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Decreasing Unwanted Behaviors in The Classroom Through the Implementation of a Social-Emotional Curriculum

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Social-Emotional Curriculum

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Abstract

Social-emotional learning programs can have an influence on social and emotional competencies which may lead to a decrease in unwanted behaviors in the classroom. This study examined the effects of one social-emotional learning program, Positive Action, on decreasing unwanted behaviors in the classroom in a rural Northeastern Iowa middle school. Participants included ten 6th grade students, 2 girls and 8 boys, who had received referrals prior to the implementation of the program. The number of referrals received was retrieved from the school district's JMC gradebook program which had a discipline referral component. A checklist was used to record the number of referrals one year prior to the implementation of the program up to the date of implementation and then weekly for five weeks after implementation. Results of the dependent samples *t*-test revealed a significant difference between the baseline and the final week of data collection. After the implementation of Positive Action, there was a significant decrease in the number of referrals students received. Future studies should examine the long-term effects of the program over the intended course of three years, including a larger number of students from more than one school district.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, character development programs, early intervention programs, disruptive behavior interventions

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Social-Emotional Curriculum

Disruptive behaviors have often gotten in the way of a student's academic success. Throughout history, educators have put academic growth at the forefront of the educational setting. More recently, a focus on students' social and emotional wellbeing has become a topic of discussion and concern. Educators have sometimes had to decide between addressing the student's social-emotional wellbeing or addressing their academic growth (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). Strahan and Poteat discuss the fact that educators do their best to find suitable interventions for academic needs, but state that research is showing benefits to integrating social-emotional needs alongside supporting academic growth (2020). The need for social-emotional learning to be addressed is becoming increasingly more relevant in today's school setting.

The problem is there are a wide variety of unwanted behaviors that are not attended to appropriately due to educators not having the resources needed to address the students' social and emotional needs in order to support their academic growth. Doolittle et al. (2007) conducted a study in which the research team read through the mission statements from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The research team found that many of the statements were directed only toward academic goals and only 16 of the mission statements mentioned anything about social behavior (Doolittle et al., 2007). More attention is needed in addressing the standards for students' social behaviors. Focusing on behaviors such as disruption, defiance, aggression, bullying, and property destruction play an important role in creating a school environment of safety, respect, and responsibility which will enable students to focus on their academic responsibilities (Doolittle et al., 2007). The search for an appropriate social-emotional learning

curriculum has left a gap in the action research completed to analyze the success rate of the various programs implemented into academic settings. Throughout the research collected, several programs were put into place but failed to show a decrease in the behaviors leading to academic growth. Many factors such as fidelity, quality, and dosage led to more questions of association with worse outcomes than before the program was implemented (Humphrey et al., 2017). Another issue is the limited number of peer reviewed articles within the last ten years focused on implementation of the Positive Action curriculum. This research will show current findings in one middle school setting using the Positive Action curriculum.

The purpose of this action research study is to provide other educators with current findings in one middle school setting using a research-based social-emotional curriculum, Positive Action, to decrease unwanted behaviors in the classroom in order to promote safety and wellbeing for all students so they can experience academic success. Information pertaining to other curriculums will be used to compare findings with the data gathered during this research. The hope is to instill the importance of meeting the social-emotional needs of students in conjunction with meeting their academic needs at the same time.

Review of the Literature

Positive Behavior Support Systems

A zero-tolerance disciplinary design is important for setting a precedence for expectations of behaviors in order to maintain a safe school climate, however, the consequences lead to suspensions and expulsions taking students out of the learning environment entirely, and there is little evidence to prove that this leads to a safer school environment (Nocera et al., 2014). The need for programs geared toward providing students with the skills to self-regulate and cope, as well as more positive interactions with teachers and peers, will lead to less suspensions and more time in the classroom. Nocera et al. (2014) share their findings of the impact of school-wide positive behavior supports on student behaviors in the middle school setting.

Nocera et al. (2014) studied school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) and found this to be an effective proactive alternative to a reactive approach in which teachers and administration react to a situation instead of proactively controlling it before it occurs. This results in positive changes in not only student behavior but in the school climate as well. The researchers found fewer incidents of problem behaviors were noted, discipline referrals and suspensions decreased, and students rated factors regarding climate and culture more favorably. They also noted that academic gains showed an increase in both reading scores and math scores.

Nocera et al. (2014) argue that schools need to change their approach to discipline, based on evidence from a previous study done by Skiba (2000), disciplinary actions leading to suspensions and expulsions do not lead to positive changes in student behavior or safer schools. Schools need long-term positive changes which can be demonstrated through the implementation of a school-wide positive behavior support system. A school-wide positive

behavior support system must have all stakeholders on board, from the school board and administration to the classroom teachers and all school staff (Nocera et al., 2014).

Many positive behavior support systems begin in the lower elementary grades and not all programs are carried through to the middle school grades. However, the need for positive behavior support systems in secondary schools is just as crucial. Caldarella et al. (2019) agree with the need for a positive behavior support system as students transition from elementary to middle school, a time when many young adolescents begin to experience more emotional vulnerability which can lead to an increase in inappropriate behaviors.. Caldarella et al. (2019) agree with Nocera et al. (2014) that disruptive behaviors pose significant problems in the middle school grades, putting students at risk for reactive discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsions. Both teams agree that a positive behavioral classroom management system is more beneficial and effective in decreasing the unwanted behaviors which improves students' academic performance.

Caldarella et al. (2019) concentrated on Class-Wide Function-Related Intervention Teams (CW-FIT). Students were nominated and ranked by teachers using a screening for behavior disorders. A baseline was collected through observations. After training, teachers implemented the intervention through teaching classroom expectations, giving praise, and awarding points. Researchers observed students in the areas of on-task behaviors, disruptive behaviors, praise, and reprimands. This program was incorporated successfully into elementary schools and then adapted for middle school levels. The program focuses on teaching the classroom expectations, reinforcement of desired behaviors, and minimizing teacher attention for inappropriate behaviors.

Caldarella et al. (2019), found that when teachers implemented the program with fidelity, the study group's on-task behavior increased, target student on-task behavior increased, target student disruptive behavior decreased, and teacher praise to reprimand ratio increased. With a positive behavior support system in place, there is still a need for a social-emotional curriculum in order to cohesively meet the social and emotional needs of all students.

In 2004, Doolittle began studying state policies which encouraged evidence-based behavior support systems in schools to see if they included student social behavior as an outcome in their mission statements. Doolittle's research team viewed web pages searching for mission statements, certification requirements and statewide initiatives. Later, Horner et al. (2007) would join Doolittle in a further study to determine the extent to which all fifty state departments, and one territory department of education in the United States include goals for student social behavior in their mission statements, what criteria is used for individual students, classrooms, and schoolwide behavior support in certification standards for general education teachers, special education teachers, and principals, and what state initiatives were focused on improving student social behavior.

Through a survey of published literature which was provided by all 51 states and territories, the team found that behavior competency requirements for general education teachers was stated in the majority of states (Doolittle et al., 2007). The team also found behavior competency requirements stated for special education teachers in most and for elementary school administrators in just over half of the states (Doolittle et al., 2007). Results also found that very few of the states and territory's mission statements included a formal commitment to providing children the social skills support needed.

The federal government had placed more weight on having supports in place for student social competence (Doolittle et al., 2007). This emphasis placed the responsibility with the states to make sure student social behavior was evident in their mission or goal statements (Doolittle et al., 2007). These supports enable the atmosphere of a school to become less disruptive, allowing teachers to teach and students to learn (Beach Center, 2005; Doolittle et al., 2007). The programs allow teachers to spend less time reacting to problem behaviors. States which have included a goal requiring teachers' competency in positive behavior support systems should provide training and ongoing support to increase the outcome of improving social health of all students (Doolittle et al., 2007).

Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Positive behavior support systems have been implemented in schools with positive outcomes in both behavior and academic gains. While we are aware of the need for the positive behavior support systems, there is also an increasing need to provide students with social-emotional learning programs. One study conducted by Strahan and Poteat (2020), investigates how a group of middle school students perceived their social-emotional development where a social and emotional learning program had been implemented in their school. Educators are caught in the middle of wanting to help and support their students through social-emotional challenges and wanting to teach the academic content students need in order to do well on mandated assessments (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). Students increased their skills in self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). Students were able to make connections with teachers and peers and through reflection were able to make connections to interests, engagement, and accomplishments (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). Strahan and Poteat (2020), suggest that when

students go through the process of reflection in each of their classes, it may be beneficial in

helping the students self-regulate their own social-emotional issues and apply what they have

learned in order to keep the momentum of the classroom learning moving forward without

disruption. Strahan and Poteat (2020) conclude that social-emotional connections can have an

impact on students' personal and academic development.

Based on Strahan and Poteat's study, the benefits of a social-emotional curriculum in our

schools in regard to making connections is apparent (2020). Students who participated in the

study were more aware of the extent to which their teachers cared for them. This in turn created

a climate of emotional safety allowing the students to have more positive interactions with their

peers and positive experiences in their lessons (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). The positive

interactions and positive experiences will allow the teachers to teach and the students to learn

without being interrupted to deal with disruptive behaviors.

Social-emotional learning programs, when implemented with fidelity, can show positive

outcomes, and can be utilized as a proactive or prevention program as opposed to a reactive

program. A preventive or proactive program can help students learn the necessary skills to self-

regulate their behaviors. Knight et al. (2019) conducted a study to find out if a social-emotional

learning program could enhance social-emotional skills in the areas of empathy, self-regulation,

social competence, and responsibility. Upon completion of the 2-year study, the researchers

used the Social Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS) to measure changes in the

students' social-emotional competency skills (Knight et al., 2019). When teachers assessed

students, results showed the teachers found that students had increased their social and emotional

competency skills, were more aware of their own emotions, and were successfully using more

positive strategies in difficult situations (Knight et al., 2019). Students, on the other hand, did

not report a change. There was evidence found to confirm that the social-emotional program used did help students recognize their own emotions, were able to communicate their emotions more effectively, and they could use their emotions to help in guiding their decisions.

Second Step

In addition to a social-emotional curriculum increasing students' abilities to make better connections with their teachers and peers, it also leads to increasing more positive behaviors and decreasing unwanted behaviors in the classroom by understanding and regulating emotions, learning to problem solve and to understand prosocial behaviors (Low et al., 2019). Low et al. (2019) examined the impact of Second Step, a social-emotional learning program most commonly used in elementary schools. From the results of their study, they concluded that it is important to have early implementation of a social-emotional learning program, such as Second Step. The effects of the program were more significant for students who were already displaying skill deficits; therefore, researchers found the Second Step program was better used as an intervention tool as opposed to being used as a prevention program.

Another study was conducted on the effectiveness of a social-emotional program, Second Step-Student Success Through Prevention (SS-SSTP), on increasing prosocial behaviors and academic skills for students with disabilities (Espelage et al., 2016). Students self-reported on measures including belonging, empathy, caring, and willingness to intervene in bullying situations. Researchers found that the students in the intervention group showed a significant increase in their willingness to intervene in bullying situations compared to the students in the control group (Espelage et al., 2016). The students in the intervention group also showed an increase of half a grade on their report cards. However, there were no notable differences between the two groups in the areas of empathetic concern and caring (Espelage et al., 2016).

Slowly but Steadily

Another social-emotional program "Slowly but Steadily" is based on the idea that social-emotional skills can be taught in the classroom using explicit instruction by teachers in the same way they teach academic skills (Zins et al., 2004; Raimundo et al., 2013). This comprehensive program emphasizes teaching the skills and how to apply them to real-life situations (Raimundo et al., 2013). When children are given the tools to tune in to their self- and social awareness, learn to manage their emotions, build relationship skills, and learn how to solve their own social problems, children are able to cope (Raimundo et al., 2013). Incorporating these skills in early grades helps shape social competencies and helps them generalize these new competencies to other classes and extracurricular activities.

Raimundo et al., conducted a study to see if this social-emotional learning program would enhance social-emotional competencies while also helping reduce internalizing and externalizing problems (2013). There were significant gains in peer relations and social competence, however no gains were found for internalizing and externalizing problems. There was also an increase in emotional knowledge and academic behavior. There was also an impact on behavioral problems such as aggressiveness and social problems, but not on anxiety. Raimundo et al. (2013) found that students who already had a middle to higher level of social-emotional competencies did not benefit directly from the program but may have indirectly benefited through being around those students who gained more competencies and reduced their externalizing problems. Implementation of a social-emotional curriculum should not be limited to only students displaying the characteristics of mental health issues, but to all students as we can see from the results of the findings of Raimundo et al. (2013).

Social Harmony

Social Harmony is a social-emotional learning program based on the perceptions and experiences of students, teachers, and parents. Haymovitz and his team created a focus prompt which was established through a secure website for participants to anonymously respond. The researchers then sent out an informal questionnaire to all minors involved in the study. Once the responses were in, participants returned to the session to complete a virtual card sort. Haymovitz et al. (2018), found that parent involvement in the program was essential to the success of the program. The researchers also found that it is important to inform parents ahead of time of the specifics of the social-emotional learning program being implemented, prompting them to be actively engaged in the program. Social Harmony is restorative and showed promising results for success in developing skills and values, nurturing healthy relationships, and supporting or rewarding positive behaviors which in turn improve students' academic performance (Haymovitz et al., 2018).

Wyman's Teen Outreach Program®

Wyman's Teen Outreach Program® is a social-emotional learning program used to reduce factors leading to unwanted behaviors in the classroom. McBride et al. (2016) examined the results of the program's success of decreasing students' suspensions received, skipping classes, and failing grades. The intervention program was delivered once a week. Students were also required to participate in 20 hours of school-based service learning. Pre- and post-test surveys were completed in the fall and spring by all participating students. McBride's team found that the students who participated in the intervention group showed a significant decrease in failing grades and also in skipping classes when compared to the students who were in the comparison group. There was also a significant difference between the two groups in the areas

of failing grades and skipping classes from the initial test to the posttest (McBride et al., 2016).

McBride et al. (2016) found that the results of their study support the hypothesis that an

intervention may positively affect behaviors to improve academic success.

Strong Kids

The Strong Kids program has been successful in elementary schools but had not been

evaluated in the middle school setting until 2020 when a group of researchers set out to see if this

program could be successful in a middle school setting with adolescents dealing with physical,

social, and academic changes in their lives (Neth et al., 2020). The participants in the study were

at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders. Neth et al. (2020) reported that Strong Kids

program was delivered with a high percentage of fidelity. Student's social emotional knowledge

increased. There were no significant differences on the effects of students externalizing

symptoms, but they did show improvement in the area of internalizing symptoms (Neth et al.,

2020). Teachers reported improvements in their student's behaviors and in their relationships

with their students. The teachers stated that the program gave opportunities for discussions that

may not have happened without the program.

Social-Emotional Learning Foundations (SELF)

The Social-Emotional Learning Foundations (SELF) is a social-emotional curriculum

which is incorporated into a literacy curriculum as an intervention. Daunic et al. (2013) wanted

to determine what effects would be evident from combining a social-emotional program with an

academic program, in this case a literacy curriculum, as an intervention for children with

emotional and behavioral disorders (Daunic et al., 2013). Explicit instruction was used to

integrate social-emotional learning into the literacy curriculum through the use of interactive

storybooks containing social-emotional content. Researchers found that the Social-Emotional

Learning Foundations (SELF) was beneficial in strengthening the self-regulation of emotions

and behaviors which improved the social-emotional competencies of the students who were at

risk for emotional and behavioral disorders (Daunic et al., 2013).

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)

Schonfeld et al. (2015) designed a study to find what impacts are demonstrated on

academic achievement for students who receive the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies

(PATHS) intervention curriculum. Researchers gathered data, such as state mastery test scores,

demographic data, school attendance, and dosage information. Students who participated in the

intervention schools demonstrated higher levels of basic proficiency in core areas at some grade

levels (Schonfeld et al., 2015). Researchers determined that the social-emotional instruction had

a positive influence on academic proficiency, especially for students in high-risk school settings.

Humphrey et al. (2017) conducted a study on the relationship between levels of

implementation and outcomes of school-based social-emotional learning interventions and had

differing results. Observations and surveys were used by Humphrey's team to generate data.

The research team found that the levels of implementation quality and responsiveness had little

significance associated with other intervention outcomes and the same for levels of procedural

fidelity, dosage, and reach (Humphrey et al., 2017). Humphrey's team found no relation

between variability and intervention outcomes in the PATHS curriculum (Humphrey et al.,

2017). The team was unable to find an association between fidelity and outcomes in the PATHS

trials and are still questioning why higher levels of dosage were associated with significantly

worse intervention outcomes when using the PATHS intervention curriculum (Humphrey et al.,

2017).

Social-emotional curriculum is more prevalent in schools today than ever before. There is not a specific program that works for every student in every school. Schools must continue to reevaluate which program they are using and learn to adapt to their students' needs. Bailey et al. (2019) set out to see what effects re-imagining social-emotional learning can happen in school and in out-of-school times by using a developmental model that identified specific, age-appropriate skills, focused on flexible strategies, and was led by teachers who were responsive to students' specific needs and experiences.

The research team provided strategies to teachers working with students in an OST (Out of School Time) summer program (Bailey et al., 2019). The strategies covered cognitive, emotional, social, grade-level specific, and all level strategies. The research team discovered that the strategy-based approach used to implement a social-emotional learning program was not only practical but was a positive experience for all who participated (Bailey et al., 2019). Teachers were able to choose which strategies they felt were most beneficial to their students, which resulted in a more positive experience with the program. The participating teachers in this study noted an increase in students' self-esteem and a decrease in conflicts among their peers (Bailey et al., 2019).

Bullying Intervention Programs

Positive Behavior Support Systems and social-emotional learning curriculums can have a positive impact on students' social-emotional well-being as well as on their academic success (Cipra & Hall, 2019). There are also programs available that focus on strengthening social-emotional competencies to decrease at risk behaviors such as bullying (Domino et al., 2013). Many of these programs are geared toward working with the students who are doing the bullying, but there is a need to have interventions that provide all students with the tools needed

to decrease the bullying behaviors and to also decrease the victimization behaviors (Domino et al., 2013). Studies by Domino et al. (2013) and Cipra and Hall (2019) were conducted on two of the programs that are tied in to a social-emotional curriculum.

Take the Lead (TTL)

A study was conducted by Domino et al. (2013) to find out how a theory-driven program for bullying and victimization could strengthen the social competencies of students in order to reduce these behaviors. The Take the Lead 16 week program was based on social-emotional learning and the Positive Youth Development theories. Students were given the Peer Relations Questionnaire to self-report bullying and victimization behaviors (Domino et al., 2013). Students who participated in the Take the Lead reported a significant decrease in bullying and victimization (Domino et al., 2013). Domino's team report a need to continue identifying intervention alternatives to address bullying behaviors and that it should continue to be a priority (Domino et al., 2013).

COREMatters

Another program used to address bullying intervention is the CORE*Matters* program. Cipra and Hall wanted to study the bullying intervention program being piloted to find out what impact the program would have on the students in a middle school setting (2019). A survey packet was completed by all of the participants and then the CORE*Matters* curriculum was implemented into the middle school and was taught by a law enforcement officer and a master of martial arts (Cipra & Hall, 2019). Research led to the findings that the CORE*Matters* program had a significant impact on higher self-esteem in the intervention group and also was consistent with other research where physical activity is used as an intervention tool (Cipra & Hall, 2019).

The findings also showed that this program positively impacted the school climate and decreased

the number of reports of teasing (Cipra & Hall, 2019). Cipra and Hall also noted evidence

showing an increase in cohesion, trust, and a sense of belonging among the students which may

have led to a decrease in negative behaviors such as bullying (2019).

School-Based Social-Emotional and Character Development Programs

Substance abuse, violent behaviors, and sexual activity are currently some of the leading

public health issues in our children, as young as elementary age (Li et al., 2011). One program

being implemented in some elementary and middle schools is the Positive Action program. Li's

research team designed their research to find out what effects the Positive Action program can

have for enhancing academic achievement and increasing involvement while decreasing

disciplinary referrals and violence (Li et al., 2011). Teachers and staff were trained and then the

program was implemented over a 3-year period. A Unit Implementation Report was completed

by teachers at the end of each unit taught, approximately every 6 weeks and surveys were

conducted at the end of the 3-year program (Li et al., 2011). The results showed that students

who participated and completed the 3-year Positive Action program reported less substance

abuse, violence, bullying, and disruptive behaviors (Li et al., 2011).

Beets et al. (2009) conducted another study on the Positive Action program to find out

the preventative benefits of the Positive Action program in the areas of student substance abuse,

violence, and voluntary sexual activity. Just as in the study conducted by Li et al. (2011), the

Positive Action program was delivered by teachers in their classrooms (Beets et al., 2009).

Beets' research team found a significant decrease in substance abuse, violence, and sexual

activity for the students who participated in the Positive Action program, concluding that there

can be a strong beneficial effect on the behaviors of students in the program (Beets et al., 2009).

A 6-year study on the impact of Positive Action, a school-wide social-emotional and character development program, was conducted by Bavarian's team (2013). Surveys were administered at the beginning of the study and then again seven more times over the 6-year period. Surveys were also completed by parents and teachers. Bavarian's research team found that the intervention had a positive impact on decreasing absenteeism, greater growth in academic motivation, and a growth in ability (Bavarian et al., 2013). These findings were considered to be predictors of long-term academic achievement and graduation rates (Bavarian et al., 2013). Improvements in test scores for high-risk groups involved in this study were another positive outcome (Bavarian et al., 2013).

The increase in the number of referrals based on non-compliance, disrespect, abusive and inappropriate language, threats, and physical aggression has prompted the school district in this study to implement the Positive Action program. The goal of the study was to research the effectiveness of the program in decreasing unwanted behaviors, such as non-compliance, disrespect, abusive and inappropriate language, threats, and physical aggression, in a middle school setting and provide follow up data to determine the success of the program.

Methods

The purpose of the action research study was to determine the effects of a social-emotional program on the behaviors of middle school students. What effect does the implementation of a social-emotional learning curriculum have on decreasing unwanted behaviors in a middle school setting? A qualitative design was used to gather data needed for this action research study. The effectiveness of the Positive Action was tested against the impact it has on the outcome of decreasing unwanted behaviors in the classroom by comparing referral data within one year before and five weeks after the implementation of Positive Action.

Participants

Student Participants

This study took place in a rural, consolidated middle school in Northeast Iowa. Participants included ten students in sixth grade, 2 girls and 8 boys. The participating students included 80% of whom were white and 20% of whom were Latino/Hispanic. Of the ten participants, none were identified with special needs. The ten students were chosen based on the data collected from the participating school's JMC gradebook, which includes a discipline referral system, showing they received one or more referrals from September of 2020 to prior to the implementation of the social-emotional learning program in September of 2021. The implemented program, Positive Action, is a comprehensive social-emotional learning program. It is aimed at improving academics, behavior, and character skills for adolescents.

Staff Participants

The Positive Action lessons were taught and/or assisted by the participating school's social worker, guidance counselor, and dean of students. One middle school special education

teacher was present for the lessons to assist students with special needs. Lessons were 30 minutes

long and were taught once a week.

Data Collection

The total number of referrals for ten 6th grade students was retrieved from the participating school's JMC gradebook in the discipline referral section of the program.   The program was implemented on September 28, 2021. Data was recorded from the school's JMC discipline referral section of the school's gradebook program. on a checklist of unwanted behaviors in the classroom; verbal threat/harassment/physical aggression, disrespect/non-compliance, abusive/inappropriate language, and technology violations. The number of referrals for each of the unwanted behaviors was checked off by the name of the student who received the referral. After the initial lesson was taught, referral data was retrieved on a weekly basis from the school's JMC program. Data was then transferred to an Excel spreadsheet.   A dependent sample t-test was used to determine whether the number of discipline referrals, related to unwanted behaviors in the classroom, given prior to implementing Positive Action, significantly differed from the number of referrals, related to unwanted behaviors in the classroom, given after the implementation of Positive Action.

An IRB Exemption was approved for this research project. Student records were obtained from the Dean of Students only for the information needed about referrals from the prior year. Current records were obtained through the school district's JMC program. All Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) requirements were followed during this research. Students participating in the study were given a random number so no identifiable information is present.

Findings

Data Analysis

Social-emotional programs are emerging in schools across the country to provide ways for students to manage situations and relationships in their everyday lives. The programs provide tools for students to use to respond to situations appropriately to help decrease problem behaviors that may occur. The goal of the social-emotional initiative is to see a decrease in the number of referrals from the previous year. The hope is that with the strategies and tools provided to self-regulate and decrease unwanted, or disruptive, behaviors in the classroom, students will be able to focus more on their studies.

The Positive Action program was implemented in the middle school at the end of September 2021. The program was introduced to all 6th grade students. Positive Action is intended to be a three-year program; therefore, the 8th grade students did not receive the Positive Action instruction but received a guidance class instead. Students in 7th grade did not begin Positive Action during the time of this study but will receive one semester of the program in the spring of 2022.

Before beginning observation of the behaviors of the 6th grade students in the classrooms, data was gathered, with the assistance of the school's Dean of Students, on the number of referrals students received in the year prior to the program's implementation. The referrals were retrieved from the school's JMC records. The focus for the study was then placed on the ten students who had received referrals the previous year and the current year prior to the implementation of the Positive Action program. Defiance, noncompliance, insubordination, and disrespect were grouped together due to teachers writing the same behavior with a different

descriptor. The other three categories that were most prevalent were inappropriate/abusive language, verbal/physical aggression, and technology violations.

The data gathered is from September of 2020 to September 27, 2021, prior to the first lesson on September 28, 2021. After the data was gathered, a dependent samples *t*-test was used to determine if there was a significant difference in the number of referrals given prior to the implementation of the Positive Action program compared to the number of referrals given after the implementation of the program. The data on ten 6th grade students, provided a baseline showing a total of 22 referrals given, an average of 2.20 referrals per student. After five weeks of lessons, the ten 6th grade students received a total of 5 referrals, an average of 0.50 referrals per student. The results of the dependent samples two-tailed *t*-test show a significant difference between the baseline of referrals ($M = 2.20$, $SD = 1.40$) and the number of referrals after the implementation of Positive Action ($M = 0.50$, $SD = 0.97$), $t(9) = 5.07$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

In the trial of the Positive Action program in this study, the intervention had a positive effect on a decrease in the number of referrals, particularly in the areas of verbal threat/harassment/physical aggression (4 prior to the program, 1 after implementation of the program), disrespect/non-compliance (13 prior to the program, 1 after implementation of the program), and abusive/inappropriate language (3 prior to the program, 1 after implementation of the program). There was no change in the number of technology violations (2 prior to the program, 2 after implementation of the program). There was also a decrease in the number of students who received a referral after the implementation of the program.

Prior to implementation, from September 2020 through September 2021, ten students had received referrals. After the initial start date of the program on September 28, 2021, only three students had received referrals. Of those three students, one student decreased referrals from two referrals prior to the program down to one referral after the implementation of the program. A second student decreased referrals from five prior to the program to one referral after implementation of the program. The third student decreased referrals from four referrals prior to implementation of the program to three referrals afterward.

The decrease in number of referrals noted in this study may be due to the implementation of the skills taught in the Positive Action weekly lessons such as learning to recognize a positive self-image, problem-solving ways to improve socially and emotionally to feel better about oneself, setting goals for social self-improvement and for emotional self-improvement, and learning the importance of empathy. An increase in these skills are encouraging as they can indicate predictors of an increase in greater self-regulation of emotions and behaviors causing a

decrease in the unwanted behaviors. An increase in positive social and emotional actions may also help students feel more confident and safer at school resulting in better relationships with peers and teachers. This connection will also help decrease unwanted behaviors in the classroom.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations of this study. The first limitation was the small number of participants. There may have been benefits to having a comparison group in another school district similar to the size of this study group. Another limitation is the group of students selected is a class of students with a low number of behavior problems to begin with. The other middle school grade levels have a higher number of referrals issued due to disruptive behaviors; however, they are not currently participating in the Positive Action program so could not be part of this study. A third limitation was the amount of time to gather referral data. The program did not start until late September and the study ended in the first week of November, therefore only allowing five weeks of lessons to base effectiveness of the program off of. Another limitation is the fact that the program was delivered to the students by staff other than the classroom teachers, thus taking away the connections that may have been made between the classroom teacher and the students.

Further Study

Further study is needed to see the long-term effects of the program over the course of three years as it is intended. The research period for this study was only five weeks long so there was not enough data gathered to see the effects of the program over suggested time frame of three years. Further study should include a larger number of students, more schools, and additional measurement instruments such as surveys and observations. This study was

conducted in one rural, low-risk, school district with only ten participating students. A larger

number of students will provide a variety of referral data to examine. Data gathered from other

rural schools of the same size would have provided information to compare similarities in the

outcome of the program. The data gathered was solely based on the number of referrals entered

into the disciplinary section of the school's JMC program. Additional measurement instruments

such as surveys and observations would provide a broader picture of what is happening in the

classroom. The behaviors reported could be biased by teachers' perceptions of the students.

Future study may also indicate the effectiveness of the program being taught by teachers

compared to the program being taught by other school staff. Teacher involvement in

implementing the program in their classrooms may result in a connection between the teacher

and students possibly resulting in a decrease in the unwanted behaviors.

Conclusion

Positive Behavior Support Systems are proactive instead of reactive approaches in dealing with unwanted behaviors in the classroom. A positive behavioral classroom management system is more beneficial and effective in decreasing the unwanted behaviors which improves students' academic performance. Social-emotional learning programs will help students learn skills they need to make connections with peers and teachers which may lead to more positive behaviors and decrease the unwanted behaviors in the classroom. Bullying intervention programs are another way to provide all students with the tools needed to decrease the bullying behaviors and to decrease the victimization behaviors leading to more positive behaviors in the classroom. The Positive Action program is helping decrease substance abuse, violent behaviors, and sexual activity that are currently some of the leading public health issues in our children.

Any of these programs can be beneficial in addressing the problem of a wide variety of unwanted behaviors that are not attended to appropriately due to educators not having the resources needed to address the students' social and emotional needs in order to support their academic growth. The decrease in number of referrals noted in this study may be due to the implementation of the skills taught in the Positive Action weekly lessons. Students actively participate in the lessons on learning to recognize a positive self-image, problem-solving ways to improve socially and emotionally to feel better about oneself, setting goals for social self-improvement and for emotional self-improvement, and learning the importance of empathy.

While there was a decrease in the number of referrals after the Positive Action program was implemented in 6th grade, the findings are not enough to say that the decrease is directly caused by the lessons taught in the program. Lessons will begin during the second semester of

the current year for the 7th grade students. I will continue to record the number and type of

referrals given out to the current 6th grade and plan to follow them through the end of the

program in 8th grade. I will also gather prior referral data on the current 7th grade class and

follow them on their journey through this program over the course of the next year and a half.

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