and the Minnesota ELA standards for teaching literacy was established. Additionally, the incorporation of

diversity in SEL and children's literature was addressed for effective teaching of all students in a culturally responsive manner. All of these areas provide much insight to further support the integration of teaching SEL through literacy instruction in the primary grades. The next chapter will provide a detailed explanation of the project and a description of the suggested SEL Literacy Curriculum. The next chapter will also provide a framework and rationale for an SEL and Literacy integrated curriculum for primary elementary education grades.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

The integration of literacy and social emotional learning can be a productive way for teachers to contribute to student success in school. This capstone project suggests that a curriculum can be developed that incorporates SEL skills into literacy learning in the early elementary school grades, specifically K-2. This chapter gives a description of the school setting, a summary of the intended participants, and an outline of the methods. Also, a project overview, framework and rationale, project description, project audience and setting, timeline, and summary will be provided. Each section will give details on the project creation, implementation, and efficacy. The chapter will look at why the project is important and the benefit it will provide to both educators and students. The research question, *How can teachers effectively teach Social Emotional Learning skills through literacy in the primary grades?*, will further be addressed.

#### Project Overview

For this capstone project, a curriculum will be designed for primary elementary grade level students that incorporates SEL skills and grade level literacy standards. The curriculum will align with CASEL's Five Core Competencies for SEL teaching: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The integration of social-emotional learning to the reading curriculum by reading books and asking questions related to social and emotional problem solving is an effective way to integrate learning and teach the whole child (Boyles, 2018). For each

SEL core competency skill, there will be two children's literature books that will be read to the whole class using dialogic reading, including prompting questions to be discussed with the class while reading that focuses on an explicit literacy and SEL learning target. As each SEL core competency skill encompasses several elements of social and emotional health, each competency will have two lessons, each focusing on a different element of that competency. Each core competency will be aligned with an English Language Arts (ELA) Minnesota State Standard, focusing on first grade. First grade was selected, as the goal of the curriculum would include early elementary grades, kindergarten through second grade. First grade is the grade level of focus because it is in the middle and the grade level currently being taught by the project designer. The ELA Minnesota State standards are linear in nature and the skills addressed can be easily adjusted to meet varying grade level standards, as well. Each lesson will be taught through dialogic reading where the teacher reads a book several times, while explaining new vocabulary, guiding discussion about the text, prompting students to make connections, and giving opportunities for students to construct meaning and better understand the text (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006). There will be an interactive inquiry-based, student-centered learning activity to build student skills and deepen students' understanding, along with opportunities for a gradual release of responsibility. Children's literature selected will be culturally relevant and age appropriate to encourage students' ability to connect with the story and pique their interests. An assessment will be given to evaluate understanding and allow time for reflection and reteaching, as needed.

The goal of the project is to provide educators with shared reading lessons that teach SEL skills while teaching literacy standards. Teachers will be able to include these lessons into their literacy block, meeting students' needs in a multi-faceted interdisciplinary approach. This curriculum will include ten lessons, two for each SEL competency, with possibilities of future expansion to include other elements of the five SEL competencies identified by CASEL.

### **Framework and Rationale**

The lesson plan framework will be based on the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework. The UbD framework is a curriculum-planning guide that is centered on helping students understand concepts and then apply the learning into new situations (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). The framework design suggests that teachers should use the following six facets of understanding to measure success and understanding of a learning goal - the ability to "explain, interpret, apply, shift perspective, empathize, and self-reflect" (p. 3-4). The goal is for learners to apply their learning into authentic contexts while constructing their own meanings and understandings. Assessments are matched with learning goals, while feedback is ongoing and descriptive. Success is measured ongoing and demonstrated by real-world application where students have opportunities to reflect, learn, and revise. In order to allow for successful planning and more purposeful teaching, the UbD framework utilizes backward planning as the main curriculum-planning strategy. Instead of starting with content, this framework begins with what students should be able to do with the content. The UbD framework includes three stages of planning including stage one: identify desired results, stage two: determine acceptable evidence, and stage three: plan learning experiences and instruction

accordingly (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). The lesson plan for this project will use the UbD framework.

The rationale for this capstone includes many elements. Considering students' social and emotional development is an integral and essential element of students' success in school (Zins, et al. 2004). One cannot ignore SEL teaching, as it is a fundamental need for all students, especially in early elementary grades as those years are building a foundation for all future schooling. Educators should integrate both the academic and social-emotional learning for best results (Dresser, 2013). Teaching cannot be taught in silos. The integration of SEL skills into academics teaches the whole child and helps students connect with their learning better. Blending literacy and social emotional learning can help prepare students for future school success by creating powerful learning experiences for children (Doyle & Bramwell, 2006).

The integration of social-emotional learning to the reading curriculum by reading books and asking questions related to social and emotional problem solving is an effective teaching strategy (Boyles, 2018). An important element in literacy is students connecting to literature and understanding characters, just as an important element in social skills in relating to others and the ability to solve problems effectively. It is a natural integration to teach SEL and literacy together. Culturally relevant teaching uses student culture to help students understand themselves and others, structure social interactions, and conceptualize knowledge (Billings, 1992). Students need to relate to books, seeing themselves and others, to build a diverse and accepting understanding of the world around them. Using diverse literature, where all students are represented, will help students build SEL skills and strengthen literacy connections.

## Project Description

Applying Wiggins & McTighe's UbD curriculum design, I will use the analytic learning frame of A-M-T (acquire the information, make meaning of the idea, and transfer the learning to new situations) to provide a scaffolded plan that aligns with the Blooms taxonomy hierarchy of learning. The learning plan will focus on teaching for understanding where students make sense of content and can apply their learning to make future implications. The learner's independence and autonomy are to be increased over time and students will be encouraged to think critically throughout the lesson, always with the learning goals in mind. Learning activities will accommodate learning differences, provide variety and choice, and are active or experiential. Learning will be centered on a cycle of model-try-feedback-refine.

The modified UbD lesson plan is below. The lessons will incorporate a gradual release model, as directed by Wiggins & McTighe in *The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* (2011).

Figure 1: Modified UbD Lesson Plan:

<b>SEL Lesson Plan</b>	
SEL Skill:	
Literacy Skill:	
Learning Targets:	(SEL) I can...
	(ELA) I can...
Academic Language Goal:	(ELL) I can...

Materials Needed:	
Minnesota Standards Addressed:	
Duration of Time:	
<b>Dialogic Reading/ Interactive Read Aloud Guide</b>	
Prior Knowledge Activation Before Reading	
Vocabulary Defined Before or During Reading	Word: definition Page Number:
Prompting Questions During Reading	Question: Page Number:
<b>Learning Activity</b>	
IRA: Teacher reads Book Aloud asking Prompting Questions; Students Turn and Talk with Reading Partners when questions are asked; Teacher asks a few partners to share their thinking with the whole class	Teacher Models Activity:
	Activity Done Together:
	Students Complete Activity:
<b>Evidence of Learning</b>	
Formative Assessment:	
As evidenced by:	
Closure, Review, Reflection:	

I align literacy lessons with CASEL’s framework for SEL. CASEL’s framework identifies Five Core Competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making.

I provide two children's literature picture books for each competency, each with an accompanying dialogic literacy lesson. I use dialogic reading to teach emergent literacy and social emotional skills while reading a book where literacy instruction is provided through a shared reading experience with strategic questioning and responding. Selected books are culturally relevant, reflecting diverse groups and perspectives.

In the acquisition activity, students are encouraged to make connections and be given opportunities to construct meaning, in order to make sense of both the text and the desired SEL outcome. The activities are structured beginning with teacher modelling, then teacher and students working together, and last students will engage in the activities independently and in collaborative peer groups.

Students are evaluated to ensure application and understanding of literacy skill and SEL competency through informal assessments. Opportunities for reflection and modification are incorporated. Lessons are approximately 25 minutes in length each.

### **Project Audience and Setting**

These lessons will be taught in a 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom at a K-8 public charter school that focuses on community, a Core Knowledge curriculum, and character development. The school is located in a suburban, middle-class city in Minnesota. The 2019 school data presented is from the Minnesota State Report Card on the Minnesota Department of Education website. The school has 35 Licensed Teachers, of which 100% are white. There are 554 Students: 1.99% Hispanic or Latino, 0.36% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 9.75% Asian, 11.01% Black or African-American, 0.00% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, 74.55% White, 2.35% Two or More Races. The students are 9.4% English Language Learners. There are 9.6% students that receive

Special Education services. There are 17.2% students that receive Free/ Reduced Lunch. There are 0% Homeless students. In the first grade, where the lessons will be taught, there are 5 classes of approximately 24 students.

The intended audience of this capstone is other primary education classroom teachers and administrators. The educators will see the research that supports the need of SEL teaching and the efficacy of incorporating SEL into literacy. The design allows teachers to incorporate essential SEL learning into an existing literacy block of time, further building students' skills and strengthening classroom community relationships.

### **Timeline**

The timeline of this capstone project began with writing Chapters One, Two, and Three over the months of June, July, and August of 2020. The majority of the writing time was spent on literature review and Chapter Two. Over the months of August, September, and October, the project and Chapter Four was developed. Creating the project included the following: listing SEL targeted skills and correlated literacy standards, aligning SEL learning targets to literacy standards, creating assessments for learning targets, reviewing diverse children's literature, selecting diverse literature for each SEL skill, and creating meaningful acquisition activities for each book/ SEL skill. Finally, the completion of the project and chapter 4 was the last step.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides an overview of the capstone project centered on the guiding research question: *How can teachers effectively teach Social Emotional Learning skills through literacy in the primary grades?* I am passionate about SEL teaching because of

my experiences in the classroom and noticing how children often do not know how to positively interact with one another. So much of my time teaching is spent helping students navigate friendships, learn communication skills, express themselves effectively, understand their feelings, cope with difficulties, and navigate problem solving strategies. My prior experience in the mental health field and degree in psychology helped guide my decisions in the classroom, but I knew that many teachers did not have the luxury of already knowing ways to address SEL deficits in their students. Being in the school both as a teacher and a paraprofessional, has helped me further identify the need for SEL teaching in the classroom in the early grades. This curriculum will allow for the development of necessary social emotional skills incorporated into literacy instruction, building a students' foundation both in SEL and literacy simultaneously.

Chapter Four addresses the process that was taken to complete the SEL Literacy Curriculum and reflects upon the creation of the project. It provides the essential learning outcomes of the literature review and the creation of the SEL Literacy Curriculum. Chapter Four also explains how the curriculum is intended to be used in schools and how this research and curriculum can benefit educators. Potential implications and limitations are also addressed. Finally, Chapter Four summarizes next steps for social and emotional learning in literacy.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflection

#### Overview

Social and emotional skills are critical to students' success in school and it is essential that educators have effective tools and strategies to teach these skills. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, CASEL, emphasizes SEL in schools as a necessary element in a child's education and development. Social Emotional Learning is the ability to understand and manage emotions, to set and achieve goals, to feel and show empathy, to develop and maintain healthy relationships, and to make responsible choices (CASEL, 2020). These essential social and emotional competencies can be taught, modeled, and practiced in school leading to positive student outcomes. In my elementary suburban teaching experience, SEL is something that, while I believe is necessary to human development, is often bypassed in academic curricula to meet the high demands of learning standards and expectations. I found that while these skills are often neglected, there are opportunities to teach them through literacy in the classroom. When students relate to characters in literature, they can learn about social and emotional skills. I have often encouraged students to transfer these skills into real life situations and wondered how to guide them to make these connections in a more structured way. This led to the guiding question: *How can teachers effectively teach Social Emotional Learning skills through literacy in the primary grades?*

This chapter provides a reflection of the capstone project. Learning outcomes will be discussed including what was learned throughout the development of the curriculum project. Also, a brief literature review discusses important literature that

supports the topic. Additionally, future implications and limitations are addressed. This chapter also summarizes future possible projects and connections to this project. Also, the benefits that this project provides to the teaching profession are discussed.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Throughout this chapter, I have learned a lot as a researcher, writer, and learner. I learned that while there is a lot of research about literacy teaching and a lot of information about SEL teaching, there is not a lot that of the two topics combined. There are more summaries of SEL teaching programs, but not a lot of specific strategies discussed. There are many SEL programs that claim to be most effective, but I could not find a lot of data about the implementation of the programs into a fully stacked academic curriculum. Most schools and administrators will agree that SEL is essential, but it is not often prioritized by school leaders and teachers.

As a writer, I learned that while I am a strong writer, it is challenging to combine this extent of research into a well-developed plan and a successful curriculum. In my school and work experiences, I have learned that to be an effective communicator, it is imperative to have good writing skills with proper grammar and organization. I feel strong in those elements, but putting it all together in an academic writing piece was more of a challenge. While I have strong writing foundations, it has been a long time since I have completed research or written in APA format. Relearning those academic aspects of writing, along with the updates to digital learning, made me realize that I need to focus on the fundamentals of research as a writer and have confidence in learning in a new way.

As a learner, I learned that there is so much more to being a teacher than simply covering the standards. Teaching the whole child is imperative to developing our future

leaders and helping guide young children into adulthood. When children can learn to navigate their social world, develop a healthy emotional awareness, learn to manage their emotions, and understand positive coping skills, they can be better prepared to learn academically. I know from my experiences that SEL is essential, but doing the research and understanding this in an academically supported way really emphasizes the importance of this topic.

These learnings were not especially unexpected; however, I thought there would be more connections between academic and SEL teaching. I expected that more SEL would be incorporated into teaching already. I did not think this was a novel concept, and expected there would be more to connect literacy to SEL.

### **Literature review**

The most important parts of the literature review for my capstone project were the definitions of SEL, the discussion of the integration of literacy and SEL, as well as the study of dialogic reading.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) created a framework of Five Core Competencies that served as a foundation for my capstone. I focused on these competencies as learning targets in my curriculum. Each competency has several elements that are encompassed in that competency. I chose subtopics within each competency when I chose books that supported the desired learning outcomes for students. The CASEL Five Core Competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020).

Another key element of my research noted that when the teaching of academic subjects is integrated with social-emotional learning strategies, students can further develop academic skills of analytical thinking while also using social skills such as handling disagreements and having constructive conversations (Blad, 2017). Boyles proposed the integration of social-emotional learning to the reading curriculum by reading books and asking questions related to social and emotional problem solving (2018). Furthermore, Doyle & Bramwell (2006) studied dialogic reading to teach emergent literacy and social emotional skills where literacy instruction is provided through a shared reading experience in small groups of students with strategic questioning and responding to children while reading a book. When using dialogic reading strategies with books that have social emotional content, teachers can guide group discussions to focus on the development of key social emotional skills in students. This dialogic reading strategy was adapted to be used in the curriculum development in this project.

Some new connections after completing the project are how to specifically connect the ELA standards and SEL competencies in a meaningful way. Understanding the research in the application of curriculum development helped me keep the fundamentals of each at the heart of the lessons I was creating. Revisiting the CASEL website brought to light some new developments in terms of equity in SEL teaching. Given the racial inequities brought to the forefront in society in Summer 2020, the importance of SEL at an early age has been more apparent. CASEL also adds further commitment to an emphasis on the importance as a means to promote educational equity and excellence. According to updates from CASEL, SEL can help address inequity in

schools and empower young people and adults to contribute to safe, healthy, and just school communities (CASEL, 2020). The research continues to stress how SEL skills can be taught, modeled, and practiced; therefore, leading to positive student outcomes that lay a foundation for success in school and in life.

### **Implications**

Some possible implications of my project include the basic belief that SEL is essential to include in schools. Social Emotional Learning should be more than something checked off the list by administrators or discussed once a month by a school social worker. SEL can and should be incorporated into daily teaching in the classroom to build positive relationships among students, develop healthy emotions, and contribute to a safe and caring classroom community where students and teachers thrive in schools. This project incorporates SEL into literacy, but there are likely many other avenues of incorporating SEL into already existing learning targets. Building teaching opportunities where SEL skills can be aligned with learning standards will offer the ability for teachers to keep SEL in the forefront of their teaching alongside their academic learning goals.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations to my project are the constricts of grade levels. My experience of teaching thus far has been in Kindergarten and First grade, so the emphasis on my project is the early elementary years. Although, the importance of SEL should be included in teaching all grade levels. Because this curriculum is entwined with the learning standards for literacy, the lessons are specific to first grade. I chose first grade, as that is the grade I am currently teaching. I know that the standards are aligned among grade levels and expand in depth as students progress, so the linear nature of the

standards could easily be adapted to this curriculum. But, that would be something that would need to be addressed by teachers in other grades. Also, my focus was on picture books. However, as students are in older grades, there are many great chapter books at advanced reading levels that could focus on SEL skills, as well. I believe there is opportunity for other grades to incorporate SEL into literacy teaching, too.

### **Future Projects**

There are several possible future related projects to grow these findings. Some possible future projects would be to expand the curriculum to include other grade levels. The ELA standards would need to be identified for other grades and books used to teach the standards and SEL skills could also be expanded for older students to be able to better relate. When I created the curriculum, I identified the CASEL Five Core Competencies as the foundation for the SEL learning targets. Also, each competency included 7-9 capacities and examples that further define the fundamentals of those competencies. I chose two areas within these capacities, but the curriculum could be expanded to include more of those elements of each competency. Also, more options of books could be provided for each core competency for follow up and fluency in the area. Additionally, future curricula could be developed to align SEL teaching with other academic areas, such as math, science, social studies, art, music, PE, and more. Incorporating SEL in a variety of ways would keep learning current and emotional health as an important element in a students' emotional growth and development.

I plan to communicate and use these results in my school. I plan to put together a box of books and lesson plans for teachers to use to promote my curriculum in their classrooms. I plan to present my findings and my ideas to my grade level team, initially,

where I will share my lessons, books, and learning targets. I will also present the information to my school principal to share what I have learned with her, as a first step in sharing with the whole school. I will offer to provide staff development to share my learning and my research with other teachers in the K-8 charter school where I teach. I also have connections with teachers in schools where I have worked as a paraprofessional, student taught, and taught as a kindergarten teacher. I plan to reach out to those teachers to share my findings and offer to share my curriculum with them, as well.

### **Benefits to Teaching Profession**

This project will be a benefit to the teaching profession as it provides a practical way to integrate SEL into literacy teaching in an effective way. I believe that teaching all the required curriculum in reading, writing, math, science, and social studies can be overwhelming, especially for new teachers. Offering a way to incorporate SEL into something that teachers are already doing, is a practical and effective way to meet students' needs in a more all-encompassing way.

My lessons also provide detailed plans for teachers to administer with little additional supplemental teaching. I include examples, specific instructions, detailed question prompts, important vocabulary teaching, as well as, effective measures of evidence of learning. The ease of the curriculum implementation will benefit teachers' ability to incorporate these lessons into their teaching.

### **Summary**

From here, I plan to not only continue to learn about the importance of SEL teaching in the classroom, but encourage my fellow teachers to do the same. My research

has cemented the value of SEL in the classroom to me and I will continue to keep updated on current information about the topic while I continue to incorporate SEL in my everyday teaching. Furthermore, I plan to incorporate my curriculum into what I am currently teaching to help my students develop and grow in their emotional health. This is important all the time, but I especially see its value this current school year where students are learning online, less connected to one another, and potentially experiencing additional stressors while distance learning online in 2020 due to a worldwide pandemic.

In addition to the valued research of incorporating SEL learning into a literacy curriculum, this capstone project research also led me to the discovery of an immense amount of wonderful and diverse children's literature that address so many aspects of SEL. I had read and heard many great books before this, but when it came time to choose, I had a hard time narrowing down my selections on which to focus in my lesson plan. I can now further see the importance of a classroom library that contains books available for children to read, be read to, and to explore that teach SEL skills, while they teach and entertain young children. I will continue to explore new books and always add to my collection of classroom books to both read to the students and for the students to read independently. I really enjoyed reviewing the books for the project and am inspired to continue to keep my classroom library fresh, relevant, and interesting to students with books that are diverse and culturally responsive, while they teach literacy and SEL skills, as well. I hope to foster a love of books in my students where they see themselves and learn about others through their reading, while developing both healthy SEL skills and literacy skills.

I dutifully plan to share my capstone with other educators and encourage other teachers to include SEL teaching to build a healthy, safe, and thriving classroom community where students feel loved and connected and where students grow as the whole-child - emotionally, socially, and academically. Not only has my research taught me why SEL is essential to young students, but also I have witnessed this growth in the students I teach. Because of my capstone research and project creation, I know I must share with other teachers how they, too, can effectively teach social emotional learning skills through literacy in the primary grades.

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