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The Importance of Social and Emotional Learning for Students in Grades K-12

by

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A Starred Paper

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

Of

St. Cloud State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Science

In Curriculum and Development

May 2023

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Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
I. Introduction	4
Purpose of the Study	4
Significance of the Study	4
Prevalence of Mental Health Issues	4
The Need for Social and Emotional Learning	5
Research Questions	5
Social Emotional Learning and Why it's Important	6
Social Emotional Learning Models and Framework	7
Developmental Stages of Social Emotional Learning	7
The Relationship Between Growth Mindset and Social Emotional Learning	12
Terminology	13
II. Review of Literature	15
Research Studies and Data	15
Building a Positive Social Culture in our Schools	24
How to Implement Social Emotional Learning into our Schools	27
Assessment of Social and Emotional Learning	28
The Covid-19 Pandemic and its Effect on Students' Need for SEL	29
Teachers and Social Emotional Learning	30
III. Conclusion	34
The Outcome of Teaching Social-emotional Skills and Growth Mindset	35
Limitations of the Study	37

References 39

Chapter I

Introduction

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to research the effect of social and emotional learning on students' mental health, behavior, and social skills and its correlation to increased academic success. The idea of a growth mindset fits nicely and is related to social and emotional learning.

Significance of the Study

The idea of social and emotional learning has been a key topic in school districts across the United States and around the world as a means for helping students develop appropriate communication skills, social-emotional skills, self-awareness, and responsible decision-making skills. Research has shown that developing these skills is correlated to higher achievement in academics as well as decreased aggressive or destructive behaviors (Taylor & Dymnicki, 2007). Some states have added grade-level standards in areas of social-emotional learning, and policymakers at the national and state levels have advocated for additional standards and increased funding for this area. This research study is meant to examine the reasoning behind the need for social-emotional learning in schools and investigate the success of social-emotional learning programs in different settings.

The Prevalence of Mental Health Issues

Current research indicates that 1 in 5 people in the United States suffer from some form of mental health disorder. 70 percent of those disorders emerge before the age of 18 (Meier, 2017). Over the past century, the lives of students have changed dramatically. Families must deal with higher economic and social pressures, schools are much more diverse with many different cultures and languages being spoken, and children have access to a limitless number of media and technology. All of

these factors influence children's and teens' mental health. With these societal pressures, changes, and influences, often they are not equipped to handle them properly. In the past, research and education related to children and adolescent mental health only focused on those diagnosed with a disorder, and schools devoted little to no resources toward mental health issues (Greenberg et al., 2017).

The Need for Social and Emotional Learning

Schools are designed to teach the academics required to be a successful adult, but those aren't the only skills needed for being a successful and productive member of society. Students must also be good problem solvers. They must develop social skills to be able to communicate effectively with their peers that may be from a variety of cultures and backgrounds. Children must learn how to be caring and show empathy for others. Finally, students need to develop good character to be able to make rational and moral decisions (Elias, 2003). Social and emotional learning creates positive outcomes for self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision-making. Improving skills in these areas promoted increased achievement scores and lessened negative behaviors. With positive social-emotional instruction, students felt more connected to their school environments, which improved school attendance (Taylor & Dymnicki, 2007). Studies have suggested that 40-60% of students are disengaged in school. Many students behave in ways that could jeopardize their futures such as drug abuse, violence, or bullying (Greenberg et al., 2017). Research has also shown that when a person's brain experiences toxic stress over long periods of time, it affects the brain's ability to manage emotions and creates an executive functioning deficit (Bailey et al., 2019).

Research Questions

1. Why are social-emotional learning and growth mindset important to teach in schools?
2. How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected students socially and emotionally?

3. What are the outcomes of teaching social and emotional skills and promoting growth mindset in schools?

What is Social-Emotional Learning and Why is it Important?

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social and emotional learning promotes learning competencies in the areas of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. Students need the skills to be able to set and work toward important goals, cooperate with others, and deal with everyday stresses. Social and emotional learning gives students the chance to learn the life skills needed for becoming competent and productive adults. Teaching social and emotional skills also serves to counteract negative risk factors (Greenberg et al., 2017).

Students need to possess basic social-emotional competencies such as strong work habits and values allowing them to be successful in post-secondary environments and possess meaningful future careers. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is based on the understanding that the best learning emerges from supportive environments that make learning challenging, engaging, and meaningful. Social and emotional skills are crucial for being successful academically, a hardworking employee, and a valuable citizen. When schools engage in social-emotional learning and teaching, they can reduce the likelihood of students engaging in risky behaviors such as drug abuse, bullying, and violence. Teaching the skills identified above by CASEL lays the groundwork for improved academic performance and prosocial behavior for students. SEL that is supported by education and the community ultimately creates a community filled with more caring individuals and a safer environment (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

Strategies to increase social and personal competence have been shown to reduce risk factors such as drug use, anxiety, or criminal activity. SEL intervention has been shown to significantly reduce

the risk of mental health issues or dropping out of school (Greenberg et al., 2017). Similarly, students who feel a sense of belonging at school and have experienced meaningful, positive relationships with adults tend to be more persistent and academically motivated. In a caring environment where positive relationships are fostered between teachers and students, student motivation and engagement are strengthened (Rutledge et al., 2015). Recent research has also found that SEL instruction may have its greatest impact on students from impoverished low-income families or the students who are behind academically because they are at a higher risk for delinquent behavior, academic difficulties, and are less likely to come from a stable, supportive home environment (Bailey et al., 2019).

Social and Emotional Models and Framework

There are different models of categorizing social and emotional skills. CASEL has a five-category framework. Researcher Stephanie Jones has developed a three-category framework. Social and emotional skills according to Jones can be categorized into three areas: Cognitive regulation, emotional processing, and social/interpersonal skills:

Cognitive regulation deals with the basic cognitive skills necessary for completing a goal or task. This area is closely linked to executive functioning skills which involve maintaining attention, working memory, being able to prioritize tasks, and controlling behavior. Children use cognitive regulation skills each time they engage in tasks that require concentration, problem-solving, making conscious choices, and resisting impulses. When students become strong in these skills, it helps them improve academically because they are able to be more engaged in their learning (Jones et al., 2017).

Emotional processes are skills required to help children with recognizing, expressing, and managing their emotions. This area also includes being able to perceive and understand the emotions of others. Emotional processes help children gain an understanding of how they feel in different situations

and handle their emotions in healthy ways. These skills are also necessary for building relationships with others and being able to have successful social interactions. In order to be able to interact positively with others, children need to be able to regulate and manage their emotions as well as feel empathy for others (Jones et al., 2017).

The final area of social-emotional learning according to Jones is social and interpersonal skills. These skills help children and adolescents interpret other people's behaviors, navigate social situations effectively, and have positive interactions with peers and adults. Social and interpersonal skills rely on a person's emotional processes. Children must be able to recognize, express and manage their own emotions before they are able to interact with others. When students have effective interpersonal and social skills, they are able to work collaboratively with others, handle social dilemmas, and interact peacefully with others (Jones et al., 2017).

The Framework Developed by CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning), is similar to the framework described above, but it divides skills into five categories: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills. Self-awareness covers a person's ability to understand their own emotions, values, and thoughts and how they influence their own behavior. Self-management is the ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. The category of social awareness helps individuals to understand the perspectives of others and be able to empathize with them. The area of relationship skills helps people gain and maintain healthy relationships, and then maneuver diverse social settings. The fifth category is responsible decision-making skills, which involves a person's ability to make wise and constructive choices about their own behavior (Casel.org, 2023).

Developmental Stages of Social-Emotional Learning

When considering SEL instruction, it is important to first make sure the skills being taught are developmentally appropriate. Neurological development and physical changes guide which skills should be taught at each developmental stage. Some skills are foundational and set in place depths of skills that will be developed over time. When children are young, most of their socialization happens in the home and they begin socializing with others as they enter preschool or other social activities. When children enter middle school, their social circle broadens. They are involved in more activities and encounter more peers and adults. When in high school, teens begin to have to deal with more in-depth situations. They must juggle schoolwork, activities, peer relationships and jobs. Therefore, all of these stages and settings require different approaches to SEL instruction. Play-based instruction seems to be most effective for preschool and elementary. For middle school, direct instruction and classroom activities that include strategies practice seems to be most appropriate. When students are in adolescence, it is important for them to be able to have independence where they can express their points of view and feel mutually respected (Jones & Doolittle, 2017).

Children's emotions and social skills develop at different stages. Executive functioning, which deals with the ability to concentrate, plan and organize, begins to develop during early childhood. During elementary school, children's social-emotional skills begin to develop in stages. In kindergarten, they need to learn skills such as sharing, taking turns, and following classroom rules. During 1st and 2nd grade, students' ability to pay attention and solve multi-step tasks increases as well as their ability to self-regulate their emotions. During the middle elementary years of 3rd and 4th grade, they start developing such skills as conflict resolution and empathy for others. Their interactions with peers become more mature. When students reach 5th grade, they are beginning to enter adolescence and they are starting to

be able to make more meaningful and purposeful relationships with peers and adults. At this stage, they are in need of help with building and maintaining positive, healthy relationships (Bailey et al., 2019).

Research conducted by Jones et al., (2007), has shown that incorporating social-emotional learning at a young age helps children develop the social and academic skills needed for success in school and all areas of life. Elementary classrooms are able to function more effectively when students have the skills to focus their attention, manage their emotions and communicate effectively with teachers and peers. These skills also lead to better overall academic skills and deeper learning. Students who have developed stronger social skills are more likely to develop positive peer relationships and stronger, lasting friendships as well as be able to communicate more effectively with teachers and other adults. Social and emotional skills learned during childhood have been linked to necessary life skills 20-30 years later such as job retention, secure financial foundation, and positive mental health (Jones et al., 2017).

Adolescence can be a very difficult time in a young person's life. Academics are becoming more difficult and rigorous, and hormones are changing drastically causing major changes in the way the brain is processing emotions and information. In order for SEL programs to be effective for adolescent-age children, they must appeal to their desire to be respected by adults and gain admiration from those whose opinions they value. Adolescents have a desire for autonomy, but at the same time, they also want to fit in with their peers. In order for SEL programs to be successful for adolescents, they must appeal to these desires. A skills model approach that focuses on trying to change the students, tends to be less effective with adolescents. They appeal more to changes in the climate of the school where staff members make an intentional effort to make the school climate more positive and offer more student support (Yeager, 2017).

Adolescence is a time of great social difficulty. Students at that age are branching out and discovering who they are and who they want to be as a person. This self-exploration along with hormonal changes makes navigating social situations and interactions challenging. According to the article *Learning to walk in another's shoes*, at the root of SEL teaching is a person's capacity to understand another person's perspective. Helping students to be able to interpret people's perspectives helps them to be able to better navigate social situations. These skills allow people to be able to see situations from others' points of view, appreciate opinions that are different from their own, empathize with others, and engage in moral reasoning. When people become better at understanding others' perspectives, it also helps improve their other social-emotional skills. Teachers can help students bolster these skills through a variety of ways in the classroom. The first way that teachers can help students improve their skills in understanding the perspective of others is to have them practice understanding the perspective of characters from a story, a person living during the Holocaust, or a scientist from a different time period. Another way to help students develop this skill is to encourage them to be social detectives by having them investigate other people's actions that they don't agree with instead of being too quick to judge them. Being able to gauge and understand other people's way of looking at situations will help students to become more understanding, empathetic and caring. It will also help them with navigating relationships and engaging with other cultural groups (Gehlbach, 2017).

Success in college and adult life depends just as heavily on self-control and other social-emotional skills as it does on academics. Self-control is an essential social-emotional skill that allows people to resist distractions, work collaboratively, overcome setbacks, and control emotions. It has been shown that employers have also noticed the importance of their employees possessing appropriate social-emotional skills. Research done by Google as a company has found that the best managers are

those that took an interest in other employees' lives, were able to relate and empathize with them and were skilled listeners who could understand others' perspectives (Elias et al., 2017).

How is Growth Mindset Related to Social Emotional Learning?

Mindset is a set of beliefs and attitudes toward a person's abilities such as intelligence. Carol Dweck, an author, and psychologist came up with the terms fixed and growth mindset to explain people's attitudes regarding their intelligence and ability to learn. People with a fixed mindset believe that they are born with a certain amount of intelligence, and no matter what they do, they will not be able to change or improve that. On the other hand, people with a growth mindset believe that intelligence is not fixed and is pliable with studying and hard work. People who believe their intelligence is preordained are less likely to take on challenges and are more likely to give up easily. When people believe that their intelligence can grow, they are more likely to work hard and apply extra effort. When the idea of growth and fixed mindset are applied to a classroom setting, those with a growth mindset are the students who are most likely to succeed both in school and in life. When teachers are able to shape a classroom culture of growth mindset, they can help students develop strong work ethics that lead to success in school and life beyond (Robinson, 2017).

Educators can help students develop growth mindsets by teaching them about the neuroplasticity of the brain. Meaning as the brain is challenged, it creates new synapse pathways to connect new information to the knowledge already learned, increasing one's knowledge. Another way to help foster a climate of growth mindset is to normalize failures. Students who have more of a fixed mindset view failure as an excuse to give up. By teaching students that failure means a chance to try again, they begin to work harder to achieve their goals and improve their determination or

perseverance. Instead of allowing students to give up, teach them new strategies for trying again (Robinson, 2017).

According to Carol Dweck, psychologist and creator of the concepts of growth and fixed mindset, students who believe their intelligence can grow, learn more, gain deeper knowledge, and do better in difficult situations. Dweck, 2015 states that people with a growth mindset do better because they are less concerned with looking intelligent and more willing to fail and try again. Those with a growth mindset are more persistent and resilient when faced with difficulties (Dweck, 2015). Students with a growth mindset tend to be more focused on learning. They tend to put in more effort and are willing to learn strategies that will help them acquire knowledge and persevere through difficult tasks. In contrast, students with a fixed mindset are more caught up with their abilities. They want to avoid looking foolish and are hesitant to try new things or take risks because it makes them feel less intelligent. Those with fixed mindsets are not able to persevere through difficulties because they are easily derailed by setbacks. Research shows that teaching students to develop a growth mindset changes their achievement and motivation (Dweck, 2014).

Terminology:

SEL: Social and Emotional Learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2023).

Growth Mindset: The belief that a person's intelligence is not fixed and is able to continue to grow with hard work and perseverance (Robinson, 2017).

Fixed Mindset: The belief that a person is born with a certain amount of intelligence, and no hard work or studying is able to change it (Robinson, 2017).

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning is an organization with a mission to make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education at all ages (CASEL, 2023).

Chapter II

Review of Literature

Research Studies and Data

In a research study conducted by Weissberg & Cascarino (2013), 213 experimental control groups, including more than 270,000 students in grades K-12. Students in the study participated in extensive social and emotional learning programs. Students who were part of the study demonstrated improved social and emotional skills, had fewer behavior problems, and performed better academically with achievement test scores increasing an average of 11 percentage points (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). Since that study, three additional follow-up studies have taken place (Sklad, et al., 2012; Taylor, et al., 2017; Wigelsworth et al., 2016). All three of these studies found similar results to Weissberg and Cascarino's study from 2013. The three new meta-analyses also studied SEL programs internationally and concluded that well-implemented programs help students to make significant gains in social-emotional skills and academics (Mahoney et al., 2018).

Rutledge et al, (2015) conducted a study of four schools in southern Florida. All schools were about the same size and demographically similar. Two of the schools were lower performing and two were higher performing. When beginning their research, one of their earliest discoveries was that the higher-performing schools had strong programs that deliberately targeted students' social and emotional needs. The researchers of this study went to each school for three weeks throughout the school year. During that time, they interviewed administrators, counselors, department chairs, special education coordinators, and ELL supervisors, and they shadowed students. At the higher-performing schools, staff members made purposeful efforts to make connections with students whereas in the lower-performing schools, this was less of a priority. The principal at one of the higher-performing schools commented that

personally knowing the students and creating an environment with a sense of family helps significantly with student success (Rutledge et al, 2015).

At both of the lower-performing schools, staff members and students made comments about the lack of student involvement in activities. Likewise, at the lower-performing schools, teachers complained of frustrations over lack of student motivation and poor attitudes and behavior. At the two higher-performing schools, a team including an administrator, guidance counselor, and other staff members each followed a group of students from 9th-12th grade. They referred to this system as looping, which was designed to support personal relationships among staff, students, and parents. Any academic or behavioral issues were dealt with by an advisor from their personal team. Students at the higher-performing schools described behavior management techniques as a way to gain or establish trust among students, teachers, and administrators. Staff used meetings about disciplinary actions as a way to check in with students about academics and home and social lives. Administrators at the lower-performing schools described their interactions with students as a means for addressing disciplinary issues and not a time for relationship building. Staff and administrators at the higher-performing schools created a positive culture of academic rigor where all students regardless of their future goals or academic performance were encouraged to challenge themselves. Students commented that they had the desire to work hard in order to make staff, principals, and parents proud. At the lower-performing schools, guidance counselors and principals described efforts to reach higher and lower-level students, but they just hoped for the best when it came to the middle-range students (Rutledge et al, 2015).

At one of the higher-performing schools, they included a program called AVID, which stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. In this program, they identified eligible students by those who received lower standardized test scores. Those students then participated in the program that

provided extra support through tutoring, additional guidance for post-secondary options, and classes that taught organization and social skills. In the lower-performing schools, they did offer some academic support programs, but they were not intentional or purposeful. Their support actions were more focused on a reactive approach to struggling students rather than a proactive approach to help students gain skills to enhance their academic skills. Students at the higher-performing schools described administrators as being present and caring. They spent time in the presence of students during lunch or classes. They made an effort to have conversations and check in with the students. At both lower-performing schools, staff and principals described adult-student relationships on more of a passive level leaving it up to the students whether they reached out to form relationships with their teachers (Rutledge et al, 2015). Although the curriculum being taught, the amount of funding received, and the quality of the teaching staff were all similar in these four schools, the intentional efforts for student support and personal connections at the higher-performing schools seem to have made a significant difference in student achievement (Rutledge et al, 2015).

Similarly, the article *Learning from Schools that Close Opportunity Gaps*, makes the claim that all students should have the opportunity to study a rich, diverse array of subjects and should be given the opportunity to study them at advanced levels instead of being tracked into courses geared toward at risk, low income, or special education students. Schools of opportunity remove these barriers by providing engaging courses and advanced coursework opportunities for all students. Schools of opportunity work to provide a school climate that supports the academic, social and emotional development of all students. This article studied two high schools that were on the verge of closure with declining enrollment. Rainier Beach High School in Seattle's enrollment had dwindled from 1,200 students to only about 320 students. To improve enrollment and school success rates, they decided to

introduce the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, which is known for its pedagogical approach and rigorous coursework. The school invested in teacher development training for all staff to support the IB approach including training special education teachers to be able to team teach with content area teachers. This allowed for students who would have normally been tracked into special education courses to take the IB level courses with success. They set up supports that are accessible for all students such as in class tutors and an after school help center. Faculty also met in teams weekly to help support one another and identify struggling students. Since the introduction of this new program, Rainier Beach High School's enrollment has more than doubled. 75% of students received free or reduced lunches and 40% came from immigrant or refugee backgrounds. Although not as high as more affluent schools, student performance has increased significantly (LaCour et al., 2017).

South Side High School in Rockville Center, NY implemented a similar reform which provided access to the IB curriculum for all students. All students including those classified as special education, take IB courses in English and history. More than half of the enrolled students take the full course of IB advance courses. The school offers numerous supports open to all students such as before school zero hour, which students are encouraged to come to school early and work with teachers. They also reading and writing labs as well as other tutoring available. Many successes have come from instituting the IB program such as 100% of South Side High School students have earned the New York State Regents Diploma. Many students have gone on to earn advanced degrees. Both of these examples show how all students are able to succeed in a rich and rigorous environment (LaCour et al., 2017).

Schools of Opportunity like the two mentioned also succeed because of their philosophy of creating a positive school climate that the academic, emotional, and social development of all students. They support the belief that all students deserve to learn in an environment that feels safe and

supportive. Teachers and administrators aim to create a culture focused on forming strong, supportive relationships with students that seek to build and restore relationships rather than focus on harsh punishments. They operate under the belief that while suspensions and expulsions are sometimes necessary, discipline should be handled with more of a restorative justice approach. Students who are continually placed in in-school or out-of-school suspension miss valuable in-class instruction and often develop a negative attitude toward school which leads to other problems such as truancy and dropout. The alternative to this is to create a culture of positive mutual respect among students and staff members (LaCour et al., 2017).

At Hillsdale High School in California, students meet in small learning communities where they meet daily with advisors to work on skills such as community building, equity, and social-emotional learning. They also use these groups as a place to work through minor conflicts or school infractions. Teachers meet regularly with administrators, school counselors, and psychologists to discuss disciplinary problems and brainstorm ways to address them. These practices have allowed Hillsdale High School to reduce its suspension rates from 11.7% to 4.75 in five years (LaCour et al., 2017).

Doyle, B. G., & Bramwell, W., 2006 did a study on using dialogic reading to teach social-emotional skills to emergent readers. Dialogic book reading involves a type of shared book reading that includes strategic questioning and responding in small groups. Dialogic reading has a positive connection to oral reading development. Books with social-emotional content can be used to teach students social skills such as cooperation, sharing, and interacting appropriately. Children learn certain social skills such as cooperation through dialogic reading, then they practice those skills through an activity to reinforce them. Books with social-emotional content show and present models of children and adults interacting and solving problems. Developing caring, positive student-teacher relationships through dialogic reading

helps students develop literacy skills while also learning social skills. When a child is able to connect with a character in a book, they are more likely to engage in deeper understanding of the skill being taught. Since dialogic reading is done in small groups, children are practicing social skills in a comfortable setting. They are learning to take turns, listen to one another, and use language in socially appropriate ways. Emotion vocabulary is taught using dialogic reading by using words from stories that express emotion. This helps students to be able to define the emotions they are feeling and can then better express or deal with them (Doyle, B. G., & Bramwell, W., 2006).

Four meta-analyses were conducted to assess the effectiveness of social emotional learning programs. The first one (Durlak, et al., 2011), looked at 213 school-based SEL programs with more than 270,000 students. The two major findings were that students who received instruction through social and emotional learning programs showed substantially higher positive outcomes in the areas of attitude and positive social behavior and substantially lower levels of conduct or behavior problems and emotional stress. Students who participated in the SEL programs also showed an 11 percentile point gain on achievement tests which indicates that SEL programming tends to boost academic success. Three additional follow-up meta-analyses have been conducted since these first findings (Sklad et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2017 and Wigelsworth et al., 2016). All three of these studies found similar results to the original study. Two of the studies looked at the short term effects while the other two looked at long-term effects. The Durlak and Taylor studies focused on students from the United States whereas Wigelsworth and colleagues studied students in the United Kingdom and Sklad's study was from The Netherlands. They all independently reached the same conclusion, which was that SEL programs produce positive results for participating students in the areas of behavior, attitude, emotional health, academics (Mahoney et al., 2018).

Schools in many cities across the country have been implementing policies to reduce suspension rates because it leads to too much time spent outside the academic setting. In Syracuse, NY they implemented discipline reforms to ensure that all students had equal access to support and interventions that help support students' self-discipline skills, social and emotional competency and promote a positive learning environment. School-wide efforts in social and emotional learning were implemented which focused on teaching, practicing and being cognizant of positive, appropriate behaviors for all students. More intensive instruction was then offered to students with conduct and behavior issues. In place of using suspensions as punishment, restorative practices were put into place to help students problem-solve, correct their behavior and make amends and restore their good standing (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Denver schools also began participating in social and emotional learning as a means to move away from exclusionary discipline practices toward a restorative discipline approach. Restorative discipline approaches aim to encourage collaborative problem-solving and relationship strengthening strategies. Again, all students in the district participate and in tier 1 social and emotional learning instruction, then tier 2 and 3 instruction is offered in a more intensive setting for students who experience conduct difficulties. Although more research is needed to prove its effectiveness, it is believed that this type of intervention and self-reflection practices help to increase students' social awareness, self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

In 2008, schools in Cleveland, OH began implementing reforms intended to support students' behavioral and academic needs and promote school safety. The aim was to provide students with interventions for both prevention of behavior issues and intervention for those experiencing problems

with conduct. Support teams were established at all levels to identify students who could benefit from behavioral interventions and collaborate to determine possible underlying reasons for behavior issues. Cleveland was one of seven districts in the nation at that time to begin training teachers in SEL strategies using curriculum developed by CASEL. They began training all teachers in grades pre-K -5 in strategies that promote self-control, emotional regulation, positive peer relationships, and interpersonal skills. These skills were taught at least 2 times a week in 20-minute lessons. Teachers were also trained to implement instructional strategies throughout the school day to reinforce the concepts (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Data shows positive results in reducing suspensions and fostering a positive climate for all three of the above districts. Between 2006-2013, Denver's suspension rates were reduced by half. Cleveland reduced their suspension rates by 60% in 3 years. In Syracuse, 54 percent fewer black students were suspended and white student suspensions fell by 39%. Cleveland schools also reported that discipline incidents decreased significantly in the areas of fighting or violence, harassment or disruptive and disobedient behavior. Although reforms implemented in these three districts varied in curriculum, approach and policies, researchers in the study have concluded that the implementation of SEL programs was elemental in bringing about the changes and successes seen by these districts (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

The strategies approach to SEL was tested during a summer program for low-income urban students in grades K-8. The teachers were given training at the beginning of the summer, and they were told they could use the scripted strategies provided or create their own lessons with other resources. The strategies that were provided focused on social, cognitive, and emotional areas and included grade-level specific strategies as well as strategies that could be appropriate to implement at any age. Each

grade level was given a set of slightly different skills to elicit an age-appropriate target skill. The overall data for this trial suggested that a strategies approach to SEL was doable and a positive experience. At the end of the summer, teachers expressed that they felt that their relationships with their students strengthened significantly. Their classroom climate became one of positivity, sharing, and growth. Teachers noticed an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in conflicts. The teachers reported that they felt comfortable with taking the strategies and adapting them to fit with what was needed for their students. Teachers appreciated the variety of resources provided to them and the flexibility of implementing them how they saw fit, but they also mostly preferred using the scripted pre-made lessons as they took less time for preparation (Bailey et al., 2019).

A study was done about mindset in Chile with 147,000 10th graders. The study found that students with a growth mindset performed similarly at all levels of family income meaning that poorer children performed at similar levels to those from affluent families. Other studies have shown that having a growth mindset has benefits far beyond the classroom. Having a growth mindset can help counteract depression, increase creativity, bolster a person's willpower, and diminish aggression. In adolescents who are struggling with peer pressure and fitting in, having a growth mindset has helped them have a more positive outlook. Teens with a growth mindset are more likely to see themselves as evolving creatures who are working through a stage of life, and they will move on to become better, improved selves as they mature. On the other hand, those adolescents who have more of a fixed mindset view themselves as being doomed to be "losers" all their lives (Dweck, 2015).

David Yeager, a colleague of Carol Dweck conducted a study of more than 200 9th and 10th graders in a low-income school near San Francisco. During the study, the students attended six sessions about growth mindset and personality. When compared to the control group who received no training,

the students who attended the training showed significantly reduced aggression. Another study showed that students who received training in growth mindset at the beginning of high school decreased their chances of developing depression by 40% (Dweck, 2015).

Having a growth mindset can also help people have success in their careers. Dweck and colleagues conducted a study at Fortune 1000 companies to see how management attitudes and mindsets affected employees and workplace climates. People who worked at companies with growth mindset ideals felt much more satisfied with their careers and stated that they felt empowered by their job. On the contrary, those employees who worked for companies with fixed mindsets were more likely to engage in devious activities in order to make themselves look better in the eyes of their supervisors or gain advancement (Dweck, 2015).

Building a Positive Social Culture in our Schools

According to the article, *Can we keep SEL on course?* by Joshua Starr, in order for SEL programs to work, they must be woven into all aspects of a school community. SEL programs cannot just be something that is focused on for a short period of time one day a week. That is the easiest way for programs to fail, and school leaders will argue about their ineffectiveness. Starr indicates the importance of SEL being instruction for all students, not just those students deemed as at risk or special education students. The whole school community must be invested in the programming in order for it to be successful. It should be implemented on the playground, in the cafeteria, in after-school activities, and during academic classes (Starr, 2019).

According to research conducted by Bailey et al., SEL cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. It must be designed to fit the developmental needs of students of all ages. It also needs to be flexible, so it can be molded to the needs of the local school. SEL instruction is most effective when students have

consistent exposure to the skills and strategies being taught. Many SEL curricula are cumbersome and rigid, which makes them difficult to implement. It is more feasible to implement when presented as a set of strategies that are practiced consistently throughout the day rather than a scripted program. SEL instruction must feel authentic to students' specific situations that they have experienced in their local areas. This will help students to buy into the concepts that programs are trying to sell. When a strategies approach is used for SEL instruction rather than a rigid, set curriculum, it allows teachers the flexibility to design lessons that fit current needs and situations. The problem with this approach is the extra time and pressure put on teachers. This type of SEL instruction needs to be well supported building wide by the administration to help develop a positive building climate and to make sure teachers are not burdened by the demand of teaching the strategies (Bailey et al., 2019).

Social and emotional learning cannot be a band-aid or duct tape-type fix according to Porter-Magee, 2020. In order to successfully educate the whole child, Social emotional learning must be clearly articulated in the school's statements of mission, vision, and purpose. It must infiltrate the entire culture of the district. SEL is not a quick fix; it is an all-encompassing mission to convert the entire school climate. Students don't learn social and emotional skills the same way they learn academic subjects. For that reason, schools cannot just put together a series of lessons about social and character development and expect to have gained those skills. Instead, a person's character and moral compass are developed in an environment where the values that are taught also match the values that are demonstrated by teachers, counselors, and administrators. Shaping a student's character requires more than instruction of lessons; it requires modeling. Expecting students to be able to regulate their emotions when teachers are expressing emotions of anger and frustration is not realistic. The culture of the school needs to emulate the values that are trying to be instilled. Strong character and good citizenship are formed

rather than just taught. This means that stand-alone skills development that is not consistently reinforced most likely will not have lasting effects (Porter-Magee, 2020).

To further reiterate this point, the article *How Social and Emotional Learning can Succeed* by Jal Mehta (2020) states that there is an increasing consensus that believes SEL programming must be integrated into academics and the entire school's culture. With this approach, SEL cannot be implemented in short lessons a few times a week, but rather it must be woven into the fabric of how staff members and students regularly relate to one another. Creating a school culture such as this requires careful fostering by everyone in the school community (Mehta, 2020).

A Washington Public Policy Organization called Civic Enterprises published a report that surveyed 600 teachers about their viewpoints on the need for social and emotional learning. The report showed that 9 out of 10 teachers believe that social emotional learning helps students learn skills they need to be successful in school, careers, and life. Nearly all the teachers surveyed felt that SEL skills are teachable as long as they are supported by a solid curriculum with school-wide support. CASEL – The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning has reviewed over 200 SEL programs, and they provide a guide for recommended high-quality programs for preschool through secondary students. Choosing the right program is just the first step to successfully implementing SEL district wide. It must be followed up with strong district support and ongoing professional development. Building a positive school climate depends upon strong principles that help build relationships among students, teachers, administrators, and other school support staff (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

A 2010 research study by Bryk and associates revealed five key components to school improvement which include strong district-wide leadership, solid parent and community involvement, ongoing professional development, and a learning environment that is safe, welcoming, and invigorating.

As of 2013, all states had preschool SEL standards in place, but only a few states had implemented stand-alone SEL standards for all grades. Many of the current Common Core standards require skills such as effective communication, peer collaboration, and broad thinking which make strong social and emotional skills imperative (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

How to Implement Social and Emotional Learning into our Schools

All students deserve to learn in a positive school community that supports their mental health. Social-emotional and character development curriculum needs to be implemented universally in order for it to be successful. This implementation needs to come from policymakers at the US Department of Education (USDOE). Next, the USDOE must make sure that school districts use strong, evidence-based programs that have been proven to improve students' social-emotional skills and character development. The Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has developed an online guide for choosing an effective SEL program at all educational levels (Elias et al., 2017).

Maurice J. Elias and his contributors give suggestions for steps to implement nationwide social-emotional learning and character development (SECD) in our schools. First, the United States Department of Education should create a senior staff position dedicated to the implementation of social-emotional skills development. Second, each state must have an SECD assistance team that sets up district training and helps districts choose quality programming. Third, there must be teacher certification training and ongoing professional development. Teachers need to be properly trained and prepared to teach SEL skills if the implementation of programs is going to be successful. Fourth, a form of assessment needs to be in place in each district to determine whether the chosen program is meeting the needs of the students. The fifth recommendation is that schools that show excellence in their implementation of SEL programs should be recognized and honored as a means to inspire others to

excel. The sixth suggestion is that Social-emotional learning and character development should go beyond the school and into the community. It is important for community members to see and support what is happening in schools, but it is even more important for students to recognize their need for SEL skills in real-life community situations. The seventh recommendation for strong SEL implementation is also maybe one of the most important; securing sufficient funding for programs. Funding for SEL programs needs to be specifically allocated in the budget federally, at the state level, and locally. Often times, one of the reasons SEL programs fail is because districts are trying secure funding from grants or other organizations. When the money runs out, the programs are put by the wayside. Studies have shown that social and emotional learning pays for itself in the long run with less teacher dissatisfaction and turnover and lower criminal activity (Elias et al., 2017).

Assessment of the Effectiveness of Social and Emotional Learning

One of the many roadblocks that are hit when trying to implement SEL programs into schools is that there are not many easily accessible and measurable tools available for assessing the effectiveness of SEL programs. This creates a problem for policymakers and those who are trying to put SEL into practice. Having good, reliable SEL assessment tools could help educators achieve many goals. Good assessment tools could help to determine students' needs and strengths as well as help guide educators' decisions about curriculum and instruction. Good assessment would also give data about the effectiveness of the program and help monitor student progress. Without proper assessment, it's difficult for educators and policymakers to gather the data needed to make informed decisions (McKown, 2017).

One of the main problems with assessing SEL is that researchers and policymakers have not come to an agreement about what SEL is. There are many different models of SEL out there, and each

one has slightly different definitions of what is included. CASEL defines SEL as noncognitive factors such as academic behaviors, perseverance, academic mindsets, social skills and learning strategies. The National Academy of Sciences defines “21st Century skills” as both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills as well as self-management. Other researchers emphasize information processing, emotional processing and other attitudes such as grit and growth mindset. None of these models are necessarily better than the other, but to have all these models in competition claiming to mean the same thing creates a problem (McKown, 2017).

The Covid-19 Pandemic and its Effect on Social and Emotional Learning

The Covid-19 pandemic has further heightened the need for social and emotional learning. Throughout the pandemic, students have experienced a significant decrease in their social interactions with peers. Consequently, research has shown that students are experiencing increased amounts of anxiety, irritability, attention problems, and apprehension (Murphy et al., 2021). A 2013 study of past pandemics and related isolation caused a large number of people to develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Since Covid-19 caused isolation in such an immediate and extreme way, it is probable that students, parents, and teachers could be affected similarly (Zieher et al., 2021). The Covid-19 school closures were detrimental to student mental health. Their social-emotional health and well-being were affected by pandemic shutdowns and isolation resulting in poor engagement with online learning. Schools are often important places for students to engage in social interactions with both peers and adults. Often times being the place where they engage in their most meaningful relationships (Huck & Zhang , 2021).

Researchers MollyAnne Light-Stevenson and Brent Elder gave the Vanderbilt University Response to stress questionnaire. About 500 students in grades 4-6 were given the questionnaire. The school used

in the study was considered a high-needs, Title 1 Institution where about half of the students live below the poverty level. The Questionnaire was given in the spring of 2021. During the pandemic and shutdown, many students were faced with a lack of support resulting in them having to cope with their feelings alone or causing them to hold their feelings in. As a result, this may lead to them using destructive behaviors and emotions as an outlet. Suppressing emotions and feelings most often leads to impairments in the students' ability to develop relationship skills. Therefore causing students to withdraw from social situations. During the pandemic, many students were exposed to prolonged periods of toxic stress which can result in adverse effects on mental and physical health. Research shows that students who experience prolonged periods of stress are more likely to perform poorly in school, avoid social experiences and participate in destructive behaviors such as substance abuse. Research suggests that many students have endured circumstances due to the pandemic that have caused long-term fear and anxiety that have affected brain development. These effects include children's ability to process emotions, relate to others, and solve problems (Light-Stevenson & Elder, 2023).

Teachers and Social-Emotional Learning

In any SEL program, the adults presenting and supporting the lessons are essential to its success. Teachers need the appropriate support and professional development to make social and emotional learning programs effective. If the adults teaching and supporting the programs lack strong SEL skills themselves or struggle with poor mental or physical health, it could be the downfall of successful implementation (Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Educators need strong personal competencies in order to be effective teachers of Social and Emotional Learning. Teachers who have strong self-awareness can recognize their own emotions and can therefore help to motivate students to learn by sharing their joy and enthusiasm. Teachers with strong skills in the area of relationship building are able to help students

with resolving conflicts and being able to understand others' perspectives. Teachers who have strong social emotional competencies are also better able to build relationships with students and manage classroom discipline problems (Gregory & Fergus, 2017).

Teachers' emotional well-being and competence can have great effects on their ability to successfully teach social-emotional skills to their students and create a warm and positive classroom atmosphere. Classrooms with warm classroom atmospheres are more likely to promote deep learning because students who feel comfortable with the teacher and the peers around them are more willing to persevere when learning becomes difficult. In contrast, classrooms with poorly managed behaviors where students feel more stressed and less safe, tend to yield lower performance and less time on task (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Just as children differ in the way they are able to handle the many emotions and experiences they face each day, teachers also vary in their abilities to manage their own social and emotional situations in life. When teachers are able to appropriately express their emotions, they are modeling to the students how to positively navigate emotions. On the contrary, when teachers struggle with positive expression of their emotions and instead display negative emotions, it can cause students to have increased aggressive behaviors and a poorer ability to regulate their emotions. Teachers who are better at regulating their own emotions are more likely to be able to help children process their emotions in positive ways. This in turn will create a more consistently positive emotional climate in the classroom. Teachers who struggle with negative emotions at work such as stress or depression are more likely to react to student emotions and behaviors with annoyance or frustration which in turn leads to a decrease in the teacher's ability to successfully manage their classroom (Zinssner et al., 2018).

Teaching is a profession that has been struggling with the attrition of teachers for many years. Many people who go into teaching believe that it is their calling, and when they discover that it is much tougher than they imagined, many give up and change careers. A study was done by Greg Gero at Claremont University to see how teacher mindset affected their approach to teaching and classroom climate. The teachers with a growth mindset valued learning over trying to make themselves look good in front of their colleagues or supervisors. They valued trying new teaching strategies over the risk of making a mistake. Those with a fixed mindset were less willing to take risks or try new strategies in their teaching out of fear of negative judgments from their fellow teachers. Many new teachers with a fixed mindset believe that teaching ability is an innate quality; either you have the natural talent for it, or you don't. These teachers were more likely to leave the profession when things started to get tough, and the natural talent they thought they had wasn't enough for teaching and managing behaviors. They were too shameful of their lack of ability to reach out for help from veteran teachers or supervisors. The new teachers with growth mindsets were able to "roll with the punches" more easily and persevered when things got tough. They were more likely to reach out to colleagues or supervisors for help (Dweck, 2014).

Social-emotional learning and teacher mindsets can help with teacher attrition. Stress and the lack of the ability to manage one's emotions as well as poor student behavior are the leading causes for teachers to leave the profession. Creating a positive school climate helps teachers feel safer and more satisfied with their jobs. Teachers need to not only know how to teach social and emotional skills, but they also need to possess the disposition to create a warm, positive atmosphere in their classrooms. Teachers' own competence and emotional well-being play a crucial role in creating successful SEL programming. Their disposition and emotional well-being also affect their ability to effectively manage classroom behavior (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

The fearfulness associated with Covid-19 in addition to the immediate and drastic switch to distance learning also greatly increased teachers' stress. This only further increased the likelihood of stress and burnout rates for educators. Evidence shows that educators who often leave the profession do so because of emotional exhaustion. The social-emotional well-being of teachers is imperative to fostering social and emotional growth in their students. For this reason, the addition of increased support for teachers' social-emotional health, especially in this post-pandemic time, can serve to alleviate this emotional exhaustion for teachers. Implementing SEL strategies therefore can be a benefit to both students and educators (Zieher et al., 2021).

Teachers have stated that in order to implement a successful SEL program, they must have adequate training and strong support from the administration. When there isn't enough training and leadership support, it causes teachers to experience a higher level of on-the-job stress. This can lead to a decrease in positive classroom climate. This stress is contagious to students. Warm classroom environments promote positive student-teacher relationships which help with successful social-emotional learning which in turn promotes greater academic success. Part of successful teacher attrition is implementing SEL training into teacher preparation programs to equip teachers with the skills needed for maintaining their own competence and positive emotional well-being so that they can foster a positive, warm environment in their classrooms (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Chapter III

Conclusion

Why are social emotional learning and growth mindset important to teach in schools and how has the Covid-19 pandemic affected students socially and emotionally?

Within this paper, I have provided information on the need for and importance of social and emotional learning in schools. I have provided information on the benefits of social-emotional learning in schools which research has shown to be a benefit for not only students' social and emotional skills but also academic and life skills. According to the research provided, Social Emotional Learning helps students to develop the skills, attitudes, and attributes to become successful students and effective members of society. I have also provided research showing the prevalence of mental health needs throughout our society, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. To that end, the need for developing appropriate social-emotional skills is more relevant than ever. Currently, in our culture, children are exposed to a limitless amount of media and also need to know how to deal with the many different cultures and languages they are exposed to at school and in their communities. They face economic and social pressures as well. Research has shown that with an increase in social-emotional skills, children are better equipped to be able to interact with and relate to peers and adults. Furthermore, social and emotional learning helps children to develop a strong character that will allow them to make rational and moral decisions. Social and emotional learning has been linked to decreased aggression, an increase in prosocial behaviors, and an overall improvement in academic skills (Elias, 2003).

According to CASEL, students need proficient social and emotional skills for many reasons including setting and achieving important goals, cooperating with others, and processing everyday

stressors. Social and emotional learning helps students develop life skills needed for becoming a competent adult and a productive member of society. Developing students' social and emotional skills can also serve to counteract negative or aggressive behaviors (Greenberg et al., 2017). SEL can also help to create a positive school climate. Within a positive school culture, students are likely to feel a sense of belonging and safety, which promotes positive learning outcomes such as being more academically motivated. According to Rutledge et al., (2015), student motivation and engagement are likely to be strengthened in a positive, caring environment.

Social-emotional learning and growth mindset are ideas that are often used to relate to a similar set of values and beliefs. Growth mindset is the idea that a person's intelligence is not fixed but has plasticity and is able to grow with persistence and diligence. When teachers are able to create a culture of growth mindset, they are able to help students develop strong work ethics which can lead to more success in school and beyond. Growth mindset is associated with being more persistent, resilient, and academically focused (Dweck, 2014).

What are the outcomes of teaching social and emotional skills and promoting growth mindset in schools?

Research studies conducted by Weissberg & Cascarino (2013) and follow up studies by Sklad, et al., (2012); Taylor, et al., (2017); & Wigelsworth et al., (2016) concluded that well-implemented social and emotional learning programs have helped students to make significant gains in the areas of social-emotional learning and academics (Mahoney, et al., 2018). Studies conducted by Rutledge et al., (2015) and LaCour et al., (2017) have shown the significance of creating a positive school climate and rigorous learning environment. In both studies, the schools involved showed positive results in overall student achievement. Doyle & Bramwell (2006) used dialogic reading to increase social and emotional

skills in early elementary school which improved developmental social skills such as cooperation and listening skills. Gregory & Fergus (2017) conducted a study of schools in several different cities around the United States who used forms of social and emotional learning to reduce negative behavior and suspension rates. The data collected shows positive results for reducing suspension rates and fostering a positive school climate.

Yeager (2017) and Dweck (2015) conducted studies on mindset. These studies concluded that having a growth mindset can have benefits that go far beyond the classroom such as counteracting depression, increasing creativity, and diminishing aggression. In a study of fortune 1000 companies, employees at companies that valued a growth mindset reported greater job satisfaction and felt empowered to work harder. On the contrary, those in the study who worked for companies that did not value growth mindset ideals were less satisfied with their jobs and more likely to participate in devious or illegal behavior (Dweck, 2015).

When considering the best way to implement social and emotional learning into school systems, the consensus is that it must be done universally while integrating its ideals into the mission and vision of the district. Social and emotional learning programs that are successful are those that work to create a universal positive school culture. It must be practiced and demonstrated throughout the district by all parties involved. SEL cannot be a stand-alone curriculum that is taught inconsistently, it must be melded into the fabric of all curricula and academics. Starr (2019), Bailey et al. (2019), Porter-Magee (2020) and Mehta (2020) all hold similar beliefs and conclusions on this subject.

As can be imagined, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on students' mental health and social-emotional well-being. Studies of past pandemic situations with similar closures and isolation have shown to cause post-traumatic stress disorder. With the pandemic's rapid spread and

immediate shutdowns and isolation, it is presumed to have caused similar issues (Zieher et al., 2020). During this time period, students experienced a serious decrease in their social interactions. As a result, research has shown an increase in anxiety, irritability, attention problems, and apprehension (Murphy et al., 2021).

When it comes to implementing successful SEL programming, well-prepared teachers are essential. They need strong support from administrators and colleagues as well as effective, ongoing professional development. Also, important to consider is the mental health and well-being of educators. If teachers do not have strong or sufficient social-emotional competencies themselves, how can they be expected to successfully instill them in their students? Teachers who struggle with depression or regulating their emotions will also struggle to create a secure, positive atmosphere in their classroom (Zinsner et al., 2018). At the same time, teaching is a profession that has been struggling with attrition for many years. Social and emotional learning as well as attitudes of growth mindset can help with teacher job satisfaction. Having a positive disposition and the ability to create a positive classroom climate will both promote a safe and positive classroom climate that is beneficial to teachers and students alike (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Limitations of the Study

Although Covid-19 most likely affected students' social and emotional skills in many detrimental ways, it was difficult to find research about the impact of the pandemic and the efforts schools have taken to combat it. I am a high school special education, learning disabilities teacher. In the years following the Covid-19 pandemic, educators and administrators in our district have discussed the impact that we have witnessed as the students try to return to a normal school environment. My colleagues have discussed that upon re-entering the full-time learning environment, students struggled with

stamina and grasping, and meeting teacher expectations. School Social Workers and school counselors have been inundated with students needing more mental health support due to increased anxiety and depression.

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