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The Effect of Social Emotional Skill Instruction on Cognitive Development

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The Effect of Social Emotional Skill Instruction on Cognitive Development

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A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

The effect Social Emotional Skills have on the Cognitive Development

Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to gather evidence on the effect of teaching social emotional skills on the cognitive development of young children. Social emotional skills are skills that people use to interact with others, manage their emotion and address social situations. Teachers use social emotional learning (SEL) programs to directly and indirectly to address social skills acquisitions in the classroom. This review of the research shares the results of studies about the variety of methods available to teach children social skills and the benefits of mastering those skills. The wide-spread financial commitment by schools for SEL programs illuminates the importance of the social emotional development of young children. This literature review explores research about the development of social emotional skills, the effect of social emotional skills on cognitive development, research of social emotional learning (SEL) programs, and effective ways to teach social skills to children with learning disabilities. As a result, many researchers agree that there is a positive connection between a young child's social emotional skills and their cognitive development.

Key words: Social skills, cognitive development, social emotional learning (SEL), learning disabilities.

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Children can adapt to changes in their environment and be successful in life based on the development of their social and emotional abilities (Brotto, 2018). The development of social emotional skills like empathy, problem solving, and self-regulation have a positive effect on a child's cognitive development. Children with developed social emotional skills exhibit better classroom behavior, which allows them to be an active part of the learning experience. Nova and Malik (2018) state that "suspensions and expulsions lead to lost learning time and deprive children, especially those with disabilities, of valuable opportunities that can help them overcome early challenges". Social emotional learning (SEL) not only improves academic achievement by 11 points, but also increases prosocial behaviors (Weissberg, 2016).

The reoccurrence of aggressive behaviors like hitting, throwing items and tantrums in the classroom often leads to children being expelled or suspended from a learning environment. Preschoolers (children three to five years old) are being expelled at rates more than three times higher than school aged children (Malik, 2017). A child's early years lay the foundation for later social and academic success. Stressful, stigmatizing experiences-suspensions and expulsions-deprive children of opportunities to develop friendships, learn new skills, and gain independence and self-efficacy (Nova & Malik, 2018).

SEL is a comprehensive approach to education and the newest branch of the whole child approach. There is a growing body of evidence surrounding SEL that says non-academic skills are decisive for students' academic success (Takabori, 2019). The classroom environment can be structured to promote positive behaviors (Hancock & Carter, 2016). There are immediate and long-term benefits to SEL programs, both in school and later life (Mahoney, Durlak & Weissberg, 2018). Academic and life success, compromised due to negative behaviors, improve when social skills are present. (Elias, 2014). In 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provided funding

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for schools' SEL programs, validating the acceptance of SEL as a teaching resource (Takabori, 2019). SEL development for students impacts how they practice positive behavior choices in the school environment.

Teachers are developing challenging and creative activities using SEL programs to stimulate students' social skills (Newman, 2020). The SEL programs cover topics like how to provide consistent and predictable classroom environments, schedules, and routines which can increase a child's ability to use appropriate behavior (Hancock & Carter, 2016). By teaching social emotional skills, children will develop the ability to regulate their emotions and thrive socially, thereby allowing them to succeed academically. The purpose of this literature review is to understand the effect of social emotional skills on the cognitive development of young children.

Literature Review

Founding Philosophies of Early Childhood Education

The concept of early education was first introduced by German teacher, Friedrich Froebel, when he implemented kindergarten in 1837 during the Age of Enlightenment. The Age of Enlightenment was a movement that changed the course of thought about philosophy, science and education starting in the 17th century (Moore & Campos, 2010). Froebel's idea was to socialize young children outside of the home, which was a new concept at that time. The purpose of a child's education was to expose each to science, music and language.

Friedrich Froebel's ideas were furthered by the educational works of Maria Montessori, the creator of the Montessori Method and Loris Malaguzzi, who created the Reggio Emilia approach in education. In 1907, Maria Montessori, an Italian educator and physician, created an approach to learning that was student focused using open ended activities, which became known

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as the Montessori Method. Ahmadpour and Mujembari (2015) conducted research involving 80 five-year-old children in early childhood settings in Shiraz City, Iran. The study included 40 students separated into a control group using traditional teaching methods and 40 students in a group using the Montessori method. The research showed that the children exposed to the Montessori method which allowed them to self-study and correct their own mistakes led to an increase in intelligence scores.

Fernandez and Feliu Torrucella (2017) studied research surrounding the Reggio Emilia approach, created by Italian educator Loris Manlaguzzi in 1947, which is an inquiry-based learning approach. This approach centers around teachers documenting the thoughts and problem-solving process of children, thereby crafting activities that engaged those aspects of the child's learning. The study showed a positive effect in learning when teachers and the environment reflected the interconnected relationships between teachers and students described in Reggio Emilia. This ties closely with what Friedrich Froebel believed about a teacher's role being that of a guide through the learning experience (Fernanadez & Feliu Torrucells, 2017).

The Development of Social Emotional Skills in young children

The Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL) defines social-emotional development as the capacity of a child from birth through five years of age to express emotions in socially appropriate ways and form close relationships (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). The development of social emotional skills in young children occur both at home and in early childcare environments. According to research by McCoy, Cuartas, Waldman and Fink (2019) there are varying levels of social skill development over different ages and a significant connection between cultural expectations on that development. Their research involved 5,000 children from different backgrounds around the world, ranging in age from 0-35

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months evaluated on their social skill development using the Caregiver Reported Early Development Instrument (CREDI). When reviewing the data, researchers report certain children develop social skills ahead of their peers depending on their cultural background. McCoy et al. hypothesized that this could be due to varying cultural factors like personal expression, group harmony and respect for authority.

When children are exposed to proper social engagement in their families, they can mimic those social skills in the classroom. Markowitz, Bassok and Hamre (2018) researched social emotional development through randomized trials involving four-year olds in the early childhood environment. The purpose was to determine how current programming addresses learning across domains. Social emotional learning is one of the identified learning domains in young children. Their research showed that supporting a child's social emotional development is most effective when it occurs early in life. These interventions could include quality assessments involving social emotional development, enhanced teacher-student interactions and parent training surrounding SEL. By the time a child is eight years old, without interventions, problem behaviors may become persistent and permanent (Markowitz, Bassok & Hamre, 2017).

The Benefits of Social Emotional Skills

Social skills are an important foundation for children's later academic success and well-being. Research has indicated that in conjunction with cognitive competence, social emotional competence is an important predictor of academic achievement (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). McCollow and Hoffman (2019) shared that when young children have delays in social and emotional development, all learning domains are affected. These learning domains can go on to affect a child's mental and physical health later in life. Ozbey and Koycegiz (2019) agreed, stating that lack of social skills can lead to developmental issues in problem solving and peer

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relations. The research by McCollow and Hoffman (2019) reviewed the effects of social skills on learning in young children. This study showed an increase in social development and physical health when children were successful with using social skills. Another study on social emotional skills in 3rd graders, conducted by Fraser, Thompson, Day and Macy (2014) found that teaching social emotional skills led to a reduction in classroom disruptions and improved academic retention. Children who were considered at high risk for aggressive behaviors often had poor academic scores and peer relations. When teachers implemented social skill activities in the classroom, a child's academic score and peer interactions improved (Markowitz, Bassok & Hamre, 2018).

Another study conducted in 2018 by McGraw Hill Education gathered results from 1,140 teachers, administrators and parents about the benefits of SEL on children. The study found that 75% of teachers found an increase in student motivation and engagement when children were taught social emotional skills. Researchers in Melbourne, Australia performed a study on 5th and 6th graders which showed that there was a correlation between student motivation and engagement and how a student felt about themselves and their skills as a student (Saeed & Zyngier, 2012). The McGraw Hill Education research noted that administrators saw an 72% improvement in social interactions both in and out of school and 80% of parents saw an increase in test scores and academic performance of children involved in social learning. Children who are adept at social skills have less stress in their day, which allows them to successfully interact with teachers and peers (Elias, 2014).

The Effect of SEL programs in Education

While many agree about the importance of SEL, Greene (2019) acknowledged that it has value and asked if it should be a structured learning activity in the classroom? Elias

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(2014) agreed with Greene, stating that there is some skepticism about the relevance of social-emotional skills being taught in schools, including those who feel those skills should be taught at home. Greene (2019) stated that SEL learning should occur in unplanned moments of opportunity and not in a structured classroom environment. Other researchers disagreed with Greene, finding multiple benefits in structured social emotional learning activities in the classroom. For example, Ashdown and Bernard (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 34 universal and targeted preschool prevention programs in 2003 found that, overall, SEL programs had positive effects on both cognitive and academic outcomes in the short term (preschool), medium term (primary school), and long term (high school). SEL programs do create a long-term positive effect socially and cognitively for children. A similar study by Ozbey and Koycegiz (2019) examined children aged 48-60 months attending preschool where they were taught using an SEL program. The program used enhanced skills in problem-solving skills and coping with peer relations to modify children's social skills. This study showed a decrease in classroom behaviors and increase in positive peer interactions once social skills were implemented in structured activities. Schools who are intentional about teaching social skills have seen positive social and academic results. The focus should be to prepare children for life, which should include addressing more than just academic skills (Mahoney, Durlak & Weissberg, 2019).

By creating a school culture that supports social emotional development research shows a reduction in challenging classroom behaviors (Nova & Malik, 2018). The social skills that children acquired tied closely to what they needed to succeed academically. An example of these skills would be self-regulation, concentration and problem solving (Elias, 2014). Mahoney, Durlak and Weissberg (2018) compared four meta analyses studies surrounding the effectiveness of SEL programs and noted two major findings. The first finding was that students participating

The effect Social Emotional Skills have on the Cognitive Development in SEL programs showed positive outcomes in academic performance, and lower levels of conduct problems in the classroom. Secondly, there was an 11-point academic gain for children participating in SEL programming. This research continues to support the theory that SEL programs add to a child's social abilities which in turn positively affects cognitive development. In a similar meta-analysis performed by McCoy et al. (2017), they studied early childhood programs for children under the age of five years old using SEL programs from 2007 to 2016. The results of the study showed that children that participated in SEL programs showed a decrease in special education placement, grade retention and an increase in graduation rates.

SEL teaching techniques and environments

A study by Britt, Davis, Wilkins and Bowlin (2016) involved the four authors, one third grade teacher, and students in kindergarten through third grade. The researchers read several stories focusing on social situations to the students, then observed student reactions and responses. There were classroom activities based on the subject matter of the stories and the children's work was assessed. It was determined through this study that engaging young children in read-aloud stories addressing emotion and creating an environment that supports emotional development positively affected their social interactions and cognitive development. Read-aloud stories that involve songs, repetitive actions and picture prompts helped children to relate to their emotions. The read-aloud stories provide two functions, to help teach social skills and increase literacy skills. The classroom can be modified to enhance the reading and learning experience through a cozy areas with emotion puppets, crafts that address feelings in the art center and interactive resources that help children express various emotions in a one on one setting (Britt et al., 2016).

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The research conducted by Ashdown and Bernard (2012) also supported structured lessons and deliberately created classroom environments that support the social emotional development of children. There are multiple supports for the classroom illustrated in the research to help support social emotional development, like hand puppets and songs with lyrics that support emotional understanding (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). Visual Aides and concrete examples are other techniques that can be used in the classroom to teach social skills. When implementing social emotional learning in the classroom, teachers should clearly define class rules and proper social interactions (Curtis, Kaiser, Estabrook & Roberts (2019). Newman (2020) agreed with the concept of multiple social emotional and behavior techniques built into the classroom. Being able to touch different objects, listen to a lesson being read, stomp or clap while counting out loud, allows children additional ways to relate to social emotional skills in the classroom.

Research conducted by Ng and Bull (2018) evaluated what type of activities, size group and type of teaching were most effective when implementing SEL. This study was a subset of a larger project called Singapore Kindergarten Impact Study (SKIP), which included over 15,000 children age four to five years old, studying the effect of early childhood education on specific learning standards. The Ng and Bull (2018) study involved six preschool classrooms with four to five-year-old children, researchers observed and videotaped the classrooms during a typical day. It was determined through the research that SEL occurs more frequently when children were in authentic situations either interacting with peers or teachers, in small group settings, and with intentional planning on the part of the teacher (Ng & Bull, 2018). Authentic interaction is an effective way for young children to identify areas for social improvement, but also small group settings allows for teachers to provide direct praise for the proper use of social skills. Teachers

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had more success implementing social skills in the classroom when they designed activities or situations where children could practice those required skills. When children missed social cues, the smaller group setting allowed for teachers to redirect the student and redirection.

Teaching Social Skills to children with learning disabilities

Nova and Malik (2018) researched expulsions and suspensions and revealed that children with learning disabilities and emotional challenges are suspended at a rate of 14.5 times higher than their general education counterparts. Children with disabilities often have difficulties with their social communication and interaction (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). This leads to children with learning disabilities being excluded from the mainstream learning environment. The McCollow and Hoffman (2019) study included two study groups with eight teachers. This research was conducted in partnership with an agency that provides treatment, education, and consultation services to support individuals with intellectual disabilities and ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder). Their research defined eight different teaching approaches that could help reinforce social emotional skills for children with learning disabilities.

The McCollow and Hoffman approaches (2019) included peer mediated interventions, pivotal responses, and structured play groups. Classmates aided the instruction and practice of social skills, causing peers to be successful in the learning environment and increase classroom participation (McCollow & Hoffman, 2019). The Pivotal Response approach taught social skills through child-initiated action in the classroom. Research by Hebbeler and Spiker (2016) involving quality techniques for children with learning disabilities supported the McCollow and Hoffman study, identifying pivotal response training as an effective social skills training method. Hebbeler and Spiker (2016) defined pivotal response as a child's motivation to learn specific

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self-regulating behaviors. A teacher can notice two children attempting to use a skill like sharing, for example, and design an activity that helps support the learning of that skill.

The McCollow and Hoffman (2019) research found positive benefits to using structured play groups to reinforce proper social skills. Structured play groups involve activities created for children that have a specific focus, for example sharing, where children interact and learn the defined skill. There would be materials set up in the play group space to encourage children to share and plan for appropriate responses when sharing was not achieved. The study by Hancock and Carter (2016) supported this approach with evidence by identifying a small number of behavioral expectations. The evidence showed teachers how expectations will look across common settings (i.e. in structured play groups). Directly teaching children how to put those expectations into practice could decrease classroom disruptions.

Technology and SEL

Technology in the classroom setting can lead to increased outcomes for students, not just academically but socially as well (Fox-Turnbull, 2019). This study was completed in 2016 with two early childhood teachers from Sweden and two groups of children ages one to six years old. Fox-Turnbull (2019) created a guided framework for implementing technology in the classroom called Technology Observation and Conservation Framework (TOCF). Using this tool, teachers crafted lessons using computers and then scored their students and their own experience after several assignments. According to the research, socialization was an area that increased with the use of technology. Children were exposed to a variety of different ways to address social and academic problems in ways that were meaningful to them. Teachers also described being able to learn more about their students when reviewing the results from the technology outcomes. This

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led teachers to create different activities and lessons to address underserved areas of a student's development (Fox-Turnbull, 2019).

Iaosanurak, Chanchalor and Murphy (2016) researched the effects of technology when teaching social skills in an elementary school in Thailand. The researchers designed animated digital stories based on social conflicts and compared results from the learning using the Thai Emotional Intelligence Screening Test (TEIST). Children were given a social situation and asked to navigate the situation to find a favorable outcome. The stories were open-ended and involved reflection which has been shown to enhance social learning (Iaosanurak, Chanshalor & Murphy, 2016). The results of the study showed a positive increase in prosocial behaviors when using the digital stories. The students stayed focused on the lessons and found resolutions to social issues in creative ways allowing for individual and cultural expression.

SEL effects on underrepresented groups

Research by Gregory and Fergus (2017) examined the lack of awareness schools exhibited surrounding privilege and cultural differences when implementing SEL programs. This allowed for behavior standards to be misapplied and negatively affect the children of underrepresented groups. The study involved three school districts from Syracuse, Denver and Cleveland. Each district tracked high suspension rates, the result of classroom disruptions or negative behaviors. While SEL programs focus on student behaviors, Gregory and Fergus (2017) cited discrepancies in how teacher bias affected behaviors in the classroom. El Mallah (2020) agreed that the framework for SEL must allow for cultural differences. Otherwise, children from underrepresented backgrounds may be disproportionately targeted. Every culture communicates

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in different ways and views behaviors differently. Schools must view behavioral situations with a diverse lens to encompass children from different backgrounds.

It was noted in the Gregory and Fergus (2017) study that black youth are two to three times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts. This discipline gap starts as early as preschool and continues through-out a student's academic career. While 19% of preschool children are black, national data from 2013-2014 showed that they represent 47% of preschool children who receive out-of-school suspensions (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). By addressing the racial disparities in the class environment prior to the implementation SEL, programs allowed for a more inclusive and holistic approach to how teachers view and address behaviors.

The study by El Mallah (2020) focused on reviewing research surrounding the equity measures related to social emotional learning. The study found a lack of cultural understanding in the SEL programs, leading those programs to be bias in favor of the dominant culture. This led to children from underrepresented backgrounds to not "measure" up to behavioral expectations. El Mallah (2020) discussed prototype analysis, which is a way to evaluate SEL programs for lack of cultural content, to broaden behavioral expectations. Being able to create an environment that socially and emotionally supports all children, regardless of background, should be the focus for schools.

Conclusion

Throughout this literature review, evidence supported that social skills in young children had a positive effect on a child's cognitive development. Social emotional skills have become a priority because these skills support the academic success of children. These skills should be developed early in life, as this is the time that the brain is rapidly developing and learning. Training children in social skills has become a focus for the classroom. There are several SEL programs that offer resources for teachers to assist in teaching children social skills. Read aloud stories, classroom culture, and emotional supports are a few of the techniques discussed in these programs. Through modified practices and modelling, social emotional skills can be taught to children with special needs. Through direct instruction of social skills, classroom disruptions may decrease, and more positive interactions emerge among peers. While there are some opposing viewpoints, especially how social emotional standards are established and assessed, most experts agree that SEL is important. Schools should be careful to address racial inequalities prior to implementing SEL programming to reduce bias. In recent years, SEL programs and legislative funding have increased, providing teachers with training and assistance to teach social skills to young children. The connection between the social skills and cognitive development of young children improved academic scores.

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