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## **Social-Emotional Learning and Educator Implementation**

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**Social-Emotional Learning and Educator Implementation**

Jennifer Grossman

Northwestern College

A Literature Review Presented

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Education

### **Abstract**

This literature review explores social and emotional learning in the elementary classroom and how educators can help support students to be academically successful. Social and emotional learning is critical to students and their success in the classroom. Social and emotional learning is defined and interventions are explained. This literature review will explore educator support, implementation, interventions, and academic achievement.

Three social and emotional learning interventions are explored. The interventions are imperative in the success of every student. An analysis of social and emotional learning interventions suggests that students are academically more successful if they receive social and emotional learning interventions. This literature review examines the effects of academic success based on social and emotional learning in the classroom. Results of the study indicate that social and emotional interventions have a positive effect on students and their academic outcomes.

*Keywords:* social-emotional learning, educators, students, implementation, interventions, academic achievement

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## Introduction

Students in elementary school are faced with many challenging situations (e.g. bullying, parent involvement, health, poverty). These challenges can interfere with a student's education. Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process of developing the skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions, develop care and concern for others, establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations, (Bracket, Reyes, Rivers, et al., 2012). Social-emotional learning helps students gain the confidence they need to help support them while in school. Educators' professional skills play the most prominent role in explaining teacher-student relationships and the comparison to student mental health (Poulou, 2018; Hanson-Peterson, Schonert-Reichl, & Smith, 2016). The skills and competencies in social and emotional learning provide for better academic performance because students are more engaged in social environments (Bracket, Reyes, Rivers, et al., 2012). Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger (2011) state that many students lack the social-emotional competencies and become less connected to school as they progress from elementary school to middle and high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance.

Students often enter school having been exposed to various risk factors (e.g. poverty, harsh parenting, maltreatment) and lacking appropriate skills to cope (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012; Sciaraffa, Zeanah, & Zeanah, 2017). Sciaraffa and the team (2017) states that relationships provide extra support that students need when they are experiencing stress throughout their school day. Emotional knowledge skills are important predictors of social behavior (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012). To ensure all

students acquire and practice social and emotional interventions, educators are asked to recognize and adopt SEL practices (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012). Educators play a critical role in helping students develop the skills needed to establish positive relationships and making responsible decisions. Educators can help support positive relationships and responsible decision-making by teaching interventions to the students.

The problem is students are faced with many challenges that set them apart from their peers and student behavior gets in the way of academic success. A significant number of children have emotional and behavioral difficulties (Daunic et. al., 2013). Educators have so many students they are responsible for and they do not always have time to sit down and talk through these problems. The students are at risk for academic delays because they are lacking necessary skills for social and emotional experiences. It is important for educators to know how social and emotional problems can influence schoolwork and how students act in the classroom. The sooner the problem is tackled, the sooner the students can get the help they need to succeed in school

The purpose of this literature review is to look at how students are impacted by social and emotional challenges and how the challenges relate to their academic success in school. Analysis of each study will illuminate how educators can effectively infuse social-emotional skills into the classroom. Educators can create a community in the learning environment by creating conditions where students feel safe and supported, (Martinez, 2016). Students who have challenges in and out of school often struggle to meet academic standards during the school day. Educators are the drivers of social and emotional learning programs and the practice in school, (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

This literature review will examine the research about best practices for educators planning to implement social-emotional skills into the classroom so that students experience academic success. The literature may inspire educators to ask if explicit instruction in social and emotional learning benefits student well-being and academic achievement in school? The articles reviewed were found by searching the keywords social and emotional learning, educator roles, and elementary education. Each were from peer-reviewed sources and published within the last 10 years. All articles in this review were found utilizing the ProQuest Eric and Education databases.

The structure of this review is thematic. The themes presented are educator support, implementation, and interventions. Implications of social-emotional learning in the classroom will be examined and future research considered.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Educator Support**

High stress levels tend to make educators sleep poorly and not function as well in the school setting (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Schonert-Reichl (2017) & Neonene, Gallagher, Kelly, et al. (2019) stress the importance of educators having support for implementing SEL in the classroom environment. Fourth and seventh grade educators from Canada completed a survey called the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Student stress was measured by collecting their salivary cortisol. Educators' results in the study indicated higher levels of self-reported burnout in the classroom and indicated significantly higher levels of morning cortisol in students (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Educators believe that SEL programs can be implemented into the classroom but emphasize support from administration on job requirements and educator responsibilities. Educators quickly become stressed when they have limited resources or the ability to change how or what they are teaching (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

In contrast to these views, other researchers hypothesized that intervention coaches' perspectives of administration acceptance were more related to implementation than administrators' or educators' perspectives (Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2012). The mixed-methods study completed by Wanless and the team (2012) consisted of 33 third grade educators in a mid-Atlantic U.S. school. The educators were trained in the Responsive Classroom (RC) intervention approach. They completed the training and implemented RC for one year before completing the study. After the first year of RC implementation, educators attended a one-week RC training during the summer. The training consisted of eight focus groups. The study consisted of a setting-level factors



questionnaire and was administered at the end of a focus group (Wanless and the team, 2012). The questionnaire consisted of two items. The first item asked educators to identify what was most helpful for implementation. The second item asked educators to identify what was most challenging for implementation.

In the setting-level factors questionnaire, educators chose schools/administration as the largest barrier (69.23%), over coaches (0.00 %), teachers (15.38 %), and students (15.38 %) (Wanless and the team, 2012). Administrations' judgments about the relevance of the intervention was instrumental to the implementation (Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2012). The study confirmed that coaches were the most helpful in implementation and administrators were the largest barrier or most challenging for implementation (Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2012). A second study was completed with educators in their second year of RC implementation. The study consisted of 48 fourth grade educators in thirteen schools. Thirteen administrators completed the study and all but one of them were from the first study. Six classroom training coaches helped with the study. A Classroom Practices Observational Measure (CPOM) that consisted of sixteen items on a three point scale was completed.

Observations were completed three times over the course of the year. Each observation was sixty minutes in length. Educators, administrators, and classroom training coaches rated administrator acceptance of social and emotional interventions (Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2012). Teacher and administrator ratings were not significantly related to implementation (Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman, et al., 2012).

A study by Reyes and the team (2012) similar to Schonert-Reichl (2017) confirmed that educator confidence during SEL instruction is more likely to continue using SEL interventions. Educators look for leadership by school administration to help with school culture and implementation of SEL (Reyes and the team, 2012). Martinez (2012) states that when SEL is implemented in schools, educators often receive limited training and support.

### **Implementation**

The impact of social-emotional learning implementation has been well researched. Recent research by Martinez (2016) has found that SEL interventions have a positive impact on student academic performance. SEL programs also help reduce student aggression and emotional distress, increase prosocial behaviors, and improve attitudes toward peers (Martinez, 2016). Research data from a similar study by (Reyes, Bracket, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012) confirmed that educators who lack investment in SEL and motivation to engage students in the SEL interventions would have differences between themselves and the SEL lesson. Reyes and the team (2012) assigned 812 sixth-grade students and 28 educators in 28 elementary schools from the northeastern United States to a study. The educators and students used a theoretical model that acquired the knowledge of recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions (RULER) intervention. Student outcomes were obtained from self-reports, performance assessments, and report cards (Reyes et al., 2012). The study showed that educators who had high-quality implementation and taught more feeling word units had students with higher scores on social competence, social problem solving, and emotional literacy (Reyes et al., 2012).

Whitcomb & Merrell (2011) agree that curriculum implementation is important to curriculum design. Educators who are able to deliver the instruction at a consistent pace will be able to provide for immediate feedback (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2011). Martinez (2016) confirmed the idea of delivering SEL at an intensive pace benefited students and their academic instruction. Furthermore, Martinez (2016) emphasized the importance of integrating SEL into students' academics in the classroom. Four hundred students and twenty educators from a school in California participated in an action research study that looked at students' needs using a five-point Likert scale (Martinez, 2012). The survey that was utilized in the action research by Martinez (2012) measured three climate factors such as accountability, respect, and empathy, in addition to loyalty, learning, and safety. On average, students and educators perceived learning and empathy as positive areas of school climate, while safety and respect were the lowest scores. Reyes and the team (2012) found that SEL interventions create emotionally supportive environments at school. When educators are involved in the design and development of the interventions, they become more positive about implementing the interventions in the classroom (Martinez, 2016).

A study conducted by Rimm-Kaufman et al., (2014) had similar views of social-emotional implementation in the classroom. The study consisted of 63 fifth-grade teachers and 387 fifth-grade students across twenty Mid-Atlantic school districts around New York. The schools were randomly placed into intervention groups (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). The study was a three-year randomized controlled trial of the Responsive Classroom (RC) approach. This approach is an instructional delivery and social-emotional learning intervention designed to provide educators with skills needed to create

positive, caring, and well-managed classroom environments. The study found that the relationship between the RC approach and greater student-teacher relationships was evident in implementation of SEL interventions (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014).

The social and emotional skills implemented by educators can positively affect students and how they react toward peers and other adults. Studies completed by (Martinez, 2016; Reyes et al., 2012; Whitcomb & Merrell, 2011; & Baroody et al., 2014) have begun to provide insight on the effects of educator social-emotional implementation in the classroom. Implementing social-emotional learning interventions in the classroom could provide educator structure in order to meet the needs of the students.

### **Interventions**

Strong Start K-2 is one of many social-emotional learning curriculums for students in kindergarten through second grade (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012). The intervention was designed to evaluate behaviors and their effect on students. A study by Whitcomb & Merrell (2012) was completed with four first grade classrooms in two public elementary schools. The schools were located in the Pacific Northwest. One school contained three classrooms that participated and another school contained one classroom that participated. A total of eighty-three students participated. The two schools were from the same district and they both implemented a universal tier of positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) for more than five years.

Administration received a strong start manual and nominated first grade teachers in their buildings to deliver the intervention. A pretest was administered thirteen weeks before the intervention. Another test was administered during the intervention. A third test was

administered after the completion of the intervention. The tests all looked at content knowledge, peer relations, and problem behaviors.

The Strong Start K-2 lessons were implemented during the months of January through April, with one lesson taught each week. Implementation checklists were used to conduct components of the Strong Start intervention. Graduate students observed and collected data. The graduate students used these checklists and made notations of their observations. Data was also collected on how long a lesson lasted, how often the educator provided students with opportunities to respond, how often students responded, and how often educators provided praise (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012). Students had better peer relations after the intervention had finished. Problem behaviors went up slightly from before the intervention period. A similar study by Gunter, Caldarella, Korth, & Young (2012) hypothesized that the strong start program was not implemented with fidelity. Roughly 90% of educators completed the study. There were no indications of academic success noted.

Social-emotional learning and literacy is another intervention that ties SEL in with literacy. The intervention focuses on self-regulation of emotions and behavior, as well as literacy instruction. The intervention consists of five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision making (Daunic et al., 2013). Five coordinated units were delivered and each consisted of three lessons. A storybook was read on the first day of each lesson. The books were chosen based on developmental appropriateness, emotional topics, ethnic diversity, and illustrations that support social-emotional vocabulary (Daunic et al., 2013). After the story was read to the students, a discussion about respecting others and

responsible decision making took place. Vocabulary instruction was taught with each lesson. The vocabulary words were pronounced, meanings were explained, and the words were used in multiple contexts (Daunic et al., 2012).

Role plays and scenarios were enacted after the third lesson of SEL and literacy had been completed. The intention of the role plays was for students to practice social and emotional situations that could rise in their personal lives. The intervention was completed with two large elementary schools in Florida. All students were in kindergarten and were from two separate classrooms. One room was a control group and the other was a treatment condition group. The treatment group consisted of twenty-six boys and four girls. The control group consisted of twenty-three boys and four girls. A behavior rating inventory form was filled out by the educators. A clinical assessment of behavior rating form that consisted of seventy questions was filled out for each student. A reading mastery test was completed for each student. A reading mastery test is a comprehension test that identifies student strengths from listening to the storybook. Students in the treatment group were at higher risk for behavior regulation and lower risk for social skills. The study findings indicated that integrating SEL and literacy can lead to self-regulation improvements and should enhance positive social development (Daunic et al., 2012). The study indicated that SEL integration can lead to more positive academic success.

Another type of intervention is the Responsive Classroom (RC) approach. Responsive Classroom approach is a social and emotional learning intervention designed to provide educators with skills needed to create a caring and well-managed classroom environment (Baroody, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, & Curby, 2014). The RC approach is

designed to provide teachers with skills needed to create a caring, well-managed classroom environment that ultimately strengthens teachers' instructional efforts, improves teachers' and students' social and relational skills, and enhances students' academic and social outcomes (Baroody et al., 2014). The RC approach is an SEL intervention developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC) to create classroom environments that are conducive to children's social, emotional, and academic growth (Baroody et al., 2014).

A study conducted by Baroody and the team (2014) consisted of 63 fifth-grade teachers and 387 fifth-grade students across twenty Mid-Atlantic school districts. A seven item parent questionnaire was filled out, along with a teacher questionnaire. The teacher questionnaire consisted of questions about the teacher's instructional teaching efficacy and years of teaching experience. Student's working memory was assessed using the working memory subtest and it consisted of twenty-one items. Educators completed two additional measures of the use of RC practices: Classroom Practices Teacher Survey (CPTS), a 46-item teacher-reported assessment of their adherence to RC practices, and Classroom Practices Frequency Survey (CPFS), an 11-item survey of the frequency of practice use (Baroody et al., 2014). Approximately one-fifth of teachers reported that conflict with students was not present (23%), and approximately two-thirds of teachers (66%) reported that conflict with students was rare (Baroody et al., 2014). The results indicated that RC training was a significant predictor of the use of RC practices. No evidence of academic success was reported.

### **Academic Achievement**

Social emotional learning interventions are directed toward increasing students' social and emotional competence skills while also promoting students' academic success in the classroom (Humphries, Williams, & May, 2018; Ferreira, Martinsone, & Talic, 2020). Durlak and the team, (2011) found that students who participated in a social and emotional learning intervention had an eleven percent increase in academic performance. Educators set the overall tone of their classrooms including the academic and social expectations for their students (Humphries and the team, 2018). Jones et al., (2017) states that students who can effectively manage their thinking, attention, and behaviors are more likely to obtain better grades.

A study completed by Schonfeld, Adams, Fredtsrom, et al., (2015) measured academic achievement in ELA through year-end report cards. A control study and intervention study was conducted. The controlled group was assigned to the Promoting Alternative thinking Strategies (PATHS) and the intervention group was assigned to an intervention that is used within the school. Schonfeld and the team (2015) assigned 1,394 third-grade students in 24 elementary schools from a northeastern city in the United States to the study. Data was collected beginning in the Fall of 2004 (Grade 3) through the Spring of 2008 (Grade 6) (Schonfeld et al., 2015). Bi-weekly educator reports were obtained on how many PATHS lessons were taught. Student state mastery tests were reviewed in March of every year. For reading mastery test scores in the 4th grade, the probability of those in the intervention group attaining basic proficiency status was 1.72 times higher than the probability of those in the control group attaining basic proficiency status. There were no significant differences in fifth and sixth grade scores. For reading



mastery status, the number of lessons was a significant predictor of 6th grade basic proficiency. Specifically, the probability of attaining basic proficiency status is increased 1.37 times for each additional lesson taught. The study indicated that students who are exposed to social and emotional interventions will have higher academic scores.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) is a systems-level approach that is used by school districts to promote a positive school culture and support the teaching and learning environment (Kelm, McIntosh, & Cooley, 2014). PBIS focuses on guiding schools in choosing practices to encourage success of all students. PBIS is a three-tier model. The primary tier supports all students, whereas, the secondary tier targets small groups of students and tailors the interventions to their specific needs. The third tier provides individualized supports to students who have more complex needs (Kelm, McIntosh, & Cooley, 2014). A study completed with approximately 15,000 students (Grade 4 & 7) and 49 schools in Canada confirmed more successful academic achievement in students who completed the PBIS intervention compared to those students who did not complete the intervention. Defined expectations consisted of safe, helpful, accountable, respectful, positive (SHARP). Educators were provided with lesson plans and taught the lessons on their own time. Evidence from the PBIS study indicated positive academic and behavioral outcomes for students (Kelm, McIntosh, & Cooley, 2014).

A study completed by Low, Smolkowski, Cook, & Desfosses (2019) examined developmental trends of social and emotional skills across two years and evaluated the impact of the adopted social and emotional learning program, Second Step. This intervention utilizes explicit and implicit learning strategies to promote critical social,

emotional, and executive functioning skills (Low et al., 2019). The curriculum is grade specific and allows educators to deliver instruction at a developmentally appropriate stage. Sixty-one schools from Washington and Arizona were randomly assigned to the intervention. Students ranged in grade levels from kindergarten to third grade and were from six school districts. The student outcomes were assessed through teacher ratings of student social-emotional skills and problem behaviors, academic tests, and direct observations in students' learning environment. The results of the study indicate that students who began the study in kindergarten had better reading achievement scores compared to those who started the study in grades one and two (Low et al., 2019). This data indicates that students who receive interventions early on will be more successful in academics, compared to those who start the interventions in later grades.

A similar study by Wallender, Hiebel, PeQueen et al., (2020) investigated the effects of the Second Step approach. Participants in this study were from a rural Midwestern school district. A pre-survey and post survey was administered to the students before and after the study. Similar to Low et al, (2019) the study was conducted over a two-year time span and the second step approach was taught. The study contained a quantitative collection of data from the students. The data was based on perceived self-regulation and problem solving (Wallender, Hiebel, PeQueen et al., 2019). The study concluded that there were no significant changes in self-perceptions over time.

### **Implications and Future Research**

The research has a number of important implications for future implementation. Consistent with Sklad et al., (2012) Second Step was more beneficial in reducing rather than preventing problem behaviors. Second, although students improved on several

measures of social-emotional competence, most gains declined during summer months (Low, Smolkowski, Cook et al., 2019). Third, although SEL was delivered universally, students did not respond uniformly. Finally, the Second Step SEL intervention was delivered to elementary students only.

Research suggests a positive relation between educators' SEL implementation and student academic success. SEL programs improved students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behavior, and academic performance (CASEL, 2021). Furthermore, the impact of SEL interventions demonstrated a positive impact on school grades and academic achievement.

Future research needs to be conducted on the effects of students who have no issues with social and emotional challenges. Several studies were conducted utilizing student perception questionnaires; however, elementary students may not know the difference between perceived and real social-emotional skills. Another area that needs to be researched in greater depth is longevity of the SEL interventions. A few studies were conducted over a few years and others were conducted over a few weeks. In order to know the greatest positive impact on academic success, conducting the research over a few years and following the same students will be beneficial. Conducting more quantitative research would be beneficial given a lot of the research was centered around qualitative research. Future research should also employ a more rigorous screening procedure. Data from multiple academic areas should be assessed. Only a few of the studies collected information on academic achievement in reading and math; however, other subjects were not assessed. Further research should be conducted regarding the benefits of academic success when SEL is implemented in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

Results from data that were collected by various researchers indicate that academic success is improved with social and emotional interventions (Lawson, McKenzie, Becker, et al., 2018; Gubi & Bocanegra, 2015; Zolkoski, Aguilera, West et al., 2020). There are many different interventions that can be implemented in a classroom; however, the educator must be willing to do research on different interventions and see what fits the needs of his or her students. Educators must have the acceptance from administration before implementing a SEL intervention. Administration and educators must work together toward one common goal to allow students growth in their academics. It is necessary for educators and students to work together toward the completion of a social and emotional learning intervention.

Many social and emotional interventions lead to an increase in social and emotional skills and improve academic achievement. Providing students with a well-rounded intervention for social and emotional learning will help students with their academics. Implementing social-emotional learning interventions in school is a promising approach to promote critical social and emotional competencies for all students (Lawson, McKenzie, Decker, et al., 2019). Evidence of SEL effectiveness is positive and research indicates that SEL interventions produce academic gains in addition to improved student social, emotional, and behavioral functioning (Meyers & Hickey, 2014).

There is an astounding amount of research on social-emotional learning interventions and the implementation of the interventions in the classroom can help improve student academic achievement. This literature review has examined how

educators can implement interventions in the classroom and report successful academic achievement. The findings of the literature review revealed that student academic success is greater when SEL interventions are implemented in the classroom. Addressing student challenges will increase the likelihood that more evidence-based interventions will effectively be implemented in schools and will support academic, social, and emotional development of students.

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