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The Impacts of Intervention on Emotional Awareness & Self-Regulation on Students with Disabilities

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The Impacts of Intervention on Emotional Awareness & Self-Regulation on Students with

Disabilities

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Masters of Special Education

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....3

Introduction.....4

Literature Review.....6

Methodology.....12

Data Analysis.....14

Future Research.....16

Conclusion.....17

References.....18

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impacts an intervention has on the emotional awareness and self-regulation skills of students with disabilities. Previous research has examined one or more of the components of emotional awareness, self-regulation, social emotional learning (SEL) programs, and students with disabilities; but none have examined all four of the components in conjunction with each other. This research was able to inspect all of these components through a mixed-methods study which implemented an intervention for eight weeks. The intervention consisted of instructing the student on recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions, as well as learning new regulation tools and strategies. Data was collected before and after the intervention took place through the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale - Child (LEAS-c), a questionnaire, and an emotion identification activity. Results showed after the intervention, the students' emotional awareness, emotional range, and self-regulation skills increased. This study shows the significance an intervention can have on students with disabilities and how their emotional awareness and self-regulation can improve, which contributes to their overall well-being.

Keywords: emotional awareness, self-regulation, social emotional learning, disabilities

The Impacts of Intervention on Emotional Awareness & Self-Regulation on Students with Disabilities

The realm of education is constantly changing and becoming more personalized towards individual students each day, and with that comes a shift to focus on the whole child including their social and emotional needs (Carnazzo et al., 2019). Dusenbury & Weissberg (2017), stated social emotional learning (SEL) can, “enhance children's and adults' capacities to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (pg. 36). These SEL skills can be incorporated into the school day through various interventions and programs, which include Caring School Community, PATHS, Positive Action, Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program, Responsive Classroom, Second Step, Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program, and Steps to Respect (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). According to Veirman et al. (2011), emotional awareness can be defined as “the cognitive ability to identify and describe one’s own emotional experiences and those of others” (pg. 265).

Closely related to emotional awareness comes the ability to regulate oneself, or self-regulation. Self-regulation is an intrinsic process which adjusts the mental or physiological state to adapt to the surroundings (Nigg, 2017). Both emotional awareness and self-regulation have been analyzed by previous studies, but gaps still exist within the research. To begin with, the relationship between these variables in students with disabilities, such as autism spectrum disorder, have not yet been fully discovered.

Emotional awareness and self-regulation are essential to a child’s overall well-being and a failure to encourage and develop these skills could result in internalizing disorders, such as depression (Van Beveren, et al. 2019), especially in students with disabilities. Popham et al.

(2018) discovered, “students with emotional behavior disorders (EBD) are considered to be at high risk of many of these negative long-term outcomes” (p. 240). SEL programs are effective for students with disabilities because the programs emphasize the following factors: (a) they identify, label, and understand the emotions that motivate behaviors; (b) generate empathy by appreciating what others are interested in or need; (c) recognize positive solutions to conflicts through implementing problem-solving strategies; and (d) use social-emotional and cognitive skills to create and maintain positive relationships (Schonfeld, 2015). The purpose of this literature review is to examine and understand the impact that SEL interventions have on the emotional awareness and self-regulation of students with disabilities.

This literature review analyzes previous research conducted around SEL. The articles included in this literature review, all of which were peer reviewed and occurred within the last ten years, were found based on their relevance to these four main components: emotional awareness, self-regulation, students with disabilities, and SEL programs. However, no study analyzed all these components together. Few sources looked at both emotional awareness and self-regulation, others examined self-regulation in relation to individuals with disabilities, while a couple viewed SEL programs and disabilities. Although these studies provided relevant information and data, none of these studies combined all four components to see what the impact of an intervention has on emotional awareness and self-regulation on a student with disabilities.

The results of this action research prove SEL intervention has a positive impact on the emotional awareness and self-regulation strategies of students with disabilities. An eight-week intervention was conducted by implementing daily SEL lessons and self-regulation activities with elementary students with disabilities. Data was collected through the LEAS-c survey, a questionnaire, and an emotion identification activity at the beginning and end of the eight-week

intervention. The LEAS-c survey results gave insight to educators and professionals in the education field as to how emotional awareness and self-regulation are affected by SEL interventions. The data results of this action research project prove a positive correlation between SEL programs and emotional intelligence which produce better outcomes for the social, emotional, and mental well-being of students with disabilities.

This literature review addresses the issues of emotional awareness, connections between emotional awareness and interventions, self-regulation, self-regulation with interventions, and emotional awareness combined with self-regulation, and individuals with disabilities. The topics of emotional awareness and self-regulation are large aspects of social-emotional learning, which is needed for all students, but especially those with disabilities.

Literature Review

Emotional Awareness

Being emotionally aware is beneficial for all since it not only allows for individuals to identify their own emotions and feelings, but it also allows them to identify the emotions of others around them. When individuals are aware of emotions which might arise in specific situations they can be better prepared for when those emotions present themselves, adapt to the situation, and deal with the possible consequences the situation presents (Veirman et al., 2011). Furthermore, Subic-Wrana et al. (2014) references the Levels of Emotional Awareness (LEA) theory, which states individuals have the capability to be aware of their own feelings, which results from the development of their cognitive-emotional abilities. It is also believed that individuals' capabilities to have emotional awareness may differ in level and their ability to increase their awareness of emotions is possible (Subic-Wrana et al., 2014).

With this in mind, there is one specific instrument used to measure emotional awareness, which is called the LEAS - Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale. This assessment measures an individual's emotional awareness and emotional range through a series of questions which delve into different scenarios and how the individual would feel, as well as others involved (Subic-Wrana et al., 2014). Subic-Wrana et al. (2014) also acknowledged individuals with lower levels of emotional awareness have more difficulty when it comes to concepts such as thoughts, feelings, and intentions. As stated before, emotional awareness can be increased (Subic-Wrana et al., 2014). In order to increase an individual's emotional awareness, interventions and practices must be put in place.

Researcher Pandya (2018) conducted a quantitative study using a yoga program to increase emotional awareness in children across different cities and countries. This two-year study examined the effectiveness in an implementation of the Chinmaya Bala Vihar Yoga Programme. The findings indicated the program was beneficial for the emotional awareness of a specific population, but further studies were necessary. A different study conducted by researchers Conner et al. (2019) examined how emotional awareness in individuals with ASD differs from those without, which can lead to higher risk of anxiety, depression, and aggression. The mindfulness-based intervention showed over half of the participants had a decrease in emotional regulation impairments (Conner et al., 2019). These studies support interventions that have a positive impact on emotional awareness of children. However, other studies did take this research a step further, and examined self-regulation in conjunction with emotional awareness.

Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is a skill that is better developed in adults than it is in children (van Loon Mariëtte & Roebers, 2017). While self-regulation can be interpreted in various ways, Nigg

(2017) stated it is an intrinsic process which holds the greatest importance when it comes to mental health. It is also dynamic, so it can change throughout an individual's life and can be regulated (Nigg, 2017). Housman (2017) connected SEL and self-regulation by examining self-regulation, the impacts of early intervention on students, and how it can increase their self-regulation skills, specifically the ECSEL intervention. Additionally, van Loon Mariëtte & Roebbers (2017) implemented evaluations and feedback to fourth and sixth grade students in order to impact their self-regulation. The feedback from this population showed that these interventions positively impacted their self-regulation and self-evaluation (van Loon Mariëtte & Roebbers, 2017). However, more research has been conducted on the interplay of emotional awareness and self-regulation.

Emotional Awareness & Self-Regulation

While emotional awareness and self-regulation are valuable to overall individual health, various researchers have examined both of these concepts and how they interplay. Emotional awareness in relation to self-regulation among university students was examined by Nawaz et al. (2020), which showed emotional intelligence is positively correlated to self-regulation. Van Beveren et al. (2019) took these concepts of emotional awareness and self-regulation and analyzed it in a different way. They began by examining adolescents' ages eight through 15 emotional awareness and self-regulation and how it impacts depressive symptoms (2019). Multiple data collection tools were used in order to measure the variables, including the Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS) to measure emotional awareness, the FEEL-KJ was used to measure self-regulation, and depressive symptoms were measured using the CDI (Van Beveren et al., 2019). The researchers found that difficulties with emotional awareness and regulation can lead to the development of depressive symptoms among youths (Van Beveren et al., 2019). A 2020

study conducted by Mascia et al. (2020) examined emotional awareness and self-regulation as well, but also incorporated cell phone usage. This study took place among 215 Italian middle school students who were given the following questionnaires: SES, self-regulation, “My Life as a Student”, Emotional Intelligence Scale, and Smartphone Addiction scale (Mascia et al., 2020). Their findings concluded cellphone addiction has a negative impact on students, while emotional intelligence has a positive impact on self-regulation (Mascia et al., 2020). These previous studies all concluded positive emotional awareness and self-regulation are better for overall well-being.

Interventions

While some studies have specifically examined emotional awareness and SEL programs or self-regulation and SEL programs, there have been other studies in which emotional awareness and self-regulation have been analyzed with the use of an intervention, such as the one conducted by researchers Dusenbury & Weissberg (2017). They analyzed the effectiveness of social-emotional learning curriculums, such as Caring School Community, PATHS, Positive Action, Resolving Conflicts Creatively Program, Responsive Classroom, Second Step, Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program, and Steps to Respect. Their findings indicated SEL programs can benefit students and can be done effectively in the school setting (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). While Dusenbury & Weissberg (2017) examined SEL programs overall, Lawson et al. (2019) examined the overall core components of SEL curriculum. Their findings indicated core components in SEL programs include social skills, identifying others feelings, coping skills, and identifying feelings inside themselves (Lawson et al., 2019). Cañabate, et al. (2020) examined how emotional awareness and self-regulation changes with an intervention in place, which included students doing activities such as yoga and tai chi. The researchers' findings concluded the intervention provided participants with an increase in their self-regulation scores

of over twenty percent. Wallander et al. (2020) also examined the impacts of curriculum on emotional awareness and self-regulation. They implemented the curriculum, Second Step, for 185 middle school and elementary students. The data from their pre and post tests showed elementary students' self-regulation abilities decreased, while middle school students showed no change in their self-regulation, problem solving, or emotional awareness (Wallander et al., 2020). The use of PATHs curriculum was used in a study conducted by Schonfeld et al. (2015). Their research examined how SEL might impact academic performance among students grades three through six in high-risk school districts. This quantitative study lasted four years and proved the SEL program PATHs positively affected the academic outcomes of a majority of students in a high-risk school (Schonfeld et al., 2015). Lemberger & Clemens (2012) examined how an intervention might impact students within an inner-city school district. This study specifically focused on fourth and fifth grade students and their executive functioning, metacognition, and feelings of connectedness (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). The Student Support System (SSS) program was incorporated into a small group setting for eight weeks, which resulted in a positive impact to student's connectedness to school and their metacognition (Lemberger & Clemens, 2012). The last study in relation to SEL programs was conducted by Espelage et al. (2016) and examined how SEL programs enhance academic skills in middle school students with disabilities. Their study lasted three years and used around 120 students in their sample. The results showed that with the implementation of Second Step-Student Success Through Prevention (SS-SSTP), student's academic performance increased over the three years.

Implications for those with Disabilities

The studies which correlate the most with my current study analyzed the implementation of SEL programs and how those impacted the emotional awareness or self-regulation of

individuals with disabilities. The first study examined emotional regulation in students with disabilities, between the ninth and twelfth grade. This study occurred in southern California and used social emotional health surveys in order to assess student's belief in and others, emotion regulation, and engaged living (Carnazzo et al., 2019). This study found students with disabilities scored significantly lower than their peers without learning disabilities in the areas of belief in self and overall emotional competency. Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al, (2018) examined how a mindfulness-based intervention (MBI) impacted the basic psychological needs of students with severe disabilities. During this intervention, over 20 students aged nine to twelve participated in 45-60 minute MBI sessions once a week, the session activities included sitting and walking meditation, mindful listening, mindful stopping, and body scans (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2018). The results showed the MBI was useful in improving basic psychological needs and decreased their anxiety, however no more than other interventions (Malboeuf-Hurtubise et al., 2018). The study conducted by Lichtinger & Kaplan (2015) also examined interventions of self-regulation of students with disabilities. Specifically, they analyzed eight students ages seven to twelve and how direct observation, interviews, and academic products impacted their motivation and self-regulation (Lichtinger & Kaplan, 2015). Overall, participants showed an improvement in self-regulation skills after the intervention had been implemented. The last study examined students and their self-regulation. It specifically looked at students with emotional and behavior disorders, or EBD (Popham et al., 2018). There were 189 participants, 80% were male and they ranged in ages from five to 17. The main purpose of this study was to inspect how self-regulation strategies impacted the academic performance of students with EBD and they found that implementing self-regulation strategies was beneficial for these students' overall academic outcomes (Popham et al., 2018).

A theme which occurred throughout these studies is that intentional practice in the areas of emotional awareness and self-regulation can positively increase these skills and abilities, which is beneficial for the individual. Each study inspected emotional awareness, self-regulation, SEL programs and interventions, and/or implementing and educating those with disabilities. While these studies established the importance of intervention on social-emotional well-being, none examined both emotional awareness and self-regulation skills among students with disabilities before and after an intervention took place.

Methodology

The current research proposes the following question: How do interventions impact the emotional awareness and self-regulation of a student with disabilities? This is a mixed-methods action research case study with the independent variable being the intervention, while the dependent variables are the student's emotional awareness and self-regulation. This study was conducted in a Strategy II special education elementary classroom in rural Iowa. The participant was a ten-year-old fourth grade student with a diagnosis of autism, who received one-on-one intervention. The intervention consisted of fifteen-minute lessons each day for eight weeks where the student focused on being able to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions. The student also partook in learning new self-regulation strategies, such as breathing techniques, deep pressure, self-affirmation mantras, and yoga.

Data was collected for this study through various measurements. The first data collection tool is the Levels of Emotional Awareness Scale - child (LEAS-c). This poses students with various scenarios in which they must state how they would feel as well as how the other individual in the situation might feel. It is then scored, and students are assessed on their emotional awareness and emotional range. Veirman et al. (2011), studied the validity of the

LEAS-c, and found it is a reliable assessment for measuring the emotional awareness of children. The other data collection tool was a questionnaire which had the student analyze the emotions of happy, sad, mad, and worried within themselves and what strategies they use in order to achieve regulation. The last piece of evidence collected consisted of the student identifying the emotions of others and which zone that person would be in if they felt that way. All of these data collection pieces were given to the student before intervention began. Half-way through the intervention period, data was collected through the LEAS-c to gauge what progress the student had made on their emotional awareness. All of the data collected was stored in a location where only the researcher could access it.

The data collected regarding emotional awareness was analyzed using a dependent sample T-Test. The student's baseline emotional awareness was gathered before intervention began, at the midpoint, as well as after the intervention had ended. These results were compared to analyze how the intervention impacted the student's emotional awareness. The student's self-regulation data was analyzed using a correlation method. Since these results did not have statistical data, comparing what the student used as self-regulation strategies before and after intervention were analyzed in order to interpret if it was influential. By analyzing both the variables of emotional awareness and self-regulation before, within, and after the intervention was implemented, the research question can be answered as to if an intervention impacts these in a student with disabilities or not.

This research was approved by the IRB board. Since the human subject was posed with some questions that could be distressing, this was needed in order for the research to go forward. Parental consent was also collected using an informed consent agreement, since the participant is

a minor. Once the study concluded, parents and the subject also received a debriefing form so any questions or concerns could be addressed.

Data Analysis

The data in the study was collected through the LEAS-c, a questionnaire, and an emotion identification activity. The participant was given the LEAS-c at the beginning of the study before intervention began, at the midpoint after four weeks of the intervention being implemented, and at the end of the eight weeks. The LEAS-c reported on emotional awareness and emotional range. Before the intervention, the participant received a score of 60 on emotional awareness, which put her in the 13.6 percentile. Her emotional range was 41, which is in the lowest percentile. The participant was also assessed at the midpoint of the intervention. Her emotional awareness score grew by five points, which then placed her in the 24.4 percentile, while her emotional range decreased to a score of 39. The participant was given the LEAS-c a final time at the end of the eight weeks of intervention and scored 79 on emotional awareness, which placed her in the 94.2 percentile. She scored a 63 on her emotional range, which was still in the lowest percentile.

The questionnaire the participant completed before and after the intervention contained questions such as:

- What does it feel like when you feel the emotions of happy, sad, mad, or worried?
- What causes you to feel happy, sad, mad, or worried?
- How do you show you are happy, sad, mad, or worried?
- What makes you feel better after being sad, mad, or worried?

Upon analysis of the student's answers pre and post intervention, there are key differences to note. To begin, her answers had more depth, such as when asked what it feels like when they are

mad, the participant first responded by showing an angry facial expression and grunting. After the intervention, the student was able to indicate that feeling mad might feel like you are out of control, which could include having an angry face, stomping, yelling, pushing something, and being in the red zone. Another way the student's answers evolved was evident in how they incorporated self-regulation techniques when asked how they feel better after being sad, mad, or worried. Before the intervention, her responses were standard, such as stating you could "chill around" after being sad, take some deep breaths when angry, and play with toys when worried. After the intervention, her self-regulation skills were more extensive. These included specific breathing techniques, countdown calming strategies, meditating, yoga, positive self-talk, doing relaxing activities like coloring, and hugging a trusted adult. Overall, the participant's understanding and perception of emotions increased throughout the past eight weeks.

The last piece of evidence used in this study was emotion identification. The student was asked to identify what zone an emotion fit into and why. The zones included red, yellow, green, and blue. According to the Mood Meter, when in the red zone an individual would have negative feelings with high energy, while in the yellow zone the individual would have positive feelings with high energy. When an individual is in the blue zone, they would have negative feelings with low energy, while in the green zone the individual would have positive feelings with low energy. For example, the student was presented with the emotion of excitement. Since excitement is a positive feeling emotion and has a higher energy level, then excitement would fall into the yellow zone. When the student was first asked to do this, she correctly identified six out of thirteen emotions, which converted to 46%. After the intervention was implemented, the student correctly identified nine out of thirteen emotions and received 69%, so the student's ability to identify emotions and their zones increased by 23%.

The data received from the LEAS-c, the questionnaire, and the emotion identification activity shows the intervention was beneficial for the student's emotional awareness and self-regulation skills. The LEAS-c showed a statistical increase in their emotional awareness and emotional range. The emotion identification was also able to show a statistical increase of emotional awareness skills. While no statistical analysis was able to occur for self-regulation, there is still evidence of increase due to the depth and range of answers produced.

Future Research

While there are important findings within this study, it was limited, and future research should occur. One limitation was the presence of only one participant. In the future, more participants should be included in the survey so the validity is higher, and the results could accurately reflect the effectiveness of the intervention. With a higher participant population, the participants could also have different disabilities rather than just autism spectrum disorder like the participant in this study. This would give a better insight into whether intervention helps just those with autism spectrum disorder or if it is effective with other disabilities as well. Another factor that should be taken into consideration would be statistically measuring self-regulation. In this study, the growth of self-regulation skills was measured qualitatively, however it could have been more valid if it was also measured quantitatively. As a whole, this study could be improved by having a larger participant population, including participants with various disabilities, as well as measuring self-regulation quantitatively.

Conclusion

Previous research examined emotional awareness, self-regulation, students with disabilities, and SEL programs, however none have examined their interdependence. The purpose of the present study was to examine how an intervention impacted the emotional

awareness and self-regulation skills of a student with disabilities. The data collected from the LEAS-c, questionnaire, and emotion identification showed that both emotional awareness and self-regulation skills increased for the student after the eight-week intervention took place. While there was a positive correlation between the intervention and SEL skills, further research should be done in order to establish this is beneficial for a larger population that have various disabilities. Going forward with these studies could result in a better understanding of how to improve emotional awareness and self-regulation in individuals with disabilities, which could contribute to an overall well-being.

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