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# What Social-emotional Learning Looks Like In The High School Special Education Setting, And How It Benefits Students With Emotional Or Behavioral Disorders

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# WHAT SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING LOOKS LIKE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL SPECIAL EDUCATION SETTING, AND HOW IT BENEFITS STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL OR BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS.

by

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## Introduction

### Background

Significant pressure is placed on high school students to achieve academically. General education classrooms require a list of strict, state-mandated standards to be addressed within a short period of time. (MN Department of Education, 2020) This time frame could look like a trimester course or span the whole year; from previous work experience it could be either. High school students are only with their general education teachers for approximately one hour a day per class. This leaves little to no opportunity for students receiving special education services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders to receive adequate social and emotional instruction within their current general education courses.

The introduction and development of social and emotional education are vital for the success of students with disabilities. With this in mind, the research question of this capstone is: *What does social-emotional learning look like in the high school special education setting, and how does it benefit students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders?*

This chapter will cover the research question and relevant background information leading to the question's creation. Why was this research question chosen? The claim that social-emotional learning is vital for students receiving special education services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders will also be addressed. To me, education is about teaching the whole student, and this chapter will explain why.

**Personal Connection**

I began my journey in education by teaching English as a Second Language in Saint Paul, Minnesota. The students within the classroom were adult English Language Learners who had recently immigrated to Minnesota. They had emigrated from countries all over the globe, which made finding common words to describe new English vocabulary challenging.

This experience solidified the importance of creating positive and safe learning environments for students. It was also an introduction to the idea of building a curriculum that teaches concepts, while incorporating skills that help students succeed in life. The realities these students faced in their lives were at times inconceivable. Within a phonetic English lesson, the activity could be deciphering how to read the label on a bottle of rat poison, or how to ask for help at the hardware store. These students had survived

unspeakable adversity and were in need of English that fostered confidence, ownership, and independence. That experience became the turning point, I knew that I wanted to teach.

I attended graduate school and obtained a Minnesota teaching license in 5-12 Secondary Social Studies. Not only did I want to teach, but I hoped to make a difference in the lives of my students. Our community as a whole benefits when the discussion of civics, economics, culture, and history is done in a way that can foster growth in students.

Communities everywhere use school for this purpose. Public education has been used "[t]o form subjects and citizens with particular identities, imaginations, and abilities in relation to the government, ethnic groups, civil society, church, market, family, and strangers" (Parker, 2015, p. 7). I was committed to ensuring students' growth.

While student teaching, I researched the effectiveness of culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) and incorporated it into the classroom. Culturally sustaining pedagogy is about more than standardized tests, it is about including, sustaining, and extending what is already important to students and relevant to their own lives (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 125). I worked hard to practice and incorporate CSP into the culture of my classroom. I often refer back to one particular quote: "CSP has at its core a commitment to sustain that which sustains us" (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 130). While I felt that this was a fulfilling and worthwhile endeavor, my professional journey shifted yet again and the creation of social studies lessons drifted to memory.

For the past four years, I have worked in the department of special education at the high school level predominantly with students receiving services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD). The category of EBD encompasses

students with a wide range of emotional and behavioral needs. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act defined EBD as a condition that exhibits one or more of the characteristics specified below over a long period of time:

- An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (U.S. Department of Education, 2017)

The category also includes students with hyperactivity, aggression or self-injurious behavior, withdrawal, immaturity, and learning difficulties. A student may also be eligible for services under the category of EBD if they have an anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, conduct disorder, an eating disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive disorder, or a psychotic disorder (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). The students I have worked with over the years have suffered from trauma, drug abuse, mental health disorders, suicidal ideation, and innumerable setbacks. I have observed how they interact with their peers and engage with their teachers. When I learned about social-emotional learning theory in graduate school I knew that I needed to incorporate it into the education of these students.

Social-emotional learning theory (SEL) is “the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and

show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020, p. SEL is... ). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identified five core competencies of social-emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. This is crucial, because according to Elias, "[t]he majority of students with learning disabilities have difficulties with social relationships. [T]hree key skill areas in social-emotional learning are identified as the main source of these difficulties: recognizing emotions in self and others, regulating and managing strong emotions (positive and negative), and recognizing strengths and areas of need" (Elias, 2004, p. 53). Maurice Elias is a current professor in the Department of Psychology at Rutgers University, and has done extensive research into the connections between social-emotional learning and students with learning disabilities. There is much at stake for students with EBD, and the research that follows will determine what an effective SEL curriculum for these high school students could look like.

What are the stakes? "In addition to experiencing unemployment, underemployment, and poor social relationships, over 60% of youth with emotional and behavioral disorders are arrested within four years of leaving high school" (Wilkins, 2014, p. 52). The significance of the research question to these students is serious. However, there is a need to prepare students for adulthood that far surpasses solely the needs of the individual. A school district also interviews the family when qualifying students for EBD. Why? Because a student does not only feel strong emotions at school.

Families and communities would also benefit greatly from including SEL into school curriculum (CASEL, 2020, SEL is...). I think statewide standards for general

education classes should also contain SEL content. Until this happens, SEL curriculum will need to be delivered to students with EBD services in the direct service special education setting.

The reason for pursuing this topic is because it is imperative that adolescents be given the tools and strategies to become successful members of society. All students need to be given the opportunity to grow and develop skills that will help them in adulthood. Students with disabilities need direct instruction on how to effectively and appropriately manage their emotions. I hope to find ways to make SEL an effective strategy for helping students with special education services under the EBD category become successful adults.

That being said, the goal of this capstone is to develop an effective curriculum for incorporating social-emotional learning theory into a direct service special education classroom. Currently, in the state of Minnesota, the content that is delivered in a special education classroom is district dependent. The goal of this capstone project is to develop a curriculum that other districts can adopt.

**Summary**

In summary, there is a need for social-emotional learning to be included in the development of high school special education curriculum. It may have been a winding journey to get to this point of my career but each professional opportunity I have had has only served to strengthen my conviction that this is necessary. Students receiving services under the category of EBD need to be supported and taught how to engage with their emotions appropriately. The topic of this capstone is to answer the following: *What does*

*social-emotional learning look like in the high school special education setting, and how does it benefit students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders?*

In future chapters, the literature surrounding social-emotional learning and special education will be reviewed, a research-based curriculum will be developed, and strategies for implementation will be discussed. The context of this capstone is to further define social-emotional learning and to look at the history of its use within special education.

The literature review analyzes and reflects on the work previously done on the topic. What are the big conceptual issues regarding this topic? In order to do this, it also includes the history of special education and its curriculum development. Historically, how have students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders been taught? What strategies were used? How can incorporating social-emotional learning into the curriculum benefit students with disabilities?

A description of what that type of curriculum could look like will follow in Chapter three, along with an overview of the created curriculum. This chapter covers the specific details of the intended curriculum and why it was chosen. Finally, there is a reflective narrative in Chapter four that will review the curriculum as a whole. Did it meet its intended purpose? This last chapter also addresses the consequences of this research on the profession, along with future possibilities.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Literature Review

Social-emotional learning (SEL) in the high school setting gives adolescent students the opportunity to work through and manage their emotions, set positive goals, recognize other people's emotions, and become responsible citizens (CASEL, 2020, SEL is...). The previous chapter provided background information regarding the research question, *What does social-emotional learning look like in the high school special education setting, and how does it benefit students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders?* This literature review is divided into three main sections: Social-Emotional

Learning, Special Education, and Adolescent Development. The first section provides an overview of social-emotional learning, the research that has been done in the field, and the impact it has on secondary students. This includes addressing not only the individual student but also school culture as a whole. This section will also look at the significance SEL has on the emotional development of adolescents and the benefits of emotional regulation for students. The second section of this literature review will address the potential benefits SEL has specifically for students receiving special education services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD).

The second section will discuss the history of special education, legal terminology of EBD, and the impact social-emotional learning can have on students with disabilities. This section will also address the theories and strategies that have been adopted to benefit students with disabilities. This includes Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), Positive Behavior Support Plans (PBSPs), and general, school-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs. The last section will address general adolescent development and the potential benefits SEL can provide at this specific developmental stage.

The last section addresses adolescent development as a whole to acknowledge the educational psychology behind adolescent learning strategies. This section also addresses the significance of social and emotional learning for healthy adolescent development. This includes the reduction of incarceration rates among young adults and increased graduation rates.

**Social-Emotional Learning**

The current definition of social-emotional learning (SEL) was introduced in the previous chapter. It will be restated below in the next section of the literature review as this section will provide an overview of SEL that is accepted today, the previous research that has been done on SEL and similar theories, and the impact it has on secondary students' emotional regulation skills.

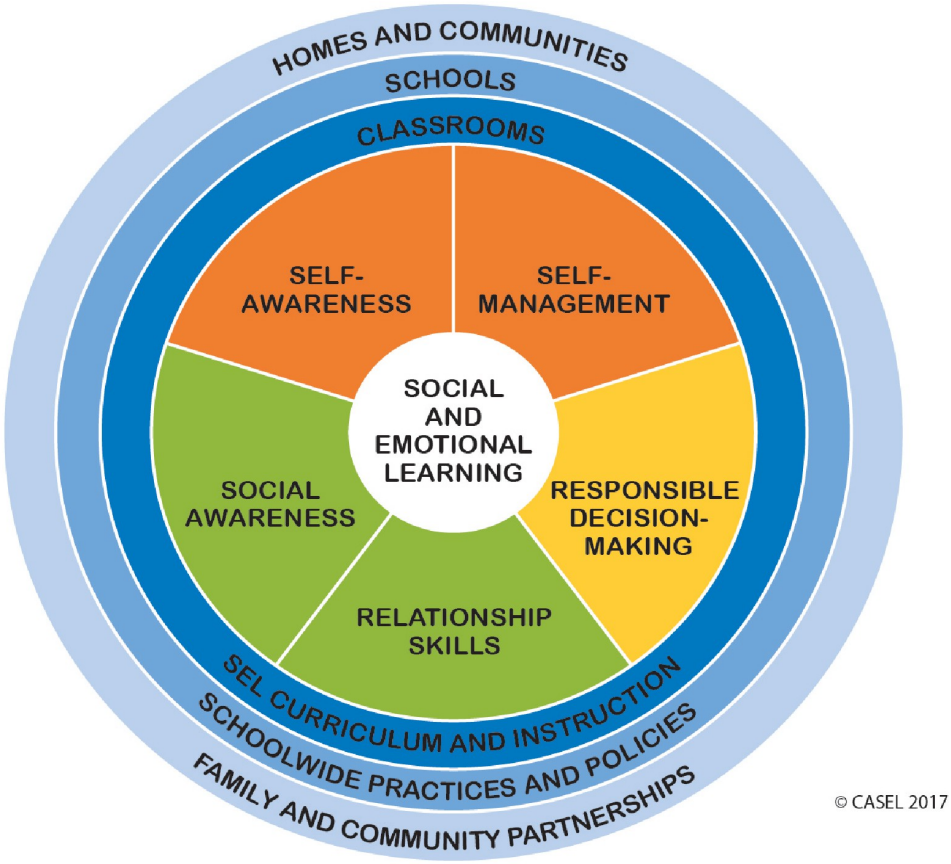
### *Beginning of Social-Emotional Learning to Modern Day*

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), SEL is the process in which students "acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL, 2020, SEL is...). Social-emotional learning uses school-family-community partnerships to establish meaningful curriculum, ongoing evaluation, and wholesome relationships. All of this contributes to effective learning environments (CASEL, 2020, Family-School Partnerships).

Social-emotional learning encompasses a broad scope, but there are five areas of competence used to define SEL (see figure 1 below): self-awareness - the ability to recognize individual emotions and values; self-management - the ability to regulate emotions, manage stress, and control behavior; social awareness - the ability to acknowledge and recognize the perspectives of others; relationship skills - the ability to form positive relationships); and responsible decision-making - the ability to make appropriate choices based on realistic expectations and consequences (CASEL, 2020, SEL is...).

Figure 1

*CASEL'S SEL FRAMEWORK*




A significant body of research suggests that the SEL core competencies are highly adaptable and can be used in a variety of different formats. Meta-analytic reviews of this research show that children and adolescents who "participate in SEL programs improve their social and emotional skills; attitudes about self, others, and schools; and prosocial behavior, thereby enjoying greater psychological well-being and academic performance" (Osher et al., 2016, p. 646).

The research done on SEL can be broken into two categories: SEL as it is defined above and previous SEL-based research. The term SEL with its current definition is only

slightly over two decades old. The field of SEL as it is known today was introduced and defined in the book Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators (Osher et al., 2016). This book provided the basis for teaching students and adults how to understand and manage emotions (Osher et al., 2016). However, there has been an interest in social and emotional development for over a century (Osher et al., 2016).

Research that could be considered SEL-based has been evident since 1900 (Osher et al., 2016). The beginnings of social and emotional learning have been traced back to the Progressive Era and the work of Jane Addams and John Dewey. Both stressed the importance of social competence and socially responsible behavior (Osher et al., 2016). Jane Addams created a national movement focused on improving social well-being that began in the impoverished neighborhoods of early 20th century Chicago (Davis, 2000). This work may not have created a shift in pedagogy, but it paved the way for the next generation.

The next great influence on SEL was from the field of ecological thinking. This primarily came from four influential thinkers: Kurt Lewin, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Vygotsky, and Sameroff (Osher et al., 2016). Lewin was known for research demonstrating the relationship between human behavior and one's psychological environment (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2020). Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory began to look at child development in a more complex way, addressing the family and school settings along with broad cultural norms and customs (Guy-Evans, 2020). Lev Semonovich Vygotsky took it further by stating that social interactions with others shape our cognitive thinking processes. He was a major contributor toward sociocultural theory (Hoy, 2019). Finally, Arnold Sameroff's transactional model of

development focused on the bidirectional relationship between an individual child and their family, school, and community. Collectively, these four thinkers sought to understand the individual and the impact of one's environment on child development (Osher et al., 2016).

This line of thinking created prevention and intervention strategies and programs that ultimately brought the conversation into modern day SEL. Two of the most notable practices of the last couple of decades include social learning theory (SLT) and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) (Osher et al., 2016). Social learning theory influenced the self-awareness and social awareness aspects of modern day SEL. Cognitive behavioral therapy played a huge role in the emotional regulation aspects of SEL and on the social problem solving aspects (Osher et al., 2016). Both are able to be adapted into school curriculums.

### *Academic Engagement vs. Social-Emotional Learning Instruction*

With the increase in research on emotional intelligence and the number of intervention programs, there arose a debate about whether or not it is the school's responsibility to educate and nurture a child's emotional development (Osher et al., 2016). It is still true that some policymakers and researchers have "called for developing and supporting SEL, citizenship, and character development, along with teaching academics" while "others see SEL and other types of nonacademic support as tangential to the core mission of education" (Osher et al., 2016, p. 645).

Recent policies have provided more opportunity for school-wide SEL programs. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) signed by President Barack Obama on December 10th, 2015, opened the door for states and local districts to utilize

nonacademic factors as a means of measuring school accountability (Ferguson, 2016). ESSA encouraged schools to " establish learning environments and enhance students' effective learning skills that are essential for school readiness and academic success" (Ferguson, 2016, p. 74). Each individual state was then able to create their own SEL standards implementation guidance. Focusing on the state of Minnesota, the work group tasked with implementation chose to create SEL standards for districts to implement that are based off of CASEL's SEL Framework (MN Department of Education, 2021). All of the five competencies have standards outlined for each that are expected to be implemented within a specific grade level. For example, a 9-12 benchmark in the area of Self-Management is "[m]onitor progress toward medium- and longer- term goals, and make adjustments to plan as needed" (School Safety Technical Assistance Council, 2015).

While this policy and set of standards provide opportunity, individual districts are responsible for the implementation of these standards. Within the districts, it is still an expectation for teachers to cover the multitude of state content standards within the classroom as well. For example, the Minnesota Department of Education has 122 standard objectives for 9th-grade social studies. (Standards Review Committee, 2020). An example of a 9th-grade objective is benchmark 22.9.6:

> Trace the roots of modern Civil Rights Movements (including but not limited to African American, Native American, women, Latinx-American, Asian-American, and Queer American), identify leaders and tactics, and analyze why changes were or were not made. (Standards Review Committee, 2020, p. 32)

Social skill instruction would need to be intentionally intertwined with the state standard objectives. In order to create an effective SEL culture, the school needs to be purposeful and allow time in the day for social skills instruction to take place.

To address the discussion of academics vs. social skills instruction, it has been shown that the most successful schools promote both academics and SEL (Eide, 2017). "The implementation of a social emotional learning program provides the necessary stability and curriculum to teach the emotional skills needed for everyday life" (Eide, 2017, p. 29)

When this occurs, research on the subject has shown increased evidence identifying the effectiveness of SEL programs on preventing problem behaviors and promoting healthy development (Osher et al., 2016). Research also began expanding to address the entire school climate rather than just the individual. "SEL scholarship has now come full circle, addressing deep-rooted policy problems that were salient in the early 1900s" (Osher et al., 2016, p. 645). These include inequality, poverty, delinquency, school disengagement and dropout, and lack of tolerance for diversity (Osher et al., 2016).

The article "*An update on social and emotional learning outcome research*" published December 2018/January 2019 in *The Phi Delta Kappan* analyzed four recent meta-analyses of school-wide SEL program effects. All four concluded that there were statistically significant benefits for students who received SEL instruction compared to their same-age peers who did not receive the same instruction (Mahoney et al., 2018).

The difference between the analyses came when the discussion changed to short-term versus long-term benefits. The two analyses that focused on the immediate

effects of SEL programs saw greater results than the two that measured later on (Mahoney et al., 2018). This is not surprising as the effects of any instruction tend to fade over time. Regardless, the research is clear, there are increased social and emotional benefits for students who receive SEL instruction.

The impact SEL can have on secondary students is noteworthy. Research has also shown a decline in anxiety, behavior problems, and substance use among adolescents (CASEL, 2020, SEL is..).

> Meta-analytic reviews of this research show that children and adolescents who participate in SEL programs improve their social and emotional skills; attitudes about self, others, and schools; and prosocial behavior, thereby enjoying greater psychological well-being and academic performance. (Osher et al., 2016, p. 646)

Adolescent students benefit from SEL programs that help them to cope with day to day trials by improving their social skills and mindset (Yeager, 2017). They also benefit from a respectful, SEL-centered school climate (Yaeger, 2017).

### *Social-Emotional Learning and the Benefits of School-Family-Community Partnerships*

Due to the fact that SEL addresses school, families, and communities, every aspect of a student's life is acknowledged. (CASEL, 2020, Family-School Partnerships) A multitude of programs and examples of effective SEL programming promote community and family engagement (CASEL, 2020, Family-School Partnerships). One example is Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity Framework for Family-School Partnerships. In one particular case study done in 2008, Boston Public Schools highlighted the possibilities for creating engagement initiatives that shift the mindset

back to promoting family engagement (Mapp & Kuttner, 2013). Another case study, which came from Santa Clara County in 2006, demonstrated home-school partnerships at a county-wide level. Another program that has been effective in promoting School-Family-Community partnerships is Partnerships by Design. This program can assist schools with creating partnerships that promote “child and youth success by working with schools to build culturally responsive partnerships with families and communities" (Ellis & Hughes, 2002). Incorporating SEL across all areas of a student’s life creates opportunities to build up one’s community and long-term success.

***The Whole Child Approach***

One aspect of SEL that has not been addressed yet is the idea of the whole child approach. This approach strives to transition the significance of education from solely academic achievement to one that enables long-term growth and success for all children (ASCD, 2014). Five main tenets to the whole child approach outline the opportunities each student deserves to have: to be healthy and live a healthy lifestyle; to learn in an environment that is physically and emotionally safe; to be actively engaged in learning; have personalized learning options; and to be challenged academically. “Research, practice, and common sense confirm that a whole child approach to education will develop and prepare students for the challenges and opportunities of today and tomorrow by addressing students' comprehensive needs through the shared responsibility of students, families, schools, and communities” (ASCD, 2014). Not only will SEL help to prepare students, it will also help to improve students’ social/emotional skills, attitudes, relationships, academic performance, and perceptions of classroom and school climate (CASEL, 2020, SEL is...).

The concept of SEL has been around for decades. The research in this section left little dispute regarding the significance of social-emotional learning for students. The debate lies in whether or not it should be taught in place of academics for students who require additional social skills instruction. This is addressed in the next section.

## Special Education

The previous section established the importance of SEL. What now needs to be addressed is the diverse population of special education students. This research project focuses on students who receive special education services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD). However, in order to understand why this population of students was chosen, the history of special education needs to be explored. The legal terminology of EBD and the impact social and emotional learning can have on students with disabilities will then be examined. This section addresses the theories and strategies that have been adopted to benefit students with disabilities, which includes Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs), Positive Behavior Support Plans (PBSPs), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) programs.

### *History of Special Education*

The mid-1960s brought significant advances in the treatment and education of students with disabilities. Forty-five state legislatures passed laws that began the dialogue for modern day special education. These laws became known as “mandatory laws” but loopholes often enabled districts to continue undeserving students with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996). These laws not only began mandating special education programs, but also dictated how they would be funded. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary

Education Act (ESEA) was the first federal effort to begin outlining direct services for students with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996).

This historical shift brought the discussion to federal courts. Most notably the 1971 case of *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and the 1972 case *Mills v. Board of Education* in the District of Columbia. (Martin et al., 1996). By 1973, the decisions of more than 30 federal court cases upheld the idea that "interpreting the equal protection and due process guarantees of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ruled that schools could not discriminate on the basis of disability and that parents had due process rights related to their children's schooling" (Martin et al., 1996, p. 25). This decision was monumental. It led to Congress designing new federal legislation titled, Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA).

Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) was nationwide, federal-level legislation that laid out how a child could be considered eligible for special education, "parental rights, individualized education programs (IEPs), the requirement that children be served in the least restrictive environment, and the need to provide related (noneducational) services" (Martin et al., 1996, p. 25). This is the foundation upon which modern day special education was built. One thing which is important to note is the absence of consistent curriculum design.

Curriculum and expectations for IEPs would be left to local and state authorities (Martin et al., 1996). The U.S. Department of Education outlines federal requirements for what is included in an IEP, but gives flexibility to individual states and school systems to interpret as necessary (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). One of the primary

requirements is that the direct service curriculum, services, and IEP implementation follow the Procedural Safeguards outlined in Section 1415 of IDEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). These safeguards ensure that all students receiving special education services are provided with a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Two other important laws help to secure FAPE for all students. The first was Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Amendments of 1973) and the second was the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Martin et al., 1996). Both were significant in prohibiting discriminatory acts toward people with disabilities.

When an IEP is implemented, the total number of special education service hours are included. These hours determine how much time a student spends with their general education peers, known as the least restrictive environment (Martin et al., 1996). These hours also determine the federal instructional setting for a student. Adolescent students who receive special education services within their public education high school are receiving instruction at federal setting 01, 02, or 03 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021).

Students with disabilities did not manifest for the first time in the 1960s. Prior to the wave of legislation that occurred in the ’60s and ’70s, “millions of children with disabilities were either refused enrollment or inadequately served by public schools” (Martin et al., 1996, p. 25). Up until this point, there were laws in most states that allowed school districts the right to refuse any student they deemed “uneducable” (Martin et al., 1996). This term was often left to local administrators to define. Those students with disabilities who were allowed into public schools were often placed with their general education peers without any additional supports or services (Martin et al., 1996).

What special programs did exist were often inadequate and did not provide for the diverse range of students with disabilities (Martin et al., 1996). It was not until Public Law 94-142 (IDEA) in 1975 that "education for all" policies were finally reality (Martin et al., 1996).

### *Emotional or Behavioral Disorders*

One such group of diverse learners who benefited from the creation of IDEA are students who have a disability under the Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) category. The category of EBD covers students with a wide range of emotional and behavioral needs. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act defined EBD as a condition that exhibits one or more of the following characteristics over a length of time:

> an inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors, an inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers, inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances, a general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression, a tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (U.S. Department of Education, 2017)

The category can also include students with hyperactivity, aggression or self-injurious behavior, withdrawal, immaturity, and learning difficulties. Another way for a student to qualify under the category of EBD is if they have a medical diagnosis of the following: anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, conduct disorder, an eating disorder, Obsessive-Compulsive disorder, or a psychotic disorder (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Even before the legislation described above was passed into existence and this category was created, there have been programs designed to address behavioral problems in children and adolescents (Gage et al., 2010). In fact, the characteristics listed above are almost word for word what Eli Bower wrote in 1960 to define students with emotional or behavioral needs (Landrum & Kauffman, 2020). Bower was a pioneer in the field of early childhood education of children with disabilities. When IDEA was first implemented, the EBD category was known as Serious Emotional Disturbance or SED (Forness & Kavale, 2000).

The term SED impressed the seriousness and severity of the problems that face students with EBD (Landrum & Kauffman, 2020). Research suggests that if a child does not receive effective services before they turn eight years old, EBD should be considered a chronic condition (Landrum & Kauffman, 2020). Students who receive services under the EBD category are considered high-risk (Gage et al., 2010). In a study conducted in 2008, an average of 55% of students with EBD drop out of high school (Gage et al., 2010). When the category was written, SED was determined to be an appropriate title.

The current terminology began with a push in the late 1990s to drop the 'Serious' from the beginning of the category name (Landrum & Kauffman, 2020). Over 30 professional organizations banded together to push for SED to be renamed EBD (Landrum & Kauffman, 2020). The thought was that EBD would be a less stigmatizing category label.

Over the past few decades, it has morphed into its current state. Since its creation, there has been an extensive amount of research done on the appropriate interventions and preventions used to help benefit students with EBD. Research has consisted of

interventions that include academic and social skills support, positive behavior interventions, and a multitude of prevention efforts. “Intervention and prevention efforts have been further compounded by the advent of the evidence-based practice movement” (Gage et al., 2010, p. 294). Research regarding what interventions benefit students with EBD spans multiple decades and academic fields.

The research and implementation of appropriate interventions and programs for students with EBD has been a subject of research studies since the 1960s. A 1964 study identified seven categories of programs currently being used with students who fit the criteria of the EBD category. These include:

1. Psychiatric-dynamic programs in which education was secondary to therapy
2. Psychoeducational programs, which blended psychodynamic concepts with educational approaches
3. Psychological-behavioral programs based on learning theory and more structured in orientation
4. Educational programs characterized by formal regular education procedures and curricula, absent of theoretical design
5. Naturalistic programs without specific design or activities, but in which teachers reacted to behaviors as they occurred
6. Primitive programs in which teachers maintain control through domination and fear
7. Chaotic programs absent of order and organization (Gage et al., 2010, p. 295).

There was such a variety of programs that research and implementation continued to differ significantly.

While there were many varying programs in place to work with students with EBD, the short-term and long-term outcomes for this specific group of students remained "abyssmal" even after the passing of IDEA and well into the 1980s (Gage et al., 2010, p. 295). In 1990, leaders in the EBD field met in Charlottesville, VA to review current programs and concerns, and create an outline of appropriate school-based interventions (Gage et al., 2010). The outcome of this meeting provided a significant shift in how students with EBD services were served.

These leaders came up with seven strategies that they believed would bring students with EBD success. These seven strategies are reflected in and used as part of modern intervention strategies (Gage et al., 2010). They include the development of systematic, data-based interventions. This can be seen in Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs). The continuous assessment and monitoring of progress is now mandated by the federal government for all special education students. Students are given the opportunity to practice new skills and participate in treatment that matches their individual needs. Lastly, programming for transfer and maintenance in case the need arises to switch programs but with a commitment to sustained interventions (Gage et al., 2010) In 2004, "teacher praise/reinforcement; opportunities to respond; clear instructional strategies; and positive behavioral supports such as functional assessment-based planning, self-management, social skill instruction, and school-wide positive support planning as research-supported practices" were found to be the most beneficial strategies for students with EBD (Gage et al., 2010, p. 297).

With the implementation of IDEA, services for students became regulated by the federal government. Every student who receives special education services within the United States is on an IEP. The plans that are utilized primarily for students receiving EBD services are Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIPs) and Positive Behavior Support Plans (PBSP). These are implemented when it has been deemed by a child's IEP team that there is an increased need for behavioral support (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). These intervention plans are utilized in addition to social skills instruction.

***Types of Social Skills Instruction Available***

In the most recent studies, researchers have looked at the impact of "social skill training for secondary students, self-management interventions, school-based prevention and intervention programs, function-based interventions for secondary students, video-modeling, and identification and treatment of anxiety among students with EBD" (Gage et al., 2010, p. 297). Currently, there are four diverse social skills instruction programs that encompass these strategies that can be used to benefit students with EBD services, Boys Town, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and SEL.

The first program is a curriculum developed by Boys Town, a nonprofit organization that provides support and instruction to at-risk students and their families (Boys Town, 2020). Boys Town started out as one farm in 1921. It has grown into a nation-wide organization with an effective social skills curriculum over the past 100 years (Boys Town, 2020).

The Boys Town social skills curriculum consists of 182 skills for interpersonal, emotional, and vocational functioning. (Boys Town Book) The notable difference

between the Boys Town curriculum and other social skills curriculums is that each skill has been 'task-analyzed" (Dowd & Tierney, 1992). For example, the skill of following instructions has been broken down into the following tasks: Look at the person, say 'okay', do what you've been asked right away, and check back later (Dowd & Tierney, 1992).

There is currently not a significant amount of research conducted to determine the benefits of Boys Town social skills instruction for students with EBD. However, there is an active postdoctoral research program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that partnered with Boys Town to provide research and training that is focused on youth with EBD (Torkelson-Trout, 2016). The goal of the program is to have researchers "engage in rigorous special education research and make significant contributions to the lives of children with EBD" (Torkelson-Trout, 2016). It is possible that the field of research will expand as this program comes to a close in 2021.

The second program available for social skills and emotional regulation instruction is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). Where Boys Town focused on the explicit instruction of an individual social skill, CBT is a psychological treatment that addresses emotions first, and then behaviors (Gillihan, 2018). The theory is that if one understands and can regulate emotions, then changing the behaviors that coincide with the particular emotions becomes manageable (Gillihan, 2018). For example, the emotions of worry and fear would be discussed and worked through. The many faces of fear would be acknowledged and discussed and the manifestation of worry would be addressed before the behavioral acts of letting go of safety behaviors and 'exposure therapy' with fear would take place. This is typically done in the clinical setting (Gillihan, 2018).

While CBT is often not used in schools, Cognitive-behavioral modification (CBM), which is a set of techniques and interventions, has been used in the school setting with students receiving EBD services (Mayer et al., 2005). There is evidence-based research that demonstrates the effectiveness of CBM interventions when used to address anger, anxiety, and depression (Mayer et al., 2005). There is currently a Cognitive Behavioral Modification-based curriculum available to schools but it is costly and only consists of 7-session or 15-session options (Melnyk, 2020). There is not a school-wide or instructional curriculum that addresses the needs of the majority of students with EBD services.

The next program that is available is Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), which is a cognitive-behavioral treatment used for mental disorders that can otherwise be difficult to treat. (Dimeff) It was primarily created to help treat chronically suicidal individuals and became known as a treatment for Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) (Dimeff & Linehan, 2001). DBT stemmed out of CBT when it was determined that CBT alone was not enough to provide beneficial results to those who suffer from chronic suicidal ideation (Dimeff & Linehan, 2001). DBT is primarily used in the clinical setting or in higher special education federal instructional settings, but DBT curriculum has been developed for general education teachers to integrate social skills into their daily lessons (Mazza-Dexter & Mazza, 2020).

The curriculum is known as DBT STEPS-A and has been designed to help adolescents develop coping strategies to use while in emotional distress. (Mazza-Dexter & Mazza, 2020). For example, self-soothe and mindfulness strategies are taught

throughout the curriculum to help individual students cope with and accept the changes happening around them (Mazza-Dexter & Mazza, 2016).

This curriculum was developed as an alternative SEL curriculum, and is a universal curriculum used to teach emotion management techniques, decision making skills, and social skills at the individual level. The primary difference between SEL and DBT STEPS-A is that the DBT curriculum does not involve family or community systems (Mazza-Dexter & Mazza, 2016).

***Social-Emotional Learning and Emotional Behavior Disorders***

The last of the school-based prevention and intervention programs being studied currently is the theory of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Social-Emotional Learning programs could benefit students with EBD both developmentally and academically. One study examined the prosocial behaviors and academic achievement for students with disabilities who attended a school with an SEL program for three years (Espelage et al., 2016). After two years of SEL instruction, students with disabilities "reported greater willingness to intervene in bullying situations than students with disabilities in the control schools" (Espelage et al., 2016, p. 329). While this is significant in terms of social skills and peer acceptance, the most notable finding from this study was the increase in report card grades for students with disabilities (Espelage et al., 2016).

The grades of the students within the study increased by a letter grade, earning a B+ instead of a C (Espelage et al., 2016). The findings indicate that the self-regulation taught in SEL curriculum helped students build emotional-regulation skills and in turn their academic learning increased. Another study, conducted to determine if the benefits of teaching students with EBD social/emotional skills was outweighed by their poor

academic functioning skills, focused on students with EBD and their academic functioning (Mattison, 2015). It concluded that "[p]oor academic progress appears more related to the nature of their academic problems rather than their emotional/behavioral problems. Therefore, because many students EBD have serious learning and/or cognitive deficits, their academic progress would be expected to be negatively affected" (Mattison & Blader, 2013, p. 208).

There is a current Social Emotional Learning curriculum, *Be Good People Curriculum*, developed by staff from the St. Croix River Education District, that six Minnesota public schools are currently using (St. Croix River Education District, 2020). The six districts include: Chisago Lakes, East Central, Hinckley-Finlayson, North Branch, Pine City, and Rush City (St. Croix River Education District, 2020). The curriculum incorporates skill-building lessons from Boys Town curriculum and it was developed with both general education classrooms and special education classrooms in mind (St. Croix River Education District, 2020). While it is not a curriculum developed for a direct service classroom, it has a bank of 106 skill-building lessons that can help with meeting an individual student's IEP or BIP goals (St. Croix River Education District, 2020).

The research indicates that students with EBD services benefit from SEL instruction. When looking at an effective curriculum for EBD direct service, SEL is the answer. The next section will look at adolescent development to determine whether or not the research shows a benefit to teaching SEL to adolescent students.

**Adolescent Development**

This last section will address the stage of adolescent development as a whole. It will incorporate the educational psychology behind adolescent learning strategies, and the current discussion surrounding adolescent development. Finally, this section will end with the significance of social and emotional learning for healthy adolescent development.

***Biological Changes During Adolescent Development***

In order to explore adolescent development, the term adolescence must be defined. Adolescence is a phase of life which is said to begin around the onset of puberty and end when an individual reaches adulthood (Somerville, 2013). Students aged 14 to 18 in the high school setting are considered adolescents. They are in between the start of puberty and the independence of adulthood. The aspect of social and emotional learning takes on new meaning in the stage of adolescence. High school students begin to spend more time with their peers than with their families, and social relationships form a crucial role in their development and everyday lives (Somerville, 2013).

Research that has been conducted on the topic of social evaluation - the mental processes used to evaluate social circumstances - has determined that adolescent students will experience "events that entail social evaluation can be experienced as highly intense, salient, persistent, and emotionally evocative" (Somerville, 2013, p. 121). This shift in perception and heightened social awareness is referred to as social sensitivity (Somerville, 2013). Teenagers are at an increased chance, biologically, of experiencing emotions and social shifts in an extreme manner.

One of the reasons that adolescents are more aware of social cues and are more likely to react emotionally to situations is due to the increase or changes of hormones

brought on by puberty (Yaeger, 2017). These increases or changes affect a number of hormones, primarily testosterone, estradiol, Cortisol, oxytocin, and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA-S) (Yaeger, 2017). All of these hormones are directly correlated to social and emotional functioning. That being said, it is these hormones "that can make even minor social difficulties like peer rejection extremely painful and hard to deal with" (Yeager, 2017, p. 74).

***Psychological Changes During Adolescent Development***

While adolescent students are experiencing significant biological changes, they are also experiencing psychological and psychosocial changes as well. One of the significant psychological shifts during adolescence is the ability to respond to stressors (Romeo, 2013). This is due to hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis reactivity, which heightens stress-induced hormonal responses (Romeo, 2013). This creates an increase in stress-related psychological disorders during adolescent years, such as anxiety, depression, and drug abuse (Romeo, 2013). This can also cause teens to become more responsive to "pleasure seeking and emotional stimulation" (Hoy, 2019, p. 40).

Another theory for an increase in these behaviors comes from the pace of brain development occurring during adolescence. The limbic system and the prefrontal cortex do not develop at the same rate (Hoy, 2019). The limbic system is involved with emotions and pleasure-seeking activities (risk taking, sensation seeking behaviors), and develops at a faster rate than the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for judgment and decision-making (Hoy, 2019). This discrepancy accounts for the inability to look at long-term consequences and acknowledges adolescents' need for immediate gratification. (Hoy, 2019).

This need for immediacy also comes through in the psychosocial changes that occur during adolescence. According to Bradford Brown, a developmental psychologist at the University of Wisconsin, adolescents have four primary developmental tasks. Adolescents need to stand out, develop their own identities, fit in with their peers, develop skills to achieve, and set goals for themselves for the future (Yeager, 2017).

Both biological and psychosocial changes need to be addressed when building curriculum for adolescent students. “Research has shown that by high school, as many as 40-60% of students become chronically disengaged and 30% of students engage in high-risk behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, violence, depression)” (Jacobs & Struyf, 2013, p. 1568)

***Educational Psychology - Learning Strategies for Adolescent Students***

The stage of adolescence is marked by drastic changes to a child’s body, both physically and psychologically. Because of this, multiple educational theories have been developed to help teach this dynamic age group.

The first theory that will be addressed is Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development. According to Piaget, there are four stages of cognitive development and adolescents are in the fourth and final stage, formal operational (Hoy, 2019, p. 52). A characteristic of this stage is adolescent egocentrism. This means that during this stage, students may feel that they have an imaginary audience watching their every move. They are very focused on their own thoughts and ideas at this stage. (Hoy, 2019). They are able to “think hypothetically, consider alternatives, identify all possible combinations, and analyze their own thinking” (Hoy, 2019, p. 53). This can lead to dynamic discussions and opportunities in a high school classroom.

The next theory has similar attributes to Piaget's but focuses more on social development. Erik Erikson created the theory of psychosocial development (Hoy, 2019). Erikson's theory stresses the importance of identity formation during the stage of adolescence (Hoy, 2019). Adolescents need to be able to explore and 'try on' other beliefs, values, and behaviors during their high school years (Hoy, 2019, p. 99). It is during this time that students develop their self-concept and overall self-esteem. It is important for teens to have ample opportunities for healthy growth.

### *Social-Emotional Learning and Adolescent Students*

Research has shown the significance of social and emotional learning for healthy adolescent development. If implemented correctly, effective SEL programs can prevent "catastrophic outcomes, such as unwanted pregnancy, arrests for violent crime, or dropping out of high school. They can also encourage greater thriving, including having less stress, better health, and a greater love of learning" (Yeager, 2017, p. 74).

The research regarding SEL curriculum and adolescents is limited (Mazza et al., 2016). There seems to be more SEL curriculum built for elementary grades, and less for middle school and high school students. The research that has been done on the general education population of high school students regarding a specific social skills curriculum is minimal (Mazza et al., 2016). However, meta-analytic literature on the results of social skills programs among students with EBD reported that two-thirds of the students who received social skills training improved their social competence (Mazza et al., 2016).

Among the existing curriculum, there are three different models of SEL at the high school level: skills, climate, and mindset. The skills model focuses on a child's skills that need to be taught or changed. The climate model focuses on changing the

environment surrounding the child, rather than focusing on the changes the child needs to make. The last model, the mindset model, is in between these two options. It focuses on using the environment around the child to teach and encourage a healthy mindset. Research concludes that the mindset model is the most beneficial for teenagers because it has shown the most lasting results (Yeager, 2017).

The development stage of adolescence comes with its own set of challenges for students. It is important to acknowledge the drastic biological and psychosocial changes that students are going through during their high school years when building effective curriculum. Not only does SEL help to build healthy social and emotional skills, it also reduces incarceration rates among young adults and increases graduation rates.

**Summary**

This chapter focused on three main concepts, social-emotional learning, special education, and adolescent development. It was important to define social-emotional learning before the introduction of the other two sections and the resulting impact social-emotional learning can have on adolescent students with disabilities.

The second section gave a brief overview of the history of special education, and gave the legal definition of EBD. It also addressed IEP plans and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports that have been designed to benefit students with disabilities.

The last section addressed adolescent development, both biological and psychosocial. This section also addressed the significance of social and emotional learning for healthy adolescent development and outlined which model would be the most beneficial for adolescent students.

In the next chapter, the curriculum design will be identified, the rationale for choosing this specific curriculum project will be presented, and the process that was used in order to create the specific curriculum model will be explained.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Project Description

### Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the curriculum that has been created based upon research done on Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). The research question is: *What does social-emotional learning look like in the high school special education setting, and how does it benefit students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders?*

The fact that became increasingly clear as I navigated their general education classes with them was that while their academic needs were being met, their social-emotional needs were not. For example, a student who worked hard during the first hour and then had an altercation with a peer between classes is often emotionally unavailable for academic learning for the rest of the day. The ability to regulate emotions is a skill, and one that needs to be taught sooner rather than later if we hope to help students be successful. Because of this experience, I chose to do my project on developing a direct service curriculum based on social-emotional learning for students receiving special education services in the EBD category.

This chapter provides the rationale behind this curriculum and an overview of what it looks like. It lays out the framework that was chosen for the curriculum and the choice of method. It also looks closely at the setting that was chosen for this curriculum and its intended audience. Lastly, it addresses the timeline for completion of the project.

### Rationale

Research conducted on SEL and students receiving EBD services shows an increase in social competency, improvements in emotional regulation, and a decrease in behaviors (Mazza et al., 2016). While teaching social skills to students with EBD services I have incorporated material from Boys Town, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and Social-emotional learning (SEL). These curriculums have been used previously in the classroom by other teachers, and I have been exploring curriculum options for my students receiving EBD services. After researching the benefits of SEL, I was determined to create an effective curriculum that will benefit these students all year.

Ultimately, I selected this project to add to the conversation that encompasses this capstone because as a Special Education teacher in a small community, I do not have access to a district or state-approved curriculum for the classes I currently teach. It is vital that the social-emotional needs of students are addressed, especially those at a higher risk of having strong emotional outbursts, just like an academic standard would be addressed.

The goal of this curriculum project was to be able to build an effective curriculum design that uses SEL to effectively teach the skills reflected in student Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals. That way, no matter who is teaching the particular class, there is a framework and curriculum in place.

**Curriculum Design**

The unit plans for this curriculum model use Understanding by Design framework (UbD) created by Wiggins and McTighe (2011). I chose this framework because the two big ideas of this framework are *understanding* and *design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011, p. 4). The other aspect of UbD that I really gravitated toward was the concept of designing

backwards. The idea is that the process begins with the long-term assessment in mind, then the short-term assessments are developed and, finally, the daily lesson plan. This leads to an increase in purposeful teaching and intentional lesson plans. This enables the teacher to use more authentic learning experiences, which is important when working through SEL. The UbD provides opportunity for students to work through 'real-world' problems while academic learning takes place (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011) and is based on six key 'tenets.' These include:

1. developing and deepening of student understanding;
2. evidence of student understanding;
3. effective curriculum development using "backward design;"
4. frequent reviews of curriculum and assessment designs;
5. teacher provided opportunities for students to explain, apply, empathize, and self-assess; and
6. collaboration between teachers, schools, and districts using technology (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011).

The "backward design" approach mentioned above is a nod toward the three-stage 'backward planning' curriculum design process, which helps teachers to design and improve upon their lessons (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). In regard to this particular curriculum, it gives the Special Education teacher the opportunity to use Individualized Education Plan (IEP) goals and SEL standards to create a long-term assessment and then work backward, creating effective and authentic learning experiences for the students.

## Project Description

A full year curriculum includes the five areas of competence outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in order to encompass the framework of SEL curriculum. However, this project highlighted the competency of Self-Management in a 15-day unit. The curriculum was designed for 9-12 grade students receiving EBD services in federal instructional settings 01, 02, or 03, and have IEP goals that refer to emotional regulation. The SEL standards that the state of Minnesota has developed will be incorporated into a curriculum unit along with content that addresses IEP goals for this category.

While each IEP goal is individual to the student, there is a bank of goals that reflect needs typically seen with students in EBD direct service classes. The curriculum is divided into three trimester sections, meant for a small group that meets every school day for 50 minutes at a time. The curriculum was divided this way due to the set-up of the school year by the district where I currently teach. The framework of SEL is addressed in the curriculum using three overarching themes, book study, group discussion, and individualized skill building.

### *Book Study*

The curriculum is divided into three trimesters. Each trimester there is a book read in class. The book will not be incorporated into every lesson plan, rather it will be read on alternating school days. For example, the book will be read aloud from on Tuesdays and Thursdays during a full five-day school week. Research has shown that it is important for adolescent students to have access to alternative perspectives and other points of view because “the more we read fiction, the more we develop the ability to put ourselves in a

character's shoes and feel for them deeply" (Hart & Draper, 2019, p. xv). The book chosen focuses on a character who faces similar challenges as the students in the class, and this provides the opportunity to discuss personal conflicts in a non-personal way. Due to the fact that the books are chosen with current students in mind, the book choice will change from year to year.

***Group Discussion - Role Play***

Each lesson includes time for group discussion and role-play. When learning social skills it is necessary to provide time to practice the new skills. Group role-plays and discussions are also important when working through individual goals. For example, a student's IEP goal may have an objective that states:

> In a role play, the student will demonstrate the steps in requesting help (decide if you want/need help, decide who might help, look at the person, use a pleasant voice, say please, explain exactly what is being requested) with 100% accuracy as measured by teacher observation.

This objective can be met during group role-play by utilizing and practicing the social-emotional learning skill, self-advocacy. This discussion time will also provide opportunities to problem-solve and hear other perspectives.

***Individual Skill-Building***

Because this curriculum was developed for students with diverse needs and goals, there needs to be flexibility in the day to provide individualized attention and work one on one towards IEP goals with students. The objectives that coincide with an IEP goal may include short-term targets such as: "Given a stressful situation, the student will describe the coping strategy they are using and its effectiveness in three out of four

situations, as determined by their instructor." These types of objectives will need to be addressed and worked on during individual skill-building time. This time is also built in for adolescent students with EBD services to focus on identity creation and self-reflection.

***Assessment***

The goal of the unit plan was to create opportunities for adolescent students with EBD to build their social skills and awareness. The effectiveness of the curriculum is measured by the progress documented on student's IEP goals along with the accuracy of the end of unit summative assessment.

Individual Education Plan (IEP) progress needs to be reported to families and the school district three times a year. After each trimester there will be data on whether or not the student's are benefiting from SEL instruction and meeting their individualized goals and objectives.

Along with progress reporting, the summative assessment will provide information for the educator to determine if students are retaining the instruction. The end of unit assessment is a final project titled, Inspirational Poster. The students will need to incorporate what they have learned onto a board, document, or slideshow in order to be able to utilize the information when necessary.

Both IEP progress reports and the final summative assessment address both aspects of the research question, *What does social-emotional learning look like in the high school special education setting, and how does it benefit students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders?* It will be short-term data, but it will be able to determine if SEL is beneficial for students with EBD.

**Setting and Participants**

The setting for this project was a small midwestern high school. This school had 1,492 students enrolled. Of that population, 230 students received special education services but only 25 students qualified for services under the category of EBD. Because students with EBD services required additional social skills training compared to their general education peers, this curriculum was delivered in a direct service special education classroom geared specifically toward students in this particular category.

The participants were in a direct service class that is 56 minutes long and the student enrolled is taking it in place of a general education elective. Each class typically had five to ten students per hour. The class size varied depending on the severity of need in the classroom.

Often, students' needs vary greatly under the umbrella of EBD. Some have specific IEP goals that consist of managing frustration, reducing physical aggression toward others, following directions, regulating emotions, using 'I' statements when feeling strong emotions, or being able to successfully utilize a healthy coping strategy when feeling anxious or overwhelmed. Students within the classroom may have medical diagnoses that include Bipolar Disorder, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Split Personality Disorder, among others. While this may sound like a diverse group, and it really can feel that way sometimes, all of the students receiving these services have a need for emotional regulation instruction and are unable to effectively manage their feelings and responses toward others.

**Timeline**

The timeline for this capstone was two semesters. The literature review and basis for the project was completed from October through December of 2020. The curriculum and reflection were completed between February and May of 2021. The timeline for completing this project will be February 2021-June 2021. I will be sharing my data and curriculum in August, and implementing it in the classroom beginning September 2021. The curriculum will be one unit in length, but can be expanded through a full year.

**Summary**

This chapter provided the broad overview of the curriculum design and rationale behind it. It is important to reflect on the reason why this curriculum project was chosen and to remember the need there is for it within the classroom. This chapter also explained the Understanding by Design framework and why it was the best fit for the curriculum. Along with this, it outlined the setting for the curriculum project and gave a broad representation of the students who would participate and benefit from the curriculum that was built. The last item that it addressed was the intended audience of my project, how to present it to said audience, and the timeline with which to get there.

The next and final chapter of this capstone, Chapter Four, contains a description and explanation related to conclusions made about this capstone project, the reflective answer to the question, “Where do I go from here?” It includes a personal plan for how to implement the curriculum in the future. Lastly, it reflects on the capstone project as a whole, and concludes the work.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Reflection/Conclusion

### Introduction

When I decided to continue my educational journey and write this capstone I had relied heavily on the knowledge obtained from past experiences to guide me into this content. Now, almost one year later, I feel there is still so much to learn. While I think that I am continuing to learn, one thing has remained clear and constant throughout this research: the development of social and emotional education are vital for the success of students with disabilities. Especially when addressing students receiving special education services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders. The research question of this capstone honed in on this subset of students: *What does social-emotional learning look like in the high school special education setting, and how does it benefit students with Emotional or Behavioral Disorders?* This research led to the creation of a curriculum outline that is meant to build social skills and increase self-management.

### Overview

This chapter is a reflection of my project as a whole. Chapter four addresses a summary of the literature review, an overview of the project created, limitations to the capstone and research, and finally the impact that this capstone could have in the future.

### Reflection

The process of this capstone has spanned almost a year. When I first began writing and developing the introductory stages of it, I was unsure if I would ever be satisfied enough with it to consider it done. The more research conducted, the more

content I felt was missing. Throughout the process, this felt like one of the biggest hurdles for me. The other difficulty that I faced was APA formatting. Writing has always come naturally to me, however, perfecting the citations within my writing proved to be a larger battle than I was anticipating. Between the idea of not having enough research, and struggling to perfect APA, I have made a multitude of edits to this capstone. I have written research papers in the past, but never on this scale.

The project also proved to be difficult in a few ways. It took longer than anticipated to complete, and it still does not feel finished. I kept wanting to add in more content but needed to keep a realistic scope of what is accomplishable within a 50 minute time-period. It also felt open-ended in the sense that there needs to be space left in each day to work on individual goals. Overall I think that it came out reflecting the research and time that has been put into it over the past year.

This experience has changed the way that I teach the curriculum within the classroom. It has made me a more confident, research-based educator and the students benefit because of it.

**Literature Review**

The three main sections of the literature review: Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), Special Education, and adolescent development, stood out in the research almost immediately. After that, the focus of my research was clear, it then became the battle of determining what to include, and when to effectively stop.

I knew I wanted to address the research that had been done in regards to Social-Emotional Learning because this was the theory I wanted to use as the base to build my curriculum for this project. In order to responsibly choose a theory for use in the

classroom, I believe that it is important to review the research and studies that have been conducted using that particular theory. The most notable data reviewed came from four recent studies done on the effects of SEL school-wide. These studies showed that there were statistically significant benefits for adolescent students who receive SEL instruction (Mahoney et al., 2018). Once satisfied with my data, I felt it important to introduce the students that would be receiving the Social-Emotional Learning instruction.

When researching students who receive special education services under the category of Emotional or Behavioral Disorders (EBD), I felt that it was important to address special education as a whole, how it is regulated at the federal level, and then investigate into the category of EBD and the strategies and theories used to help develop social skills and emotional regulation skills for these particular students. The major curriculum noted include: Boys Town, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and Social-emotional Learning (SEL). When discussing the use of Boys Town and other curriculum programs with peer teachers, it has been noted in the classrooms that elementary-aged students with EBD respond well to the segmented steps, where adolescents have not.

Lastly, I wanted to acknowledge that the curriculum focuses on secondary students in the adolescent developmental stage. I wanted to research the use of social-emotional learning on this particular developmental stage and determine if this learning theory was effective for this particular student age group. In order to determine if it would be appropriate it was first important to identify the biological, psychological, and psychosocial changes that occur during the adolescent developmental stage. The

educational theories of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson were also addressed and explored (Hoy 2019).

The research conducted led to determining that Social-Emotional Learning will benefit adolescent students who receive special education services under the category of EBD. This led to the creation of the project attached to this capstone.

**Project Overview**

The project portion of this capstone takes the research done on social-emotional learning and its effects on adolescent students who receive EBD services and creates a tangible curriculum that can be utilized within a direct service Special Education classroom. The lesson plans within this curriculum model use the Understanding by Design framework. This model was developed by Wiggins and McTighe (2011). I chose this model because it frames a unit that is organized around standards and is developed strategically with the target outcomes in mind.

The primary learning outcome of the unit is the Social-Emotional Learning competency self-management. The curriculum also outlines the use of a book study, group discussion, and individual skill-building activities. The lesson plans utilize each of these and are designed this way due to the diverse needs of students within the classroom. These activities are research-based and incorporated into the curriculum to support adolescent student development.

The purpose of this project was to provide educators with a curriculum that can be flexible to fit the needs of each individual student within the class, but that also provided concrete ways to incorporate social skill building and strategies within the class structure.

**Limitations to Project**

The main limitation of this project is the reality that every direct service classroom that services students with emotional or behavioral disorders is drastically different based on the dynamic of the classroom and the needs of the students. Every student within the direct service classroom has an individualized goal on their IEP that they are working toward. This makes planning ahead difficult. Also, an adolescent student may receive the same direct service class for the entirety of their high school career. This means that every trimester and school year needs to have new content but still stay consistent with the curriculum.

This leads into another limitation of this project. Every student and every classroom varies so significantly that when researching and collecting data it is difficult to grasp the whole picture of a school, classroom, or student.

There is also the unfortunate fact that some feel there is a stigma attached to the category of EBD. Therefore, when conducting research, it is difficult to note an author's bias toward the category or the students themselves. For example, while working with a colleague she stated that she wanted a child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) to state Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) rather than Emotional or Behavioral Disorder (EBD) due to the difference in response from the child's general education teachers. This saddens me, because it does nothing but further stigmatize the category if educators are afraid to use it and attempt to understand it.

**Impact**

The immediate small scale impact of this project will be realized within my own classroom. The curriculum will be utilized within the direct service classes for students receiving services under the category of EBD beginning in the fall of the 2021-2022

school year. On a larger scale I would like to share the curriculum with the local districts to help create a tangible outline for how to best support students receiving services under the EBD category.

**Summary**

This chapter was a personal reflection of the capstone process and final product. This included the written capstone and the project. This chapter was a helpful exercise that allowed the ability to reflect on the journey. When this process began, I was unsure if I would finish it in a timely fashion. Now, I am grateful for the setbacks and the long research days. They have helped me to grow and realize what I am capable of as a scholar and educator.

Chapter four also briefly addressed the literature review, the project created, and the overall impact that it may have in the future. While this impact is unclear, I am hopeful that this capstone will be used to help other teachers build an effective curriculum for adolescent Special Education students.

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