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SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING INTEGRATION INTO LANGUAGE ARTS
CLASSROOMS

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Arts in Education.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Capstone

Growing up is hard. I doubt there are many people who would be interested in traveling back in time to relive their adolescent years. It is a constant tangle of emotions and friendships and decision-making. When reflected upon, those early teen years can incite anxiousness in even the most successful post-middle-schoolers. Growing up seems increasingly challenging as our youth navigate it all with the heavy backdrop of social media. Results from surveys through the 2007 Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (as explained in Nutt, 2018, para. 7) found that “five times as many students in 2007 ‘surpassed thresholds’ in more than one mental health category than they did in 1938. Anxiety and depression were six times more common” (para. 7). It has been more than a decade since that survey, and now “nearly a third of all adolescents ages 13 to 18 experience an anxiety disorder” (Nutt, 2018, para. 15).

To combat the rising number of students affected by mental health issues, variations of social-emotional learning— sometimes known as character education, bullying prevention, life skills, and much more have been pulled into the education community. Social workers, school counselors, and teachers have begun to teach and practice development of the whole child— the idea that kids have social and emotional needs that must be met in order to be successful academically. Which leads me to the question, *How can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?*

Throughout this chapter, a clear context and rationale will be established to support the research and study of social-emotional learning within the classroom. This includes an explanation of social-emotional learning and my professional experience with the topic. Additionally, the significance for stakeholders, potential future effects, and many variables for change outcomes are briefly outlined as it relates to the study.

Rationale and Context

As far back as Ancient Greece, the concept of social-emotional learning has been studied. The philosopher Plato suggested that education includes a healthy mix of physical education, arts and sciences, math, and character and moral judgment lessons (as cited in Edutopia, 2011). The concept of teaching the whole child grew with a movement from the 1960s through the 1990s, and became an even stronger force with the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2011. This act “allows funded training to include training in classroom instruction and schoolwide initiatives that enable students to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills most conducive to social and emotional competency” (H.R. 2437, 2011).

Social-emotional learning, referred to as SEL, is quickly becoming an even larger focus in the schools. According to Tate (2019), until a few years ago, social-emotional learning and the development of the whole child was not a driving force in education. As the populations and backgrounds of students in classrooms grow more diverse, how we motivate students and strengthen their wellbeing must be supported by safe and positive learning. The five pillars of social-emotional learning are the core of this safe and

positive learning, and all five develop students' ability to succeed, not only in school, but in all aspects of life.

These pillars— self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision making, show students how to handle any situation that life throws at them. As Weissberg (2016) explained, by learning and using the pillars, students are capable of understanding their emotions and behaviors, realizing others' perspectives and how to connect with others, and make decisions based on this knowledge. This learning connects directly to their educational life as it builds confidence, positive interactions, and productive behaviors.

Frequently, social-emotional learning is implemented in schools through policies and initiatives, like Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (OSEP, 2019), Respect Retreats (Youth Frontiers, 2019), and school wide celebrations. Our students receive weekly half-hour lessons on an SEL topic. These lessons are often unrelated to any new learning from the week and feel very disconnected. Yet, all of these practices throughout the school year do not seem to have the desired effect. Our school wants students to take these pillars and apply them to all aspects of their lives, but instead, we are seeing disengaged behaviors whenever social-emotional learning comes into play.

This last year, one of our school counselors discussed the possibility of integrating the pillars of SEL into my project-based learning course. I have been developing this course on my own for the past two years without the SEL component as a way to practice real-world applications of collaboration and presentation. Since this is the only course of its kind in our building, it seemed simple to match PBL to SEL, and even easier to pair

the English standards to the SEL pillar standards. This way, we could make decisions within our small team of two and adjust many aspects of the class as we saw necessary. The goal was to incorporate lessons reflecting on personal choices, others' choices, teamwork and relationship building, journaling, and time management where it fits with the standards and topics, rather than randomly throughout the year. Both students and parents have seen positive changes in the behaviors of the students. However, I would like to create even more authentic lessons, as some of the work we do is slightly ambiguous and it often does not seem sufficient.

Social-emotional learning is professionally significant to me and my colleagues. Important life skills are learned, practiced, and discussed when purposefully focusing on SEL. All students, especially middle school students, could benefit from support in academic, mental, and social achievement, which are all included in SEL learning. Since the introduction of our project-based, social-emotional learning course, we've been able to use this class as an intervention for some students this year. With more SEL integration in the class as it continues to grow and evolve, hopefully the stronger the curriculum becomes and support it can provide more support to students.

Since I am co-teaching the sixth grade piloted-English class with one of our school counselors, I am able to use social-emotional learning to impact student success. Within this class, we have tried to integrate the pillars into the English curriculum genuinely, rather than random lessons that feel piecemeal implemented and disconnected. Although this previous year has been a pilot of this class, after several surveys and data points have been shared with our administrators, we have been authorized to continue

offering this course for the 2020-2021 school year. As “social-emotional learning” is included in the title of the class, it is easy for us to influence this topic. We will be able to develop a plan and effectively integrate social-emotional learning authentically into the classroom.

Ideally, after conducting research to discover unique ways to incorporate social-emotional learning, it will inform future action in the classroom, and potentially the entire school. The main goal would be to have positive impacts within the sixth grade English classroom, where students are presented with further real-life and engaging opportunities to grow and succeed through the five pillars.

With that success, the curriculum design could be adopted and implemented in more sections of sixth grade. This way, more students would receive direct instruction to develop themselves in a healthy and supported manner. Another potential opportunity would be to use the knowledge gained through the curriculum development to develop the class through the next grade level and beyond. Almost as a ranked understanding of the concepts within social-emotional learning, moving a group of students from sixth grade to seventh grade language arts while continuing to work on the skills could invite many more options for personal growth.

The middle school as a whole could also benefit in the future from social-emotional curriculum within their language arts class. The class could be used as a targeted service. Reaching students who need further assistance in developing behavior or social-emotional skills could be considered a legitimate tier two-level intervention. It would not work for every student though, as the core classes are locked in for the entire

year. Additionally, the class could be used as a model to integrate into other content areas, like social studies, science, or math. This way, the main pillars would be more authentic in the English classroom than previously, and students would come to realize that the pillars apply to every situation in their lives.

Of course, there would be possible variables in investigating how to integrate social-emotional learning authentically into the classroom. Within the physical classroom, the make-up of the students randomly or purposefully selected to participate in the class makes a difference in the outcomes. This make-up can include the ability levels and maturity of individual students or the group as a whole, as well as their backgrounds and life experiences.

As for planning and preparation, variables of integration may include challenges of blending or connecting the social-emotional pillars directly with the language arts state standards or prescribed district initiatives. It can be difficult to connect relationship skills to individual standardized test-taking, or self-awareness to grammar lessons. As both of the co-teachers also have other classes or duties to attend, the commitment of either teacher to the class could play into the success of the research and application. As this is another class to prep for during the day, it may not receive the full focus or attention needed to fully apply social-emotional learning to the lesson or unit.

One final set of variables would be access and support from the administration. Without building or district approval, it would be impossible to move forward with the basis of the class, thus leaving no ability to study integrated social-emotional learning. There may come a time where it is necessary to request access to resources and time to

build knowledge and combine pillars and standards. Without being provided certain resources or time, further development of a social-emotional language arts class would come to a halt. There has to be access to materials and learning to be able to move forward in any process.

With any research and application, many variables may change the outcomes or direct the exploration in a certain way. However, regardless of these various parameters, ideally the final results will inform future action to continue the cyclical pattern of developing a plan, collecting, analyzing and interpreting data, and putting the outcomes to practice.

Summary

Within Chapter One, the rationale and context behind social-emotional learning in the classroom were delineated. It is necessary to understand the definition of social-emotional learning to understand why it is necessary to incorporate it into our everyday teaching. When thinking about *how social-emotional learning can be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom*, it is important to reflect on purposes and potential challenges during the research process. I have already had some professional experience during the 2019-2020 school year but that experience has urged me to discover more ways to develop the whole child in my own classroom.

Adding this curriculum to my established practice can benefit many stakeholders, including students, families, and interested staff. The integration of social-emotional learning will undoubtedly have outcomes, whether positive or negative. Either way, other English classes, other grades, or other content areas could use the findings from the study

to merge the five pillars into their own classes. Of course, there are many variables that many affect the outcome of the study, which can be confronted further as the need arises.

In the coming chapters, the capstone study and project will be further explained and researched. Chapter Two, the literature review, provides an overview of researched and published works from experts in the field. Following, Chapter Three, the project description, gives a detailed description of the research and project. Lastly, Chapter Four will be an explanation of the conclusions determined from the research study.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

As social-emotional learning continues an upward trend in education, schools are looking deeper into ways to “create learning environments for students that help them excel as global citizens, think creatively and collaboratively, and reflect on situations and make iterative adjustments as needed” (Thorson, 2018, para. 1). However, integrating any new curriculum or type of learning is complex and requires a detailed investigation into many facets of education. Part of that investigation involves using research-based information to create informed decisions about choices best for each district or building.

The focus of Chapter Two is to explore and examine expert research to support and to answer the research question, *How can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?* The research will help to inform and provide a dissection of current inquiry by professionals centered around social-emotional learning, referenced as SEL.

Throughout this chapter, six conceptual themes will be explored as a way to understand the overall issue of social-emotional integration. In order to successfully teach social-emotional learning, educators need training, which will be the first topic examined in Chapter Two. This examination includes the purpose of training, pre-service teacher opportunities, using social-emotional learning in the school setting, and also how teachers can be supported throughout their training by the school district. The second section details social-emotional learning in the middle school setting, which reinforces the research question through recurring practices, school-based programs to use for

integration, and other types of curriculum that can be easily partnered with social-emotional learning.

Third, after exploring middle school integration, the purposes of integration in English-language arts content areas will continue to encourage social-emotional learning. The correlation between SEL and the Common Core State Standards will be surveyed to confirm academic performance, and social-emotional activities for general language arts education as well as specific literacy education will be explored. To continue with social-emotional activities, the fourth section provides some suggestions for further research-based practices, including stress-management, community engagement, cooperative learning, and meditation.

Just as academic work in schools needs to be assessed, social-emotional work does as well, which is the focus of section five. During that section, challenges of social-emotional assessments will be addressed, and followed by specific options and tools for assessment that have demonstrated success through research. Parents and guardians have a role in supporting social-emotional learning at home after the school day is through. This topic will be the final focus of the literature review, where steps for schools to assist parents are outlined, as well as specific resources for parents at home.

Throughout the investigation of these important themes, ideally the research will explain and reinforce the guiding question of the entire focus: *how can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?*

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

In order to feel prepared as a teacher, educators need to have proper training. Although content area instruction is vital, it is also necessary that teachers have an understanding of other material as well, including time management, classroom control, and social-emotional learning. As the topic of social-emotional learning becomes more widely addressed in school, teachers should receive thorough training. The first part of this section will focus on the importance and reasons for educator instruction. Secondly, examples of how social-emotional learning can be taught through preservice internships will be described. Following that, purposes of teaching social-emotional learning in schools will be explored. Lastly, this section will explain ways that districts can help teachers demonstrate growth and support peers within their classrooms.

Importance of Teacher Instruction

Being an educator is such a large task. Not only do teachers need to know the content in which they teach, they need to have an inherent ability to connect and be a constant role model to other humans, to quickly problem solve and adjust plans at a moments notice, and reflect carefully on hourly, daily, weekly, and yearly lesson plans, delivery methods, interactions, and so much more. Often, these extra educator responsibilities are not taught during the undergraduate education phase of teaching. These are just some of the skills that can make or break a teacher, especially those new to the classroom. Teachers can benefit from so many supports to learn how to work with the additional challenges of education. Beltman et al. (2011) suggested that these supports

could be anything from administrative, mentor, peer support, or a successful pre-service program with proper training.

The same training can be deemed necessary to successfully integrate social-emotional learning into the classroom. “Teachers are tasked with implementing new social-emotional learning practices without adequate, ongoing support, which can tank the effectiveness of the initiative” (Will, 2020, p. 19). One way to combat that is to provide social-emotional training during teacher preparation programs. Providing training for social-emotional learning in these programs builds “emotional resilience” (Donahue-Keegan et al., 2019, p. 153) in teachers and can strengthen their skills within the five pillars— self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship management. Through social-emotional training, preservice teachers can “continually develop their abilities to recognize, manage, and respond to difficult emotions” (p. 153) Because after all, Pamela Lathrop, a principal in Andover Massachusetts explained, "Anytime you want teachers to have a change or have an effect on kids, you have to also recognize teachers need to have that experience within themselves" (cited in Will, 2020, p. 19).

Pre-service Internships with Social-Emotional Learning

In 2019, Marianne D’Emidio-Caston conducted a case study of best practices from a Californian preservice teacher internship focused on “social-emotional development as the foundation for academic learning” (D’Emidio-Caston, 2019, p. 129) Within this internship, to-be teachers were provided with an opportunity to see equal value in social-emotional learning and academics. The student teachers were provided

with intentional placements, where SEL was integrated autonomously into the curriculum. The cooperating teachers within these placements have worked with SEL implementation and were a guiding resource. In the program, the cooperating teachers also had the opportunity to collaborate with their SEL teaching peers as a form of support. The student teachers also received the same peer support through weekly small group discussions and reflections. Additionally, all lesson plans were expected to contain an explanation of how the children may respond or internalize the lesson, the differences in the logical and the emotional development through the lesson, and “the social expectations of the lesson” (p. 132).

Besides the expected in-classroom internship, the Californian program also offered evening classes for pre-service teachers to build further understanding of the roles of social-emotional learning within the school setting. Courses offered during the evenings include Conflict Resolution and Mediation— a course designed to be “highly self-reflective” and an “[orientation for] candidates to the entire program philosophy and pedagogical approach” (p. 134). Another social-emotional course included Resilience Education and the School Community. Here, learners explore building empathy and creating connections for the more demanding students.

One requirement for student teachers to successfully complete the program are three assignments, a Sociogram, and Caring Learning Community Plan, and Who Lives Here, as explained by D’Emidio (2019). In each of these assignments, the teacher uses the five pillars and their own SEL skills to explore the students they work with. In the first assignment, they must create a map of the classroom dynamics using assumptions,

then data to explore the makeup of the class. Through the Caring Learning Community Plans, the student teacher builds a plan for positive classroom climate management, not just focusing on behaviors. Finally, the Who Lives With Me assignment, provides the student teacher with an understanding of each of their students' backgrounds and personal lives, to avoid any assumptions about the class as a whole.

As explained in D'Emidio-Caston's research:

We cannot generalize to any larger population of teacher education programs from this study, we can gain insight into how a program that promotes SEL is implemented. We have dense descriptive data of the strategies most useful to achieving the caring learning community as an effective social-emotional intervention. (p. 139)

Preservice training gives those interested in education an opportunity to witness and interact with social-emotional learning in an actual classroom. This way, when they are in their own schools, they are more likely and able to incorporate SEL practices effectively.

Teaching Social-Emotional Learning in Schools

Providing instruction and personal application support gives educators the ability to understand and practice their own skills, which in turn allows them to use their knowledge to teach social-emotional skills within the classroom. From quality social-emotional training, teachers can more effectively build relationships and trust, teach active listening, offer choice within learning, and know and make use of students' strengths (D'Emidio-Caston, 2019). By incorporating these assets and connections into everyday learning, a stronger community and learning environment is formed.

With the social-emotional skills learned in professional development, teachers can build their students' skills as well. According to the California Department of Education, teachers can guide students to “set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and understand and manage emotions” (as cited in D’Emidio-Caston, 2019, p. 119).

The use of authentic social-emotional learning in schools has proven to be a useful practice as a way to meet all students where they are at regardless of their backgrounds (Donahue et al., 2019). Rather than working with the assumption that all students academically and emotionally learn the same way, providing teachers with a social-emotional framework sets the stage for more unbiased and accessible learning, which in turn creates healthier learning communities where all students can feel successful at school.

District Support

Like any extended education, quality professional development or teacher training is not always affordable. Districts do not have the funds to provide extensive training for all staff to be proficient in social-emotional learning. However, there are ways to create a positive social-emotional learning district or school building environment without breaking the district's bank.

One district in Texas hired SEL coaches to work with teachers and administrators through learning sessions, observations and feedback, and data discussions (Will, 2020, para. 10). Having expert SEL coaches available for teachers who are looking for immediate support provides a sense of reinforcement and makes teachers more willing to

continually implement social-emotional activities and lessons. According to Will (2020), another large school district near Boston, Massachusetts, sent teachers from each of their ten schools to a ten-day training program. These teachers then were able to use their new knowledge to apply social-emotional lessons in their classrooms. Additionally, many of the teachers who had attended the training were becoming certified social-emotional learning coaches to support their colleagues.

No person is inherently good at a skill. They may have some talent within that skill, but in order to be the best they can, it takes practice. In order for teachers to be the best they can at authentically integrating social-emotional learning into their classrooms, they need practice. Presenting educators with learning opportunities as pre-service teachers and with district support can provide that practice needed to ensure positive SEL implementation. However, professional development and practice is not the only key to a thriving social-emotional community. The age and ability level of the students needs to be taken into account.

Use of Social-Emotional Learning in a Middle School Setting

Although it is generally understood that social-emotional learning plays a vital part in growing up, there has yet to be one clear way to implement the practice in everyday teaching and learning. There is a greater research focus on this type of learning within elementary schools, but less is shared about secondary level practices. This can make it challenging as a middle grade teacher to find support for authentic SEL applications. In this section, the initial focus will be on the lasting effects and need for regular, recurring social-emotional learning practices. Next, “one-size-fits-all”

school-wide programs in the middle schools and the successes and failures within those will be explored. The final subject of this section will be on pairing SEL with Project-Based Learning and Service Learning, two modes of instruction that assist with authentically integrating SEL into secondary classrooms.

Lasting Effects of Recurring Practices

Implementing social-emotional learning into classrooms and districts is a lot like growing a garden. When planting the seeds, the gardener knows full well that the product of the seed will not appear overnight. Plants need sunlight, water, and nutrients to grow and without careful tending, the gardener will not see the desired results. SEL practices also need careful tending. According to Hoffman (2017), social-emotional skills of students grow the most successfully with continual consideration and care.

In the middle schools, social-emotional programs can produce more engaging interactions between peers, as well as staff and students. As middle school is often seen at the time for social development, these programs provide greater opportunities for students to see their social needs met through cooperative learning and exploration. Within a span of eight months after incorporating SEL into the classrooms, teachers and students in one district saw an increase in positive emotional climates, positive student behaviors, and student perspective integration into the curriculum (Rivers et al., 2013).

However, if the ongoing attention to social-emotional learning in schools begins to decline, the effects are visible. After five constructive weeks of SEL implementation into a middle school, Bundy (2019) saw higher levels of emotional self-identification and positive relationship-building with her students. When the school followed the five weeks

with a four-week hiatus from social-emotional lessons, she noticed the students reverting back to surface-level engagement (Bundy, 2019, pp.8-9). Social-emotional administration into the schools does not need to be a full-scale, over-the-top ordeal. “Small and seemingly minor changes can produce profound and lasting results as children are exposed to SEL in their daily lives, especially over a period of years” (Hoffman, 2017, p. 50). What is important is that best practices for social-emotional learning are incorporated on a regular basis to see the greatest effects.

School-Based Programs

A simple way to ensure that students are getting constant exposure to social-emotional learning is through school-based programs. As Hoffman (2017) explained, schools will have the most success with SEL implementation if there is a joint decision on a schoolwide curriculum throughout the building. There are a variety of curriculums available, ranging from direct instruction focused on the five social-emotional pillars to individual lessons for creating a “positive school culture and climate” (Wallender, 2020, p. 35). Any of these curriculums can help teachers create student-centered responsibilities and choices with high expectations, a supportive classroom environment, and routines and discipline geared toward students (Yoder, 2014). Like mentioned earlier, regardless of the program, it can take an ample amount of time to receive the desired results of social-emotional learning. Hoffman (2017) estimated schools should be dedicated to the work, as it can take three to five years for successful implementation. Three to five years can seem like a daunting amount of time, and may hinder staff participation. However, according to Frezza (2018), through SEL

practices, students are happier and more attentive. This can help teachers feel value in SEL methods as students are their best selves. Plus teachers have reported a positive impact on their own emotional states, organizational systems, and attentiveness.

Just because schoolwide implementation of social-emotional learning may require some serious dedication, that does not mean it is not worth putting forth an effort. There are multiple ways to incorporate SEL learning into the building. Elias (2019) outlined four different basic program options for schools to consider, including “short effective practices— brief strategies; curriculum-based SEL programs— evidence based practices; whole—school SEL approaches— pre-developed curriculum and routines; and climate and character approaches— setting norms and expectations” (p. 237). All four options are not individual from another, and work together to create a positive space for students to develop their social-emotional skills.

One program option, *Self Science*, included parts from short effective practices and climate and character approaches. A study in 2001 of *Self Science* found that:

100% of the teachers surveyed agreed that Self Science improved classroom relationships and cooperation. Additionally, 92% of teachers saw improvements in student focus, attention, and student-teacher relationships. Improved student learning, enhanced collaborative work, fewer verbal put-downs, and more positive verbal statements were also positively associated. (Hoffman, 2017, p. 48)

Another program, *Second Step*, supports middle school educators in teaching self-regulation, social skills, and problem-solving skills (Wallender, 2020). With a variety of

program options, schools can take the time to meet students' needs with the best schoolwide approach.

However, these one-size-fits-all programs are not always successful. One study in Sweden found that students, especially those in middle school where it can be a challenge to justify learning as it relates to oneself, do not always accept the curriculum (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). Survey results from the 2020 study show that kids saw the schoolwide social-emotional curriculum implementation as predictable and structured, and reported not wanting to share personal experiences with classmates.

Another issue with schoolwide programs is the rigidity and lack of cultural context. Zakrzewski (2016) explored in the article, *Why Don't Students Take Social-Emotional Learning Home?*, that some of the practices within programs are developed to reflect Western culture, and do not take into account children's backgrounds and home experiences, where things like emotion management may look different. For example, certain cultures celebrate emotional articulation of an individual, where other cultures encourage humility and emotional reserve. When selecting a social-emotional learning plan, schools must consider a "flexible and reciprocal relationship with the school and the community" (Zakrzewski, 2016, para. 15).

Pairing Curriculums

As Hoffman (2017) explained, "Academic achievement is the business of schools; however, the foundation for which all academic growth happens is the essence of providing a nurturing, supporting, caring, and emotionally safe environment" (p. 81). This must be taken into consideration when pairing social-emotional learning with

academic curriculum in the middle schools. Two ways to build academic achievement while building a safe learning environment is through Project Based Learning and Service Learning.

According to the Buck Institute of Education (2020) site, in Project Based Learning, students learn by “actively engaging in real-world and personally meaningful projects.” By connecting social and academic outcomes to real-world projects, students are more likely to feel motivated to set and achieve goals (Chung & McBride, 2015). Learning through activities that are personally relevant and support self-awareness and management, relationship skills and social awareness, and responsible decision-making increase opportunities for students to “define their identity and importance” (p. 192).

Service learning is experiences that have an explicit student learning focus and is integrated with an equally fundamental community focus (Bringle et al., 2013). Pairing service learning with social-emotional learning is a way for students to practice their social-emotional skill set while working within their community. This type of learning may have lifelong positive effects. Studies have shown that students who participate in service learning make large gains in self-esteem, academic ability, civic engagement, while reducing undesirable behaviors, like drug and alcohol use (Chung & McBride, 2015).

Just like growing a garden, schools must tend to student needs through implementation of social-emotional learning practices. Although it may take schools time to yield the desired outcomes, middle school students have shown to make social and academic gains from these programs. As long as social-emotional learning continues to

be attended to while considering student backgrounds and needs, teachers can work toward applying SEL to their specific content-area curriculum, such as English-language arts.

Strategies in the English-Language Arts Classroom

The English-language arts content area is unique in that any other subject can be taught through the main components of the curriculum. These areas— reading, writing, language, and speaking and listening— lend themselves to endless topics, anything from historical time periods and current events to geography or health practices. Because of this, one of the most logical places to teach and practice social-emotional learning is in the English classroom. To justify these practices in language arts, the first part of this section will demonstrate the correlation between SEL and the Common Core State Standards, as well as the effectiveness of SEL on academic performance. The following section will outline research-based language arts activities. Finally, the focus will be on the importance of social-emotional learning practices paired with specific literature and literacy application.

SEL, CCSS, and Academic Performance

In the About the Standards section of the Common Core State Standards website, “the standards that define the knowledge and skills students should gain throughout their K-12 education” (2020, para. 2) These standards drive what is taught to all students in math and language arts. It may seem that Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are the only things society should expect taught in schools, but academics are not the only outcome of education. Students spend at least thirteen years of their lives in classrooms

learning not only the pythagorean theorem or the types of persuasion, but also how to be a contributing member of society, work collaboratively with people of similar and different backgrounds, or develop and follow through with goal-setting. According to Elias (2014), in order to be prepared for life after school, students must be able to support and challenge their own and others' ideas, understand and analyze their thought processes, work through challenges and build versatility and determination, and strive for independence and integrity. All these practices fall under the social-emotional skills category.

Although CCSS does not specifically list these skills as requirements for proficiency before high school or grade-level graduation, the standards actually introduce ways to incorporate social-emotional learning into the language arts curriculum. In the opinion of Elias (2014), some standards call for students to become deeply immersed in intricate texts, understand and make inferences about vocabulary meaning, or to engage in discussions about content with peers and adults. These may be academic expectations, but these tasks build social-emotional competencies. By completing the standards, students learn to resolve conflict through discussions, and recognize and manage emotions such as, "stress, anxiety, frustration, and disappointment" (Elias, 2014, p. 60). It guides students to self-regulate by sustaining focus for long periods of time, problem solving through inferring, and perspective taking during discussions or through authors' works and characters' lives and experiences.

Studies have shown that implementing SEL as a partner in academia can build student achievement at least "10 percentile-point gains on standardized tests" (Durlak et

al., 2011, p. 417). Despite that fact, it can still be a challenge to see the benefits of integrating social-emotional learning into the CCSS. Concepts like emotional vocabulary can demonstrate the need. Simple terms— mad, sad, happy— often do not provide an understanding of the true feelings (Elias, 2014). Vocabulary inferences and practice for students can help them navigate their own and others' feelings in writing, reading, or self-reflection, where mad becomes flummoxed, and happy is the more intense feeling of elated. Being able to discern between terms builds self-awareness, relationship skills, and provides vocabulary practice. This is just one example of matching social-emotional learning to the Common Core State Standards and the language arts curriculum.

Research-Based Social-Emotional and Language Arts Activities

There are many other ways to teach social-emotional skills during English class. Uncomplicated systems within the classroom, like flexible grouping, can be a quick way to integrate social-emotional learning. In flexible grouping, teachers create student teams of various sizes and ability-levels depending on the task. When Marlatt (2020) incorporated flexible grouping into his classroom, he noticed that “These multiple combinations of learners allowed for further strengthening of the classroom community and encouraged students to adopt a range of roles and responsibilities in different contexts” (p. 47).

Other activities include allowing students to skip answers, meaning if they are not feeling confident in a question, they can pass on a response with the understanding that they will be called on again later (Marlatt, 2020). By doing this, those participating are creating and reaching small academic goals by being actively engaged. The Feeling Word

Curriculum, another vocabulary-focused educational program, focuses on connecting the emotional connotations of words to “personal experiences, academic materials, and current events” (Hagelskamp et al., 2013, p. 3). A word like “alienated,” is demonstrated visually, practiced through oral discussions and written work, and examined as related to emotion management.

Mission Mondays, as explained by Marlatt (2020), “advocates for positive school culture through multiple channels...designed to steer our collective efforts toward establishing schools that are supportive and nurturing for students” (p. 45). On Mondays, students receive a new “mission,” a goal to accomplish for the week that applies social-emotional learning and are simple ways for teachers to use social-emotional learning without a schoolwide program. These can be pre-planned missions like sharing something that made you smile, or self-guided missions like making a new friend. Students then journal about their experiences with the mission to continue reflecting on the social-emotional skill while also practicing sustained writing.

This weekly activity builds “trust and collaboration” within the class community, and brings students together outside of the classroom (p. 47). Mission Mondays would work within a language arts course to support the Common Core State Standards of speaking and listening through class or one-on-one discussions, or specific missions. It could also provide an opportunity to practice writing standards through reflection.

Social-Emotional Learning and Literacy

There are many ways to engage students through the language arts content, and one of the strongest ways may be through literacy. Books, both fiction and nonfiction,

welcome readers into worlds where they can identify and empathize (a social-emotional skill) with characters and stories. All five social-emotional pillars can be addressed in reading, from understanding perspectives, appreciating diversity, setting goals, reflecting, and social engagement. One way to build engagement with literacy while collaboratively practicing social-emotional skills is through book clubs. As Marlatt (2020) explained, “book clubs capitalize on SEL by leveraging classroom community toward recreational literacy” (p. 48). In his book club, he and his students arranged reading activities to accompany their books- themed snacks, costumes, and movie nights with families and other community members. Although these may seem just like fun and different ways to look at books, it is also using several social-emotional skills. Students are building social skills, developing a community connection, and understanding personal strengths and weaknesses.

Danifo and Valdez (2019) used a program created by the Pennsylvania Humanities Council to encourage literacy and social development called the Teen Reading Lounge. This program is similar to book clubs, but involves even more student interaction. Kids work together to determine the featured text read by participants, have both scheduled and informal dialogues to analyze the reading, and then use the issues discussed in the dialogue to create a hands-on project “incorporating community engagement or volunteer components” (Danifo & Valdez, 2019, p. 27). The students create the agenda for the entire text, with adult guidance, and in turn are creating leadership skills. Some issues explored in the Teen Reading Lounge include immigration, navigating tragedy, and gun violence.

Because the content in language arts lends itself to social and emotional discovery, it only makes sense to couple it with social-emotional learning. “In addition to boosting academics, SEL programs intend to teach students the broad range of skills needed to cultivate quality relationships, and be psychologically and physically healthy” (Hagelskamp, 2013, p. 541). SEL language arts curriculum development requires careful analysis and coordination with the language arts Common Core State Standards, is easily integrated into the curriculum, and encourages literacy and collaboration. There are many other opportunities to incorporate social-emotional practices within the school day that can work for other disciplines as well.

Further Research-Based Practices

Because social-emotional learning encompasses five pillars— self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making, which further encompass many smaller topics, there are lots of different ways to approach SEL learning. Since every classroom and curriculum varies, not every task or approach that has been studied fits with teacher needs. This section will center solely on research-based social-emotional learning strategies and activities, ranging from stress-management, community building, cooperative learning, and meditation. However, it is understood that the practices outlined in this section are not the only available, and can be adjusted to classroom necessity.

Stress Management

Everyone has some level of stress in their lives. Stress can take a toll on the physical, mental, and emotional state of a person. One social-emotional pillar,

self-management, focuses on being able to successfully manage stress or stressful situations. Collaborating with students to develop strategies for stress management is a key practice within social-emotional learning.

Sprenger (2019), a seventh grade teacher, devised a way to generate stress management through a relationship breakup letter. This letter introduces stress monitoring and control to students by identifying and writing their own breakup letter to their personal stressors. Throughout the school year, Sprenger continually discussed stress management with her students and they collaborated on other in-class and outside of school strategies, including journaling, breathing exercises, verbal discussions, and both quiet and active spots within the classroom. The self-management of stress management can begin to help students realize their own stressors and how to handle stressful situations.

Meditation

Another way to work on the self-management and self-awareness pillars is through meditation in the classroom. Meditation supports stress management, coping skills, and resilience (Valosek et al., 2019, p. 111). In the school, 101 sixth-grade students participated in a study to measure success of a classroom meditation program called “Transcendental Meditation” (TM).

Half of the students took part in meditation practices during the school day, and the other half remained the control group. Those that partook completed teacher-supervised ten minutes of meditation at the beginning and end of each day and were encouraged to continue the practice at home. As explained by Valosek et al. (2019),

to accurately instruct students in the TM work, they completed a seven-step course over five sessions that included check-ins to verify correctness.

All students completed pre and post surveys and teachers worked through many data-driven student analyses to measure the effectiveness of the meditation practices. According to Valosek et al. (2019), the students who participated in the meditation made huge gains in social-emotional competency measures and students “have shown reductions in negative school behavior, improved academic achievement, and higher graduation rates and lower school dropout” (p. 116). Meditation in the school day has proven to be a valuable tool for students, and “policy makers and educators are encouraged to contribute to the healthy development of children by supporting” these practices (p. 117).

Community Building

To practice the pillars of social-awareness and relationship skills, community building is a way to create a sense of community with individuals in the classroom. Ice breakers allow students to “get acquainted and begin conversations, relieve inhibitions or tensions between people, allowing those involved to build trust with and feel more open to one another” (Chlup & Collins, 2010, p. 34).

Dressel (2020) described using various icebreakers to help students build relationships and practice social-emotional skills. These ice breakers can be used throughout the year depending on the comfort level of the class. High-Fives might work well starting in the early school year, where students find a partner within the classroom to high-five in a directed manner (low-five, elbow-five, etc.). They share a fact about

themselves and continue on to become acquainted with classmates and find a working partner. The Toilet Paper Game is a quick way for classmates to learn about each other as students rip off squares from a toilet paper roll and share one thing about themselves to the class for every square they have. Icebreakers “create an inclusive and safe environment that students want to learn and participate in” (Dressel, 2020, para. 12). There are many more icebreakers available to engage students at the beginning of the year, and as mentioned before, using icebreakers as recurring practices reinforces relationships.

Cooperative Learning

Speaking and listening are necessary proficiencies for all people and can be learned through pillar practices in self-management and relationship skills. Within any classroom, cooperative learning skills can be sharpened through several practices. According to the Classroom Resources and Teaching Strategies section of the Teaching Tolerance website (n.d.), using Critical Listening Guides in classrooms allows students to gather meaning from class texts. During this plan, students listen and/or watch a text three separate times, first for “initial reactions.” Then again, students listen using a critical listening guide to identify different points like context— the speaker’s identity; audience—the speaker’s assumptions about the readers; purpose— the speaker’s relevant and sound reasoning; values—the speaker’s values being communicated; and style— the tone of the author.

Additionally, Teaching Tolerance (n.d.) suggested using Four Perspectives as another social-emotional cooperative learning strategy. This involves finding a text that

can support the four anti-bias topics of identity, diversity, justice, and action. From there, students work with the text after reading it by looking at specific excerpts and defending the anti-bias standpoint or holding discussions with text-dependent questions. This practice encourages interaction and “positive identity development, prejudice reduction, social justice, and collective action in ways that are relevant to teaching and learning” (Teaching Tolerance, n.d., para. 3).

To further create a cooperative learning setting in the classroom, teachers can guide students through student-centered discipline, classroom discussions, and balanced instruction (Yoder, 2014). Through speaking and listening, students take part in deciding acceptable routines and behaviors for the class. This way students take ownership of their class responsibilities. In classroom discussions, “teachers ask more open-ended questions and ask students to elaborate on their own thinking and on the thinking of their peers” (p. 14). This practice inspires students to actively listen to their peers comments and questions. Balance instruction refers to providing multiple modes of instruction and learning throughout the day, through options like large-group, individual work, games, and projects. Students may also be provided choice in learning modes. Having balanced instruction allows students to “learn and engage with the content” in ways that work best for them (p. 16).

The stress management, meditation, community building, and cooperative learning practices explained above are just some of the many options of research-based SEL for any classroom instruction. Taking time to integrate these practices into the classroom and content area has been shown to generate positive self-awareness,

self-management, social awareness, relationship, and responsible decision-making skills (Dressel, 2020; Sprenger, 2019; Valosek, 2019; Yoder, 2014). Social-emotional learning practices should be as inherent in a classroom routine as content, classroom expectations, or assessments.

Social-Emotional Assessment

Assessing and grading certain content areas is more challenging than others. This is because subjects that fall into the humanities category— languages, literature, art, etc. can be very subjective since there may be more than one correct answer. It can also be difficult to assess growth in areas where not all those being assessed have the same outcome. This can be seen especially in the pillars of social-emotional learning.

For example, one student has shown huge strides in the area of goal setting, while another student has also made gains, although smaller. Is it fair to assess the students on the same scale? Both students continued to grow in one area, even though they didn't have matching growth. For teachers, assessing SEL can be a very big undertaking. In this section, two topics will be the main focus. First, the many challenges to assessing SEL will be explored, followed by an explanation of several different research-based assessment approaches and tools. Although one clear and concise measurement tool would be more convenient and practical, there are numerous options available to assess the various SEL development and capabilities.

Assessment Challenges

Much work has been done within the social-emotional environment in the last several decades, but “relatively little work has focused on the assessment of student

social and emotional competencies” (McKown, 2019, p. 206). It is much simpler to assess objective items as there are usually clear correct answers, like math problems. Social-emotional learning is more subjective, as it relates to personal feelings and opinions. This creates a large challenge for assessment developers to create equitable measures for SEL growth.

The challenge has not deterred assessment progress and there has been a variety of assessments created and tested. Yet still, these evaluations are not totally perfected assessments; they can often be inconsistent, inaccurate, and many scores do not correlate over different tests (Abrahams et al., 2019). These issues should not deter educators from incorporating social-emotional learning into the curriculum. More funding and field-testing are being supported by programs and companies such as the Institute of Education Sciences (McKown, 2019). Because of this, there is greater growth of inventive ways to measure SEL, which in turn demonstrates there may be more options or assessments for educators.

Krachman et al. detailed in a 2018 report that there are several tasks that educators and districts can perform until there are more defined and consistent assessments available. The first step is to create district-wide social-emotional learning plans and “conduct needs assessments around SEL” (p. 33). Districts should try survey-based assessments and continue to evaluate data based on adjustments within instruction. Next, schools should add or edit current student, staff, and community surveys, like school climate or engagement surveys, to include SEL components to gather further information on current and future practices. Finally, Krachman et al. (2018)

suggests continually using formative assessments to determine successful practices for developing students' competencies can increase the efficiency and time for teachers to incorporate curriculum changes.

While developers continue to work toward dependable assessments, there are actions that can be taken to ensure quality outcomes. As McKown (2019) outlined, there should initially be equal developer and user contributions. Since the user, mostly school professionals, will be the ones adopting the assessment, they should be able to voice their opinions, aspirations, and concerns. Following user input, developers should use data from surveys and feedback to interpret and adjust assessments. Finally, both developers and users need to complete professional development to understand the potential and ability of the assessment as well as how it aligns with coordinating standards.

Assessment Approaches and Tools

While new assessment tools and approaches continue to be established, there are plenty of social-emotional assessments already available. All types of assessments have challenges and opportunities, and depending on the need of the user, some versions may work better than others. Abrahams et al. (2019) briefly delineated several assessment styles to measure SEL by both staff and students. The first of these styles is the forced choice method, similar to ranking questions. Surveyors are less likely to be dishonest in answering questions, as there are no biases presented. The downside to this method is it can be challenging to score since there are many combinations of answers. Likert scales are another common form of assessment. These are often "presented with numbers or generic labels as scale anchors (e.g., 'fully disagree,' 'disagree,' 'agree,' or 'fully

agree’)' (p. 466). Likert scales create a clear outline of the skill expectations, making it straightforward to self-assess. Since some of the labels automatically have negative connotations, unfortunately those taking the assessment are more likely to present false information to avoid bias.

Ambulatory assessments, as Abrahams et al. (2019) explained, are recurring self-reports about “current feelings, thoughts, or behaviors as they are experienced in their everyday environment” (p. 466). Students are able to identify their own social-emotional competencies as they change depending on the current situation and they are not hindered by trying to recall specifics of previous experiences. Regrettably, ambulatory assessments are time-consuming and often users put in less effort as time goes on. This can make it hard to gauge success over a long period of time. Another quick self-assessment option is Situational Judgement Tests, or SJT, where participants are “provided with a set of hypothetical scenarios accompanied by several plausible courses of action. ...Test-takers are asked to rank or rate the varying responses according to their appropriateness in that situation” (p. 467). As the responses may be a personal opinion, SJT shows clearly how respondents understand situations, but it is not an appropriate assessment for every situation since it is attitude-based and cannot always judge specific types of social-emotional practices.

One additional SEL assessment outlined by Abrahams et al. (2019) is performance assessments. Performance assessments are seen as the “holy grail” (Kyllonen, 2016, p. 205) of social-emotional measurements because they provide “critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving, and written communication

skills” (Abrahams et al., 2019, p. 467). During a performance assessment, students are less likely to feign answers, and it shows assessors what the student is capable of completing, rather than their own or other’s opinions of their actions. Issues with this type of measurement include time and integrating multiple skill assessments, as well as objective assessment between each test-taker.

Besides the assessment measures explained by Abrahams et al. (2019), the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, or CASEL, offers a database of assessment tools to assist educators in selecting the right approach for the task being assessed (CASEL, 2020). This database organizes tools by grade level, type of respondent (self, teacher, family, etc.), and social-emotional skill practiced. The tools displayed can help assess overall social-emotional pillars, like self-awareness or responsible decision making, or specific skills, such as focus, leadership, or integrity. After the database provides the initial search, it outlines the aspects of each tool, including but not limited to— the developer and their website, the format and method of administration, the number of items on the assessment, the cost, and the scoring approach.

Although there are many challenges in creating consistent and accurate social-emotional skill assessments, there are tools and approaches that can still work to measure many SEL proficiencies. Depending on the task needing assessment, different paths may be useful, like likert scales or performance assessments. CASEL’s Assessment Catalog database provides a breakdown of options as well as the tool capabilities. Assessment is a vital piece of demonstrating learning and must be considered within

social-emotional curriculum development. In some situations, schools may ask parents to complete a measure of their child's social-emotional competencies. In order to faithfully accomplish any assessment, parents need to be provided with resources to support their student through his or her growth in social-emotional learning.

Parent Resources

In order to become really good at something, the old saying applies— “practice makes perfect.” Social-emotional learning is a key component of successful growth as a human, however that learning should not only take place at school. The more practice students can get with authentic social-emotional learning, the more likely they are to succeed when faced with real-world challenges. To support their children, parents should incorporate aspects of SEL into their everyday family lives at home. Parents may not know what and how to include these practices while raising their children, but that does not mean it should be avoided. In the final section of the literature review, multiple parent resources are included. First explored are the steps that schools and teachers can take to include parents and guardians in the SEL work happening during the school day. The last focus of this section will be on several research-based methods described for parents to include on a daily basis at home.

District Social-Emotional Learning Support at Home

Bernard (2001), Elias (2006), and Lewis et al. (2011) all agreed that in order for children to receive the most favorable instruction for social-emotional development, there needs to be a healthy partnership between parents and schools. If schools are the only avenue where students are practicing social-emotional skills, as much as staff may work

to incorporate the learning, skill proficiency for students will inevitably not reach full potential (Lewis et al., 2011). Parents are generally not SEL experts and may benefit from some specific instruction for supporting social-emotional practices at home and at school.

Lewis et al. (2011) suggested that while in the early stages of SEL planning, districts should share with parents the outcomes of development sessions so that they can provide opinions to help define the SEL standards. It is also advised that when final decisions are made for SEL implementation, districts offer orientation sessions for parents to become familiar with the curriculum. Both Elias (2006) and Bernard (2001) saw value in offering continual overviews for parents throughout the year as SEL lessons and activities change themes. This way, there will be a greater awareness of practices in the classroom, which will hopefully lead to conversations or practices at home. These overviews could be set up as newsletters (Lewis, 2011), teacher-parent discussion meetings as ways to share ideas (Elias, 2006), or volunteer opportunities to invite parents to experience social-emotional instruction firsthand (Bernard, 2001). Districts that provide many options to become acquainted with the specialized learning of social-emotional methods are allowing more parents to be actively involved in their child's learning, thus helping the child build their skills.

Districts can also provide resources to build healthy social-emotional habits at home. Parenting is not an easy task, so presenting parents with ways to “to organize the morning routine and homework routines to minimize conflict, and communicating with parents the importance of having positive times with their children, despite difficulties, to build children's sense of hope” (Elias, 2006, p. 10) may ease some stress at home. Having

routines and spending quality time with family both focus on almost all the SEL pillars- self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, allowing more practice at home for both adults and children.

Parent Resources

Besides districts providing parents with resources in the building, there are other strategies parents can use as a way to support students' social-emotional skills. Acting as a role model for children is one simple way to encourage SEL growth. Bernard (2001) and Lewis et al. (2011) understood that displaying the desired behaviors in front of children can be one of the most influential ways to support social-emotional development. Acting as a role model can be as natural as recognizing and apologizing for incorrect actions, or being kind and respectful to other people.

Bernard (2001) also explained other methods for parents to strengthen their work with SEL at home. She suggested that parents should practice "being a good listener", and have their kids do the same, as well as clearly display "respecting differences" (para. 6) between multiple children's interests and personalities within the home. Doing so encourages students to do the same, like role modeling that both she and Lewis et al. (2011) explained. Plus, it supports SEL skill development because the child will be more willing to build relationships through communication and feel that they are valued as an individual while they become more self-aware.

Benard (2001) also understood that not every familial situation is always simple and many times throughout childhood, kids may experience difficult situations. In times of home, city, or national crises, She suggests seeking support services as another SEL

strategy. In school, educators may not always know what is going on within a student's life, but connecting with school counselors or other outside social services help children continually practice their self-awareness and management skills. Even if parents have a very close-knit relationship with their child, when it comes to troubling situations, the child may be more willing and comfortable verbalizing their thoughts with "another trusted adult" (Bernard, 2001, para. 7). Plus, having a positive relationship with a school counselor or other social services expert can be another way to maintain SEL practices. They have many resources available for parents when different needs and situations arise, not just crises. These can range from therapy clubs, community programs, and camps (J. Dvorak, personal communication, July 17, 2020).

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2020b) also provides research-based resources for parents looking for more SEL assistance. On their "Parent SEL Resource" site, they have many links to books, chapters, and reports that guide parents through parenting with SEL practices. There are also many links to further websites, guides, and videos to strengthen the relationships between parents and social-emotional learning.

Schools play a huge role in children's growth and development, both academically and social-emotionally. Parents or guardians play an equally big role in that development. Knowing this, districts should utilize parents and foster their needs as they help implement and exercise social-emotional learning. Thorson (2018) asserted that:

SEL in the home means that families can use moments that happen organically to grow students' SEL skills. Trips to the grocery store, playing a board game,

responding to a family experience, opportunities to meet new and different people while out and about, and other experiences that happen every day add breadth and depth to social-emotional learning instruction and practice (para. 6).

By incorporating parents into SEL integration for schools, students will be receiving ongoing skill practice. This way, they can be proficient at understanding and managing themselves, building and maintaining relationships and empathy, and making responsible decisions.

Rationale

Throughout the research review of Chapter Two, Thorson's quote (2018), "students with a strong social-emotional skill set are primed for greater academic success" (para. 1) continues to stand out and encourage the implementation of SEL into the classroom. If an educational practice can advance students in their academics, why would all school districts not require its integration? The research certainly supports integration of social-emotional learning in the middle school language arts classroom.

In order to properly integrate SEL practices in any school setting, teachers or preservice teachers need district support. The previous literature also asserted that constant and recurring practices are successful within the middle school setting, and there are several program options designed specifically for junior high implementation. Delving deeper, it is very possible to incorporate social-emotional learning into the English curriculum. Elias's research (2014) explains that the driven focus of language arts education, the Common Core State Standards, are actually aligned closely with the social-emotional pillars. Further research confirms that these practices can be used within

any classroom setting, not just language arts, through routines and other activities or lessons (Dressel, 2020; Sprenger, 2019; Teaching Tolerance, n.d., Valosek et al., 2019; Yoder, 2014).

Even though assessing the skills of social-emotional learning is not an easy task, the research in Chapter Two demonstrates that there are many different ways to assess skills. Regardless of the competency being evaluated, it is possible to find an appropriate assessment tool, even if it is not completely flawless. Assessment challenges should not deter from integrating social-emotional practices into the classroom. Parent support in new initiatives can be challenging as well. However, the research above has shown there are ways that districts can get parents involved and interested in strengthening their child's social-emotional development. Plus, there are other ways for parents to encourage social-emotional growth at home, without district support.

The literature and research in Chapter Two supports that social-emotional integration in the classroom is not only possible, it firmly reinforces child development and academic achievement. Through the help of their district, students can receive thirteen years of positive intellectual development, and equally important, a strong social and emotional foundation.

Summary

For school districts to begin or further their development of social-emotional implementation, there must be a solid foundation of research that supports the changes. Chapter Two closely examined research from professionals in the field of social-emotional learning. To explore the question, *how can social-emotional learning be*

authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom, the research focused specifically on aspects to build that foundation within a middle school and language arts setting.

When incorporating new curriculum or initiatives into a school setting, districts need to provide staff-training, which was one topic explained. When implementing social-emotional learning into the middle school, research also needs to show the effects of recurring practices as well as pairing curriculum with those that are already established. The same can be said for language arts curriculum and social-emotional learning, where the Common Core State Standards and literacy needs to be seriously considered. The research in Chapter Two also provided examples of specific activities that would work in any content area, including stress management and community building.

Incorporating social-emotional learning into any classroom can be a challenge, especially in the area of assessment. The many challenges of assessment are explained in this chapter, as well as tools with various purposes that have been used by experts. Finally, Chapter Two focused on creating available resources for parents to support their child's social-emotional growth. Districts have many options to provide further instruction for parents, and parents can continue to practice social-emotional skills at home, which are laid out in the previous paragraphs.

As the research review in Chapter Two explored and encouraged social-emotional integration within the middle school language arts setting, Chapter Three will be used to describe the development itself. There, the research design frameworks will be explained

and discussed, as well as the methods used. As projects require a specific time frame, the overall timeline and description of the project will be delineated, as well as the project's audience. All of these aspects in Chapter Three will continue to support the question: *how can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?*

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

In order to successfully create anything new, there must be an initial plan in place. That plan should provide the context for the design and should include a detailed description of the different facets within the project. This chapter provides insight into the participants and environment, as well as the project explanation and timeframe. Additionally, the research from Chapter Two supports the framework to develop a new curriculum to answer the question, *how can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?*

Research Framework

Expert research and models are a crucial part of new curriculum development since they include tested theories and practices to ensure success. McTighe and Wiggins' framework (2012), *Understanding by Design*, encourages planning the desired results first as a way to decide what is important for students to be able to do. When thinking about social-emotional learning in the language arts classroom, deciding what students need to be able to do, learn, or practice comes before designing specific activities. From that point, as McTighe and Wiggins suggested, assessments can be planned, followed by the learning experiences for the particular social-emotional skill. This method is the optimal planning approach to develop the curriculum within the quarter.

Abrahams et al. (2019) offered another useful research framework to use while creating academic experiences for social-emotional learning. Although it is not a comprehensive methodology, the article *Social-Emotional Skill Assessment in Children*

and Adolescents: Advances and Challenges in Personality, Clinical, and Educational Contexts provides many options for assessing social-emotional learning depending on the task. When working through the backward design strategy explained by McTighe and Wiggins, the work by Abrahams et al. helps in the assessment planning stage.

Elias (2006, 2014, 2019) is also an important figure in the realm of social-emotional learning within the classroom. He has completed many studies on social-emotional efforts for students, and has also researched and reported on pairing SEL with English- language arts content. Although his work is not a specific framework, his articles and analysis of SEL for middle school students are beneficial in completing the *Understanding by Design* method. While deciding what students should be able to do in their social-emotional development, Elias provides suggestions through his writings. There is also information that supports social-emotional assessments and learning experiences throughout Elias's research.

Setting and Audience

Developing curriculum to authentically integrate social-emotional learning into the language arts classroom took place in an affluent southwestern suburban neighborhood outside of a large urban area. The district in this area served 8,700 students in fourteen different buildings. In the middle school, where the project was developed, there were 1,100 students ranging from eleven to fifteen years of age, supported by 58 staff members. According to Niche's site *2020 Best Public Schools* (2020), it was ranked in the top five percent of middle schools within the state based on test scores, student-teacher ratio, diversity, and teacher and school district quality.

Specifically, the project took place and was designed to be successful in a sixth grade language arts classroom. There were approximately thirty students in the class, with an equal division of males and females. Approximately 20% of students in the classroom were minorities, 6.4% were Hispanic, 5.7% were African-American, and 5.3% were Asian. This setting supported social-emotional learning curriculum. The current language arts curriculum was a pilot of Project Based Learning, and could be easily adapted or adjusted for collaboration with SEL.

Project Description

To attempt to answer the question— *how can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom*, a strategy must be put in place to manage the development of a new curriculum. The project focused primarily on pairing and practicing social-emotional learning lessons into the language arts classroom described above. These lessons supported the five pillars of social-emotional learning; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. On a more specific level, the lessons concentrated especially on areas similar, but not limited to, group work, communicating self-understanding, compromising, and time management skills. The themes and lessons were prepared to be substituted or altered throughout the quarter depending on curriculum changes, student needs, or learning models set forth by the district.

Although the curriculum design was the heart of the project, all lessons are housed on the Social-Emotional Language Arts Curriculum website. This was developed as a way to keep all lessons organized by SEL pillar and so that lessons and resources

could be easily accessible and identifiable. On this site, users could find materials to connect with parents, to introduce social-emotional learning, or for each specific lesson detail.

Primarily, the entire curriculum design was an introduction to social-emotional learning in the language arts classroom. It introduced the pillars as recurring themes and built up the skills students would be using throughout the year in various lessons and activities.. Some of the lessons included Timecards as a way to practice self-management and responsible decision-making, and Compromising— to practice self-awareness and relationship skills.

The language arts Common Core State Standards and the current classroom curriculum were used to build lessons, mini-units, and other educational activities that were authentically combined with social-emotional skills. Almost all lessons included the two substandards— writing and speaking and listening. These standards align closely with the SEL pillars and were easily integrated. This step of including standards in the project was important, as it was where students received the actual instruction to strengthen their SEL development. There were opportunities for students to apply their understanding to academic and social tasks.

Throughout the process of designing the SEL curriculum into the ongoing language arts content, both formative and summative assessments were created to support the competency being demonstrated. These assessments varied depending on the specific skill or learning experience, as well as the language arts lessons presented to students.

Research and expert opinions guided the creation of SEL measures specifically designed for the lessons taught within the classroom.

These measures were used to drive the instructor-implemented social-emotional learning instruction within the overarching pillars or precise application of social-emotional learning. Again, this was a critical phase in the process of authentically developing SEL lessons for any classroom because it revealed whether the integration and routine use of one or more SEL skills for the students was successful. Applying the data from assessments provided a vision for future instructional needs and curriculum changes or additions.

Because each experience is unique in the skill being taught, the assessment method of the skill varied. At times, the evaluation was a quick, completion assessment like in Journaling, or a more comprehensive assessment in Best Party Ever, the Likert scale— as described in Abrahams et al. (2019).

Parent communication is of utmost importance in a classroom. With that in mind, the website includes access to an introduction letter for parents to understand the class as a whole and its overarching concepts. A class newsletter was also designed to be sent home from teachers. In this newsletter, there was a space where students could share skills practiced and lessons learned in both language arts and social-emotional learning in the class. Additionally, resources could be included to encourage parent involvement in social-emotional learning with their students. There could also be a section for parents to suggest skills needing the most practice based on their observations at home, as well as

sharing any supports they may have found helpful. Building this newsletter supported the SEL curriculum and increased parent engagement.

Timeline

The two parts to creating this project— building the curriculum and creating assessments took a significant amount of time. To accommodate that, the writing of this project took place over a period of months, equaling approximately one quarter of the school year. This time frame allowed for many different types of learning development, including various activities, lessons, mini-units, and focus groups, all integrated with the English curriculum and Common Core State Standards. These learning experiences included reviewing texts exploring perspective-taking, stress management practices, collaborative challenges to assess ability to work in a group, or time management activities.

Summary

Planning is a key component to building something new, from making a sandwich, to constructing a house. Chapter Three outlined the planning details required to build new curriculum. This plan requires attention to many aspects of curriculum design, including the environment it was designed, as well as the participants it served. Two other necessary aspects of creating content are the timeline and description of the project. Without these, there would be no clear direction. Lastly, using prior research or frameworks to support the development can help generate new ideas or ways to solve problems and answer questions.

The question, *how can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom*, can be answered using the specifications indicated within this chapter. Moving forward, Chapter Four will provide a final conclusion and reflection after the project development has ended. This will include considerations on the process and literature review, as well as implications or limitations for future projects or agendas.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

In schools, students learn addition and subtraction, the rock cycle, and ancient civilizations among hundreds of other skills and topics. But, teachers and other professionals teach more than just their discipline or subject area, they encourage students in building strong relationships, staying organized, understanding personal strengths, and so much more. These other non-academic skills, the social-emotional skills are just as important for human development.

As a teacher, I believe social-emotional learning is an integral part of growing up. Rather than subconsciously provide students with support in those areas, teachers should give direct instruction to continually practice these skills. It is important that social-emotional learning is an active part of education, which led me to wonder— *How can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?*

To further understand this question, I first considered the reasoning for considering social-emotional learning topics. Within this reasoning, I looked closely at my own instructional circumstances, and others' like mine, to determine the importance of this type of learning in the classroom. From there, I explored and reviewed several different research themes to understand how to incorporate successful instruction. With the new knowledge to support the research question, I developed introductory lessons and units that may be used to integrate social-emotional learning into any classroom setting.

This chapter is a reflection of the social-emotional curriculum developed to integrate lessons into everyday learning. This reflection includes my professional growth and learning while working through the creation of the curriculum, how the information gathered from supporting literature guided decisions, implications and limitations of the curriculum content, future possibilities for further research, and impactful professional collaborations. Throughout this chapter, I will answer the research question, *How can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?*

Professional Growth and Learning

The capstone process is not a quick and simple task. My goal, to authentically integrate social-emotional learning into the language arts classroom, aims to help students grow as learners and as humans. It had not occurred to me that I would grow in the process. Throughout each step, I realized more about myself as a researcher, a writer, and a learner than I would have expected.

Learning as a Researcher

I have never considered myself a researcher. I often equate the term “research” to science, an educational discipline that I have not had much success with throughout my past. What I slowly discovered, though, is that research does not have to always be qualitative or related to the Earth, the physical body, or outer space. While researching in both the literature review and for the development of my curriculum, I learned that there are multiple options to support and collaborate with professionals that may know more or have a different viewpoint than myself. Working closely with my content supervisor

guided my research work in new ways as he suggested angles of social-emotional learning I had not thought about previously. Connecting with peers during capstone design courses through Hamline University introduced me to other frames of reference and provided me with suggestions I had not previously considered.

I also realized that research is ongoing and that trial and error practices can be a benefit. I am the type of person who prefers things to be very successful immediately; when I do not feel successful I can be quick to shut down. Because of this, I am often unwilling to try new activities because it is likely I will not be successful immediately. Knowing this about myself, I struggled at first with experimenting to find the most rewarding method for building a social-emotional learning curriculum. Brainstorming and formulating full unit plans did not always prove to be the best method. initially. It sometimes took several tries to figure out how to turn my ideas into lessons while incorporating both the language arts standards and the SEL pillars. I have slowly come to appreciate that there are multiple ways to approach a task and that multiple studies and attempts can lead to great results.

Learning as a Writer

Although I may not consider science to be one of my greatest strengths, I do feel as though I have a strong writing ability. Being able to formulate sentences to express ideas has made the capstone process considerably simpler. However, I know that every experience provides an opportunity for growth. While working through the writing process, I have continued to improve my writing skills with the support of my peers,

professors, and content supervisor. Each person has played an important role in supporting my development as a writer.

Additionally, I have realized that research writing is very different from the styles of writing I learned in my undergraduate program, as well as the styles I teach in my own classroom. With an English background, I am much more familiar with using MLA citations and bibliographies, so using APA formatting to cite my research has opened my eyes to a completely new option for writing with research. In my classroom, my students learn that there should be a very structured, formulaic way to communicate through writing. Completing this capstone project has helped me reconsider how I teach writing, including the expectations for paragraphs and idea arrangement. Although my students are just beginner writers, these realizations will help me show them different options for written communication.

Learning as a Learner

Just like the life skills I try to teach my own students, this project has shown me the importance of being a lifelong learner. Learning is a forever ongoing process. Just because I have completed a written chapter in the paper or developed one lesson within my overall social-emotional curriculum does not mean I am finished. Each part of this capstone project requires future referencing or reflection. While I moved forward in curriculum development, I found that I often needed to revisit ideas I had developed earlier to expand or alter as a way to fit my new understanding. Going back to previous work to improve is an important life skill that I want my students to know.

As a learner, I have also understood through this process that it is important to recognize my strengths and weaknesses. I felt successful within this project as I used my strengths to support my needs, and used my weaknesses as opportunities to grow, rather than roadblocks in my learning. From this process, I learned that I can see both the bigger picture and the smaller details to complete tasks. For example, while deciding how to create a social-emotional curriculum, I focused on the end goal and was quickly able to see what activities and standards could pair with the overall concept. Again, this is a valuable skill to teach my students as well so they know when to ask for help or when to push themselves further.

Throughout this project, I have learned much about myself as a researcher, writer, and learner. This process has shown me that trial and error is an important part of researching, and that collaboration can offer a different perspective. I was able to use my strengths as a writer, and remember that learning is an ongoing process. Both of these were useful reminders as I worked through the project. Going into this project, I had little knowledge of social-emotional learning and as I learned about myself professionally, I also learned that many researchers had laid important groundwork for me to develop my understanding of social-emotional learning.

Valuable Literature Review

One of the largest parts of the capstone project was the literature research and review. Through the literature research process and the subsequent review, I was able to gather the information that guided me through the development of the social-emotional curriculum. Prior to this stage in the capstone process, I had no idea that there was such a

large amount of research already focused on social-emotional learning. Expecting to see little work on the content, it was a great surprise to realize that so many important people before me have taken time and effort to develop knowledge on the subject area. Although some of the knowledge gained through the literature did not apply to the lesson creation, many articles and sites provided a great starting point to steer my idea toward actual design. I especially found value in literature focusing on the state standards, relationship building, social-emotional activities and assessments, and parent involvement.

Common Core State Standards

From the beginning, Elias' work (2014) involving the language arts Common Core State Standards, as well as the standards themselves from the Common Core site (2020) drove a lot of the initial design for each lesson. Standards are the base of any lesson or unit, as it is a very clearly defined set of expectations to ensure that all students are receiving the same skills and information to be successful.

Elias (2014) really supported the concept of social-emotional integration with the language arts standards. His article "Social-Emotional Skills Can Boost Common Core Implementation" focused on the idea that the standards and pillars align very closely (2014). Keeping this in mind, I was able to quickly locate language arts standards, especially those in the writing segments, that matched the social-emotional pillars and my overall goal for the lesson and the curriculum as a whole.

Relationship Building in the Classroom

Two other sources that I found very helpful, especially when looking at collaboration and the larger relationship skill pillar, were Marlatt (2020) and Chlup and

Collins (2010). Both sources encouraged group collaboration, although through different methods. Marlatt saw value in flexible grouping, or creating various group options (2020). These group options could be random or based on ability levels of students. Mixing up methods of grouping encourages students to continually practice self-awareness and relationship skills, as explained in the Team Tower Challenge, Best Party Ever, Compromising, and Time Management lessons.

Chlup and Collins (2010) also stressed the importance of collaboration, especially through community building. By creating a sense of belonging for students, they will be more likely to feel supported throughout some more vulnerable lessons, like Behind the Mask and journaling. Chlup and Collins provided many community-building strategies, and although I did not use those ideas specifically, they were great starting points to create the About Me Presentation, and several of the other lessons where relationship skills were stressed within the curriculum.

Social-Emotional Learning Lessons

One source from the literature review inspired me to build the Timecards and Time Management lessons. Sprenger (2019) explained the use of a Stress Breakup Letter, where students name the sources of their stress and identify ways to cope with those feelings. With that in mind, I was able to create a lesson to teach students about managing time as a way to combat stress. In the Timecards activity, students are self-driven to complete certain tasks by actively maintaining their focus for a selective amount of time. The goal here is that students can see and work through a list of tasks that may feel

daunting at first, but as they complete each job, students would realize that staying focused and engaged can decrease that negative feeling.

In the Time Management mini-lesson, students are asked to complete a certain task within a time frame, like completing a puzzle, without direction while also being distracted by the instructor. Initially, students may struggle with some immediate stress, to try to finish the task in time while outside factors disturb their focus. However, in the middle of the lesson, students are provided the end goal, which helps them regain their focus and ignore those distractions. This is an important self-management lesson as it shows students how to manage stress by setting and working toward goals.

Assessing Social-Emotional Learning

Through many sources during my literature review, I gathered that assessing social-emotional learning can be a large challenge, as it does not always have one objective answer. Both Abrahams et al. (2019) and the CASEL Database (2020a) direct social-emotional teachers to ways of assessing student growth. Abrahams et al. provided a brief list and explanation of assessment options, including Likert scales (2019). For the student self-assessment at the end of the larger unit, Best Party Ever, I created a Likert scale assessment, which was easy for students to clearly analyze their abilities and contributions. The CASEL database (2020) also allowed users to indicate their assessment needs by using filters related to grade level, social-emotional skill practiced, or type of assessment desired. Using this database also helped me develop the Best Party Ever group and individual assessment.

Parent Involvement

Lastly, Elias (2006), Bernard (2012), and Lewis (2011) all played a role in creating the Parent Communications. Elias (2006) and Bernard (2012) greatly stressed the need to consistently connect with parents about the social-emotional practices happening in the classroom. I used this idea to create the introduction letter so that parents have a general understanding of the purpose of the social-emotional curriculum in the classroom. Also, Lewis (2011) suggested using a recurring newsletter to showcase events and activities within the classroom. After reviewing this concept, I developed a template for a one-page newsletter using the graphic-design site, Canva. This can easily be shared with parents and can also be used to display student writing.

Although not every source directly benefited my project, I was able to glean information to develop several different aspects of the project. The state standards were a necessary piece of curriculum development, as well as building relationships within the classroom. I was also able to learn more about social-emotional activities and assessments through the sources during the literature review. Resources were also available to aid in designing parent involvement. From the lessons I developed using these sources, I could see some clear results, even though I ran into a few obstacles along the way.

Implications and Limitations

Social-emotional learning is becoming more prevalent within the school system. Some of the lessons being taught, however, are a separate entity from the classroom curriculum. In my own building, we are provided social-emotional learning lessons to

teach weekly without any personal or applicable connection for the students. After spending some time researching and developing a way to authentically integrate social-emotional learning into the language arts classroom, I have realized that the capstone project has possibly had some implications that may influence decision-makers within the school and broader community. Of course, some limitations restrict the success of the curriculum, but as a whole, these lessons do not require much to integrate into the classroom.

Implications

One huge change that could come as a result of this new curriculum would be the integration of social-emotional standards into several classrooms. Multiple sections of a social-emotional learning class coupled with the classic disciplines or state standards could create a brand new way of learning for many students. In turn, this course as a whole would be an important addition to the idea of teaching both the academic and the social and emotional aspects of human development. A clear, direct connection between academia and social-emotional learning could allow students to see that both aspects of learning are equally important and play an equal role in becoming a well-rounded individual.

The introductory lessons and units I created could be considered a way to bridge social-emotional learning across grade levels and content areas. Policy and decision-makers could use this curriculum as an opportunity to reach more learners, not only because the number of students receiving instruction would be greater, but the

students who do not always gather information from traditional teaching styles may be more likely to understand the content.

Opening up the option to include social-emotional learning into different classes would allow for varied viewpoints as well. The pillars could be addressed differently for students from both the instructors as well as the relationship between the pillars and the content within other classes. Every teacher has a distinct style of instructing, which would allow for the social-emotional pillars to be taught in many different ways. Then, students would be more likely to think critically about social-emotional learning as they are understanding various alternatives and perspectives. Along those lines, the social-emotional pillars may tie into an individual subject's standards in different ways. Students who consider other subjects to be their strengths could better understand the pillars as they relate to their preferred content.

Limitations

Throughout the design of this capstone project, there have been few limitations, thankfully. However, the pandemic caused by COVID-19 played a small role in material access for students and time frame issues for lessons and units. However, both concerns were able to be adjusted so the lesson didn't lose its importance. During the early stages of my curriculum, COVID-19 did not affect my planning. In the future, I would like this curriculum to be available every year, so it needs to be versatile, no matter the resources available or scheduling concerns as it is impossible to predict how education will look in upcoming years.

One instance of an implementation limitation was during the first major lesson, Behind the Mask. I would have preferred that students create their masks during the lesson using actual supplies— scissors, paper, markers, etc. Because students were not allowed to use my classroom supplies, nor did they have their own, we created masks using an online app that allows for writing and drawing. In my district, to accommodate building capacity guidelines, we had groups of students attending class every other day. This affected the speed at which the lessons or units could be taught. Instead of seeing students five days a week, I would only see them twice in one week. This huge decrease greatly affected my timeline, as lessons that I expected to take one or two days took over a week to get through.

Of course, if any educator were to use this social-emotional curriculum in the future, there may be implications that prevent the success of the learning. Stakeholders always need to be taken into consideration, especially administrators and community members, who often have the most say in what is taught within the classroom. These groups of people may need an introduction to the importance of social-emotional learning to fully understand the need for classroom integration. Additionally, the willingness of staff to support another initiative, procedure, or change in expectations may be a challenge. Teachers would need to clearly see the benefits of teaching social-emotional learning for students, while also not adding another burden to their already-full plates.

This project has paved the way for some potential positive results when integrating social-emotional learning. Students could receive further instruction through multiple classrooms, several grade levels, and different content areas. From each of these

areas, social-emotional skills can be learned through varied viewpoints to increase student understanding. I dealt with two small limitations of my project— time frames and material availability. However, I was able to include ways to combat both in my project. This way, the project can be used again, and possibly expanded for any future integration.

Future Possibilities

Just like learning is a continual process, the process of any capstone project design is not ever fully complete. There is always the possibility to continue learning and growing through research, literature, and development. After spending so much time with social-emotional literature and curriculum development, I believe there is potential for this content to grow within the school setting as an expansion of the initial concept of integrating into one sixth-grade language arts classroom. This project can lead to additional offshoots in social-emotional development or further drafts of the current program, creating more options for potential projects and future agendas.

Potential Research Projects

After completing this capstone project, I have realized there are areas related to integrating social-emotional learning into the language arts classroom that could be used to develop more research projects. One concept that intrigues me is the longitudinal approach. My specific project is aimed at middle-grade students, especially sixth graders. I would be interested in developing a social-emotional curriculum to incorporate into other grade levels. This would be a way to see how multiple years of social-emotional learning impacts students.

Researching grade level variations may open the door to allow for learning in younger grades— those in elementary schools, or older grades— late middle school or high school. As students grow in maturity and ability, the curriculum could grow as well, accommodating the developmental levels. This long-term outlook could decrease identification times of at-risk students and could increase skill practice so that all students move through the curriculum while building expertise in self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

If the longitudinal approach were to become its own research project and eventually transform into actual courses, some recommendations should be considered based on my own experience with social-emotional curriculum development. Lessons need to be adapted to the appropriate developmental level of the students. The curriculum as a whole would also need stakeholder support.

The specific lessons I developed for my capstone project were directed at sixth-grade students. Some lessons, like *Behind the Mask* may be too complex for students in elementary school as it requires some level of personal reflection. Considering this, however, *Behind the Mask* may be a very valuable lesson to use with upper grades, as self-reflection abilities become stronger. Certain lessons, like *Compromising*, may be too juvenile for students older than those in sixth grade. Although, it could be adapted to include characters or figures within the current discipline, like political leaders or characters in a class novel.

Additionally, as a recommendation for future research projects related to social-emotional integration, stakeholders should be supportive of the learning and

involved as much as possible. Administrators, parents, and community members should be aware of the importance of social-emotional learning and a periodic update of student experiences within the course. These same groups of people should be occasionally invited into the classroom to interact with the students and the curriculum.

In my own experience, I invited several administrators in our building into the classroom once I was ready to implement the About Me Presentations. The goal was for these administrators to give their own brief presentation so that the students just starting middle school recognize more faces and make more connections. Of the five administrators I invited, only one took advantage of this opportunity. All five people were aware of the integration of social-emotional learning taking place in my classroom, but not actively invested in it. I recommend guiding administrators to support the course additions and participating in purposeful instruction.

Upcoming Research Agenda

As explained throughout this chapter, this capstone project has had a very immediate impact on my own classroom. As I developed these introductory social-emotional lesson plans, I implemented them into my sixth-grade project-based learning-focused classroom. Doing so actually helped me understand the needs of each additional assignment. Every application of a newly created lesson allowed me to see what I need to add to the next lesson. This was useful when I felt that certain aspects were lacking, when I wanted to refer to earlier practices, or when I wanted to push students to use our previously developed skills as a way to increase our comprehension.

For example, during the Best Party Ever unit, I noticed that the groups of students were struggling to come to agreements. Within this unit, students focused on all five social-emotional pillars but paid special attention to self-awareness and relationship skills to create an imaginary party that their peers would be thrilled to attend. In groups, students needed to decide a theme for their party, entertainment, food, a schedule, and how to adequately use their party budget.

Many of the groups often talked over one another and each believed their ideas were the best. This prompted the development of the Compromising mini-lesson. Within this lesson, students worked together to decide what activity would be the best for a random selection of animals to participate in. This helps students consider compromising from the animal standpoint, and to work together to come to an agreement within their teams. The addition of this lesson to the Best Party Ever unit helped students recognize how to compromise with a simple activity.

Continuing to look forward to the future, I am excited to develop more lessons to further integrate social-emotional learning into the language arts curriculum. Soon, my sixth graders will be immersed in our literature unit, where we explore themes, points of view, and characterization, among other topics. I believe that these language arts-related subjects can blend seamlessly with specific social-emotional learning subjects, like perspective-taking. It could also pair with the larger pillar of social-awareness when looking at direct and indirect characterization and concepts and ideas that apply to humans as a whole.

It is possible that the pillars of social-emotional learning have a lot of potential to fit in most language arts units and smaller standards. I am hoping to generate enough units and lessons to support our language arts learning throughout an entire year of school. I would eventually like a social-emotional learning language arts class to become a course options staple within my district.

There are lots of opportunities to expand the social-emotional integration project in future projects or agendas. It could span over grade levels and include decision-makers in the learning process. I have been able to incorporate my lessons into my own classroom currently, and I am looking forward to adding more social-emotional content in the upcoming language arts units. Additionally, I plan to share my project with my colleagues so that more teachers and more students can benefit from the work I have completed.

Impactful Professional Collaboration

Students need to have access to the learnings that take place within my capstone project curriculum. It is equally important for other professionals to have teacher access to lesson plans and materials. As this social-emotional concept benefits the profession as a whole, other teachers must have access to the units so they may choose to integrate the work into their own language arts classrooms.

Communicating with other Professionals

To easily communicate my lessons and overall social-emotional curriculum, I created a website. On this site, all lessons, materials, and explanations are available for any educator who may be looking for ways to incorporate social-emotional learning into

academic content. The site is also set up with a lesson timeline so that any sixth-grade language arts teachers can clearly see timeframes for each lesson and the introductory course as a whole. During the monthly sixth-grade language arts meeting, I plan to share the site with my colleagues. This way, they will have a better understanding of the learning taking place in my classroom, and the ability to use some or all of the lessons I created.

Benefits Within the Profession

After completing this capstone, I believe I have developed something valuable for myself and the teaching profession as a whole. The introductory lessons in social-emotional learning is a practice in teaching the whole child. Rather than focusing on just language arts curriculum development or just social-emotional learning content, combining the two focuses on building a well-rounded human. Integrating social-emotional practices with language arts standards creates an avenue to grow academically while understanding personal development of five pillars of social-emotional learning— self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Summary

In the final chapter of my capstone project, I reflected on my research question—*how can social-emotional learning be authentically integrated into the middle school language arts classroom?* This reflection included my own professional growth and learning as a researcher, a writer, and as a general learner. I also reexamined the literature review as a way to understand which sources were most valuable throughout

the process. This project created implications and limitations, as well as future possibilities for further research. Finally, I considered how to successfully collaborate with other professionals to use the social-emotional curriculum to the fullest.

Growing up is hard. It is a constant tangle of emotions and friendships and decision-making. By integrating social-emotional learning into the middle school language arts classroom, school professionals can teach and practice the development of the whole child. This way, kids can be academically successful while having their social and emotional needs met at the same time. The curriculum designed in this project will be one way to increase social-emotional learning in the school setting and will hopefully make growing up just a little bit easier.

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