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Social Emotional Learning: A Professional Development Series for Teachers

Danielle Plumley

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**Social Emotional Learning:
A Professional Development Series for Teachers**

By
Danielle Plumley

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

Hamline University
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Capstone Project Facilitators: Abigail Rombalski and Shelley Orr

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

How can we as teachers incorporate social emotional learning on a regular basis to create meaningful progress for students? This is the focus question of my capstone project. This project researched the most effective strategies for teaching social emotional skills to elementary students and provides teachers with resources to do so.

A very important aspect of student success in school is their social emotional well-being. One might consider “success” in the classroom to be only academic success, but students need much more than good grades to be successful in life. They need to be able to do things such as create meaningful relationships, solve conflicts, effectively communicate, and manage their emotions. If they are unable to do those things, it can impact their lives negatively as they grow in life. The lack of social skills to be successful in these areas can also impact their academics. For example, if a student is unable to work through a conflict with a friend, it may cause them to be too distracted to focus on their learning. If they are feeling too frustrated about something small and can’t manage that frustration, it can grow into a bigger problem that takes away from their focus on the work. Elementary school students are in a crucial time where these social and emotional skills are being learned and tested on a daily basis. For students to be successful, we need to integrate social emotional skills into our daily learning. There is so much pressure to fit in everything academically, but if we as teachers don’t take the time to incorporate Social Emotional Learning (S.E.L.), it will affect students in a negative way as they grow into adults.

Personal Experience

Ever since my first day of student teaching, I have found myself in schools with high behavior needs. The first day I was student teaching in a first grade classroom, we had to evacuate students from the room because one student began throwing crayons at the rest of the class. I thought, “What am I getting myself into?” The girl who was throwing the crayons turned out to be one of the funniest, most charismatic children I had known at that point. I then got my first teaching job in a very diverse school considered a Setting 3 behavior school, which means we not only have high behavior needs in our school, but we house center-based classrooms for students needing constant adult supervision for behavior. The first month in my classroom, I had to stop a fist fight between two fourth grade boys, who were basically the same height as me. I again thought to myself, “What have I gotten myself into? Am I in over my head?” However, yet again, I grew to know those students and learn so much about who they were. We made amazing strides in behavior over the year. What I quickly learned in that time was that my assumption, that students came to school equipped with those social and emotional skills intact and ready to learn, was wildly incorrect. They need help to build those skills at school. I also realized that it is impossible to realize what the students are learning at home when it comes to social emotional skills. Not every parent has the ability or the resources to be able to teach their child social and emotional skills at home.

What I quickly realized as a new teacher was that building relationships with these students, helping them work through their feelings and frustrations, and teaching them skills to deal with those feelings, was the thing I felt most passionate about. I

continue to work at the same school where I began my teaching career. It is a Title 1 school, with minority enrollment making up 92% of the student body, and 82% free or reduced lunch. It is a very challenging school to work at when it comes to student behaviors. However, I pride myself in my ability to help students grow in their social emotional skills by building relationships and earning their trust first. I first need to focus on getting to know the student by asking questions, figuring out what makes them feel comfortable, and showing them they can trust me. Once the relationship is growing and the trust is there, it is much easier to help the student with social emotional needs. If they trust you, they are willing to listen to your advice on how to self-regulate, are more likely to use their words to explain their emotions, make appropriate choices on how to react to situations, etc. Each student is unique, so it takes time to learn what skills they need growth in, and what works for that individual. I love the feeling when I see a student using a technique to keep themselves calm, hear them expressing a frustration with words instead of a behavior, and recognizing that growth in themselves.

Rationale

It is important that we give students direct instruction on social skills. Social skills involve interactions with others. The skills students should be learning about are things such as communication, cooperation, empathy, and building relationships. These are skills that will apply to every aspect of their lives. Learning proper social skills will also help students grow into adults who are able to work and interact with others effectively.

Although academics are important, I find the most important skills to lead a happy and healthy life are social emotional skills. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, many students spent months, or even years, distance learning at home. After returning to in

person learning, I noticed a lack of skills in these areas from students who had not been in a social atmosphere for quite some time. I see students struggle to communicate their feelings to peers in an appropriate way. I see students struggle to work cooperatively. It has become clear that student deficits in these areas are higher than ever. Some of our students did not get social interactions with people other than their family for almost two years, other than on a computer screen. They did not get the chance to play, communicate, build relationships, or work through conflict resolution in person. It is always important to teach students social emotional skills, and this pandemic has proven that it is needed more than ever as we try and help students fill in the gaps that they need in order to reach their full potential. These skills are essential in everyday life, and lead students to success at school.

Mental health is such an important part of any human leading a successful life. Anxiety and depression are already prevalent problems in many people, but it has become an increasingly large problem during the pandemic. Many students who already deal with anxiety and depression struggled with mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Social and emotional learning is always important, but right now it is extremely important that focus on these skills is a regular part of classroom instruction. We need to make sure that these students grow into teens and adults who take care of their mental health. In recent years we have also seen an increase in diagnosed behavior problems. Examples of diagnosed behavior problems include things such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or emotional behavior disorders (EBD) like oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD). All students, and especially students diagnosed with behavior problems, will benefit greatly from direct instruction on how to

deal with their emotions. Students should understand what is happening in their brain when they are feeling different emotions, and learn effective strategies that work for them. Another group of students who can really benefit from SEL are those who have experienced traumas. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic or potentially traumatic experiences in a student's life. Examples of an ACE would be abuse, neglect, family with substance abuse problems, or the death of a loved one. These experiences have a tremendous impact on students in many ways. ACEs have long-lasting effects on mental health, and can impact a student's ability to form relationships. What I have found in my years of teaching is that students with trauma outside of school tend to act out when they are at school because they do not know how to handle their feelings and emotions. Depending on their home environment, they also might not have great examples of healthy social skills and communication. The students with the biggest behavior resistances I have worked with almost always have had some sort of outside trauma. For example, I have students who have dealt with death in the family, domestic violence, abuse, homelessness, and many other things. They come to school and are expected to be ready to learn, when there is so much else going on in their brain. They may be feeling angry, sad, agitated, distracted, etc. and are being asked to read or do math. This is where I see students' behavior explode- when they haven't been taught the skills to manage their emotions. If they are unable to communicate a feeling, or have a known skill that can help with that emotion, they may often respond with inappropriate behavior. It is extremely important to build relationships with students to not only know what is going on in their lives, but what exactly they need help with. It may be that they need to be taught how to name a feeling and express it. It may be a breathing strategy to

know how to self-regulate and calm themselves down. It might be modeling how to advocate for themselves when they feel they need help.

There are so many skills that we can teach kids to help them through feelings and emotions. It is also essential to creating a positive learning experience for all students. If you have a student responding to their environment by exploding, slamming doors, yelling, etc. because they are unable to regulate their emotions, it negatively affects their classmates' learning and experience in the classroom. It should be our goal as educators to create a safe, welcoming environment for all students.

Social emotional skills will continue to be important as students grow into adults and enter the workforce. These are skills that employers will value. An employer will value an employee who has good communication and good interpersonal skills. Elementary students are a long way away from the workforce; however, these skills need to be learned now and practiced as they complete school and grow into successful adults.

Summary

The question I address in this project is *“How can we as teachers incorporate social emotional learning on a regular basis to create meaningful progress for students?”* As a teacher, I know that sometimes we have great intentions with teaching SEL in meaningful ways, but it can easily get pushed aside with the pressure to teach academics. . My goal in this project is to compile research-based SEL strategies and resources into a professional development for teachers that can apply to how they approach social emotional instruction in their classrooms. I had intended on creating a curriculum for students, but ultimately felt that it would be most helpful to equip teachers with knowledge and skills to use with their students. The professional development sessions

should leave teachers feeling that they gained new information and skills they can implement in their classrooms to address social and emotional skills with their students. The project will include electronic resources for teachers with visuals they can use as they teach the concepts to their students. The goal is for teachers to know how important social emotional skills are and how much they impact student success.

In the next chapter, I will review different sources of literature that discuss social emotional learning.

CHAPTER TWO

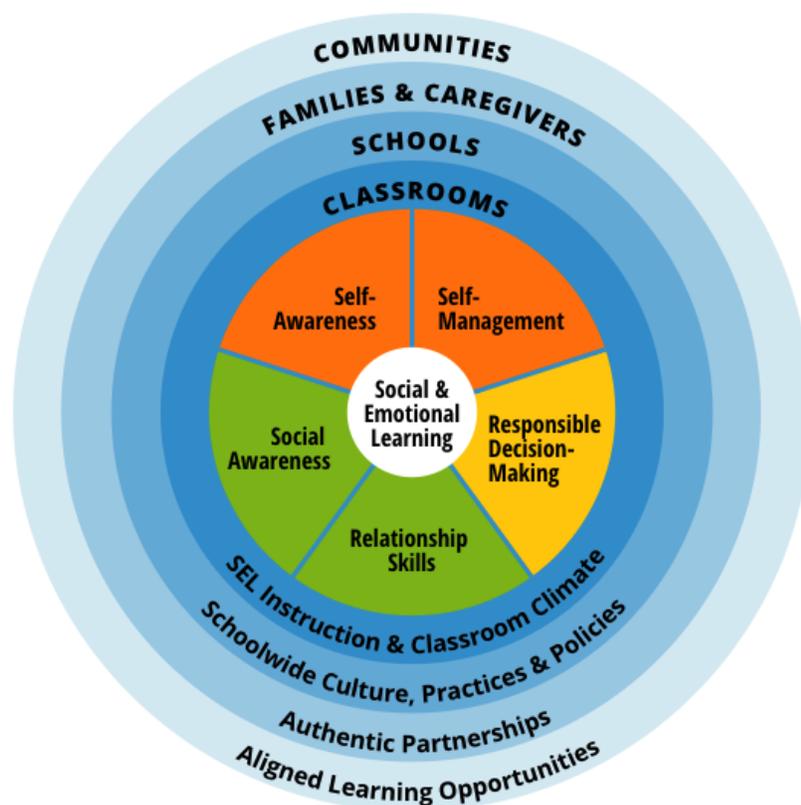
Literature Review

Components of Social Emotional Learning

Social emotional learning, also known as SEL, involves teaching students the skills they need to manage their emotions and handle social situations and relationships with appropriate respect. There are many different frameworks of social emotional learning. Emotional skills are things such as managing frustration, recognizing emotions, and regulating emotional responses in appropriate ways. Social skills are things such as effective communication, social awareness of others, building and maintaining relationships, and responsible decision making. This section will overview all of the aspects of social emotional learning and what it looks like to teach those in the classroom. I will give some examples of the skills as they are represented and utilized during a typical school setting. According to Elias et al. (1997), SEL is “the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one’s life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development” (p. 2). This all encompassing definition of SEL has a lot of components to it. There is an organization called the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). This organization first coined the term “Social Emotional Learning (SEL)” in 1994 (CASEL, 2022). They have something they refer to as the CASEL 5, which are the “five broad and interrelated areas” of social emotional learning (CASEL, 2022). Many schools across the country have adapted the CASEL 5 and use these concepts to articulate what students should be able to do to be successful in school. Those five concepts within

the framework are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. According to CASEL (2022), self-awareness is when a person has the ability to understand their own emotions, thoughts, and values, as well as how it can influence their behaviors. This skill also involves recognizing your own strengths and weaknesses. Self-management is closely related to self-awareness. It is understanding those previously mentioned aspects of one's self, but then being able to manage them to achieve goals. In life, this can look like being able to control impulses, managing stress, and exhibiting self-motivation. The next two concepts, social-awareness and relationship skills, are closely related as well. When describing social-awareness, CASEL (2022) states that it involves understanding and empathizing the perspectives of others. To have this skill is to demonstrate it across a diversity of people from different cultures or backgrounds. To demonstrate social awareness, one needs to be able to see others' perspectives and show understanding. Social-awareness has to do with compassion for others, which leads to creating relationship skills. Branching off of that, CASEL (2022) explains that relationship skills are the ability to "establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships". Relationship skills involve healthy and effective communication, cooperation, active listening, and resolving conflicts. The last of CASEL's five concepts is responsible decision-making, which is described as being able to "make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions"(CASEL, 2022). These skills are present in all aspects of students' lives, including school, in families, and in the community.

On the following page is the image that summarizes the framework of SEL and shows how they are incorporated into different aspects of life (CASEL, 2022):

Figure 1*Interactive CASEL Wheel*

CASEL. "CASEL - CASEL." *Casel.org*, 2019, casel.org/.

First, let's focus on the *social* aspect of SEL. This involves how someone relates to society and other people. It is important to have social awareness, which means recognizing others that are different from you and having the ability to empathize with them. People are different from one another in many ways, whether it be physically, culturally, or socially. Students must learn to be socially aware of the differences in others compared to themselves, and have the social awareness to show respect and empathy to other people. In a school setting, this skill is so important in many areas. Students are around their peers all day long when they are at school. There are many schools, such as the school I teach in, that are very diverse. This means that students are surrounded by

peers who may look or speak differently than they do. Their peers may come from different backgrounds, cultures, or socioeconomic statuses. They have to have appropriate social skills to be able to form relationships with others. They need to demonstrate social awareness skills of kindness, caring, and empathy to form peer relationships (Denham & Brown, 2010, p. 657). The students have times like lunch and recess, where they have free social interactions and social play, which they have to be able to navigate in appropriate ways. For example, lunch is a time when students can practice respectful communication and active listening. At recess, there are many opportunities during play where students can have the opportunity to communicate and work through conflict.

Recess is a part of every student's daily schedule, and is a place where so many of these skills are necessary. Students need to have the social skills to hold an appropriate conversation with their peers. They need to learn communication skills, like communicating their thoughts and emotions clearly, and active listening. Cooperation is also a skill that becomes a prevalent need in free social play times, like at recess. Children need to be able to navigate conflicts with others, which often come up in games, and work through those with respectful communication. Often, students lacking these skills will resort right to an altercation or frustration scenario because they don't know how to have healthy communication and problem solving with others. If children have the ability to understand themselves and others, it will lead to a successful school experience (Denham & Brown, 2010, p. 653).

Communication skills are also so important in the classroom during academics. Students need to be taught how to effectively communicate their thoughts and ideas, as

well as listen to others sharing their ideas. They need to be taught how to have an effective conversation during learning. This can be taught with things like sentence starters. For example, during a math discussion, students can be taught to respond to a peer with a statement like “I agree with how you said...”, or “I like your strategy and how you ...”. Students need to be able to transfer those skills to a group setting, because working with small groups is something they will continue to do throughout their school career. Being an effective group member involves cooperation skills, such as listening to others’ ideas, presenting your own ideas, and the ability to compromise with a group of peers. These are all abilities that fall into the “relationship skills” category of social emotional skills, and will lead to success in school. (Denham & Brown, 2010, p. 657)

Social awareness is another important element of social skills. (CASEL, 2022) Students need to be able to recognize and show empathy for others that are different from them. They need to learn to recognize how others are feeling, and how to act appropriately towards others in those situations. Teaching responsible decision making is an important part of creating success in these areas for kids. They need to be able to identify their problem and analyze the ways that they can choose to react and work through their conflicts. It is important to teach skills on what appropriate reactions look like when they are in a situation where they have a disagreement with a peer. Weissberg & Cascarino (2013) state that “social awareness is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports” (p. 10). I have seen firsthand how important that awareness of diversity is, as I work in a very diverse school with students I hereby accept all Terms and Conditions for the use of Wi-Fi from many different cultures

and backgrounds. This social awareness is something that can be taught through lessons on appreciating others' differences and how to respect and be empathetic towards those things.

Next, there are the *emotional* skills aspects of SEL. The concept of self-management is very crucial to a student's success at school. Children are still learning how to manage their feelings and emotions in many situations. There are situations that arise at school that may cause feelings of frustration. Those situations can be academic or social. Perhaps a student is frustrated because a group member was not communicating respectfully to them. Perhaps they are feeling frustrated or defeated because they are working on a difficult math problem. Sometimes, it can be something as simple as a pencil breaking that can cause a student to experience feelings of frustration. The important part is whether or not they have the skills to regulate those emotions. Students' academic success is directly affected by how they are able to manage and regulate their emotions. As said by Denham and Brown (2010), "children who have difficulties dealing with negative emotions may not have the personal resources to focus on learning, whereas those who can maintain a positive emotional tone might be able to remain positively engaged with classroom tasks" (p. 659). For example, if a student is still upset by a conflict they were unable to work through at recess, they may be distracted and not ready to engage in a math activity and focus on an academic task. If that student is taught skills for managing their emotions, such as calming strategies, they may be able to work through those feelings faster and be ready to engage in an academic activity.

Another reason it is important for students to be able to self-regulate their emotions is because they may feel frustration during difficult academic tasks and need to manage that emotion. Students need to be taught about frustration and perseverance to be able to work through things that might feel difficult. Young students may not have the terminology to label their emotions. They need to be given the skill set to identify what feeling they are experiencing, and how to navigate that emotion. They may only know terms such as “happy” or “sad” to label how they feel. The social emotional learning component of self-awareness can help students identify and assess their more complicated feelings, such as frustrated, hyper, distracted, or disappointed, and come up with solutions to work through them. (Denham & Brown, 2010, p. 656) Often, students who are unable to express their feelings or seek solutions, will resort to negative behaviors that ultimately impact their academic success. Negative behaviors can be things such as yelling, slamming doors, refusal, disrespectful or inappropriate language, or many others. It is very typical for a student to exhibit negative behaviors in a way that is trying to seek attention from an adult, because they do not have the necessary skills to communicate what they are feeling or what their needs are.

The Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011) is a visual that helps students understand what “zone” their emotions are in. There are four color zones that each represent a set of emotions. Red represents extreme emotions like anger and aggression. Yellow represents emotions such as frustration, silliness or overexcitement, or worried. Green represents a happy, controlled state. This is the zone that students should be in to be ready to learn. Blue represents slow moving emotions, like sick, sad, or tired. Having these visuals can help students identify those emotions and then be taught skills for how

to get them back to the “green zone” and be ready to learn. Below you will see a visual representation of the Zones of Regulation (“THE ZONES of REGULATION: A CONCEPT to FOSTER SELF-REGULATION & EMOTIONAL CONTROL”).

Figure 2

Zones of Regulation

			
<p>Blue Zone</p> <p>Sad Bored Tired Sick</p>	<p>Green Zone</p> <p>Happy Focused Calm Proud</p>	<p>Yellow Zone</p> <p>Worried Frustrated Silly Excited</p>	<p>Red Zone</p> <p>overjoyed/Elated Panicked Angry Terrified</p>

Teaching children about how their brains work can also be a very important component of SEL. They can be taught about the different parts of their brain and what the “job” of each part is. If they understand the concept of “fight or flight”, and how their emotions cause their brain to not make logical decisions when upset, it can help them see why it is important to get their brain back to a calm, logical state to make decisions on their behavior. One resource that is used to teach these concepts to kids is the *MindUp Curriculum* (Mind Up, 2021). The concepts in the resources focus on teaching students about neuroscience, mindfulness, and psychology in relation to SEL. Again, helping students fully understand the ways their brain and body work and connecting that to their emotions can help them recognize their choices and make more logical decisions.

Incorporating all of the components of SEL on a regular basis in the classroom is key to students understanding and implementing skills that will positively impact their success at school.

Benefits of Social Emotional Learning

Acquiring social-emotional skills is beneficial in many ways. McCormick et al. (2020) discuss how social emotional skills are important in becoming a successful student, especially for students in low-income schools. Durlack et al. (2011) conclude that “there are a variety of reasons that SEL programming might enhance students’ academic performance” (p. 417), such as attitudes toward school, self-confidence in learning, perseverance in learning, self-discipline, etc. It is also a key component of having meaningful relationships in and out of school. Social skills continue to be important all through one’s life and will lead to success in the workforce. This section will detail the benefits and impacts that social emotional learning can have on a student’s life.

As mentioned in the previous section, having SEL skills has been shown to impact students’ academic success in a positive way. One example is when students come across a difficult academic task, they may feel frustrated and want to quit. If they are taught the skills to identify frustration, as well as skills such as perseverance through a difficult task, they may have better academic performance (Durlack et al., 2011, pp. 417-418).

If students are more self-aware, they may also feel more confident and willing to try more difficult tasks. They will persist in challenging projects and potentially be more motivated in their studies. Whereas, if students are not taught skills of self-awareness and

how to work through frustrations, they may continue to give up easily on academic tasks which will continue to impact their success throughout their school career. As an adult, these skills will transfer to the workforce. It will create adults who are able to work through difficult projects, manage stress, and have self-discipline.

Students' ability to self-regulate their emotions is also beneficial to the academics of the rest of the students in the classroom. If you spend the time to regularly incorporate SEL skills to teach students to self-regulate their emotions, you as the teacher will end up needing to spend less time helping individual students work through their emotions and find coping strategies to work through them. As a result, you will have more time dedicated to instruction and helping all students in the classroom with academics.

Whereas, if a SEL skills are lacking, a teacher may regularly be pulled away from the rest of the class to help individual students with emotional and behavioral needs. It will take time to regularly incorporate SEL into daily practice, but if it is embedded into routines and regular curriculum, it will have positive effects that will save teaching time in the long run. It is also important to have the tools available to help students self-regulate their emotions. Common calming strategies can be a variety of things, but some examples are sensory options (ex: a stress ball), yoga stretches, deep breathing, or drawing. (Minahan, 2013). These are practices that children can be taught to do on their own in the classroom. Teachers can create a space for students to use calming strategies and teach students the expectations of that space.

Todd, Smothers, and Colson (2022) describe what a space for self-regulation may look like in the classroom:

Creating a sensory-friendly space for mindfulness and self-regulation is another option to promote healthy social and emotional behavioral practices. These spaces may go by a variety of names such as a calm corner, chill zone, or sensory room. The designated area or room is a calm place that allows students to focus solely on emotional regulation. (p. 22)

Another benefit of SEL instruction is the ability to create meaningful relationships through positive social interactions. Relationships are a key element in life, whether that is with family, friends, acquaintances, or coworkers. People need positive relationships to lead a healthy life. As students grow into teenagers and adults, they will continue to build many relationships in different aspects of their lives. If we teach students at a young age how to have social skills of respectful communication, cooperation, and social awareness, it will assist them in creating healthy relationships in all aspects of their lives. If social skills are incorporated into the classroom on a regular basis, it will create long-lasting positive impacts on the way that students maintain relationships. As they grow and become adults, they will be faced with many situations where healthy relationships are important, whether that is going to college or beginning a career. If an adult is in a situation where they have a conflict or disagreement with another person, such as a coworker, they need to have the skill set to handle the situation with respectful listening and communication. In both school and work environments it is essential for people to have “strong social and emotional competence among learners, including the ability to persist, empathize with others, and manage their behavior” (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013, p.12).

Students who are equipped with social emotional skills in school, have those skills available to take through life and become successful adults. Successful adults should be able to enter the workforce and maintain healthy relationships throughout their lives. We as teachers are building the future generation. The students we are helping to learn and grow right now, are the future citizens of our communities. The intentional focus on SEL along with regular academic curriculum will create adults who are able to handle and navigate the challenges of life more successfully.

Behavioral and Emotional Resistances Impacting Student Success

There are a variety of things that can impact a student's success related to social emotional skills. A student may experience trauma outside of school which causes deficits in certain necessary skills. Howard (2013) discusses how childhood trauma can impact a child's future behavior. She went on to discuss how children with histories of trauma may show either disinhibited behaviors (hyperarousal) or inhibited behaviors (hypoarousal). There are also many diagnosed behaviors that can impact a student's social emotional skills, such as anxiety, ADHD, and emotional behavioral disorders. Children with behavior disorders tend to have difficulties in other areas of their lives that are similar to those with learning and with their teachers (Wilson, 2005). It is important to understand all of these things and how they can impact students at school in order to really focus SEL instruction on what skills students might be lacking related to other factors. This section will outline some of the areas in a student's life that can impact their behavior and social emotional skills.

Childhood trauma is an extremely important piece to consider when thinking about student behaviors. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention

(2022), trauma can be events such as experiencing or witnessing any form of abuse, violence, neglect, loss of loved ones, homelessness, family illness, etc. These traumas are also known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Research shows that trauma has long-lasting effects on children's lives- including school. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) says that ACEs can impact a student's education and future job opportunities. A student that has experienced trauma or is experiencing trauma outside of school will often show effects through behaviors exhibited at school. Students experiencing trauma may have difficulties when it comes to forming healthy and stable relationships (CDC, 2022). Although teachers cannot control what traumas a student has experienced, there are ways that we can help them cope with the effects through SEL. School is a safe space where students can learn how to manage the emotions they may be experiencing from their trauma. There are scenarios where students are not seeing positive, healthy relationships or communication at home, which impacts their ability to exhibit those skills on their own. Teachers can build relationships with students and model positive, healthy communication and relationship skills. When thinking of trauma, it is also important to consider the traumas of different groups of people. For example, when thinking about African-American students, consider that their lived experiences might be different than that of their white peers. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) explains more about this:

Instead of a more Western-centered approach to the human as separate and compartmentalized, a significant aspect of African American culture is the need to fully integrate mind, body, and spirit. Thus, social-emotional and mental health and wellness concerns would be integrated into a re-set curriculum. These

social-emotional and mental health components of the curriculum are necessary if the re-set school takes on the challenges of a world that is increasingly perilous for African Americans. Shootings of unarmed African Americans and increased risk of death through a viral pandemic pose important questions for school-aged African Americans. Why do these shootings keep happening? Why do the police keep getting away with the shootings? How is it that Black and Brown people are more vulnerable to this disease? Although these questions have empirical answers, they arise out of emotional concerns that also must be addressed. (p. 74)

Students who struggle with behavior problems and controlling their emotions will often be labeled as having an emotional behavior disorder (EBD). Some of these are also referred to as disruptive behavior problems (DBP). According to Ogundele (2018), DBPs include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) and conduct disorder (CD), with ADHD being the most common. ADHD is characterized by “levels of hyperactivity, impulsivity and inattention that are disproportionately excessive for the child’s age and development.” (Ogundele, 2018, para. 12). This impacts students because of the inability to stay focused and being easily distracted during instruction. There are ways we can support students with ADHD by teaching them social and emotional skills. Students with ADHD tend to have impulsive behaviors, which can negatively affect their relationships with peers or their academics. Teachers can teach them to communicate when they are feeling like they can’t focus. Elias et al. (1997) tells how teachers can use scaffolding questions that serve as a catalyst for creative thinking and new insight on the part of the child. This can help teachers “enhance the child’s ability to think independently and share ideas and feelings with

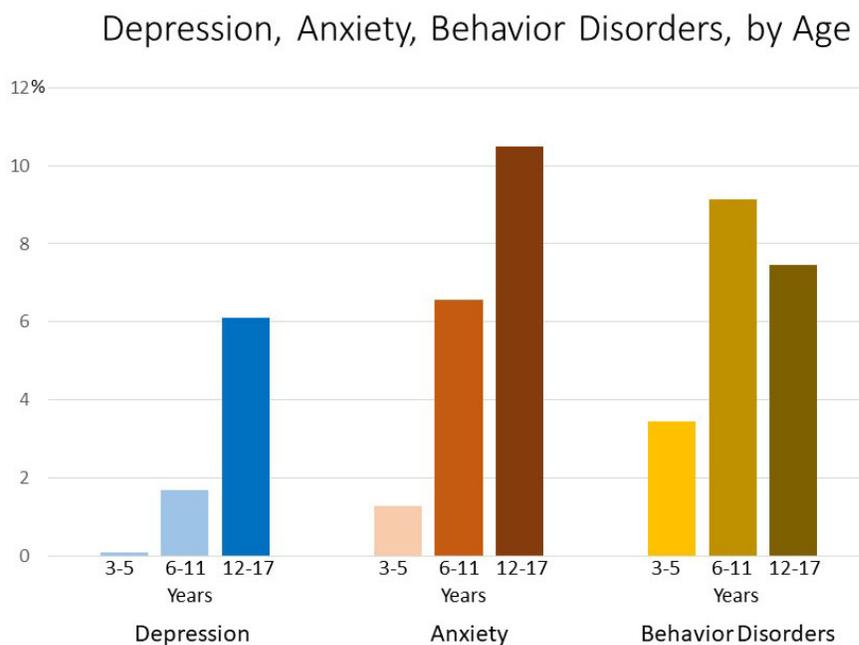
others” (Elias et al., 1997). Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is a disorder in which students are argumentative, defiant, irritable, and lose their temper easily. In school, students with ODD actively defy directions from teachers. They are often hostile or mean towards their peers and lose their temper easily. Behaviors in school are often physical and verbal aggression, such as slamming doors and yelling. These effects negatively impact a student’s academic performance as well as their ability to maintain healthy relationships with peers. Students with these struggles are often placed in social skills groups to learn how to build healthy relationships. Students with conduct disorder have much more severe behavior problems. These behaviors are things such as being aggressive, violent, excessive fighting, repeated lying, cruel, deceitful, dishonest, etc. These students have trouble relating to others and showing empathy. It is not uncommon for students to have multiple diagnoses, such as ADHD along with CD (Ogundele, 2018). Students diagnosed with autism also tend to greatly benefit from being taught social emotional skills. People on the autism spectrum often have deficits in their social interactions and communication skills.

Next, there are emotional problems that impact many students. Anxiety and depression are among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents, according to the World Health Organization (2021). Anxiety can be diagnosed as a disorder, but is also a normal emotional response when mild or moderate in stressful life situations. Students may also have social anxieties, making it difficult to interact socially with their peers. Teaching calming strategies when experiencing anxiety, as well as social relationship skills, can both be very beneficial to students who experience social anxiety. Depression can occur for a multitude of reasons, such life events, loss, or stress. It can

also be genetic. According to Ogundele (2018), students experiencing depression may exhibit symptoms such as sadness, low energy, social isolation, low self-esteem, and difficulty with relationships (among many others). Although anxiety and depression are both medical diagnoses that may require medication, there are also certain steps we can take as teachers to help students with emotional skills. While at school, students can be taught how to identify feelings and advocate for themselves, as well as learn some emotional coping skills to help with self-regulation. Below you will find a figure from the CDC (2022) that shows data concerning students with anxiety, depression, and behavior disorders.

Figure 3

Depression, Anxiety, Behavior Disorders, by Age



CDC. “Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).” *Www.cdc.gov*, 8 Sept. 2020,
www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html.

Although SEL is beneficial for all students, these particular groups of students are vulnerable to social and emotional struggles for different reasons. As teachers begin to integrate SEL into their curriculum and daily routines, they can be aware of individual student needs and differentiate the teaching of specific skills that might be helpful to students with any emotional or behavioral disorders.

Lacking Skills After a Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had effects on all of our lives, but one of the biggest impacts for children is how it affected their growth in social and emotional skills, as well as their mental health. When students are at school, they are learning these skills through social interactions and learning scenarios. When students were forced into distance learning, we saw a lack of growth in those areas that they need to be successful. This section will discuss the ways that students' social and emotional skills were impacted by distance learning during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an experience that no one was prepared for. Students and teachers were forced to move schooling online, which created a whole new world of distance learning. While online classes are a common experience for college students, it was a new normal for elementary, middle, and high school students. Children had limited virtual interactions with their teachers and peers. Distance learning took away the valuable social interactions that students learn and grow from while attending school in person. During this time, "children's screen time may have increased rapidly, which could exacerbate the risk for depression, anxiety, and inattention among children, especially those in lower-income families" (Lee, 2022, p. 8). As a teacher who experienced the changes of distance learning during the pandemic, I saw firsthand the

effects that it had on students. One of the biggest challenges I've seen is the skills that students are lacking as they returned to a regular school year. Some students had spent close to two years distance learning, and some socially isolated from anyone other than their family. As students return to school, they are missing out on almost two years of socially interacting with peers and adults. They did not have the opportunity to build relationships, resolve conflicts, or develop healthy communication skills outside of their homes. During distance learning, students did not have the opportunity to develop their social awareness with peers, which involves seeing and understanding others' perspectives and empathizing with them (Denham, 2010). Although they may have had social interactions within their families, there are certain skills that just can not be developed at home. According to Denham (2010):

Numerous skills are crucial at this level, including making positive overtures to play with others, initiating and maintaining conversations, cooperating, listening, taking turns, seeking help, and practicing friendship skills (e.g., joining another child or small group, expressing appreciation, negotiating, giving feedback). In addition, skills related to being assertive (including resisting peer pressure to engage in unsafe, unethical, or unlawful conduct), resolving conflict, and addressing the needs of all concerned via negotiation develop during the preschool to primary school period. (p. 657)

These crucial skills that students were missing out on during distance learning are so important to focus on, for all students but particularly elementary students, as they are such formative years. Fontenelle-Tereshchuk (2020) states that "social interaction is key to the mental and physical development of young children" (p. 3). They need to

experience those social situations in order to develop their social awareness and responsible decision making in those relationships.

Not only were social skills impacted by distance learning, but emotional skills as well. As stated by Golberstein (2020) states that “the COVID-19 pandemic may worsen existing mental health problems and lead to more cases among children and adolescents because of the unique combination of the public health crisis, social isolation, and economic recession” (para. 3). As a teacher during and after the pandemic, I have seen skills such as self-awareness and self-management lacking in many areas. Students have come back to school from distance learning with a lack of stamina, shorter attention spans, and lack of self-motivation. Students had a lot more flexibility with their schedules at home, and may or may not have had family members there to help them. They did not have the high expectations that they are held to at school when it comes to working independently and productively. Lischer, Safi & Dickson (2021) found that students “expressed difficulties in concentrating and maintaining the necessary motivation for distance learning” (p. 7). As they have returned to school, many students have faced some challenges as they are expected to stay on task, work through problems on their own, manage their time, etc. to be a successful student. The SEL skills of self-awareness and self-management are important to rebuild as we make up for the skills that were not developed during distance learning.

An area that students struggle in since the pandemic, is managing their emotional skills. They may not have had the opportunity to work through their emotions at home, or the skill set to do so. Many families had working parents doing their best to help their students during distance learning, but may not have been able to help students work

through feelings like frustration or anxiety during school work if they were busy working themselves. Students need to be taught SEL skills in order to self-manage feelings and emotions. Students can be very easily distracted and easily frustrated if work feels difficult. These skills are always a work in progress for students, but it has become more prevalent since the pandemic and distance learning.

As we see students lacking any of these important skills, it is so important that teachers remember the impact of distance learning, and take the time to teach students what they may be missing. Teaching SEL will help students fill in the gaps that they may have after almost two years of not being in a regular classroom setting with regular social interactions.

Summary

In summary, we know through research that social emotional learning is essential to student success at school. There are many areas of focus when looking at SEL. Students must learn skills such as social awareness, relationship skills, communication skills, self-management, and self-regulation. There are many opportunities for teachers to incorporate SEL in regular curriculum and everyday school settings. Research has shown that the development of social emotional skills has positive impacts on academic success, and affects students as they continue on in life, whether that is maintaining healthy relationships or being successful in the workforce. Although some of these skills may be taught at home, it is so important to embed SEL into curriculum and interactions at school in order for students to be successful.

All students will benefit from SEL instruction, but there are also certain vulnerable populations that it is extremely important for, such as students diagnosed with

behavioral and/or emotional disorders. These students are often lacking crucial social emotional skills because of their diagnosed emotional or behavioral disorders, and will greatly benefit from SEL instruction at school. There are also other mental disorders that affect a student's emotional skills, such as anxiety or depression, and those students can benefit from learning self-regulation.

All students were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and distance learning. During distance learning, students lost opportunities for important social interactions and relationship building at school, and did not have the same opportunities for growth in their self-regulation and self-management skills. Because of this, it is more important now than ever to have an SEL curriculum and resources that make it a regular part of the classroom setting. Teachers should be able to easily incorporate SEL skills throughout their day and embedded into their curriculum.

For my capstone project, I will be creating a curriculum that has easily accessible SEL resources for teachers to make this possible. It will be a curriculum that contains activities, scenarios, discussion topics, and role playing situations to help students develop and grow in their social and emotional skills. It will contain visuals and tools for the classroom that will help students with self-regulation skills, such as calming strategies. My goal is not to create more work for teachers, but to create something that is meaningful and beneficial for elementary-aged classrooms. Chapter 3 will outline this project, goals, and what to expect in the context of the curriculum.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

In the previous chapters, the need for social emotional learning in the classroom was discussed through a literature review of research, as well as in my personal experiences. My experiences come from my positionality, which I view to be considered a “privileged” background. I am a white, straight, female, who grew up in a rural town in a middle class family. I am able-bodied and have no physical or academic disabilities. When I think about my positionality, I need to be very cognizant of how I approach my project, especially when designing a curriculum for people with different experiences as mine. For example, I teach in a school with a majority population of students that are minorities and come from low-income families. I was lucky to grow up in a middle class family and financial concerns did not impact my childhood. I am not a minority. However, I do need to think about how those aspects of my students' lives might change their lens at school. As I created my professional development project for my capstone, I was thinking about all factors, being inclusive, and using unbiased language. In this chapter, I will provide a detailed explanation about what the project is that will be created, based on the previously mentioned research and conclusions. The research question that guides this project is “*How can we as teachers incorporate social emotional learning on a regular basis to create meaningful progress for students?*” The question was formed as I reflected on my six years of teaching. I have always seen such a need to include social emotional learning in teaching, especially in my school, which is composed mostly of low-income students. I have only noticed an increase in these needs

since the COVID-19 pandemic. My school has utilized elements from different social emotional learning (SEL) curriculums over the years, and they have left me with some big takeaways. When I first began my capstone, I had the intention of creating an SEL curriculum. I feel passionately about what is best for students in learning social emotional skills. I had noticed that sometimes, for teachers, SEL can come in second behind academics. I wanted to make a curriculum with resources to make it easier for teachers to include SEL on a daily basis in their classrooms. After I had done my research and began creating my project, I had the realization that what I really wanted was to make sure that other teachers learned and cared about teaching social emotional skills as much as I do. This caused my project to take a turn into becoming a professional development series, covering some of the concepts of SEL that I have researched and find useful in the classroom. I felt that this project could be a great opportunity for teachers to reflect on their own knowledge of SEL, and how they incorporate social emotional skills into their own lives and most importantly, their classrooms. This chapter will discuss the capstone project in detail. It will introduce the intended audience, review the research that supports the project, describe curriculum models that guide the project and provide rationale, and give a timeline for the professional development.

Project Overview

This project was designed with teachers in mind, and seeks to give them the knowledge and skills they require to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. The goal in creating this project is to cover some key topics of social emotional learning, and compile those into a professional development series. This professional

development should help teachers address social emotional skills in a meaningful way and provide them with knowledge of how to incorporate this learning in their classrooms.

As a teacher, I have attended many professional development sessions. As many teachers know, we can sometimes feel unenthused about having to attend yet another professional development, when we so badly want time to be prepping for our students. My goal is to make these sessions meaningful and informative for teachers. The teachers who participate in the sessions should leave with a feeling of having gained some knowledge in SEL, reflected on their own social emotional skills, and thought about how they can utilize this information with their own students. The information, including resources, will also be shared with teachers after the sessions so they can leave feeling like they have taken something that they will be able to employ in their classrooms while it is fresh in their minds. The professional development series will be presented to my third grade team teachers in our weekly hour-long collaboration meetings. This way, teachers will feel that they aren't being tasked with "extra work" by attending the sessions, as we already have to meet during these times. Since our weekly collaboration meetings change topic and we have many things to discuss during that time, I plan on including these professional development sessions for 45 minute sessions over the course of three collaboration meetings throughout the year. The dates will be flexible depending on the needs of our students.

The professional development includes sessions about Zones of Regulation to discuss emotional regulation. It also includes a session about MindUp, which discusses the parts of the brain and how they work in response to our feelings and environment. Lastly, there will be a session about Purposefull People, a curriculum by Character

Strong, which discusses different character trait skills in relation to the five main areas of SEL according to CASEL (2022). In the sessions, I will be showing many visuals related to the social emotional learning topics I am covering. I will make sure that the participants have access to these resources for use in their classrooms after we have completed the professional development sessions. This will include things such as the Zones of Regulation visuals, parts of the brain, and different images that coincide with the character traits of Purposefull People.

The professional development was designed with third grader teachers in mind, however could easily be used for other elementary grades and staff who aren't classroom teachers. The school that the curriculum was designed for is located in a suburb near a major metropolitan area in the midwest. The specific school is a Title 1 school, which means that there is a high percentage of children from low-income families and the school receives supplemental funding to aid students. The school serves approximately 450 students, with 92% of the student body made up of minorities. Approximately 75% of the students receive free or reduced lunch. The professional development sessions were designed with this student population in mind.

Rationale

The topic of social emotional learning was selected because of the needs I have seen in my school, as well as hearing those same needs from my colleagues. Social emotional skills have already been shown to be extremely important in life in general, as well as impacting academics. These needs have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic, considering that students spent time distance learning and not getting those social experiences that they would in a school setting. With the needs I have seen in our

students, I felt a teacher-centered professional development in social emotional learning would help us think about the important needs of our students, outside of academics. The idea for this project is inspired from multiple social emotional concepts. There are concepts from the *MindUp Curriculum* (Mind Up, 2021), which focuses more on understanding the brain. Participants will be able to understand why their brain reacts a certain way, concepts such as “fight or flight”, and how to work on self-regulation by using those understandings. In addition to learning about how the brain works, participants will learn about emotional regulation through *The Zones of Regulation* (Kuypers, 2011). Participants will have a better understanding of all the emotions they and their students may experience. The goal will be for teachers to help students to label their own emotions by saying things such as “I am feeling frustrated because of something that happened at recess”, or “I am having a hard time controlling my body because I am excited”. In addition, the *CASEL 5*, which are the pillars of social emotional learning (self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making) will be discussed along with learning about character traits. (CASEL, 2022). Those character traits will be further explored through a curriculum called *PurposeFull People* (PurposeFull People, n.d.), by Character Strong, which explores nine different character traits that can be focused on with students.

As the literature review has shown, social and emotional learning is a very important component to students’ success (Durlack et al., 2011). When students are lacking in their social emotional skills, there is less focus on academics. However, when a student has strong skills in those areas, it has been shown that their academics are impacted in a positive way. It has also been discussed that these skills are not only

important in school, but that they transfer over as a student becomes an adult in the workforce. Weissberg & Cascarino (2013) stated that in both school and work force, there are necessary skills required for success, including empathy for others and self-management. These discussions support the idea that students who are equipped with the five pillars of social emotional learning will have success in many areas of their lives, including relationships, academics, and in the workforce as adults.

In order for students to achieve success in the five pillars of social emotional learning, they have to have a teacher who understands the concepts, promotes an environment of social emotional learning in the classroom, and intertwines those values into their own lives. Because of this need, I created this project for my team of third grade teachers, with the goal to be better for our students.

Project Assessment

The professional development contains self-reflection surveys. They will be short reflections prior to the sessions, and after. These will be used to determine the usefulness of the sessions and what participants felt they gained from them. There will also be discussion questions that I will use as formative assessments to gauge the learning and engagement of my participants.

I will also ask for feedback from the teachers who attended these sessions, which will be my third grade cohort. I will be looking for feedback about the effectiveness of the professional development, and how it impacted their social emotional instruction in their classrooms.

Project Timeline

The timeline for this project began in January of 2022, where I developed a research question for my focus. I identified multiple sources of information that supported my topic and the need for social emotional learning. After doing a literature review, I determined the strategies and research that I wanted to guide my capstone project. The next step was designing my project. I began with the intention of creating a social emotional learning curriculum, and through the journey of creating this capstone project, I decided to change the direction of the project by creating a professional development series for teachers. During the summer of 2022, I developed a series of Google Slides presentations that follow the sessions, along with a guide for presenting them. This project was designed for third grade teachers, and will be presented throughout the 2022-2023 school year at team collaboration meetings.

Summary

In this chapter, I outlined my capstone project which was based on the question *“How can we as teachers incorporate social emotional learning on a regular basis to create meaningful progress for students?”* I outlined what the project looks like. It consists of a social emotional learning professional development series designed for third grade teachers. The project contains a three part series of Google Slides sessions to be presented as professional development. This chapter also outlined what the project assessment will look like. It will contain pre and post evaluations, as well as formative assessments throughout the sessions. Lastly, the timeline for the capstone project was described. This project will be implemented throughout the 2022-2023 school year. Chapter Four will be a reflection about the development of the capstone project.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reflection

Introduction

The purpose of this capstone project was to explore the guiding question, “*How can we as teachers incorporate social emotional learning on a regular basis to create meaningful progress for students?*” In my six years of teaching, I have learned so much about social emotional learning. When I became a teacher, I of course knew that social skills and emotional skills were important for children to have. However, over the years I realized just *how* important. As I was trained in many different areas of social emotional learning (SEL), it became a passion for me. Over the years it became natural for it to be a part of my everyday routines, discussions, lessons, and interactions in my classroom. As a teacher, I feel strongly that it is so important for us to be equipped with the skills to teach and incorporate social and emotional skills along with academics in our classrooms. This is what eventually led me to my capstone project idea: a professional development series intended for elementary teachers to have the responsibility of teaching social emotional skills in their classrooms.

In this chapter, I will go over some of my major learnings throughout this project. Next, I will revisit my literature review and discuss connections I have made. I will discuss implications, limitations, and future research possibilities. Finally, I will discuss how I plan to use the results of my professional development training and how it is a benefit to teachers.

Major Learnings

I had many insightful moments and new learnings as I worked through the completion of my capstone project. This is, as many capstones are, the first time I have ever written such an extensive research paper, and then gone through the process of turning that into a project. I learned a lot about the research process and saw the benefits of doing a literature review. As I researched from so many different sources, I found how helpful it was to gather and compare information to feel knowledgeable enough to write about the topics at hand. Doing the literature review helped me see that a large variety of sources is important when looking for information.

Next, I learned a lot about my values as I completed this project. I already knew going into this that I felt strongly about social emotional learning, which is why I chose to do my capstone around that topic. However, as I dove further into reading about social emotional learning, I developed more thoughts about subtopics I felt strongly about within the realm of social emotional skills. I also learned that, although my number one priority is the students and making sure we instill them with the skills that they need in life, I actually really feel passionately about making sure teachers are equipped to do just that. As I morphed my project throughout this journey from originally wanting to create a curriculum, into deciding to create a professional development, I realized that is because I care about teachers having the knowledge and tools they need to better our students.

Finally, I learned quite a bit about designing a professional development (PD). I have created presentations before, yes, but not in this manner. As a teacher, I understand the phrase often said that “teachers are the worst students”. From experience in years of professional development trainings, I believe there are many reasons for that phrase

existing. I think teachers are constantly overwhelmed with work, so it is often hard to feel invested in a PD training when there is so much prep and work to be done for our students. Also, I think that teachers can often feel that professional development training is repetitive, and are often topics they have already learned about. From these observations, I wanted to make sure I created something that felt meaningful to the teachers I will have as participants in this PD. It is definitely challenging to create something for adults that feels engaging and meaningful, when I am so used to creating things meant for eight year olds. As I thought about the future audience of my professional development, I couldn't help but think about the people that will soon be presenting information to me and all the hard work and thought they will have put into those training sessions. Generally speaking, I felt that I learned a lot about what it is to create a professional development for adults and the amount of time and effort that goes into it.

Revisiting the Literature Review

Now that I have reached the end of this capstone journey, I will take time to reflect back on Chapter 2, my literature review. I will discuss what information was important, connections I made, and new understandings I gained.

One of the major learnings for me was reading more about the CASEL Framework and the five pillars of social emotional learning (CASEL, 2022). I had heard of each of the five pillars before, but had never read more in depth about the framework and how they group social and emotional skills into those five main categories. As I read, I felt a lot of connection in how I see those skills with students in everyday life, and why I feel so strongly about the importance of social emotional learning to be a successful

student. I created professional development around a curriculum (Purposefull People) that is available at the school where I teach, and it was helpful to have learned more about the CASEL framework, as the CASEL standards guide Purposefull People.

A new learning for me when researching more about the Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011), was the idea that all zones are okay. Teachers, including myself, often have used the color zones to identify emotions, but with the goal to “get back to the green zone”, which is calm and happy. I am guilty of using that language in the past. However, Kuypers discusses the idea that all feelings are okay, and the purpose of the Zones of Regulation is to help students identify the emotion they are experiencing, and have strategies in place to manage those emotions. The idea is to teach students that it is okay to feel their emotions in the zone they are in, rather than encourage them to “get back to the green”. As adults, we also experience a variety of emotions, and may be in different zones, but we don’t always tell ourselves to get back to being calm and happy as soon as possible. Rather, for example, if we are feeling stressed, we may have tools that we know help us regulate that emotion to deal with it. This idea really made me reflect on my teaching practices in the past, and think about what I will do differently going forward. Changing the language we use when thinking about the Zones of Regulation is one concept that I am excited to present to my teacher participants in the professional development. I think it is really important information and will help create emotionally healthy students.

Implications

When I think about the implications of this capstone project, I think about one of the definitions of the word *implication*, which is “the action or state of being involved in

something”. When I read that definition, I can only think about how important it is to be involved in our students' lives, and in their development as people. I think as teachers, we have the privilege of instilling these skills in our students that will help them grow into successful adults. By being involved in their lives every day, it is our responsibility to make sure we are helping students develop their social and emotional skills in order to be successful, kind, empathetic humans. I believe that the major implication of my professional development sessions will be that the participants will leave with positive intent to better themselves and their students in social emotional skills.

Limitations

One limitation of my project is time and unpredictable teacher schedules. I have slotted these professional development training sessions to be presented in our team collaboration meetings. As many teachers know, things come up, such as having to miss a meeting to cover a class, or something important coming up and getting moved to the top of the agenda for collaboration meetings. I want to be realistic about the fact that in a school setting, things often come up, and I may have to be flexible with my presentation timing.

Another limitation is knowing that although I can present information to my participants through this professional development that I feel passionate about, I cannot control what they choose to do with the information. My hope is that they will take away concepts and strategies that they plan on utilizing in their classroom with their students.

Future Research

When I think of future research or projects, I think about my original plan for this capstone project- a social emotional learning curriculum. What ended up being the factor in deciding to create a professional development instead was that I really wanted teachers to have the knowledge and resources to feel confident in teaching these skills to students. What I would be interested in doing in the future is creating a curriculum for these same teachers to further help them implement social emotional learning in their classrooms. Again, the hope is that after my professional development, the teachers who participate will put these concepts into regular practice in their classrooms. Once that becomes a habit, it would be beneficial to then create a curriculum that coincides with the concepts of social emotional learning that they have become comfortable with.

Results and Benefits

In my professional development, I have short assessment surveys. I will use those to assess whether or not participants felt like they gained knowledge and left the sessions with information they will use in their classrooms. I also have the benefit of being able to ask the participants their honest opinions of the professional development and whether they have any feedback that I can improve on, or things they would have liked to be included. I will use their feedback to adjust my sessions as needed, and if they feel successful I will be happy to share my work with others in the school.

I think the benefit of my project to the teaching profession is that it will provide information to teachers that can help them become better for their students. Social

emotional skills are just as important as academics, if not more, in my opinion. I hope to have teachers leave my sessions feeling the same.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a reflection of my project and the experience of creating it. I first reflected on some of my major learnings through this experience. Then, I revisited some of the concepts from my literature review that I felt became really important as I continued my project, as well as some that were new information for me. I then discussed the implications and limitations of my project. Future research or project options were discussed. Lastly, I considered how I would use my results and what the benefits of my project will be to this profession.

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