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## **Empathy for Self and Others: An SEL Curriculum for a Catholic Middle School**

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Empathy for Self and Others: An SEL Curriculum for a Catholic Middle School

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Masters of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

August 2022

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Unprecedented. It is the watchword of our times. Students, teachers, everyone has been through unprecedented times and changes, especially in the world of education. Our last few 8th grade classes have not been physically present on-site in school for at least two years and, based on my experiences as a teacher who began in the winter of 2020, I know that there is a need for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) now more than ever, for both educators and students. There is a desperate need for an immediately usable curriculum, since teachers' have increased responsibilities for using technology, online teaching, and health checks. Students need ways to practice empathy and explore their own mental health more than ever, and teachers need support in building the classroom climate that will help all participants feel safe, seen, and able to learn. With many middle schools implementing advisory or homeroom time intending to create time for this instruction, teachers need curriculum tailored to the unique Catholic school experience paired with the extraordinary needs of the middle school setting.

This capstone explores how best to deliver a social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum to students in a Catholic middle school, based on mental health and explicit empathy instruction. I intend to explore and deliver immediately implementable strategies, slides, and activities for time-poor teachers to use with students during advisory courses. The research question that drives this endeavor is: *How can I develop an explicit social emotional learning curriculum for middle school students focused on mental health and empathy for self and others?*

Middle school is the time where students begin to push boundaries and build their sense of identity, both for themselves and others. Therefore, it is imperative to help students build empathy for themselves as well as their fellow students. There are specific mental health needs

of middle schoolers due to their key growth stage of identity development. In Catholic teaching, empathy is often other-oriented, but when it is paired with empathy for oneself and explicit mental health instruction, students can be equipped with lifelong skills leading to better success.

Chapter One will explore the context, both personal and professional, which led to my interest and passion for this topic, as well as the environment in which it will be delivered. In addition, the audience and parameters for significance and success will be considered. The significance of an SEL curriculum is that it is effective, uses meaningful strategies, is built with a lens towards intersectionality and cultural responsiveness, and can be measured by the ultimate success of the curriculum itself. The personal and professional context is narrative in form, then the chapter transitions to informing about the nature of the research and the overall content of the next few chapters.

### **Personal and Professional Context for School Year 2020-21**

My career began just as the COVID-19 pandemic hit. I have taught online, hybrid, and in-person. My first full-time teaching experience was an 8th grade Communications course I was hired for in January of 2020, and it started the day after my wedding. There were only 2 ½ months of in-person learning with students before we transitioned to an asynchronous learning model with students one-to-one with iPads at home where activities were posted, and students completing them at any time before the due date. When that school year ended, it was with the students scattered to their homes and my having barely been in school with them at all.

I transitioned to teaching in a Catholic school setting in my second year, the 2020-21 school year, and had a 6th grade homeroom and taught English Language Arts to students in grades 5 through 8. It was decided only immediately before school began that we would be teaching completely online, synchronously with students, meaning that we were on Google

Meets with students from the beginning of the school day until the end and often beyond.

Students were 1:1 with Chromebooks that they had rarely used before that point. This online teaching was a unique look into students' lives, but it was an unsustainable learning model since no single teacher can perfectly serve two such different learning environments as in-person to a school and at home via online instruction.

Prior to our 2021 spring break, we transitioned to a hybrid model, with some students continuing to log into a Google Meet and others coming to school in person with COVID safety measures that made the learning experience more individual and strained, as students could not interact with each other and had to follow stringent guidelines that kept them isolated. With a year out of the school building, inconsistent school routines, and little time to reacclimate to school expectations before the end of the year, students struggled to make connections and feel confident in their own abilities. For several of my students that year, the first time I ever saw them in person was at their 8th grade graduation, the culminating event of their middle school experience.

In the midst of all these experiences, the most constant need I saw was students' need for connection with others and support for mental health, especially in the secondary educational atmosphere. Students craved connection, not only with their teachers, but with their fellow students, and were seeking ways to know more about themselves. For instance, during online learning, students would frequently come to my Office Hours Google Meet without even the pretense of an academic question because they wanted an unstructured time to socialize with their teachers and other students. A small group of students formed who would regularly come to the video meetings to share what they were doing in quarantine that week or to reminisce about past spring semesters in school. Prior to this experience, I probably would not have guessed that

students would voluntarily choose to do more school. This was a stark example of the need and desire students have for social and emotional connection, and it showed again the need for comprehensive SEL.

Incidents like this remind me that as an English teacher, I was trained for content and classroom management, but teenagers need more than that. To succeed in the classroom and in life, due to increasing social and societal demands as they deepen their sense of who they are and their place in the world, they need SEL skills. Explicit teaching in how to manage social situations, process adverse experiences, both personal and societal, and talk about difficult subjects, is more important than ever (CASEL, 2021). However, we are rarely taught those soft skills ourselves as professionals and between the immediate need of teaching curriculum and being unsure how to proceed as a new teacher, it is critical to have easily accessible materials for use with students whenever able (Bailey et al., 2019), such as an advisory or homeroom time.

Many schools, and indeed all of the middle schools I have personally taught in, include an unstructured advisory or homeroom time meant for this SEL enrichment (Bailey, 2018). Indeed, almost 90% of administrators said that they used SEL in their schools in a recent survey (Yettick, 2018). Usually, the goals of this time are conveyed to parents and students as time for enrichment, social-emotional learning, and future-planning activities. These are largely left up to the teacher to design, plan, and implement. As an incoming teacher, unused to the school culture and unsure of student needs, this left me deeply unsure of how to move forward.

Numerous schools throughout the United States already have an established SEL curriculum, such as Responsive Classroom, but these are rarely designed with teacher needs or student interest in mind, focusing on regimented lessons rather than strategies to build a toolbox of approaches based on need (Stearns, 2016). As I will discuss in Chapter Two, regimented

curricula are often also not based on differentiation and cultural responsiveness, which does not allow for tailoring to the specific needs it exists to serve (Wood, 2018). Existing SEL curriculum often provides common language and paradigms for teachers to utilize but those require time to teach and do not have slides or immediately usable activities. As teachers are often exhausted or emotionally overtaxed, especially new teachers (Teacher Burnout, 2019), and not trained in social emotional conversation leading, these pre-prescribed curricula are often not helpful beyond determining a vague direction or herding students through an activity that even the teacher is not sure about.

However, as someone who has experienced mental health issues and worked hard to manage their effect on my schooling, I remain keenly aware of the importance of this work to involve explicit SEL curriculum in the everyday instruction. This, as with any important content, must be done in such a way that is accessible to both teachers and students, as well as addressing the ongoing systemic issues that feed into mental health. By basing it on cultural responsiveness and using differentiation to address diverse student needs, both teachers and students will be empowered to bring their whole selves and experiences into their learning rather than adjusting to fit a curriculum that does not apply.

I am struck by the boundless opportunity we have now to equip students with the information and skills that many educators, like me, have had to work so hard to build for themselves. If I had had some of the strategies I have now, many situations would have been very different and much easier to navigate. For example, the process of unlearning negative self-talk and working to build empathy and care for myself, especially in the process of learning something new, has been so helpful to me personally and professionally. The fear of failure is one that I see plague students regularly and I see echoed in my own experiences with learning.

Overcoming that fear of failure and its consequences helps bring down their own anxiety as well as improve their learning outcomes.

One of the best teaching adages I heard as a new teacher was from a community expert therapist whose mother had been an elementary school teacher. This important leader reminded us that teachers should have a dream for each student. At the root, my dream is that every student finds a way to be happy and healthy within themselves and with the world around them.

### **Significance and Success**

Social emotional learning (SEL) is not just an educational buzzword of our time, but a key foundation in establishing school practices that are immediately helpful to students, teachers, and communities. With solid mental health practices and paradigms, and ways to talk about how they are feeling and why, students can go out and transform their communities and our society. Most mental health conditions develop in adolescence and are not caught, resulting in impaired health in adulthood (World Health Organization, 2020). In addition, according to a new study about stress in the U.S., mental health issues are rapidly growing and escalating into what the American Psychological Association termed a national mental health crisis (American Psychological Association, 2020). Overcoming the ongoing stigma around mental health and emotional vulnerability is a key step in addressing that mental health crisis in this country.

Thus, there is a strong need and significance around this work in terms of both individual student needs and systemic societal issues. Empathy is a stepping stone for conversations around intersectionality, issues around race, class, and gender. If students are well equipped to have conversations around difficult issues, and have cultivated a deep sense of empathy and understanding for their fellow human beings, no matter the differences, they can make all elements of society, from individuals to institutions, better and kinder. Empathy and mental

health not only help students succeed at school, but help them to become better citizens and better people. While this project cannot hope to single handedly accomplish change in all areas, the significance of this research ultimately lies in making the conversation around mental health and empathy easier to start.

Success in this endeavor looks like an immediately usable curriculum developed with cultural responsiveness to the needs of the student community with which it is being used, and that effective conversations around empathy for self and others are taking place. To know that I have created an effective SEL curriculum, I aim to create one that is deeply rooted in Catholic values and practices, empathy in particular, and a curriculum literate in the systemic issues in society and how they affect the mental health of middle schoolers. Slides, activities, and worksheets that can be easily accessed and adapted to teacher needs will help new teachers in Catholic schools do this important work of SEL.

Catholic tradition has always placed great importance on the sanctity of human life (Catholic Church, 1994) and the importance of empathy in every aspect of life, and it is a natural fit to use that strong tradition to address the needs of our modern society and students. As Catholic School teachers often have less training and less pay (Orlin, 2013), yet, in my experience, often meet the needs of students who did not prosper in a public school setting, it is imperative to address the unique social context of Catholic middle schools and build on the advisory time to create explicit mental health and empathy instruction. Many parents have explicitly told me and others in my team that they enrolled their child into a private Catholic school setting because they knew they would get more attention and help. This social-emotional learning undertaking is unique in its significance due to the focus on a Catholic school setting,

use of Catholic tradition, and cultural responsiveness to the diverse group of students it addresses.

### **Intended Audience**

Within the current political and social context, middle schoolers are exposed more than ever to divisive rhetoric and negative messages about themselves and others. As a middle school teacher during two presidential elections, I have heard students unknowingly and knowingly repeat racial slurs and fight with fellow students about parents' political beliefs without a framework of empathy. If we can address it at the middle school level, then students move forward knowing how to have constructive conversations around difficult topics such as politics from a place of empathy.

The current ecosystem of social media is an important element as well. Students need to have empathy not only for other people different from themselves, but also for themselves. Both young boys and girls struggle with body issues and rising eating disorders (Katella, 2021). Students who do not know how to be kind to themselves in the mirror in the morning struggle even more so when getting an essay or project back. Constructive criticism lands like an attack when they do not have self-confidence. As teachers, having ways to support students and help them learn those skills.

Ultimately, the audience for this capstone project is incoming teachers with diverse student populations in Catholic schools, to help create a framework for them to use in advisory or homeroom time to teach SEL skills. This will address the pre-existing gap with an immediately usable curriculum that addresses the need in Catholic middle schools, while not adding to the planning burden on overwhelmed teachers. It is important then, to create a

curriculum with cultural responsiveness and diversity planned for from the beginning, and tie it into slides, activities, and worksheets that can be implemented even at short notice.

## **Conclusion**

There is no one perfect way to teach the important social and emotional skills that students need. I will aim to deliver an immediately usable SEL curriculum for diverse students in a Catholic middle school by focusing on the following question, “*How can I develop an explicit SEL curriculum for middle school students focused on mental health and empathy for self and others?*” Within the current social and societal context, the need for explicit instruction at this level is more important than ever. Young teens are dealing with overwhelming obstacles, and armed with mental health information and empathy for themselves and others, they will be better off.

As I have discussed, the context of this research stems from my own experiences, both personal and professional, that show the importance of SEL instruction with minimal impact on teacher work time. Addressing it directly to students of diverse backgrounds and within a Catholic middle school creates a more culturally responsive curriculum, and the significance of addressing these issues now helps students to be better citizens and better people.

The chapters to follow further explore the best practices for SEL instruction, how best to address diverse student needs, and which instructional strategies to include as well as why. Based on my own experiences as a professional educator, combined with the research explored in the next chapter, there is further information and ideas to create the best curriculum possible for this particular context. In Chapter Two, the preexisting literature is reviewed in order to establish the efficacy of an SEL approach, specific strategies and interventions that help student outcomes, and a culturally responsive approach to the diverse student needs represented in any

classroom. Chapter Three is an in-depth project description with a project rationale, exploration of the setting and audience. Finally, in Chapter Four, the project as a whole is reflected on and revisited after its completion.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Socialemotional learning (SEL) is an acknowledgment of the key speaking, relational, self-regulation, emotion naming, and other skills that are necessary for daily living and learning. These so-called “soft skills” (Adams, 2013) have been determined to be especially important for middle school students who are still developing their identity and relationships with others. While research and experience has shown that SEL curricula have often been written and implemented ineffectively in the past, when done well, they have made a significant difference to student, teacher, and school outcomes. Thus, my research question is: *How can I develop an explicit social emotional learning curriculum for middle school students focused on mental health and empathy for self and others?*

This literature review explores SEL efficacy, specific research-based interventions and strategies that can be implemented, as well as cultural responsiveness used to help address diverse student needs. We will begin by establishing and examining how effective curricula can be when implemented differently from the failed efforts of the past, building credibility for this important work, and learning from the body of work and mistakes of the past. For the implementation of curriculum, it is important to identify specific activities and opportunities to use SEL in the classroom, so that best practices can be established. When students struggle with these skills, as they will, interventions will be necessary to re-teach.

Finally, tying in diverse student needs and being deeply respectful of student/family culture is necessary for an effective curriculum that will help every student build lifelong skills

that are useful outside of the classroom. All of these topics together will help to inform an SEL curriculum template that best meets the needs of the students in an urban Catholic middle school.

### **Social and Emotional Learning Efficacy**

What SEL efficacy is, broadly speaking, is the actual ability of an SEL curriculum, including SEL interventions, to improve the experiences, outcomes, and mental health of students. Attempts to study or defend the efficacy of this work are relatively new in this emerging field, but those that have been done have repeatedly shown the helpful nature of explicit SEL teaching. In studies, student mindset and outcomes were improved as the classroom/school culture improved. This included students from the largest districts in America (Marsh, 2018) and students in rural boarding schools in China (Wu Deli, 2021). Questions have nonetheless been raised about the effectiveness of an SEL approach.

There has historically been skepticism and even outright resistance to the concept and practice of SEL. There has been a perception that interprets SEL as furthering the “nanny state” by enshrining thought control and extending school influence into the home and wider community (Effrem, 2019). While the fear of bad implementation has been warranted, based on moderately less advantageous outcomes for students with less trained teachers (Wu Deli, 2020), there were still improved outcomes for all students, and the idea that SEL programs could override societal and familial beliefs was determined to be reasonably unfounded. SEL asks us to have a holistic view of the child, involving not only their academic success but their social development, yet these fears are often underpinned by a fear of political or philosophical influence rather than a preoccupation about positive outcomes for students.

Again and again, SEL approaches have been shown to be helpful for ALL students (Kuo, 2020), have improved academic and behavioral outcomes (Kanopka, 2020), and have reduced

anxiety for scholars (Deli, 2021). The research is relatively new at this time of writing, but that only shows that the most up-to-date and cutting edge approaches are being used. This efficacy, as stated earlier, is shown through surveys and by examining student/school outcome data, such as dropout rates, grades in core concepts such as Math and English, and course failure rates.

Both surveys and data points proved important in understanding the efficacy of SEL approaches, since surveys have often functioned as subjective evaluations, taking into account student, teacher, parent, and staff views and experiences (Hough, 2017). Surveys have sometimes been accompanied by observations and interviews, which has allowed for contextual understanding to occur (Marsh, 2018). When used on their own, or in conjunction with outcome-oriented data points (Kanopka, 2020), research has shown that teaching students explicitly about how to relate well to each other socially, and regulate their own mindset/emotional state, has helped them do and feel better in school.

Certain elements of SEL have been found to be especially helpful to students, in particular for students in middle grades 6-8. For example, students were 51% less likely to fail a course if they had strong academic discipline, and even if they had failed an English or Math class previously, they were more easily able to recover and improve the next year with explicit instruction around Academic Discipline, Optimism, and Orderly Conduct (Kuo, 2020). This shows that SEL factors that are not directly related to content, such as the ability to add numbers or write a thesis, have a direct effect on academic success and student perceptions of success.

This work of developing students' emotional and social well being has directly affected their outcomes outside of school as well. As the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation demonstrated in their 25 year longitudinal study on page 3, ". . . the greater the difference between students' social competence scores in kindergarten, the more pronounced the difference in their outcomes

by the age of 25. Children who scored well . . . were four times more likely to obtain a college degree” (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2015). Kindergarten teachers were able to relatively accurately predict student personal success based on their ability to relate well to others and emotionally regulate themselves. Those students who struggled socially and/or emotionally often fell further and further behind academically (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2015). This shows the key importance of this work and of doing it well. SEL is effective, helpful, and improves student outcomes.

### **Interventions and Strategies**

Any attempt to intervene in a student’s social and emotional approach or wellbeing is an intervention, sometimes targeted to an individual child or deemed to be appropriate for an entire school. Strategies include pre-emptive and holistic approaches to SEL. A pre-emptive strategy intends to teach the tool before it is needed or to literally preempt a specific, targeted social or emotional need. A holistic approach aims to surround students with social and emotional care, helping develop those skills across the whole person by building them across the whole school or classroom. Any curriculum used consistently needs to be composed of both, and so this section explores some of the research-driven strategies and interventions to consider for potential implementation.

As indicated above, and repeated throughout the research, implementation of SEL strategies, even when not done with perfect fidelity, improved student outcomes and teacher experience (Bailey et al., 2019). Nonetheless, it is important to examine the literature around strategies and interventions, which are largely centered around three subtopics: improving Classroom Culture, Teacher-Oriented modifications, then Activities and Actions. These will be

explored to provide a basis for the types of interventions and strategies that will be used in this empathy-oriented curriculum.

Investment from all stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, families, and all others involved in the school community, was shown to be key (Brackett, 2019) but for the purpose and determined by the locus of control for this particular project, the focus here will be on the changes a single classroom teacher has control over, such as their relationship with students, the classroom environment/culture, and the activities undertaken in the course of the year.

### ***Classroom Culture***

The classroom environment and conversations should have been considered and planned well before students ever step foot into the classroom. That important work must continue, even on the first day, before any content has been communicated. SEL as a holistic approach has been shown to be most effective when planned from the outset, from consideration of student seating, classroom posters, and procedures/routines identified for use during the school year (Yoder, 2018). An emotion and empathy conscious classroom should be evident from even a short observation, as seen in the *Social and Emotional Learning toolkit* observation rubrics (Yoder, 2017), and clear classroom practices and posters used in the RULER approach, such as the Mood Meter which helped students name and quantify their emotions (Brackett, 2019).

Even on the first day, SEL practices that were repeated across several curricula were effective in establishing clear community norms with student input. One example was the “From Chaos to Community” lesson (Anderson), where the teacher began by asking students what the worst classrooms felt/sounded/looked like, then contrasted it with the best classrooms in which those students had learned. The RULER approach too, while more regimented, began with a

class “Charter” anchored by the question, “How do we want to feel?” (Brackett, 2019, pg. 14). This practice built students’ self-awareness, relational empathy, and self-management skills while also taking into account their established expectations of classroom and culture norms, which allowed for cultural responsiveness.

Building this strong foundation with student input not only helped students be more invested in maintaining behavioral norms (Nickerson, 2018) but also reduced student anxiety which in turn, built up their investment in the classroom community. For students to stay in class and fully participate, they had to first feel that they were safe and able to move through emotions that were brought up. Chronic absenteeism from class and school has a detrimental effect on students’ anxiety and negative emotions around the class, but with a strong connection to the class and lowered feelings of stress, students are shown to be more likely to stay in the classroom and participate in learning (Nichols, 2021).

Research has reliably shown that one of the strongest ongoing strategies that teachers have used to maintain strong classroom culture and relational ties was to have clear and consistent language, routines, and discipline. When students were connected to their teachers and each other, school violence went down, reporting of bullying increased, and students were determined to be much more likely to find positive ways to express their frustration with one another (Nickerson, 2018). When a student uses a slur or uses physical aggression, having a planned response that attenuates to both the perpetrator and the victim, and using it consistently, can build continuity and community. Students do not bully because they are bad, but because they do not know how to relate to each other well. Instead of further alienating students who bully, Nickerson invited teachers to cultivate more positive actions, such as “sharing, donating,

cooperating, and volunteering instead of being disciplined... he is less likely to continue on a path of violence” (Nickerson, 2018, pp.46-50).

Ultimately, creating a climate of belonging, safety, and consistency fostered the community's ability to engage in the difficult work of social emotional learning deeply and meaningfully. When observed, the classroom should look “structured so students feel included and appreciated, creating a space where it is okay to make mistakes and where the teacher checks in with students about academic and nonacademic concerns.” (Yoder, 2017, pp.60-66). Both the students and teacher were able to feel more comfortable, seen, and appreciated in a positive and well-planned environment.

### ***Teacher Orientation***

Implicit to this work was the underlying knowledge that the teacher must have a strong basis and orientation towards meaningful social and emotional learning for students. Even the initial step of building teacher knowledge around SEL practices and approaches with students was shown to improve student relationships and academic outcomes (Bailey et al. 2019). The actions and position of the teacher towards their students' emotional and social wellbeing was paramount in helping students achieve that wellbeing. *Teacher-oriented* means that the main locus of control and responsibility for these strategies lay with the teacher and not the classroom as a whole. From the classroom setup, to interactions with students in the classroom, to how the teachers discussed strategies and found support among other staff, teacher orientation towards holistic wellbeing in addition to academic success was a catalyst for meaningful growth - not just for the students, but for the teachers' experience of school as well.

Studies showed that teachers who regularly implemented and internalized SEL paradigms and practices reported being less frustrated, felt more supported, and had less burnout when

implementing SEL practices regularly (Kim, 2021). With less burnout, there was higher retention of teachers, which had positive effects across the board. By building teacher knowledge and efficacy around mindfulness practices and trauma-informed response, teachers were able to internalize less student misbehavior and address it in more meaningful and effective ways (Lithoxoidou, 2021). It also affected how teachers were able to help their students. As Nickerson stated regarding school violence, “For educators, just being aware of students’ social-emotional potential can make a difference in their trajectories” (Nickerson, 2018, p.48), which showed that teachers' orientation towards a difficult student could indeed help change the outcomes for that student .

One example of this in practice was the growing body of research showing that entrusting teachers to choose and implement SEL approaches for themselves and their classrooms improved how the strategies were used and improved their efficacy. As Bailey declared in *Re-imagining social-emotional learning: Findings from a strategy-based approach*, “With a strategy-based approach, teachers are empowered to decide what gets implemented, when, and how.... encouraged to adamant strategies to accommodate specific student, classroom, and community needs. Empowering teachers to design their SEL instruction makes sense, because they know their students best” (Bailey, 2019. pg. 56). When contrasted with a regimented approach such as RULER, teachers still reported positive outcomes but fidelity had to be closely monitored, which was often cost prohibitive, especially for smaller schools (Brackett, 2019). This curriculum then will be activity and intervention-oriented, to ensure ease of implementation and teacher agency.

### **Instructional Resources**

A major way that teachers were successful in helping students build their social emotional skills, was to connect them with resources in and beyond the classroom. Especially for students who were struggling with their mental health or learning disability, partnering with

counselors, family, and experts to better understand the root cause built on teacher instinct to better understand what the student was experiencing. As Nicols showed in their 2021 study, students needed early and frequent screening for mental health and other recurring issues. A good example of this was the School Refusal Assessment Scale Revised (SRAS-R), an easily accessible questionnaire, for both the student and parent, to help focus on the specific struggle that was leading a student to miss or leave school. This was a tool often employed by a school counselor or psychologist, which when used in concert with teachers, who were made aware of available choices were much more likely to be invested in ways to successfully address the underlying issue.

The importance of having teacher input and understanding extended to in-classroom accommodations and adjustments as well, not just those decisions made in conjunction with other staff. When students struggled, teachers who had a sense of efficacy around helping students address the underlying emotional or habitual issues that were keeping them from succeeding were able to help students in a number of ways. For academic work, teachers broke the work into ‘chunks’, only reading one part of the story at a time then answering the connected question rather than reading the whole text and all the questions at one time. This was determined to be helpful for students who were experiencing overwhelming feelings or executive dysfunction because it helped them build confidence and stamina with difficult academic tasks (Nichols, 2021) .

Other teacher-oriented accommodations for students' social and emotional wellbeing, as well as their academic success, included both individual and large group adjustments, depending on the needs and skills of the students. Providing extra time on larger assignments, with enrichment activities for students who were already finished, created a supportive class

atmosphere for each student as an individual, and added to a growth mindset around how each person approached a task differently, as well as allowed for student choice and agency (Yoder, 2017). Providing pre-typed class notes is another strategy that can be given either to a whole class or to individual students, as needed. If the teacher was going to have a lecture or required students to take notes, having a pre-written version from the teacher potentially reduced student anxiety about ‘missing something big’, and bridged gaps between processing and the activity of writing (Nichols, 2021). It allowed for different learning styles where students may have needed to intake important information before writing, and added to a class climate of strong discussion by asking all students to refer back to their notes.

### **Emotional and Disciplinary Needs**

Guided Notes also demonstrated the teacher-oriented practice of modeling. By modeling what good note-taking, emotionally healthy behaviors, and pro-social practices looked like, teachers were better able to support students in exhibiting these themselves (Yoder, 2017). This also applied to explicit social and emotional instruction. Modeling positive behaviors in difficult situations helped students recognize their own choices when finding themselves in an emotionally heightened state, as well as reinforcing a positive classroom environment.

When a disciplinary situation began to escalate, teachers who successfully modeled emotional regulation and empathy could further model that behavior and care to the student, who was then more likely to use those strategies in their own interactions with the teacher as well as with their fellow students (Nickerson, 2018). Instead of yelling back at the student, pausing to externally name their frustration as a teacher and their desire to help modeled emotion-naming, taking a pause, and showing empathy even during tumultuous or highly charged moments. Overall, these practices reduced bullying, office referrals, and teacher frustration. In the small,

often insulated environment of a Catholic school, this could help to ensure students are not alienated or inadvertently encouraged to begin identifying themselves as bad students. It also upholds the important Catholic value of human dignity, both for the teacher and students, because they create a more positive, humane environment for all.

### **Awareness and Development of Students**

Another teacher-oriented practice that reduced teacher frustration and improved student experience was positive affirmation and student awareness. When implementing this strategy, teachers chose to focus on what students were already doing well and tailored their approach to the individual student. This modeled growth mindset, focusing on positive outcomes, and visualizing a student's best self (Brackett, 2019). This teacher-oriented practice was in use by many SEL programs and practitioners, stated in observation rubrics as "the teacher demonstrates that he or she appreciates each student as an individual and is concerned about how and what each student learns" (Yoder, 2017, p.12). Consistently and meaningfully noticing what students worked hard on and succeeded in helped students build on their strengths and previous successes in order to continue cultivating achievement.

In addition to the important classroom climate and the specific instructional activities, a teacher's strategic orientation towards students' holistic development - academically, socially, emotionally, etc. - determined how well these actions were carried out. Teachers committed to SEL are required to educate themselves so that they could create "instruction that reflects students' lived experiences at school, at home, and in their communities" (Bailey et al., 2019, p.56). Giving teachers those resources and support better served all students and the teachers themselves. In the specific Catholic school atmosphere of this project, it is clear to see how helping teachers understand their students will directly help all involved, due to the smaller class

sizes and longevity of students' time in one building. Having that positive atmosphere throughout the building and for each student reflecting the value and intent of Catholic education as well as acknowledging what research indicates is best for everyone.

### ***Activities and Actions***

Based on strong teacher orientation and positive classroom culture, the specific strategies implemented in the classroom are important in creating the explicit instruction of SEL. As an emerging field, there are many new and old activities that are being actively researched, but some have already been widely found to be effective.

As mentioned earlier in this capstone paper in the section on Class Climate, a highly compelling opening activity for the year is to begin by agreeing on predetermined class rules and norms. Noted in the article “From Chaos to Community”, Anderson says “The last thing I wanted to do was model a chaotic beginning for students, so I decided to spend much of the first month on community building” (Anderson, n.d., p.1). This showed a strong modeling practice and demonstrated the importance of social and emotional wellbeing before embarking on the course content. By asking students to reflect on previous school experiences, and how they collectively wanted their school year to play out, it built self-reflection and teamwork, and deepened student understanding as to why rules exist in the first place. The RULER Charter practice functioned in a similar, more codified, manner within the larger sphere of the prescribed approach (Brackett, 2019) but similarly sought to build student awareness and investment in making meaningful rules and abiding by them.

Even by naming the emotions and experiences in the collective past of previous classrooms, both positive and negative, students were working towards another important strategy: naming and differentiating between emotional states. Bullying occurred when students

did not have better tools to relate to other students (Nickerson, 2018), so activities to name and work through emotion were a transformative tool to help students choose positive behaviors, and helped them see themselves in a more empathetic and positive light. If students did not know why they were hurting others, it was harder for them to stop doing so.

When teachers learned to name student emotions, they were often more empathetic and effective in helping students to deal with that emotion (Kim, 2021). Taking the further step to work explicitly with students on regularly naming their emotional states before and after a lesson, and brainstorming how they might positively process that emotion, not only helped students to focus better since they felt they had had their emotional state acknowledged (Brackett, 2019), but also enabled them to practice those skills for future use outside of school (Nickerson, 2018). In that way, it helped better prepare students for the world outside of school.

There were many approaches to helping students identify and process emotion. In the RULER approach, they used the “Mood Meter” to place themselves in a four-quadrant emotion chart and the “Feeling Words” curriculum to explicitly teach gradations of an emotion; instead of just *happy*, the student was able to identify using emotions such as *powerful*, *proud*, *interested*, to name just a few (Brackett, 2019). With students in Greece, a different mixed methods approach was used to explicitly teach students to name and work through their emotions, especially stress, since the economic decline had directly affected so many students, and they reported lower stress levels and higher self-efficacy after having received explicit instruction (Lithoxoidou, 2021). Both of these approaches showed that taking time in class and with individual students to explore what emotions look like for them could be extremely beneficial, in addition to providing them tools to address emotions and situations in increasingly healthy ways.

One strategy that has been shown to help students move through and process those emotions are mindfulness practices. Beginning with learning the purpose and helpfulness of mindfulness neurologically and socially, then doing explicit brain breaks to pause learning in a moment of quiet before moving on, and practicing breathing exercises as a group; it was found that both teachers and students found the practices helpful, healing, and built skills helpful in every area of life (Kim, 2021). Explained in many different ways in different SEL approaches, the mindful approach of sensory-grounding, which is focusing on what is seen, heard, felt, and smelled, also helped students de-escalate when urgently stressed (Nichols, 2021). These mindfulness strategies and interventions were identified as activities that could be used as a whole class or with specific students who were identified as having the need. Especially during the emotional tumult of adolescence, in middle school, helping students as a class and as individuals set them up to feel and do better.

Cognitive behavioral strategies have also been found very helpful to students, particularly for those struggling with anxiety or other negative emotions. Nichols stated that, “The most frequently referenced interventions...incorporate cognitive behavioral strategies that help individuals recognize thoughts and feelings, understand how thoughts influence feelings, and teach individuals to intervene at the level of thought. By doing so, individuals can change their feelings and their behavior” (Nichols, 2021, p.19). Similar to naming emotions, this intervention continued to build self reflection surrounding how thoughts and feelings were connected, and how they were influencing student actions. For a middle school student, this helped them see that their actions, such as procrastinating on an important assignment, directly lead to a negative effect on their emotions and their goals. Helping to name these connections created opportunities for key emotional and social growth for adolescent students.

An example of an activity to use with students to build their familiarity with cognitive behavioral strategies outside of counseling settings would be keeping a journal similar to the “Catch it, Check it, Change it” resource from BBC Headroom, which can help an individual name (Catch) the thoughts and feelings (it), check what it is contributing to them, then plan how they want to make changes to their behaviors or thoughts around it (BBC, n.d.). Positive affirmations are an external validating action, but this also encourages student agency and reflection, as well as writing habits. Students can also find strong benefits from working with their fellow peers to build these social and emotional skills. Peer mediation, as an ongoing practice and independent intervention, helped students to practice positive problem solving and peer interaction (Lithoxidou, 2021). Students who participated in peer mediation reported feeling proud of their positive role in the classroom, and greater self confidence in resolving conflicts without teacher intervention (Lithoxidou, 2021). Building in opportunities and routines around peer mediation proved to be freeing for students and teachers alike.

Roleplaying emotional or tense situations is a strategy that can foster positive peer mediation experiences, modeling healthy responses and building student confidence. Even teachers wanted concrete examples of how to use new strategies (Bailey et al., 2019), and working through a scripted or improvisational practice role play allowed a safe space for students to try things in new ways, using the social emotional skills they have learned (Lithoxidou, 2021). Depending on the developmental level and comfort of the students, they were able to successfully roleplay social situations with a point by point script or engage in a class dialogue about how best to resolve the situation.

These strategies and interventions were able to be used in concert with each other and separately as needed. As with any curricula, they worked best when implemented consistently

and clearly (Brackett, 2019) and when used, lowered student stress levels (Nichols, 2021) and teacher burnout (Kim, 2021). It was incumbent on each educator to find their best mix and application of these strategies (Bailey et al., 2019) but they all were shown to improve classroom climate and improve student outcomes.

### ***Rationale and Summary***

While there are many interventions and strategies that can be used within an SEL approach, the three subsections enumerated here are the most repeated in the relevant literature. The classroom culture of care for self and others, shepherded by the teacher's orientation towards holistic care for students, and the activities and actions chosen by that teacher to further students' knowledge and use of those skills, all together create an SEL approach that research indicates will most help students.

Again and again the importance of empathy in the critical identity development time of middle school came up, and while not explored in detail due to the focus on actionable interventions and strategies, it underpinned all of the approaches listed here. Once students are in a place of ongoing mental wellness, they are more likely to be able to connect and empathize with others such as their peers and teachers. By building thoughtful and caring environments to foster mental health and explicitly teaching students to care for themselves and others through the lens of empathy, this curriculum will not only help student outcomes but also bolster teacher empowerment.

### **Cultural Responsiveness and Diverse Student Needs**

Cultural responsiveness is a practice and paradigm of orienting activities and curriculum towards being in dialogue with the cultures of the students and community that they serve (Carter Andrews, 2020), which contrasts previous patterns of teaching that sought to isolate

students from their culture or assimilate students to the dominant white culture (Stearns, 2016). Cultural responsiveness encouraged the growth of ‘cultural intelligence’ as urged in comprehensive studies of SEL application (Wood, 2018). Cultural responsiveness was, and continues to be, important because every student’s culture and family are an integral part of what they bring into the classroom, and understanding the student’s culture well enough to respond appropriately to it was helpful in bringing their whole selves to a place of effective learning (Duane, 2021). This cultural responsiveness and intelligence is achieved through a number of approaches and actions, and the best practices to do so within the locus of control for one classroom teacher are discussed here.

This culturally responsive approach was designed to take into account the cultural and social needs of every student, and so has been extended and paired with a consideration of the whole student for the purposes of this review. To consider and address the whole classroom and the diversity represented therein, student needs across intersectional approaches have been discussed here. As Wood puts it, students were “. . . signalling a need for an alternative approach to SEL, one that embraces difference and pluralism” (Wood, 2018, p. 261). It is the goal of this section to find the best way to achieve that approach. Diversity in this section refers not only to diversity of race, but gender, ability, and neurodiversity. Historically marginalized or overlooked students have been negatively affected by a lack of awareness and attention paid to their experiences in school and with curriculum (Simmons, 2021), and so it becomes key to address these students’ needs directly.

It is essential that an SEL curriculum address all students, because it has also been found to help students with autism and other social disorders succeed academically and socially (Agoratus, 2020). This approach was also helpful in decreasing instances of bullying of and by

middle school students with disabilities (Espelage, 2016). By addressing and working through social and emotional expectations and situations explicitly, students who didn't pick up on non-verbal cues easily were demonstrated to more quickly discern and apply more tuned-in perceptions they could then use to build positive relationships. Paired with the earlier exploration of SEL efficacy, or the effectiveness of the social emotional learning approach in helping students, it became clear that a focus on empathy was able to help diverse middle school students, in particular, to build their identity in a safe and caring manner. As Espelage stated, "Given the relations among empathy, caring, and disability status, SEL programs represent a logical intervention to address these deficits among students with disabilities' ' (Espelage, 2016, p.324).

Cultural responsiveness and a consideration of SEL approaches for a diverse student population, in terms of race, gender, and ability, is an important consideration when building a curriculum for use in the classroom. The focus of this section was a review of the literature on what is most helpful for diverse students and how this curriculum can best tie in culturally responsive practices to build on what is already working well for students outside of the classroom. This builds on a strengths-based approach, where the assumption is that every student comes to school with inherent strengths that can be built upon rather than presenting with deficits. This necessarily includes their already existing social emotional skill sets.

### ***Non-Responsive Social Emotional Learning***

First, it is important to consider the antithesis of socially and emotionally healthy approaches, some of which have been used under the auspices of SEL. It was key to establish that SEL is not a form of discipline or control (Simmons, 2021), a mechanism to maintain constant positivity or status quo (Stearns, 2016), Finally, it cannot become a practice that teaches

students to ‘act white’ (Wood, 2018). At its heart, SEL has been proven to be a transformational approach helping students discover and be empowered by what is healthy for them within their larger cultural contexts (Duane, 2021). To reach this point of healthiness, it is important to consider what SEL is not and to clearly enumerate how it can be implemented harmfully so it can be avoided.

In her 2016 critique of the regimented and highly popular “Responsive Classroom” curriculum, Stearns brought up many of the ongoing issues with pre-existing prescribed SEL curricula, such as; the underlying assumption of teacher incompetence that must be addressed through highly expensive training and seminars, as well as the unspecified terms around key elements such as what they considered social skills and pro-social behaviors to be. These are some of the key arguments made against existing SEL curricula. Such issues leave definitions open-ended, leaving the person learning about it to assume their own definitions, which necessarily rely on the recipient's pre-existing biases.

Since a majority of teachers are white (Schaeffer, 2021), this pre-supposition of terms and positive behaviors added to the inherent bias that students acting ‘white’ was better. This not only alienated educators of color by requiring them to either do the additional work of speaking up or simply to teach it to their students, but also harmed students of color by assuming inaccurate cultural deficits (Simmons, 2021). When student focus groups were conducted with middle school students, in a study published in 2020, Carter Andrews explored the effects of teacher bias on students’ experience of discipline specifically. One group of all Black students discussed their perception that they were picked on far more often, especially the boys, for being too loud or active. One student was given lines to write at home due to his interjections when

none of the other students who were talking or sharing received such a punishment, which took away valuable time at home with family (Carter Andrews, 2020, pp. 33-35).

Interviews with teachers and other professionals in school settings, such as paraprofessionals, student counselors, and school resource officers, revealed their bias extending even so far as to thinking of SEL work as actively fighting what is happening at home (Wood, 2018). In that study, educators and teachers assistants used terms like the ‘right way’ or ‘good student’ to describe behaviors, thus conflating student compliance with a moral action. Positive student-teacher relationships, where students feel like their teachers like and care about them, have been identified as being key to a student’s sense of belonging and willingness to hear corrective feedback (Carter Andrews, 2020). Students who did not comply with curricula they found undermining their cultural experience withdrew and began a cycle of isolation. When teachers viewed SEL as a tool to fix what was interpreted as inherently flawed at home, students quickly internalized that teachers were trying to fix them because they were inherently flawed, and either refused to comply or became ashamed of their own heritage (Duane, 2021). This is a negative outcome of an SEL curriculum, based on misuse of social and emotional skills.

Another common misconception and misuse of SEL was employing it in a way that only allowed for positive feelings and experiences to be expressed, in an effort to maintain a positive and fun climate, thus unintentionally maintaining the ongoing status quo. This did not leave space for the negative emotions and experiences students faced and needed to have space to express (Duane, 2021). Students were able to identify a fairly accurate awareness of racial biases or difficulties with their disabilities (Carter Andrews, 2020), so it did not benefit them to ignore their lived realities within an SEL curriculum. As Torres said in the online article *Mindfulness Won't Save Us. Fixing the System Will:*

“...students and families in these communities aren't struggling because no one taught them mindfulness; they are struggling because they're fighting generations of oppression in an unjust and unequal system. Can mindfulness and SEL help communities facing systemic oppression? Absolutely, and particularly because these communities need support processing difficult experiences and emotions" (Torres, 2019)

There is a larger ecosystem in which classrooms exist, and to truly help students manage their social and emotional wellbeing, teachers must be aware of their lived experiences. By simply moving past the negative emotions and not dealing with the factors that lead to the negative feelings, relentlessly positive SEL techniques can do students and educators a disservice in the pursuit of learning and growth, cutting out a genuine opportunity for discussion.

Therefore, instead of striving for a constant state of positivity, which has been shown to have negative effects (Stearns, 2016), it was more helpful to seek the more conflict positive approach that has helped students build confidence and capability in moving through conflict (Wood, 2018). Especially within the context of a Catholic middle school, there are many times where it may be necessary and healthy to engage with the harmful actions of the Catholic Church in the past to help students know that they are fully accepted in this school, even when historically they may not have been.

When we look at the long history of harm and the ongoing research, it is clear that SEL cannot be a method for teaching students to act white, unfairly discipline them as bad kids when they do not comply, nor maintain toxic positivity. These approaches do not benefit students' social and emotional outcomes, and will do more harm than good in preparing students for the broader social context of our world. While individual classroom teachers cannot control the

political and institutional context beyond their walls, they can be reflective on the actual needs of the students before them.

### ***Implementation of SEL practices***

In order for students to succeed in a diverse and culturally responsive environment, research indicated several factors for ensuring successful SEL implementation at the classroom level. Before exploring what SEL is and has an obligation to be, this subsection will show the necessary bedrock for a culturally responsive and effective SEL curriculum foundation. Teacher reflection, acceptance of non-closure, and the safety/acceptance of all people in the classroom are needed for SEL to meaningfully happen in a diverse classroom.

Since prescribed and pre-written curricula have not left sufficient space for teacher instinct (Stearns, 2016) and tailoring to address specific student needs like empathy-building (Espelage, 2016), it was determined to be important to construct curricula in ways that encourage teachers to reflect on outcomes, successes, and failures, and adjust accordingly. Dement and Salas provided an example of meaningful teacher reflection in their 2019 exploration of several “disorienting incidents” while teaching novels on the intersection of race and poverty (Dement & Salas, 2019, p.1). In their dialogue between two educators, one author noted what did and did not work for students, then considered factors that may have contributed to successes and failures, with the guidance of a mentor educator who had the benefit of different lived experiences to share and consider. For example, a newer teacher was able to share their experience with a mentor teacher, where they could safely discuss and make sense of it together. This is similar to the 2020 Carter Andrews’ approach of having a critically reflective approach to troubling data, such as students’ negative experiences of discipline, that was then reflected back by a mentor educator with further experience and insight.

This model provided a possible template for classroom teachers to employ for critical reflection. While a mentor teacher was the preferred option, it could also have been a community elder or other esteemed community member, since not all teachers had access to safe mentor figures in their workplace (Simmons, 2021). A journaling approach, where the teacher returned to previous experiences to gain further insight, also proved helpful, and could be undertaken independently or paired with a mentorship. This practice of reflection also helped teachers' own emotional growth and modeled positive self-reflection (Dement, 2019). No matter what teacher reflection looked like, teachers needed to have time for reflection on how their individual practices were helping or hindering students' outcomes. For example, something may have sounded like a good idea - such as the communal board with each student represented as a fish in the 'school' of their classroom community, then when students misbehaved their fish was moved further away from the school. However, upon reflection on day to day application in the classroom, it became clear that this was an isolating and publicly demeaning practice with negative consequences for student outcomes (Carter Andrews, 2020). Cultivating self reflection ensures that something that initially sounded like a good idea but when confronted in practice was not, can be reworked for the benefit of the classroom in real time.

The process of self-reflection also supports the knowledge that growth is an ongoing process, and non-closure is key in allowing space for that growth in situations where resolution cannot yet be created. Acceptance of negative emotions and experiences helped classrooms grow with the knowledge that teachers also needed to move through their own sometimes messy emotions and accept that they had to undergo their own process of transformation (Stearns, 2016). Previous experiences, biases, and personal struggles all played into how a teacher responded at any given time (Simmons, 2021), but accepting that a negative situation occurred

and growing from it without needing to fix it helped teachers be more emotionally and socially aware themselves.

Non-closure as a requisite component to successful SEL implementation also applied in the context of classroom dialogue and management. While it may have been more comfortable to put a happy ending on a negative experience, such as requiring a student to write a note of apology in response to name-calling another student, making that student write a note of apology was really more for the adult than for either student (Stearns, 2016). A response was still necessary, but may not have been able to neatly resolve the situation, which is normal and natural in human relationships. This mandate for non-closure often felt risky, as it is unfamiliar and required vulnerability (Dement, 2019), a necessity for true belonging, learning, and safety. Incorporating self-reflection is vital even though it can feel vulnerable because it invites non-closure and requires learning from things when they have already transpired.

In order to achieve deeply internalized learning, it was necessary to create environments where individuals felt fully accepted, emotionally, socially, and culturally, in the full context of being themselves (Duane, 2021). This acceptance first required from all individuals in the room the vulnerability of allowing others to see them fully. Such vulnerability only happened with true safety and connection (Espelage, 2016). For SEL to truly and authentically occur, students and educators both had to perceive themselves as being safe and fully accepted (Duane, 2021). Acceptance neither occurs all at once nor without intentionality. To be culturally responsive to diverse student needs, a classroom must be safe, fully accepting, comfortable with non-closure, and encouraging of self-reflection from all those in the classroom.

### ***What Social Emotional Learning Is and Can Be***

With an understanding of what social emotional learning is not, and a grasp of what needs must be met to achieve using it well, there is more room for a recognition of what SEL is and can be in a culturally responsive classroom with diverse learners. These include building a toolbox of SEL approaches for students to utilize, capitalizing on student voice and choice, using SEL as an ongoing developmental process to help students decide who and what they want to be and helping them achieve those goals through implementation of SEL strategies, then making it effective for all students within a diverse classroom, and aligning it with Catholic values. This is not an exhaustive exploration, but works effectively within the specific context of an empathy building, Catholic classroom setting.

Instead of approaching SEL as another method for ensuring student compliance, an effective technique for classroom teachers was to help build a toolbox of various strategies to be used when social and emotional issues arose (Duane, 2021). That provided for student choice and agency in how and when to implement those strategies, as well as allowed for teacher flexibility in tailoring the SEL approach to the specific needs of each student (Stearns, 2016). By teaching several different approaches, like breathing exercises (Torres, 2019), how and when to use them, and capitalizing on self-reflection of outcomes, students were able to find solutions that resonated with their existing skill sets and were positioned to be better equipped to internalize and build on their SEL.

This is also reflected in student voice and choice in the classroom, especially around communal expectations of behavior. When students were invested and reflective of why the rules exist, they were less likely to feel that they were being picked on, singled out, or isolated (Carter Andrews, 2020). Explaining the rules and reasons behind them explicitly was also helpful to

students with autism (Agoratus, 2020) and developmentally disabled students (Espelage, 2016), who were then better equipped and more invested in following those rules for the benefit of their classroom community.

SEL in a culturally responsive classroom is an ongoing process that changes based on which teachers and students are present, because it is inherently responsive to the cultures and dispositions of the diverse individuals involved in the cooperative pursuit of learning and healing (Simons, 2021). It was not a static destination, but rather a method to help students along their learning journey, as they made decisions regarding their own identities and helped them successfully navigate strategies such as self-management, organization, and mindfulness practices (Wood, 2018). Students had to invest in ideas or ways of being outside of their teacher's values (Stearns, 2016), which also benefited the greater community by representing more diverse viewpoints.

An SEL curriculum must be effective for all students within the classroom. A compelling SEL curriculum has been shown to be instrumental in reducing instances of bullying among students with documented IEPs (Espelage, 2016), improved social and academic outcomes for students with autism (Agoratus, 2020), and helped to foster racial healing (Simmons, 2021). Even a simple practice such as mindful breathing to begin and end a class period helped reduce student anxiety and fostered classroom community, when leveraged in a positive and thoughtful manner (Duane, 2021). Based on the research of these many authors, in order for a curriculum to work for all students, the expectations must be clear, understandable, and historicized. SEL that is authentic, reflective, and continually growing will be most effective.

## **Conclusion**

In an effort to best understand the existing research and build towards an improved SEL curriculum in the particular context of a Catholic middle school, this literature review has explored and established how effective SEL curricula can be, enumerated specific research based interventions and strategies for successful implementation, and has explained the importance of culturally responsive and diversity conscious SEL when implementing a thoughtfully considered SEL curriculum. Starting in several sections with what does not work, based on literature critical of previous SEL undertakings, this chapter carefully considered what to avoid and ended with an optimistic view towards what can and does work as a curriculum is developed for this particular context.

Taking into consideration these new learnings, Chapter Three describes the particulars of this project as I create an effective, flexible, activity and intervention rich curriculum grounded in cultural responsiveness for diverse student needs. In acknowledgement of the limited resources of historically marginalized groups and limitations of a Catholic school's budget, this curriculum will be freely available in its entirety. Research shows that SEL can be extremely beneficial for all students at classroom and individual levels. This project is deeply committed to the work of bringing a truly holistic SEL curriculum into the Catholic school environment and to enhance its helpfulness to student and teacher outcomes, as well as fulfilling the goal of advisory time. Finally, Chapter Four reflects on the project impact post-completion.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

The main point of this project is to create a usable, flexible curriculum for social and emotional learning in middle school. The aim is to be a curriculum with culturally responsive and effective practices to best suit the needs of the students and support teachers. Thus the research question is; *How can I develop an explicit social emotional learning curriculum for middle school students focused on mental health and empathy for self and others?* asked in an attempt to build on what came before and best fit the needs of an urban Catholic school. To show how this curriculum will accomplish this goal, this section will overview a description of the project, including the envisioned audience, proposed implementation timeline, and how data will be collected for reflection and assessment purposes.

The major subsections of this section will be the rationale, a description of the setting and audience, and a project rundown to explain how the finished project will look. To begin with the rationale for the project mirrors the *explaining why* strategy that is included in the project; explaining why first helps build trust, deeper learning, and a more honed understanding of what the end goal is. In this paper, once the reason and purpose is established in the rationale, a further description of the intended school setting will give greater social and emotional context, acknowledging the complex ecosystems and possible biases implicit in any work, especially that of education. Finally, even when you do not know what a rundown is, it will be helpful to have an overview of what will be included, a timeline, and some of the pedagogical moves that will be made as part of the project.

Based on the research conducted in Chapter Two, many of the strategies and underlying paradigms will be utilized in a real world capacity here. This is a SEL curriculum focused on flexible strategies and interventions so that it can be easily deployed. I intend to do needs assessment and design so that the primary focus is on research based and immediately usable strategies. There will be reflection embedded in the curriculum with survey materials at the end, as per the research on cultural responsiveness, which will naturally lead to evaluation and changes the next year, as with any curriculum that is adjusted for the needs of students. For the purpose of this project, the focus of this chapter will be on needs assessment, design, and proposed implementation.

### **Project Rationale**

As a curriculum development project, the lessons and projects proposed are meant to help students learn about and internalize healthy mental behaviors, such as empathy, gratefulness, self-love, and emotional regulation. This will largely be a strategy based approach (Bailey et al., 2019) that focuses on building tools for students' social and emotional toolbox so that they can choose what approach works best for them in the moment they need it (Duane, 2021). There will also be several recurring activities and strategies that will cycle in as it is helpful to the students being taught. This will be determined through teacher instinct, student surveys, and student feedback.

To create the actual curriculum, I will use the Understanding by Design Framework (Wiggins & Tighe) and build it using backwards design. The end goal is an “enduring understanding”, as described by the Understanding by Design text, of students' empathy for themselves and others (Wiggins & Tighe, pp. 2). Based on the research described in Chapter Two, I intend to begin the year by establishing communal class rules and expectations along with

students, as per Anderson and Brackett. Examples from CASEL and the success of the Core Districts act as evidence towards SEL being a helpful and important idea to teach and help students internalize social and emotional skills. Ongoing strategies include using morning meetings and Circles depending on student need. Ultimately, the project is aimed towards empathy and mental health as important elements in identity making for middle school students.

### **Setting and Audience**

To understand the project, it is key to understand where and what it is made for, so that it can best address the community needs and be understood in its broader social context. This school is in an urban setting, right in the center of a major metropolitan area, in a neighborhood that has gone through several socioeconomic and political changes. An historically wealthy area, there has also been a long tradition of immigrant families moving near because of the strong scholastic tradition in that area, with several parochial schools, serving from young children to colleges all near one another. This creates a proud history of academic excellence, as well as tension with the historically marginalized populations who have been historically excluded from partaking. Recently there has been more diversity and acceptance of all students, however, as the school and neighboring high school, as well as the similarly Catholic private colleges nearby, are all tuition-based, this is still true to an extent. Scholarships are available, but are based on completing paperwork or contingent on enrolling several children at a time.

These policies also have the effect of limiting the class size, with a maximum middle school class size of 25 in the school currently. Overall, there are around 340 students in grades Kindergarten through 8th, resulting in a 12.0 students to every teacher ratio, better than the national average of 16:1 (NCES, 2014). This allows for greater relationship-building between

teachers and students, as well as being able to notice and aid students who may be struggling more easily.

In terms of demographics, the majority of students are white (80%) but the school also serves some students from the local black community (6%) and a few Hispanic students and those of other ethnicities (NCES, 2014). Since the majority of the student population is white, work around diversity and empathetic understanding often have to begin by de-othering other ethnicities and historicizing conceptions of race. Many come from invisibly privileged experience and experience distress when discussing ideas contrary to those they grew up with, displaying resistance to notions of critical race theory or even the concept of white privilege. While this depends on the individual, the work of cultural responsiveness in this context is often to understand how non-empathetic and fear driven dialogue is impacting the discussion without assuming a lack of empathy, only a greater need for scaffolding towards it.

Around 80% of graduating 8th graders feed into the private high school across the street, which is unusual for a Catholic middle school since there are so many Catholic High Schools in the area. Since a majority of students go to the nearest high school, and can even take extension classes there from their middle school if they qualify, their teachers know more about the expectations and prior knowledge needed for their high school experience.

As a parish school, it is directly linked to a faith community and independent of district policies or paperwork, unlike most schools who have an external governing body. This allows for greater flexibility and intentionality towards policies that make sense for the specific situation and school, rather than trying to address a wide network of community needs. There is a strong community aspect between the church and school; theater programs run by church volunteers, first communion and confirmation sacrament preparation, in-classroom church volunteer

teacher's assistants and fundraising. Teachers are majority Catholic, all are white, and a majority are female. While the middle school teacher team is half male, half female, there are no men teaching in the younger grades.

The motto for the school is “Where Every Student is Known and Honored” which indicates a positive environment for SEL work aimed towards holistic development of students. SEL is also listed on the school website under “Student/Family Support”, and the advisory time is listed as a major component. The language is vague, but encouraging, describing many of the paradigms around student support and community input that have been expressed in this project as well. To help address the rising mental health and emotional dysregulation, the school has been implementing a “Peace of Mind” initiative around using the Nurtured Heart paradigm to help students, as well as bringing in more counselors and funding for mental health programs.

As the main audience, the middle school advisory course within this greater school context has had the most experience and social investment in the school, while also transitioning to a new high school experience. They are navigating a smaller, more heterogeneous social sphere than they are likely ever going to experience again, and will benefit from practicing new ways of relating to one another in this safe and well known environment, so they are better prepared to deploy the SEL strategies in high school. As a generational group they are also dealing with more schooling interruption and change due to COVID-19.

Adolescents also struggle with record stress levels and anxiety (Bethune, 2014), only compounded by increased social isolation and politicized experiences of school, such as home resistance to critical race theory or mask mandates. Social media and lackluster media literacy also contribute to students’ mental health issues, and so it is more important than ever that they

have social and emotional tools to help them practice empathy and mentally healthy practices in a way that works for their specific experience of these mitigating factors.

The other element of the intended audience is the teacher. As shared in the introduction, this curriculum is meant to help make SEL activities accessible to new and time poor teachers. It is intended to build up confidence, competence, and to trust teacher instincts. Having joined teaching just as COVID-19 drastically changed much of what we do in schools, I am also trying to find new ways as an educator to meet the teaching needs of my specific audience within this context. Within the wider school setting of a majority white and urban school setting, the intended audience of middle school advisory courses and their teacher will build on their empathy and understanding of SEL.

### **Project Rundown**

The project will largely consist of preparation of the curriculum, then planned implementation of it over the course of a school year. Both will be explored here and the proposed timeline for completion and implementation. As with any curriculum, it will change based on the needs of the students and further research or experience gained by the teacher using it. Reflection will be a necessary function both within the school year and over the course of the summer holistically to better understand how to adjust and update it.

### ***Preparation and Implementation***

The bulk of the project is to prepare an SEL curriculum for use in the advisory course of a Catholic middle school. This will be achieved in the summer of 2022, after teaching in the school for a full school year, to best meet the needs of the students and teachers. Using the research from Chapter Two, experiences from teaching, and previous positive SEL strategies, pulled together as a starting place. These will be used to help assist in creation of new resources,

such as worksheets, slides, and activity examples, for ease of implementation as the school year begins. The scope and sequence of the curriculum will be developed for an entire school year. That is the full scope of this present project, and will be completed over the course of a summer.

The planned implementation timeline of the curriculum itself starts before the school year begins, by working on internalizing teacher orientation and developing the curriculum. Once the school year begins, students will work together with the teacher to develop class rules. A morning meeting every morning and with the bulk of the SEL lessons delivered during advisory, there will be SEL implementation at several points throughout the week. Mindfulness is also incorporated, with prayer beginning every day and ending it. While students opt-in to prayer and petitions participation, it will be a moment for quiet reflection for every student.

Reflection is a key component of this implementation as well, and there will be reflection points planned throughout the year to help internalize and adjust the SEL. Both students and teachers will formally reflect before or after holiday breaks, depending on the scheduling, a natural milestone in the year to reflect on growth. Beginning with clearly written reflection on pre-year hopes then the first week, then at the following break points: All Souls/All Saints, Thanksgiving, Christmas, Spring Break/Good Friday, and the end of the year. Each of these chosen intervals are periods of heightened reflection in the Liturgical Year, and will integrate naturally into school practices around those times.

Thus, the project will be completed over the course of a summer, based on the needs seen through having taught there for a year. The curriculum that will be developed will be implemented over an entire school year, with several points of reflection embedded, so that the curriculum can be revisited and reworked based on experience or further research. SEL

instruction will be delivered every day in a number of strategies, and underpinned by a teacher orientation and modeling towards empathy and mental health.

### **Conclusion**

The intent of this project is to create a SEL curriculum to build empathy and mental health. This will be delivered to a group of middle grade students in a Catholic middle school and be built specifically towards their urban, community-oriented, and transitory situation. It will be created over the course of a summer and implemented throughout a school year, with several forms of SEL instruction and reflection embedded consistently throughout.

The success of this endeavor is explored in Chapter Four, as well as the learnings and reflection. Based on the research and ideas presented here, it explores the challenges and triumphs of curriculum writing, as well as the complexities of a strategy based approach that is still easily implemented in a busy school year. Several new products, like worksheets and lesson plans, are introduced and connected back to the research they are based on. While this chapter worked through a planned execution of this project, the next explores the reality of it.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusions and Reflection

#### Introduction

The main purpose of this undertaking was to create an immediately usable, helpful, and empathy focused Social Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum to use during a flexible advisory time. It aims to answer the question: *How can I develop an explicit social emotional learning curriculum for middle school students focused on mental health and empathy for self and others?* to fit the needs of an urban Catholic middle school. Aimed towards helping students build empathy, especially during their formative middle school years, and to practice social and emotional skills, the project slides are meant to be easy to use even for new and time-poor teachers. This project culminated with at least 50 slides and 15 assorted activities that teachers can immediately use as well as resources they can deploy.

To best reflect on this process, since reflection itself is an important aspect of social and emotional learning, this chapter begins by exploring the setup and format of the project. What and why each element of the format was chosen is explored, and how the slides are set up for use will help readers grasp the final nature of the project. A few of the activities and slides created and their overall set up are explained; this will then connect back to the research explored in Chapter Two, connecting the research basis developed there with the how-to resources put into practice during the project. The learnings for myself and the limitations of this project are explored, leading into suggestions for future research or projects. Finally, my personal timeline and plan for use of this project is detailed.

## **Project Format**

As all of the teachers on my middle school team, including myself, use slides on a daily basis, I decided first that Google Slides would be the best digital setup. Since the aim was for it to be easily accessible and editable to different teachers' styles and situations, I chose a basic template and minimal pictures. This should allow others to make copies and then edit those copies to fit their needs with ease.

The project begins with a slide on *How To Use This Curriculum*, detailing the purpose of the project, that the slides can be copied and shared, as well as the color coding key used in slide titles. The table makes clear time delineations of activities that will take five to ten minutes, then 10-20, then more than 30 minutes, with a fourth column for those activities that work best only over the long term, such as Circles. Circles are an ongoing activity where classes engage in a structured kind of conversation, and work best when implemented over the course of the year. This will allow a teacher to choose an activity that fits the amount of time they have for SEL or creates an opportunity to incorporate smaller activities more easily.

Each of these activities are hyperlinked to take an interested viewer directly to that activity so that if they are only interested in one activity it is easy to access. Then, there is an explanation of the green highlight on many of the activities at the end, detailing that those can be used every day and work best when done habitually with students. Thus, making it easier for teachers to deploy a consistent and intentional use of SEL whenever possible. Finally, a few of the activities are marked with an exclamation mark and there is a description detailing that these would be the best activities to start with and to use most often. This marker is to make it easier for new teachers or those inexperienced with SEL to start using the recommended activities with confidence.

As stated in the How To slide, the slides with purple colored titles are intended primarily for teacher eyes - with directions, resources, and ideas aimed towards the instructor. Those slides with black colored font in the titles are meant to be displayed to students, with activity directions, discussion questions, and less text for easier readability across age levels. For example, in the slides about Brain Breaks, there is a slide *When and How to use Brain Breaks* meant for students with a description of what brain breaks are and how to use them, along with expectations and a small image of a brain working out to keep students engaged visually. The teacher slide has several video resources and how they might be used, with lots of text and links and no pictures.

The project is set up this way with the intention to encourage and make easier any further educator research into these practices, and because students will have different comfort levels and abilities with reading. Having pictures and diagrams where possible is to promote access and equity; these skills are important enough that reading should not be an impediment whenever possible. This is also why I used gender neutral and culturally diverse names as much as possible, and chose clipart and videos of diverse students. The hope is that when students see themselves represented in the instruction, they will see these skills as being helpful to them as well.

The Student Survey activity comes near the end of the slides, as a way to encourage reflection for the viewer as well. How will they evaluate and reflect on SEL progress in their learning space? The first slide is simply an image of a CASEL survey, so that a teacher can easily project this on the board or read it to students and receive back a one through five indication on their hands, and then has a direct link to the complete, well researched survey for students to fill out if that fits their needs better. The simplicity of this is meant to encourage

repeated and accessible surveying of students, to create reflection and show teachers what their students may still need.

This project format was designed to be as flexible, usable, and accessible as possible while still providing helpful research-based information and resources to teachers. The layout and slides were meant to be clearly aimed at either teachers or students so that student reading and visual needs could better be taken into account. Responsive practices can be found even in the art and student example names given. The sequencing of the slides was important as well, with the intention being to encourage teachers to use these practices in a mindful manner, such as highlighting the benefit of surveying and reflecting at the end of SEL activities. These formatting choices were based on the best practices found in the earlier research done in Chapter Two, and then followed up with resources that put that research into practice.

### **Research Into Practice**

When I began the work of putting the final curriculum together, the basis of my efforts was from several components of work from my initial research in Chapter Two that cemented a strong grounding of best practices and their efficacy for students. The first activity laid out in the curriculum, *Making Classroom Rules*, was heavily influenced by Anderson's "From Chaos to Community" lesson and underpinned by approaches like those of Brackett in their analysis of the RULER approach to SEL. The activity takes the community building approach of Brackett and marries it with the practice of Anderson's lesson, modified slightly.

Similarly, Nickerson established in "Can SEL Reduce School Violence?" (2019), that having positive, consistent, and community building activities can have astoundingly positive effects for schools. This translated into an implementation strategy of the *What I Heard: Addressing Insensitive Language* activity in this curriculum, wherein teachers are encouraged to

build their research and knowledge base with resources such as the *Personal Identity Wheel* that can teach students about the many types of diversity, building conversations around intersectionality. The project has a strong research basis about why these strategies are helpful to students, which paired well with resources on specific implementation of activities and how best to do that.

Activities in the curriculum, such as *Naming Emotions* and *Brain Breaks*, that can be brought up and implemented throughout lessons during the year are also backed by an important research element. As shown in the Interventions and Strategies section of Chapter Two, by modeling healthy emotional patterns of thought and behavior through naming emotions in a situation, and by taking time to have breaks for breathing and other stimulation, teachers are following recommendations by those like Yoder and Kim on how best to help students process their own emotions, especially around overwhelming thoughts or feelings. A simple how-to resource like that of the “Relaxation Skills for Anxiety” from the University of Michigan Medicine is an in-depth and detailed resource linked in the curriculum, with a few easy to implement exercises highlighted. Having both the easy to use activity slides and direct links to more sources helps teachers build these skills with students right away while also giving them further avenues to learn more, based on their students’ needs, and builds on the earlier research of why these strategies work by putting it into practice.

*Role Playing* and *Peer Mediation* are two more activities that are used in the curriculum, based explicitly on the research previously done. Lithoxidou’s 2021 work in role playing and peer mediation was especially influential, establishing why these practices are so important despite their complexity in implementation. To make it accessible for teachers and students to use, I found step by step guides authored by experts in the field, such as Gfroerer and Valdes, and

then wrote my own prompts for potential role playing simulations with neutral names and pronouns so all students can participate.

The strong research basis established in this thesis' Chapter Two indicated what helpful and effective strategies would be, and then in the process of developing the curriculum itself, I was able to connect that to distinct resources and guides that showed how best to put those strategies into practice. Since Chapter Two was why it works, then the curriculum was how it works. Several of the activities came directly from the research indicating they had positive outcomes for students and teachers, and then those were connected with practitioner guides on how to put the research into practice.

### **Learnings and Limitations**

Through the process of researching and writing this, I have grown immensely as an educator, researcher, writer, learner, and person. Even though SEL was always an area of vague interest, I often worried that I was not well informed enough to advocate for how important I felt this work was. In my early days as a new teacher, I kept thinking that someone out there would certainly see that this was important and help me understand how best to implement it in an error-free way. As I now know, that could never have happened exactly that way. Yet, I am grateful for the process of learning it on my own, and hope that this has assisted me in making it easier and more accessible for other teachers to use these resources and ideas, as I was able to model them on my own experience. SEL implementation can feel intimidating even still and there are many ways to do it harmfully, as shown by Bouffard, among others. However, SEL as a practice and paired with an ongoing commitment to learning how best to use it with my students has also been shown again and again to be beneficial for students, especially those who are often overlooked in school (Agoratus, 2020).

For myself as a researcher, I have also had to learn that organizing and synthesizing information are skills unto themselves. There were several points in the development of this project that I felt a strong sense of imposter syndrome, as I was pulling together others' wonderful resources. There are so many breathtakingly detailed and well researched guides for these SEL skills, such as *Community, Circles and Collaboration: The First 10 days* from the Armadale Public Schools (D. Bucci, A. Cannon & A. Ramkarran, n.d.). Seeing how in depth and well written they were, it was difficult to feel that I had something meaningful to contribute. It was not until I was able to share my drafts with peer reviewers and coworkers, and was able to see their delight and excitement in having so many resources easily available and clearly explained, that I truly understood the value of my own work in organizing and synthesizing these resources. As teachers in a digital age, there are so many great guides and ideas, but with insufficient planning time and overwhelming decision fatigue, having a clear and accessible place where so many resources are clearly compiled for immediate use can truly be a meaningful gift.

The implications of this are manifold. Creating detailed explanations and guides should still be a focus in educational research, but pairing it with easy to use formats and freely accessible resources should be planned for too. In addition, so many wonderful resources were unfortunately locked behind paywalls that either required already underpaid teachers to use their own money to access, or required use of their precious time to petition their administrators to unlock. How many times have teachers used subpar SEL resources because that was all they had the time to uncover or the ability to access? It should not only be businesses or those looking to generate a profit that create easily usable resources for teachers. In an effort to show significance for grants or other funding, resources can often be either too greatly detailed and lengthy to be

immediately useful, or are hidden behind hard to access paywalls. Educational funding to create easily usable and high quality resources, like worksheets or slides, would help students and teachers in an immediate and impactful way.

However, there are naturally limitations to any work that seeks to create immediately usable and accessible SEL curricula. This project in particular has many drawbacks that, while it does not diminish the value, must be acknowledged. With the emphasis on usability and immediacy, depth of knowledge and expertise could necessarily be shortened and may be unable to do full justice to the nuance of how best to implement these practices. While the project attempts to account for that by directing users to more detailed resources, the onus is on the practitioner to educate themselves more fully. This acknowledges and builds teacher agency, but limits the project to the shallow end of a rich pool of resources.

In addition, due to the very specific context of a Catholic middle school in an urban setting, this project and even many of these activities will not work for all cultures and all students. While the aim is to be culturally responsive wherever possible, and this aim is put into practice in both the underlying research and the visual aspects of what icons are chosen in the slides, such a project cannot be all things to all people. There must be SEL curricula intentionally developed by underserved communities based on the social and emotional skills that are most needed in those specific contexts. Should the needs and demographics of my students change, this curriculum would by necessity change as well. It is meant to be a flexible resource for teachers to use to create the experiences they know will work best for their students.

Overall, this project has encouraged me to learn a great deal, and will hopefully do the same for others in the future. I detailed how I overcame a sense of personal inadequacy but through the process, came to recognize the importance of this work, as well as how best to serve

my students and fellow educators. The limitations of this work were explored, in that the aim for accessibility and usability means it cannot go as into the full depth that these important topics deserve, and that the project is also limited in that it cannot be all things to all people and completely culturally responsive since it is created for use in a specific context. Thus, future developments must be explored.

### **Future Development**

When planning future developments of SEL curricula, there are many considerations. The next SEL curricula that are developed need to keep in mind teacher time and accessibility, providing straightforward resources in addition to depth of content. The best resources I found, based on my own preferences as a teacher, were those that assumed teacher competence, directed to further research as desired, and had clear directions for use. In my experience, those things that help teachers plan easily directly help students because when their teacher is less stressed and has access to more resources, they will be better equipped to assist their students.

An assessment of the time it takes to deploy the resource could also be a helpful addition to many guides, such as saying how many minutes an activity is likely to take. There could also be research done in how long it takes teachers to find, understand, and begin using a new resource well. This could provide helpful information on best design practices. Most importantly, culturally diverse and responsive SEL must be further explored and developed, especially by those from underserved and marginalized communities.

For myself, I would like to continue creating slides and worksheets that can be easily and immediately implemented, and that are freely available to all. I want to learn more about culturally responsive mindfulness and cooperation practices that would be helpful for historically underserved and marginalized students, as well as how to continue incorporating SEL practices

into academics. As an English teacher, I continue to be intrigued by the intersection between language use and thoughts, such as in the CBT practices used in counseling and briefly discussed in this project. The way that our thoughts form our words is well known, but the ways our words influence our thoughts fascinates me in the context of a classroom, especially around the written word across the ages.

The future development of such SEL projects is key, and should focus towards teacher usability, how teachers internalize resources, and cultural responsiveness. In my own future endeavors as an educator and researcher, I would like to continue creating materials for fellow educators that make it easier for them to do their job well. I also continue to be intrigued by linguistic and counseling intersections and would welcome the opportunity to study it more in depth. Before I can tackle that however, the question arises - where to take this project from here.

### **Personal Plan for Use**

To explore my personal plan to use this capstone and where to take it from this point, I want to begin with the schedule for the upcoming semester. I will continue to teach at an urban Catholic middle school with limited unstructured time for Advisory. In the past, this has been used by different teachers for very different activities. This year, I will share this resource with my teaching team and plan to use it myself. I want to use these activities not only during our Advisory time, but also during any unexpected downtime, and interweave it with our English Language Arts academic time where helpful.

For example, I plan to use the *Naming Emotions* activity before and after lessons to check in about student emotions, as well as using it during creative writing activities so that students can practice varying their vocabulary as well as explore emotional depth through creative writing. I also plan to use several circle variations later in the year to help facilitate student

discussions around complex topics that come up in our school year and in our texts. In the Sixth grade, students will read *Wonder*, a book about a child with a facial deformity. This intersects easily with several of the activities in this project, such as *Positive Self-Talk*, since the book is written in first person from multiple perspectives and can allow for a good discussion of how different characters' self-talk is different and shows how they think about themselves and others.

Even as I developed this curriculum, I was excited to try it with my students and to have this resource easily accessible for myself during the school year, when I often feel that planning and research time becomes an extremely limited commodity. Now, when I want to use one of these great activities, I have the slides and resources prepared and easily accessible for myself and to share with others. Knowing that I have a high quality SEL curriculum for my students is a great relief.

My personal plan for use is to deploy these activities during our unstructured advisory and other unstructured downtimes, as well as tying it into academic situations as much as possible. When I developed the curriculum, I did so for this specific context and setting so that I can plan to use it throughout the year both with my own students and to share with my team. I have specific content points in mind to tie it in with, as well as several points throughout the year that I plan to use these activities. To have this easily accessible and usable SEL curriculum is not only a relief, but will mean that my students will have many opportunities to learn and practice empathy for themselves and others.

## **Conclusion**

To try and sum up the entirety of this project is an undertaking unto itself. The times we are in may be unprecedented, but we are capable. When we find and share the resources we need to learn and practice empathy, self-care, and all social emotional learning, everyone can benefit.

The aim of this project was to create an SEL curriculum to students in a Catholic middle school that delivers immediately implementable strategies, slides and activities for teachers to use during unstructured Advisory times.

I have attempted to achieve that here by formatting my project in such a way that teachers can use it right away as well as providing opportunities for further research into these topics. I took the research basis of why and how SEL works and then implemented it further with in-practice guides and articles from practicing educators. I considered my own learnings and limitations, in addition to the future development of SEL curricula, then connected it to my own personal plan for use of this particular project. My hope is that my effort will not only help my own students and my ability to deliver high quality SEL instruction to them this year, but any other educators in a similar situation. We do the job that I think can most effectively change our world. When we can help each other, help our students, we help the world. We have all been through unprecedented times and changes, but together we can not only weather it, but come out stronger.

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