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The Impact of Social and Emotional Learning on a Kindergarten Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research was to determine the impact of social and emotional learning on the behavior of kindergarten students. Participants were fifteen five and six-year-olds in a private school in a rural setting. Qualitative data was collected through observation in a pre and post intervention setting. Six weeks of social and emotional learning lessons were implemented between observations. The results of this study suggest that social and emotional learning does affect students' behavior in a positive manner.

The Impact of Social and Emotional Learning on a Kindergarten Classroom

The world of Kindergarten differs from that of its conception so many years ago by Friedrich Froebel in Germany in 1837. Froebel intended it to be a place of socialization and learning through play. In recent years, it has become more academic. The researcher wondered if education is currently placing too much emphasis on academics and not enough on the socialization of kindergarten students. Kindergarten is often the starting place of formal education for many children. At the beginning of the year, students must learn a myriad of procedures and processes for getting along in school. This means learning how to get along with others, pay attention, follow directions, solve problems, and manage emotions besides learning Math, Language, Science and various other subjects. All this learning can cause young children to become over-stimulated, which leads to classroom management problems for a teacher. The researcher was looking for a way to intentionally and effectively teach socialization skills to Kindergartners in order to eliminate negative classroom behavior. This led to the idea of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). A good definition of social-emotional learning is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. This definition comes from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL). The question guiding this paper is: does teaching SEL lessons to kindergarten students improve their behavior in the classroom?

Literature Review

Elbertson, Brackett, and Weissberg (2009) provided a current perspective on school-based social and emotional learning programs. The authors reported on a conference hosted by the Fetzer Institute in 1994. The conference examined issues that had arisen in schools. Various researchers, educators, and advocates gathered for discussion. Meeting the developmental, psychological, educational, and general health needs of children was examined. As the issues were discussed, the term social and emotional learning was coined. It was decided this term described the desire to help youth learn the skills needed for “attaining and maintaining personal well-being and positive relationships across the lifespan” (Elbertson et al., 2009, p. 1017). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was also formed at this time. The goal was to establish SEL as part of K-12 education. CASEL has continued to serve as a guide to school-based SEL programs. Since then SEL has also been given a more specific definition. In 1997, CASEL and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) collaborated on *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators*. This book gave educators strategies to create SEL programs for schools and defined four primary domains of SEL. For the next two decades, CASEL drove the research and initiatives to provide the evidence and information needed by those working for the advancement of SEL. In 2015, CASEL released *The Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice*. Research and other initiatives for the promotion and implementing of SEL in the schools continue to be led by CASEL (casel.org). Elbertson et al., (2009) also pointed out that parents and educators have begun to see the need for social and emotional learning in

schools. It has come to be understood that education is more than academics. Students who learn the skills of SEL are more productive in school and in society long after schooling has been completed. The authors presented the findings of a 1999 report of the U.S. Department of Labor stating skills and traits necessary for a successful workforce. It was noted that many of these skills were similar to the skills taught in an SEL program (Elbertson et al., 2009). The authors noted other changes over time in the teaching of SEL. At first, schools often addressed only one aspect at a time such as preventing bullying, substance abuse, unhealthy sexual practices, and character education. In the last decade, Elbertson et al. (2009) reported that SEL programs have become more school-wide, but often only parts of a whole curriculum are used and results are limited. Recently, however, CASEL has made a variety of effective SEL programs available. The authors went on to present the argument that the best success comes when the classroom, the school, the home, and even the whole district make use of an effective SEL program. Students need opportunities to practice and apply the skills of SEL. Examples of these kinds of programs include those which are evidence-based and meet the guidelines given by CASEL. They are effective, according to CASEL, because they lead to improved academic performance and other positive outcomes. A program also needs to be continuous from preschool all the way through grade twelve. Teachers and administrators need to be educated themselves on its implementation and committed to the program, according to the authors.

The National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2017) provided many reasons to teach social and emotional learning in the schools. The 28-member Council of Distinguished Scientists collaborated on and endorsed The

Evidence Base for How We Learn (2017): Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development brief. Jones and Kahn (2017), two members of the Council, summarized the consensus statements and the research behind them. Jones and Kahn (2017) stated that social, emotional, and cognitive domains are interconnected in the learning process. The argument put forth was that parents and employers have long known that youth will succeed not only if academically astute but also if well versed in social and emotional development. Social-emotional learning will help youth solve the many problems in life. The authors went on to argue that because children spend so much time in school it is the best place for them to learn social-emotional skills. The problem is schools are so focused on the academics there is barely time left for SEL. Jones and Kahn (2017) also argued that SEL is integral to the setting of education. Evidence was presented to back up these claims. In conclusion, young people can succeed and focus on both academics and SEL at the same time. The authors argued "that major domains of human development—social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, academic—are deeply intertwined in the brain and in behavior. All are central to learning" (Jones & Kahn, 2017, p. 4). Teaching social and emotional skills will improve teacher-effectiveness and well-being. These skills can be taught and there are effective programs available. The Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development feels now is the time to work for the inclusion of social-emotional skills in the learning of our nation's students because social, emotional, and cognitive competencies will enable students to be contributing citizens of society. This learning will transform schools enabling them to ready students for the 21st century.

In a research-to-practice brief, Nicholas Yoder (2014) looked at the impact of SEL and the important role teachers play. Yoder (2014) argued that education needs to be of the whole child in order to prepare for college and life. Yoder also argued the workload of teachers should not be increased, but there should be support in incorporating SEL into existing evaluation and development. Yoder (2014) suggested the procedure to follow is to “Identify the teaching practices that promote student social-emotional learning, which in turn are critical for student academic learning” (p. 2). Yoder (2014) then presented three teachers already incorporating social-emotional learning into the curriculum. To begin, a definition of SEL was provided which was the same as the one determined by CASEL, social-emotional learning is the process of developing students’ social-emotional competencies – that is, the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors individuals need to make successful choices. The author moved on to the argument for the need of SEL. Yoder (2014) argued that it helps students attain the standards for college readiness. SEL also helps prepare students for life, and students who are taught SEL are better equipped to meet their academic goals. The author argued that because teachers are essential in teaching these skills teachers need the proper supports in place. Some states like Illinois, Kansas, and Pennsylvania have adopted state standards for SEL. The U.S. Department of Education has made safe and supportive schools a priority. In 2010, the Department gave out \$38.8 million in grants to eleven states to measure school safety and provide interventions to schools most in need. A review of existing research had been conducted and the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders then identified and explained ten teaching practices that were used most frequently across six SEL programs and

eight SEL scholars. These ten practices included student-centered discipline, teacher language, responsibility and choice, warmth and support, cooperative learning, classroom discussions, self-reflection and self-assessment, balanced instruction, academic press and expectations, competence building modeling, practice feedback, and coaching (Yoder, 2014). The brief also reported that states and districts are changing teaching evaluating systems to support SEL. Yoder (2014) purported that teachers need professional development in the area of SEL. The researcher also suggested that teachers need to be able to incorporate SEL into their existing curriculum rather than make room for it as a separate subject in already packed schedules. Yoder (2014) concluded with some action steps states should be prepared to take in order to develop social-emotional learning activities.

When looking for the bulk of work that has been done on social and emotional learning, the focus lands on the (CASEL). The Collaborative has determined a working definition for SEL that most proponents of the idea used. CASEL has gone on to further the definition by establishing five competencies. The five competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. CASEL began releasing guides of various SEL programs in 2003. CASEL then released an updated version the *2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs – Preschool and Elementary School Edition*. This guide gave teachers and administrators a framework for evaluating SEL programs. In 2013, CASEL also issued *The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools*. In the introduction of *The Missing Piece* (2013), Jennifer Buffet and Timothy Shriver (2013) began by

pointing out that an important part of education is being missed. That missing piece the authors argued is social-emotional learning. Teachers are aware of this problem and have been working to correct the issue, but more needs to be done. The report argued that we should be listening to the teachers who are on the front lines of education. The Survey's findings included three themes: teachers understand, value, and endorse social and emotional learning for all students, teachers believe social and emotional learning helps students achieve in school, work, and life, and teachers identify key accelerators for social and emotional learning. The survey reported that teachers believe SEL can help in a variety of ways. The United States is facing an educational challenge. According to the most recent PISA results, from 2015, the United States ranks 38th out of 71 countries in math and 24th in science (Desilver, 2017). Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan (2013) argued that SEL is the way to improve this status because SEL boosts academic performance, increases student interest in learning, improves behavior, prevents and reduces bullying, improves school climates, and helps prepare students for the real world. This led to the argument that the way forward is to support teacher interest in SEL, embed it into learning standards, provide professional development for teachers, and engage parents and families according to the authors.

An important piece of research in the field of SEL was a meta-analysis of SEL studies issued in 2011. The authors of the study, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) looked at 213 school-based SEL programs, which included 270,034 students from kindergarten to high school. The authors recorded having found that compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an

11-percentile-point gain in achievement. Many of the same authors of *The Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* were involved in the completion of this meta-analysis.

Another report from some of the well-known names in SEL summarized the results of three reviews of research on the impact of SEL on elementary and middle school students. The three reviews included 317 studies and 324,303 children. The authors Payton et al. (2008) summarized the various reasons for examining SEL which include the fact that as students progress through the grade levels they are increasingly disengaged. Students who lack competency in the area of social and emotional skills, cause class disruption. Again, the argument was put forth that we are not only preparing students for academics but for life. The authors argued that SEL can help prepare students for school and life while reducing problem behaviors. Payton et al. (2008) also reported that SEL programming yielded an average gain on achievement test scores of 11 to 12 percentile points. Interventions were effective in both school and after-school settings and for students with and without already identified behavior problems. Most results remained over a period of time but were most noticeable immediately after the intervention. Interventions were effective when conducted by school staff, which suggests they can be incorporated into the regular curriculum. Two of the reviews found that interventions that followed four recommended practices for skill training (referred to as SAFE programs) were more effective than others were.

Many reasons exist for teaching social and emotional skills in the schools. A study conducted by Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley (2015) showed us that kindergarten students who are competent in social skills will be better prepared later in life. The authors argued that children need more than just cognitive ability to get along

in life. The authors used data from the Fast Track Project to argue that non-cognitive skills much like those highlighted in SEL can be predictors of future well-being in life and success in the workplace. Cognitive skills and those referred to as non-cognitive skills are interrelated; therefore, if schools are going to focus on teaching cognitive skills it cannot be done without also attending to non-cognitive skills. Students from neighborhoods with low-socioeconomic status in three cities and one rural setting were first tested in kindergarten on their social competence. Nineteen years later the same students were revisited. Information on education level, employment, criminal activity, substance abuse, and mental health were recorded and compared. It was found that being socially competent at an early age is a good predictor of outcomes later in life. The study suggested focusing on teaching preschoolers and kindergarten students these skills whenever possible because social competence in kindergarten was a good indicator of outcomes for high school graduation, not receiving public assistance, low crime rates, and less substance abuse later in life. While non-cognitive skills might be more difficult to record than cognitive skills, the authors argued that interventions are useful. Non-cognitive skills are skills that can be taught and should be included in the curriculum of children.

A study by Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, and Abbott, (2008) focused on training teachers in classroom instruction and management skills, teaching children social, emotional skill development, and parent workshops. It measured whether or not this had an effect on students 15 years later. The authors looked at the ability of those studied to function in school, work, and the community, and at mental health, sexual behavior, substance use, and criminal records. The study reported that their

interventions in the elementary years show that something like SEL can have a positive impact on students into adulthood.

Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, and Gravestijn (2012) performed a review of 75 studies on the effects of universal, school-based, social, emotional, and/or behavior programs. The authors noted that education is for more than teaching academics. The goal according to Sklad et al. (2012) is to prepare students for their futures and to act as worthy citizens. In this review, the authors looked at whether or not SEL programs are effective in teaching what they claim to offer. The authors found that there are a variety of SEL programs, and the programs themselves are diverse in nature. Although there are differences, all programs seem to be focused on some sort of social and emotional skills. The authors argued that some programs are actually not effective and do not deserve to be called programs because of this. Many programs available were compared to each other, but they do not all focus on the same skills. The analysis of Sklad et al. (2012) focused on school-based, universal programs that concentrated on promoting development and not preventing problems. The authors also limited their focus to the analysis of recent programs. Outcomes were classified into seven categories: Social-emotional skills, positive self-image, antisocial behavior, prosocial behavior, substance abuse, mental health disorders, and academic achievement. The authors searched literature and documented data from 75 studies of universal school-based programs published from 1995 to 2008. The study reported that universal school-based social, emotional, and/or behavioral programs have shown a positive effect on social and emotional skills. However, Sklad et al. (2012) cautioned about conclusions on lasting effects because most studies reported findings within six months

of intervention. To be noted is also the fact that this analysis looked at programs without regard to the socio-economic status of students and concluded that the effects are not limited to at-risk children. When schools seek to educate their students beyond just the academics, SEL helps the teachers reach that goal. The study also gave guidelines for schools when looking for a Social Emotional Learning program which should be based on their goal for the program.

Another study showing that social-emotional learning influences academic outcomes was performed by Bavarian et al. (2013). These researchers used a school-based social-emotional and character development program titled Positive Action. The curriculum was taught in grades K-8 in selected Chicago Public Schools. The study was completed over a six-year period from 2005 until 2010. Results of the study concurred with the indications of other studies: teaching a social-emotional program can improve academic achievement. The authors also reported improvement in student behavior and health.

Jones and Bouffard (2012) made use of previous SEL research to present ideas for new ideas and research. The authors argued for a new perspective on SEL. While there are benefits, Jones and Bouffard (2012) believed benefits are increased by integrating SEL into all aspects of education. The authors argued that children with strong social-emotional skills do better in school than their peers. These skills cannot be developed in once a week lessons. They must be developed continuously, over time, and when the opportunity arises. Jones and Bouffard's (2012) proposal was that schools integrate SEL skills into daily interactions with students in order to be more effective. The strategies the authors suggested have not been involved in scientific

studies but are grounded in research. The authors argued that schools have not integrated SEL properly. The reason for this was that schools did not set aside a specific time in their schedules for teachers to teach SEL so the lessons were fragmented. There was no continuity from one year to the next and many schools did not use evidence-based programs that have been suggested and approved by CASEL. Schools often did not integrate the lessons learned into the curriculum. Many programs focused only on the classroom, but that is too narrow a scope because the skills are also necessary outside the classroom. Teachers did not receive enough training on how to be effective. Jones and Bouffard (2012) suggested four principles to make programs more effective: 1) continuity and consistency, 2) social, emotional, and academic skills are interdependent, 3) SEL skills develop in social contexts, 4) classrooms and schools operate as systems. The authors went on to explain each of these principles. It was suggested that SEL skills be “integrated and embedded in ways that are both deep and wide” (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p.11). Teachable moments need to be captured. Teachers often leave out the teaching of these skills because of time constraints. The authors proposed that “schools need a continuum of approaches that range from routines and structures school staff and students use on a daily basis, to schoolwide efforts to promote respectful and supportive cultures and positive climates, to universal SEL programming for all students, to intensive services for students in need of the most support” (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 12). The authors went on to suggest ways to integrate SEL into daily practice. Jones and Bouffard (2012) argued this begins with routines that are followed by the school as a whole. Teachers need to receive training and support. Administrators need to learn how to

integrate SEL into the daily workings of the school. It is also important for the adults who are teaching SEL skills to have strong SEL skills themselves, and it would be beneficial for states to adopt SEL standards along with the Common Core Standards.

Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, and Curby (2014) studied how a teacher's beliefs about social and emotional skills and practices related to having a supportive emotional classroom environment. The authors pointed out that not much study has been done from this angle to date. Researchers have mostly focused on parents and the home environment before now. The authors suggested the idea that the beliefs of parents about emotions affect their teaching of SEL skills to their children. Zinsser et al. (2014) argued that this is also true of a teacher because young children are spending more and more time in their care. The authors presented that there are more and more programs encouraging teachers to explicitly teach SEL skills and create emotionally safe environments in which children can learn. The study used a mixed-methods design and found that a teacher's beliefs about emotions were related to their own social and emotional teaching practices. The study also found no difference between teachers who work hard to incorporate SEL skills into their daily curriculum and those who used an SEL program. The authors concluded that teachers believe parents are primarily responsible for a child's social and emotional development. However, teachers do play an important role. The researchers argued that this study also showed that SEL skills are more far-reaching than just the classroom. The researchers found that there is a lack of training for teachers in SEL skills that need to be addressed.

There are specific studies reporting positive results when Social and Emotional Learning is taught in a classroom. Upshur, Heyman, & Wenz-Gross (2017) performed a

study in which the Second Step Early Learning (SSEL) curriculum was used in a Head Start classroom and compared to the use of the usual curriculum. Data showed that students receiving the SSEL curriculum scored better at the end of preschool on their Executive Functioning Skills and Social-Emotional skills than the others. Executive Functioning Skills are skills in which a student regulates behavior and thinking including paying attention and then shifting attention, working memory, and inhibition of impulses. The authors also looked at the relationship of social and emotional (SE) and Executive Functioning (EF) skills to school readiness and academic success. The authors argued that SE and EF skills are interrelated. Upshur et al. (2017) noted the importance of these skills as interventions for at-risk preschoolers. The authors reported that kindergarten teachers placed great emphasis on their students having SEL skills to enable them for the academic pressures of the rest of their educational life. This study is one of a few conducted looking at both Head Start classrooms and community-based private preschools, which makes its results applicable in a more general way. It was found that this SSEL curriculum was indeed able to help students develop their social-emotional skills, but especially the skills of executive function (Upshur et al., 2017).

Bierman and Motamedi (2015) looked at SEL programs slated for preschools. The findings were reported as one of the chapters of the Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning. These authors took note of the changing face of education, especially at the preschool and kindergarten level. Though more opportunities for early education have been made available to children today, the authors reported that many children are still entering kindergarten without the necessary social-emotional skills. The authors looked at the history of preschool SEL programs, the developmental needs of

preschool children and their impact on SEL programs, and reviewed the evidence. Bierman and Motamedi (2015) noted that preschoolers are still developing SEL skills. Care must be taken to find and teach appropriate programs. Preschoolers still need much adult support in their learning. The authors explained various SEL programs and their effectiveness. The PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) program was one of the programs examined. This program was designed in connection with the PATHS curriculum for the elementary grades. The preschool program focuses on four aspects of basic social-emotional skills: 1) friendship skills and prosocial behaviors like helping, sharing, taking turns, 2) emotional knowledge, 3) self-control, 4) social problem-solving. The program was evaluated in three randomized trials. The first study used 20 randomized Head Start classrooms as the control group and an intervention group using the PATHS program. Two hundred eighty-seven children were followed for one year using a pre and post-test to assess skills. In the end, it was reported that the children from the PATHS classrooms showed significantly greater gains in emotion knowledge and emotion recognition skills. There was more improvement in teacher and parent ratings of social competence, but no differences in aggression. In the second study, children in 44 Head Start classrooms were randomly assigned to use the Head Start REDI program, which included the PATHS curriculum along with a literacy intervention and a control group in a usual Head Start program. Again, positive effects were reported for those students receiving the intervention. They showed significantly higher levels of emotional understanding, social problem-solving skills, and observed learning engagement and lower levels of teacher-rated aggression. Other programs examined and reported included Tools of the Mind. For various reasons, the studies

from this approach did not show significant gains in social competence. The I Can Solve Problems program did show students making improvements in their social-emotional skills even up to a year later. The AI's Pals program also showed improvements, but the ratings could be biased so more studies are needed. The authors noted one of the items of greatest impact on the implementation of these programs is professional development and strong support for the teachers. Parental involvement was another item of importance. Studies reported parents also need to be educated and supported by parenting practices that promote positive SEL. Bierman and Motamedi (2015) summarized preschool is a great time for SEL because it can help increase school readiness and give children the skills necessary for later success. The only problem reported was more research is needed.

Nix, Bierman, Domitrovich, and Gill (2013) also did a study using the Head Start Research-based, Developmentally Informed (REDI) program and whether or not it would have an impact on kindergarten outcomes like prosocial behavior, emotional understanding, self-regulation, aggression control, and language and emergent literacy skills. The Head Start REDI program is an intervention that is an enriched form of the traditional Head Start early childhood education program. The authors noted that kindergarten readiness is an area of concern. Kindergartners lacking skills in oral development and emergent literacy have been linked to being behind in the long-term and even to failure. Preschool SEL skills then are also important for readiness. SEL skills help a child with their learning engagement, social behavior, and even academic performance. The study reported that using an evidence-based preschool curriculum integrated with social-emotional skills taught intentionally had positive effects on

children even up to a year later in kindergarten.

Social and Emotional Learning is not only of huge interest to educators and psychologists in the United States, but it is also gaining attention worldwide. In England Humphrey et al. (2010) reported on a trial of “New Beginnings”, a short social-emotional intervention for primary aged children. The study was conducted using 253 children aged six to eleven from 37 schools across England. The authors reported mixed findings. Students self-reported a positive impact of the intervention, but this was not shown to be true in the data collected by teachers and parents. The data collected from the teachers and parents did not show evidence of an impact from the program. The authors also reported that gains from the intervention began to decline within a few weeks. Humphrey et al. (2010) suggested more intensive intervention for a longer period of time.

Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, and Davidson (2015) began their findings by stating, “Self-regulatory abilities are robust predictors of important outcomes across the lifespan, yet they are rarely taught explicitly in school” (p. 1). These authors studied the effects of a 12-week mindfulness-based Kindness Curriculum used with 68 preschool children. The outcomes of this study showed the intervention group making greater improvements in social competence and earning higher report card grades than the control group. It was reported that the control group showed behaviors that were more selfish. The mindfulness training is an intervention in which students are taught to be more aware of focus and executive function skills (Flook et al., 2015). The study noted that the effects of the training were still apparent three months after the intervention had ended.

Morris, Millenky, Raver, and Jones (2013) tested the hypothesis that a child's learning environment will improve with the use of an SEL program and will give teachers the necessary skills to handle disruptive behavior. The authors reported findings from the Foundation of Learning Demonstration, which was done with low-income children. This study gave the perspective that there is a difference between the benefits of SEL for low-income children. Morris et al., (2013) reported this difference in benefits creates difficulty for quality instruction thus impeding the readiness of students. These findings differ from some of the findings of other studies. Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017) performed a meta-analysis of 82 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions involving 97,406 kindergarten to high school students. These authors reported that race, socioeconomic status, and school location made no difference in the findings of SEL interventions. One of the hypotheses of the meta-analysis was that SEL interventions would be an effective approach with diverse racial and socioeconomic populations. The authors made sure to look at studies of ethnically, socioeconomically, and regionally diverse samples. The results yielded positive effects on student populations from different racial groups and socioeconomic statuses (Taylor et al., 2017).

Jones, Brown, and Aber (2011) did a study that looked at the impact of SEL and academic functioning when using an intervention for a two-year period. The intervention used an SEL program that involved learning and literacy called the 4Rs Program, "Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution" (Jones et al., 2011). The study examined 1,184 third grade students in 18 public schools in New York City. The study is important because it reported findings from an intervention performed for two years,

which had not previously been done. The study also used an SEL program in which social-emotional skills were integrated into the literacy curriculum and showed another way to teach SEL skills. The authors argued that because SEL is important and effective more must be done to develop programs in which this link between social-emotional skills and academics are integrated.

Methods

Participants

This action research project was conducted in a general education kindergarten classroom in Northwest Iowa. There were sixteen students, to begin with ranging in age from five to six. Midway through the intervention, one of the female students moved away. Out of the remaining fifteen students, there were eight females and seven males. The students' demographics showed a class that was predominately Caucasian and above free and reduced lunch socio-economic status. None of the students were on individualized education programs or English language learners.

Data Collection

The focus of this action research project was to determine if teaching a social and emotional program to a class of kindergartners would improve behavior. Qualitative data was collected prior to an intervention. Data was determined through observation. Each time a student manifested a particular behavior, it was marked on a tally sheet. Behaviors recorded were: talking out of turn, talking in transition, not keeping hands to self, tattling on others, arguing with others, interrupting others, not working quietly, needing reminders of classroom rules and procedures. The data collection process took place during the week of January 15. Students were observed for the three days

of the week in class. This totaled 18 hours of observation in all.

After data was collected, an intervention in social-emotional lessons was taught. Lessons consisted of 30-minute sessions three times a week for six weeks. Lessons were taught from January 22 through March 2. The researcher used a social-emotional program developed by Susanna Westby, a teacher from British Columbia, Canada. Westby has been teaching for 20 years and has experience working with various SEL programs like Mind Up, the Second Step Program, and the Alert Program. Westby used her experience to develop the Kindness Classroom for teachers. The program Westby produced integrated many of the same topics often addressed in social-emotional programs. The lessons fit in with CASEL's definition of social and emotional learning, the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. Lessons were taught on emotions, growth mindset, self-management, kindness, conflict resolution, and respect. The lessons were set up to be taught in an engaging manner.

Data was again collected post-intervention. Students were observed on the same behaviors as the pre-intervention. Manifestations of behaviors were recorded in like manner. The post-intervention covered the same time span as the pre-intervention.

Findings

Data Analysis

Qualitative data was collected pre-intervention through observation by the researcher. Manifestations of predetermined student behaviors were tallied on a chart

and totaled. After six weeks of social and emotional lessons, a post-intervention observation was completed in the same manner as the pre-intervention. The number of occurrences of behavior was totaled for each student as can be seen in Table 1. The difference in occurrences was also calculated along with a percentage showing the amount of decrease of occurrences a student showed. As a whole, the class showed improvements in their behaviors from the time of the pre-intervention to the time of the post-intervention.

Table 1

Behavior Occurrence Totals

Names	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention	Difference	Percent Decrease
Student A	24	4	20	83%
Student B	36	8	28	78%
Student C	10	12	+2	20% increase
Student D	6	5	1	17%
Student E	20	0	0	0%
Student F	21	1	20	95%
Student G	48	14	34	71%
Student H	29	7	22	76%
Student I	18	9	9	50%
Student J	20	4	16	80%
Student K	20	6	14	70%

Student L	27	9	18	67%
Student M	54	15	39	72%
Student N	18	10	8	44%
Student O	3	1	2	67%
Student P	40	4	36	90%

Student C was the only student in the class that did not show improvement. The student had a 20% increase in production of behaviors observed. This score may indicate that the student was often inattentive during the intervention period. Student C also missed out on many of the intervention lessons because he was working in the resource room at the time.

Student E moved soon after the intervention began; she did not receive all six weeks of social and emotional learning lessons. There is no data for this student in the post-intervention.

Student M, who is male, improved the most in the difference of behaviors. He shows a difference of 39 points from pre-intervention to post-intervention. The interventions seemed to help him think before he acted. He even stated on one occasion that he had decided to have self-control instead of being impulsive.

Student D, who is female and very shy showed the least amount of difference in behaviors. She only improved by one point and decreased in the production of behaviors by the least amount of 17%. This could be because a case of the extremely quiet student blending in so well that she often goes unnoticed in the classroom.

The results for Student G and Student N might also have been different on the

post-intervention. This is due to the fact that both students were absent for one day during the data collection period.

Overall the females made the most improvements in behavior averaging a 72% decrease in behaviors while the males showed an average of 64%.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The findings of this study indicate that being involved in social and emotional learning helps improve the behavior of kindergarten students. The data shows that the interventions helped reduce the number of negative behaviors occurring in the classroom.

Limitations of Study

One of the limitations of the study was the short amount of time that lessons were taught and data was collected. Social and Emotional Learning programs suggest a longer period of time for teaching lessons. Another limitation might be that intervention was done halfway through the school year instead of right at the beginning of the year. The intervention and data collected were also only done in one kindergarten classroom. Results might be more effective when they are more widespread. CASEL recommends that lessons be taught school-wide in order to be most effective. The results may also have been affected by the makeup of the class. The class is all white and there are no students of a low-socioeconomic status.

Further Study

Implications for future study and research would include teaching SEL and collecting data for a longer period of time. It would be beneficial to use an intervention and collect data on a more diverse group of students. Prior research indicates that SEL lessons should be implemented across grade levels. More research could also be done to find those lasting effects. Only one SEL program was used in the study; it would also be important to compare various programs and their impact on student behavior. It has also been noted that teachers need to be trained in this area of the curriculum. Quality professional development needs to be established and implemented. Teachers also need to be given a way to find more time in their curriculum in order to implement SEL.

Conclusion

The findings of this action research project indicate that social and emotional learning has a positive impact on the behavior of kindergarten students. The students involved in this study showed a remarkable change in behavior after having received only six weeks' worth of social and emotional learning lessons. The researcher concludes in agreement with Bridgeland et al. (2013), the authors of *The Missing Piece*, that SEL is part of what is missing in our classroom curriculum today. Academic learning increases when the learning of the whole child is addressed in classrooms and should become a necessary part of the curriculum.

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