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## **The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom**

Rachel Freland

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**The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom**

Rachel Freland

Capstone Project: An Action Research Project

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

**Abstract**

The purpose of this action research project was to investigate whether a correlation exists between stronger social-emotional learning (SEL) skills and attendance records and behaviors at school. The participants included four males ages five to seven in kindergarten and first grade in an early elementary building in a suburban school district in Iowa, USA. The research focuses on the effects of the targeted behavior intervention plan for each student based on their pre-Social, Academic, Emotional, Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS) assessment; SAEBSRS scores determine which SEL skills are most needed for students. This study discusses the helpfulness of various SEL skills reported by students in an interview. Researchers found no correlations to better attendance and behavior to stronger SEL skills. Future research with more students, all genders represented, and longer interventions would provide more data and understanding of the impact on SEL in the elementary classroom.

*Keywords:* social-emotional learning, emotional and behavior disorder, autism spectrum disorder, attendance, behavior intervention plans

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### **The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning in the Elementary Classroom**

Social-emotional learning (SEL) focuses on establishing self-worth, building a growth mindset, identifying, and understanding feelings and emotions, learning how to manage situations and make decisions, while developing meaningful relationships and empathizing with others. SEL provides students with the necessary tools to regulate emotions, foster relationships, and create self-awareness. Ongoing SEL support and instruction is essential in young learners; therefore, continual research to find correlations between lasting effects of SEL curriculum and the success of students is necessary. Many studies have looked at the relationship between SEL and student outcomes. SEL provides students with the abilities, skills, and attributes to succeed in school and beyond (Bergold et al., 2019). For elementary students, SEL is an essential part of developing the whole person. Fortunately, there are programs and curricula for educators to use to teach students proper methods for calming down, making friends, socializing, and making good choices (Lawson et al., 2019). Providing educators with the proper training to instill confidence in students and help them develop self-efficacy is essential for student success. Students taught the proper way to calm down have a decreased amount of problem behaviors (McDaniel et al., 2017).

However, the problem in early education is that academic curriculum is being focused on more than SEL. Due to the increase of adverse childhood experiences and trauma, SEL needs to begin at an early age to allow students the opportunity to implement these strategies throughout their lives. In addition, students need to expand their social skills due to losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. These losses may be particularly profound for the youngest students, who may have missed developmental opportunities such as learning to have a good relationship with

others. New findings suggest a doubling of rates of disorders such as anxiety and depression among children during the pandemic (Chafouleas, 2021).

This action research study focuses on the impact of SEL on kindergarten and first grade students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or students with emotional or behavioral disorders (EBD). Researchers and practitioners alike have recognized that students with EBD face multiple academic, behavioral, and social difficulties that interfere with their ability to learn and to develop positive relationships. SEL is known for reducing problem behaviors in students, increasing emotional regulation and expressivity, and prompting and improving growth mindset skills.

This study will explain the benefits and challenges of implementing SEL curriculum into the classroom and specific programs recommended for inclusion. Some educators believe academics to be more essential than SEL; therefore, the purpose of this action research study is to answer the following three questions:

- Are stronger SEL skills linked to better attendance and behavior?
- Which social-emotional skills do students need most?
- What SEL skills do students report being most helpful?

Answers to these questions could help teachers feel confident about the value of SEL and inform their choice of curriculum. Findings will potentially provide adequate correlations between attendance, behavior, and social-emotional skills. In addition, this study will give students a voice, responsibility, and confidence in their mental, behavioral, and social life.

Research for this paper was drawn from the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database, the WorldCat discovery tool through DeWitt Library, and Google Scholar. The criteria for these studies include peer-reviewed journals within the last ten years discussing SEL

in the elementary classroom, trauma-informed teaching, growth mindset, behavior plans, and the development of student learning.

The elementary school in which this study is conducted is one of three elementary buildings in a public school district in a small rural town in the Midwest. There are approximately 809 pre-school, kindergarten, and first grade students and 45 with special needs.

In the school district of this action research project, SEL is taught weekly in two core ways: one guidance counselor lesson using Second Step Curriculum and one specials teacher lesson using Leader in Me curriculum. In addition, all teachers use common language when giving positive praise and redirecting students during problem behaviors. Special education students with behavior or adaptive behavior goals are taught SEL skills with PATHS curriculum by the special education teachers.

Each section of this action research study contains information regarding the impact of SEL in the elementary classroom. The literature review includes SEL programs, growth mindset principles and emotional regulation, reducing problem behaviors, and teaching social skills to students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This study analyzed the relationship between the average SEL skill level and the average attendance record for students. Findings will show the helpfulness of various SEL techniques reported by students.

## **Review of the Literature**

### ***Social-Emotional Learning Programs***

Many SEL programs have been incorporated into elementary curriculum; however, which programs are the most effective? The mixed-methods research study of Lawson et al. (2019) examined various programs for implementing effective SEL strategies using the CASEL (collaborative, academic, social, and emotional learning) framework. The program was granted

inclusive if it targeted all five areas of the CASEL framework, provided opportunities to practice SEL strategies, included an evaluation study, supported more than one grade level services, developed training for staff, and concluded a positive outcome for students. The results found the following 15 programs to meet inclusion criteria: Second Step, Incredible Years- Incredible Teachers, PATHS, I Can Problem Solve, Social Decision Making/Social Problem Solving, MindUp, Michigan Model for Health, 4R's, Competent Kids, Caring Communities, Open Circle, Positive Action, Raising Healthy Children, Resolving Conflict Creativity, Steps to Respect, and Too Good for Violence.

The impact of SEL on elementary students' mental, social, emotional, and behavioral health has been thoroughly verified. In a two-year study, 8,941 students, 321 teachers, and 61 schools were used to evaluate the effects of the SEL curriculum: Second Step (Low et al., 2019). Researchers in Washington and Arizona used program and teacher preparation, behavioral observations, and academic achievements to examine student performance. The results found that Second Step was beneficial for students as those with SEL education outperformed those without it. However, emotional symptoms stayed level. Second Step was better at reducing behaviors than preventing them. According to this study, promoting social-emotional proficiencies can prevent problem behaviors (Low et al., 2019).

A British study evaluated another SEL program. Panayiotou et al. (2020) researched the impact of Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) on children's wellbeing in a study of 5,218 students, ages seven to nine. PATHS teaches students how to develop positive peer relationships, a growth mindset, critical thinking skills, and emotional regulation. According to the findings of the multilevel intent-to-intent (ITT) analysis, PATHS increased student psychological wellbeing but had no impact on peer social supports or school connectedness



unless intervention compliance such as group size were considered. Incorporating SEL interventions into students' daily lives is an integral way to promote expressions, relationships, emotional regulation, and experiences (Panayiotou et al., 2020).

One program not on Lawson et al.'s (2019) "inclusive" list was Making Choices. According to Fraser et al. (2014), 688 third grade students participated in the Making Choices SEL curriculum. This five-year quantitative study was to discover the effects of this program. Fraser et al. (2014) would argue Making Choices to be an essential program because this training had a positive effect on students' social processing skills and reduced their aggression. Early intervention can prevent students from developing additional health problems later in life. Raimundo et al. (2013) analyzed the effects of the SEL program, Slowly but Steadily and found that boys developed self-management, aggressiveness, and social problems more than girls after implementation.

### ***Growth Mindset Principles and Emotional Regulation***

SEL is reported to increase growth mindset in students. In a three-year mixed-methods study in Scotland, Fraser (2018) researched the impact and implementation of growth mindset principles in school. Six teachers and 28 pupils participated in semi-structured interviews; observations were also conducted in three classrooms. Four themes were found during the implementation process: embarking on the process, classroom culture and teaching, using skills outside the classroom, and pupil approach to learning. Parents, teachers, and students collaborating with this innovative approach to learning helped students develop in this area. Findings found that students understand well of making mistakes and respond appropriately positively. However, some students have not yet developed their growth mindset outside of the classroom such as on the playground.

Like Fraser's study, Kwon et al. (2017) studied emotional regulation and expressivity in relation to academic learning in elementary students. In this mixed-methods research study, 417 fourth through sixth graders in a Midwestern metropolitan area participated. Researchers used questionnaires and structural equation modeling. Results found happiness and anger associated with academic functioning, whereas sadness was not. Emotional regulation appeared through positive engagement. Further research using the zones of regulation could increase understanding and provide adequate data in emotional regulation.

Developing social skills is essential in early childhood to increase the ability to regulate emotions. Bardhoshi & Swanston (2019) examined social-behavioral stories increasing social skills using an app with 39 kindergarten students in a high-poverty public elementary school in a suburban school district in the Midwest. Students were assigned to receive training as usual (TAU) or TAU with intervention at random. Researchers gave teachers a pre- and post-intervention Social Skills Improvement System Scale. Findings found that TAU with intervention significantly helped students' developmental skills and decreased problem behaviors.

Is developing growth mindset and emotional regulation skills harder for students with various disabilities? In a social practice research project, Kristensen & Morck (2016) explored the life of a first-grade student with ADHD. His mother put him on medication right away to correct the ongoing behaviors. Researchers found his medication becoming a barrier in the establishment of social awareness and understanding. Advanced studies in this area would be beneficial to see if these skills are harder for students with disabilities struggle in development.

### ***Reducing Problem Behaviors***

One in ten children suffer from Adverse Childhood Experiences, also known as ACEs. The common identifiers for ACEs include economic hardship, caregiver separation, EDB problems, and asthma. Furthermore, Carr et al. (2018) found female students who come from low-income households or have poor visual working memory are more likely to need individualized intervention to support the development of spatial skills.

Thompson et al. (2020) researched specific ACEs and their association with other problems such as behavior in childhood. This quantitative research study was given over six months as a questionnaire to 138,009 parents or guardians. Researchers used survey data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health. They found parents reporting one or more ACEs for their children; the average was between four and 30. The higher the score, the higher odds associated with emotional and behavioral disorders.

So, what is being done about students' trauma? Green et al. (2021) evaluated the SPARK SEL mentoring curriculum for elementary students focusing on strengthening resilience for children ages eight through ten with ACEs. SPARK found an increase in students' emotional regulation post intervention. Therefore, with further studies, researchers can find long-term impacts this program has on children.

The implementation of social skills and SEL in the classroom can add value and success for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. McDaniel et al. (2017), studied a brief social skills intervention called Stop and Think to reduce challenging classroom behavior. Students were taught specific skills such as following directions, listening, being polite, and accepting consequences. Researchers observed two classrooms of students: Sid, Bill, and Mitt were nominated for the intervention in classroom one, while Sam and Hal were chosen from classroom two. These students were in a self-contained, alternative K-12 school for students with

challenging behavior in the southeast United States. The research took 12 sessions with two-week follow-up observations. Teaching methods included teaching, modeling, role playing, and performance feedback. Researchers found an overall improvement in problem behaviors with students. Sam averaged 22% and 2% after. He showed the most improvements over the intervention. Improvements were also made to peer problems and total difficulties. Overall, students averaged a 15.2% decrease in behaviors post-intervention. More research should be conducted on this program to determine if it can be used in the general education classroom or if this program works solely on students in the self-contained special education setting.

Are children coming to school with more ACEs or are teachers displaying less effective classroom management? DiPerna et al. (2018) developed a cluster randomized trial of the Social Skills Improvement System- Class wide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) for first graders in the Mid-Atlantic region of the USA. Fifty-nine first-grade students in six school buildings were observed over 12 weeks (about 3 months). This program targets specific social skills based on teacher choice. Teacher ratings were measured using the Social Skills Improvement Rating Scales-Teacher Form, and direct observations of classroom behaviors were developed using the Cooperative Learning Observation Code for Kids (CLOCK). This study found that SSIS-CIP improved empathy, social engagement, academic motivation, and academic engagement. However, problem behaviors and academic skills were not improved by this program implementation. This study raises the question of whether all students are showing problem behaviors or just those with certain diagnosis?

In the two-year German et al. (2019), examined the agreement and discrepancy between parents' and teachers' assessments of kindergarten children's behavioral and emotional problems. This mixed-methods study took place in suburban and urban areas in seven states in

Germany; parents, kindergarten teachers, and 922 kindergarteners were used in this research. Students were rated using the Conners Early Childhood Exam, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, and the Questionnaire for Assessing Preschool Children's Behavior. Results found a substantial agreement between parents and teachers when assessing when assessing problem behaviors and social-emotional skills. fewer problem behaviors, social skills, and student development than parents.

Researchers want to dive into specific kindergarten student functioning to target skills in future research. A study by Doctoroff et al., (2016) found preschool students with better social-emotional skills predicted higher math abilities, and students with more behaviors had lower math skills. In addition, teacher observation showed students with higher levels of behavioral and emotional difficulties were associated with lower levels of interest.

### *Social Skills for Autistic Students*

Developing peer relationships can be challenging for students, especially those with autism. In a two-year mixed methods study conducted by Kasari et al. (2016) in Los Angeles, Baltimore, Seattle, and Ann Arbor, 137 autistic children in K-fifth grade were randomly selected for one of two intervention approaches (SKILLS and ENGAGE) for eight weeks with an eight-week follow-up. Teacher reports of problem behaviors and teacher-student relationships were analyzed for this study. Findings concluded that children who were not close with teachers improved more with the SKILLS instruction, and children with close teacher contact improved more with the ENGAGE curriculum. Students given the SKILLS instruction improved peer relationships, engagement, and peer time during recess. These results show that students can benefit from instruction due to increased peer acceptance and engagement during recess.

In a qualitative two-year study, Kamps et al. (2015) researched peer network intervention to improve social communication for autistic kindergarten and first grade students. This action research study was performed in a public school with 56 students in the intervention group and 39 children in the comparison group. The intervention was to determine the efficacy of a peer network intervention that combines peer training and direction instruction. Researchers used social groups to teach social and communication skills and age-appropriate activities and games. The findings showed that children in the intervention group given social probes were able to show initiation with others more than the comparison group. According to Kamps et al. (2015) total communication scores for language and adaptive communication increased from treatment session data. Data also showed that teachers' ratings of students and their social skills levels increased in the intervention group.

Teaching autistic students' social skills can improve their interaction with others. Laugeson et al. (2014) studied the social skills of autistic students and found the change in social functioning for adolescents with high-functioning skills following interventions. This study lasted 14 weeks (about 3 months) at Village Glen Middle School in California with 73 middle school students along with their parents and eight teachers. Researchers used the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS) curriculum with a daily 30-minute instruction. Results found that PEERS intervention improved social functioning in many social areas: responsiveness, communication, motivation, and awareness. Students reported individual improvements in social skills due to making friends and growing their ability to communicate with others from the confidence and tools developed. Research also found a decrease in student anxiety on the Social Anxiety Scale parents filled out. This social skills training is a program for autistic students developing social functioning.

Berkovits et al. (2017) researched emotional regulation in autistic children. This mixed-methods study took place in the Netherlands over a two-year span observing 108 autistic children four to seven years old. Within 10 months, parents reported on social skills, behavior, and emotional regulation in children. This study used the Emotion Regulation Checklist, Child Behavior Checklist, Social Skills Improvement System, Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scales of Intelligence, Third Edition, Comprehensive Assessment of Spoken Language, Social Responsiveness Scale, and the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule. The findings found that dysregulation increases social and behavioral difficulties throughout time. Social and behavioral functioning was associated with children's IQ.

This literature review discussed SEL programs, growth mindset principles, emotional regulation, reducing problem behaviors, and social skills for autistic students. Overall, due to the statistics of ACEs, all students need an effective social skills curriculum to build relationships with others, gain confidence in themselves, and learn how to regulate emotions appropriately. In addition, students with autism and emotional behavioral disorders especially need the time and practice implementing these skills into their daily lives. Furthermore, data shows female students are slower to notice social development and need more detailed interventions. Schools need effective research-based curriculum that trains staff members how to use, instructs students on preventative skills such as where to go and what to do before feeling out of control, and teaches SEL skills like how to take turns, accept no, be patient, follow directions, and share.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Questions**

The research questions of this action research project are the following:

- Are stronger SEL skills linked to better attendance and behavior?

- Which social-emotional skills do students need most?
- What SEL skills used do students report being most helpful?

### **Participants and Research Site**

This action research project took place in Iowa, USA. The participants of this study included one kindergartener and three first grade special education students (students A, B, C, and D) with behavior intervention plans and functional behavior assessments. All students in this study were boys. Each student had a smiley behavior chart with a daily check-in, check-out system. These students each received specially designed instruction for behavior at least twenty minutes per day. This action research study took place in a special education setting. However, each of these students stayed in the general education classroom throughout the school day with extra adult support. More details about each student participant are below.

#### *Student A*

Student A is a five-year-old male kindergartener with autism and an EBD. He struggles with math, reading, processing, potty training, and behavior. He is constantly taken out of the classroom for displaying inappropriate behaviors such as elopement, aggression, physical and verbal disruption. He receives specially designed instruction in reading, math, writing, and behavior.

#### *Student B*

Student B is a six-year-old male first grader with autism. He struggles with changes in routine, math, organization, reading, and impulsive behaviors. He invades peers' areas constantly throughout the day. Though developing his social skills, he often gets frustrated. He also misses



a lot of school. His parents wanted him held back in kindergarten. He receives specially designed instruction for reading, math, speech, and behavior.

### *Student C*

Student C is a seven-year-old male first grader with EBD. He also has divorced parents and has experienced severe trauma. He struggles with telling the truth, tattling, impulsiveness, elopement, aggression, verbal and physical disruption. This student sees a school-based therapist. He receives specially designed instruction for behavior.

### *Student D*

Student D is a six-year-old male first grader with EBD. He has severe trauma and does not live with his parents. He is starting to struggle with reading but is developing core social skills. This student sees a school-based therapist. He receives specially designed instruction for speech and behavior. He also receives Title I reading services.

## **Intervention and Timeline**

Following university and district approval, the formal research process began in early October 2022. First, the researcher got to know students and email guardians for consent and provided a detailed overview of what students will do. The researcher sent an email to guardians with parental safeguards and an explanation of confidentiality. Next, the researcher introduced the action research project to the general education teachers for students involved in this study in a meeting. This information included a project overview, process for providing informed consent, safeguards for protecting confidentiality, and a timeline. Weekly meetings with teachers started the second week in October.

Students were taught SEL skills using Second Step curriculum one time weekly through the guidance counselor lessons. In addition, students were given individual SEL instruction daily through PATHS curriculum specifically on how to take a break appropriately. Classrooms were given calm-down areas for students to use whenever they needed to use them. Students were taught they can take a break no matter what feeling they have. Students chose different options on their chart whenever they are experiencing different emotions. These zones included blue, green, yellow, and red. The blue zone indicates sad, tired, sick, bored, and moving slowly. Green indicates happiness, calm, feeling okay, focused, and relaxed. The yellow zone indicates frustrated, worried, silly, excited, and loss of some control. Red indicates mad, terrified, elated, devastated, and out of control. Students were taught to use the zones of regulation to help them choose a way to calm down, take a break, and get themselves back into the green zone and ready to learn.

The first round of data collection began early October. The second round of data collection was taken in mid-November. The research period for this study lasted approximately eight weeks.

### **Variables**

The independent variables included attendance and behavior. The dependent variables included the social-emotional skill level of students and the reported helpfulness of various SEL techniques. An additional variable includes age.

### **Measurement Tools**

This action research study determined correlations in SEL, attendance, and behavior. For all quantitative data analysis, the researcher used the IEP system and Google Sheets to organize all data and determine averages. Each tab was labeled for each student. Attendance was marked

in the online Infinite Campus online system. Researchers used this document only. Measurement tools included the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS) on the FAST Bridge website, attendance records, behavior data, and student surveys.

### **Anticipated Statistical Analysis**

The researcher got SAEBRS scores from previous general education teachers from the spring of the previous year. SAEBRS are typically taken three times per year: fall, winter, and spring. This data will allow teachers to score students based on their social, academic, and emotional behavior. After the first round of quantitative and qualitative data had been collected, the researcher began analysis in late October. In addition, the researcher analyzed weekly behavior data along with attendance records. The researcher administered a student survey asking students what SEL skills they need most. Students were also asked to report the helpfulness of SEL techniques the week of October 17. The pre SAEBRS scores helped determine the SEL skill needed most for each student.

The researcher looked at attendance records of students during the second round of data collection in mid-November. In addition, the researcher examined the behavior data and analyzed the correlation between behavior, attendance, and social-emotional skills being used. The general education teachers were asked to take the SAEBRS test from their perspective based on student performance. These scores determine if students used SEL skills learned throughout the intervention. The researcher conducted a student survey asking students what SEL skills they need most and reported the helpfulness of SEL techniques the week of November 21.

### **IRB/ Exempt Research**

This research poses minimal risk to participants, is conducted in a school, and involves normal educational practices; therefore, it is exempt research. Exempt Research (2018) “is

research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to gain experience required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction.” This includes most research on regular and special education instructional strategies, and research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods. For this provision, benign behavioral interventions are brief, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, and not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the subjects. The investigator has no reason to think the subjects will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing.

The researcher has an autistic brother and previous trauma, which allow for potential bias in advocating for students. The researcher will ensure personal bias does not slant research and will take further steps such as rereading and using data to support reasonings. The researcher will not sway students to answer questions in a certain way. The researcher will use a calm voice to help students in problem behaviors. To help control this bias, the researcher will request the K-1 instructional coach to offer accountability during student surveys and observations.

### **Data Collection**

Quantitative data was collected using weekly behavior averages, attendance records, and SAEBRS. Qualitative data was collected through observations of behavior, SAEBRS scores, and student surveys.

Daily behavior and attendance were kept. There is no validity or reliability of these due to paraprofessionals' and general education teachers' input of data. The researcher conducted observations of behaviors and student surveys. Therefore, no information will be provided on the validity and reliability of these. Behavior data was recorded and analyzed weekly. Student

surveys recorded what calming tools students prefer, what methods they have learned, reported helpfulness of specific SEL techniques, and skills students need most.

SAEBRS is a teacher's reflection of social, academic, and emotional behavior within the classroom. According to the SAEBRS website, “FAST Bridge’s valid and reliable assessments help educators identify students' academic and social-emotional behavior (SEB) needs faster, align the right interventions at the right time, and measure whether interventions are helping students catch up—all in one platform and in up to half the test time” (Use Social-Emotional Behavior Assessments to Support Social-Emotional Learning, 2022). The social behavior domain has six items, academic behavior domain has six items, and the emotional behavior domain has seven items. SAEBRS can identify students at risk and helps educators determine what supports and interventions to prioritize for students. Educators must consider behaviors that may fall in the always, in between, or never categories. Questions to teachers include the following:

#### Social Behavior:

- Does this student argue in class?
- Does this student cooperate with peers?
- Does this student engage in temper outbursts?
- Does this student engage in disruptive behavior?
- Is this student polite and socially appropriate?
- Is this student impulsive?

#### Academic Behavior:

- Does this student show interest in academic topics?
- Is this student prepared for instruction?
- Does this student produce acceptable work? This does not mean academically correct.
- Does this student find it difficult to work independently?
- Is this student distracted?
- Is the student academically engaged?

### Emotional Behavior

- Is the student sad?
- Is the student fearful?
- Is the student adaptable to change?
- Does the student have a cheerful outlook?
- Does this student worry?
- Does this student have difficulty rebounding from setbacks?
- Does this student seem withdrawn?

## Findings

### Data Analysis

Students received specially designed behavior intervention and instruction over an eight-week period using PATHS curriculum while behavior and attendance data were tracked. The students took a pre- and post-assessment using the SAEBRS screener. Students received an overall cumulative score for the three categories combined: social, academic, and emotional behavior. Students answered two questions pre- and post-intervention: What SEL skill do you need the most? What SEL skill do you think is the most helpful for you?

### *Student A*

In the pre-assessment SAEBRS, Student A scored a 30 (See Figure 3.). This data showed he needed help in the following areas: being disruptive, argumentative, and impulsive. Student A reported needing to take breaks throughout the day. With adult prompting, he also said he can calm down by taking a break, which is the most helpful. Intervention focused on how and where to take a break appropriately in the classroom. Student A was taught how to do “Turtle,” which is a breathing mechanism and counting to ten. Student A earned 92% intervals without aggression (See Figure 1.) for 21/21 days (about 3 weeks) in September (See Figure 2.) and 95% intervals without aggression (See Figure 1.) during 17/21 school days (See Figure 2.) in October.

In the post-assessment SAEBRS he earned a 33 (See Figure 3.). He grew three points. His scores reflected an increase in the social area related to temper and arguing. He was able to report where to take a break in each classroom and demonstrated how to do “Turtle” when he needed to calm down. He was able to articulate the problem and how he felt. Student A earned 96% intervals (See Figure 1.) without aggression during 15/17 school days (See Figure 2.) in November.

### *Student B*

In the pre-assessment, Student B scored a 33 on SAEBRS (See Figure 3). This data showed he needed more support with impulsiveness, cooperation, and positivity. Student B reported, “I can earn stuff. When I am mad sometimes, I calm down. I calm down in another classroom. I can take a break when I am sad too. Sometimes I am mad. I take deep breaths and I can squeeze stuff.” Student B explained that taking deep breaths is the most helpful. Student B has two goal areas: absence of aggression and displaying appropriate behaviors. In September, Student B earned .38 instance of aggression and 87% appropriate behaviors (See Figure 1.) during 20/21 school days (See Figure 2.). In October, Student B was meeting his first goal and has inconclusive data for showing appropriate behavior due to missing paperwork. However, Student B missed five school days in October (See Figure 2.). Intervention focused on growth mindset and taking turns.

In the post-assessment Student B earned 33 on SAEBRS (See Figure 3.). He flatlined. Because this student missed so many days of school there were few days between testing periods. However, student B reported learning how to be a good friend and can state the daily mantra by himself. Student B earned 85% appropriate behaviors (See Figure 1.) during 12/17

school days (See Figure 2.) in November. This data shows his behavior declined throughout November.

### *Student C*

In the pre-assessment SAEBRS, student C earned 29 (See Figure 3.), which was the lowest score of the four students. His scores showed difficulty in resilience, disruption, and temper. Student C reported that “taking a break, walking with adults, and taking deep breaths” are the most important SEL skills. The most helpful SEL skill for Student C is going for a walk, which helps them calm down. Student C has a goal of following directions. In September, he followed directions 63% (See Figure 1.) during 21/21 school days (See Figure 2.). In October, student C followed directions 78% (See Figure 1.) during 21/21 school days (See Figure 2.). Intervention focused on how to take a break appropriately; however, lessons on the following directions were also included.

In the post-assessment SAEBRS, student C earned 31 (See Figure 3.), which was a two-point increase. He earned additional points in the social area for temper and disruption. Student C was able to state multiple SEL skills: doing Turtle, taking walks, being nice at recess, taking breaks, breathing, going to a calm down spot, and having his teacher help him. The most helpful skill taught was where to take a break and what to use. He earned 72% for following directions (See Figure 1.) during 16/17 school days (See Figure 2.) in November. This data shows a decline in behavior since October.

### *Student D*

In the pre-assessment, Student D scored a 36 on SAEBRS (See Figure 3.). This score was the highest of the four students. However, he earned high scores in academics and lower scores in social and emotional. This screener showed difficulties in sadness, anxiousness,

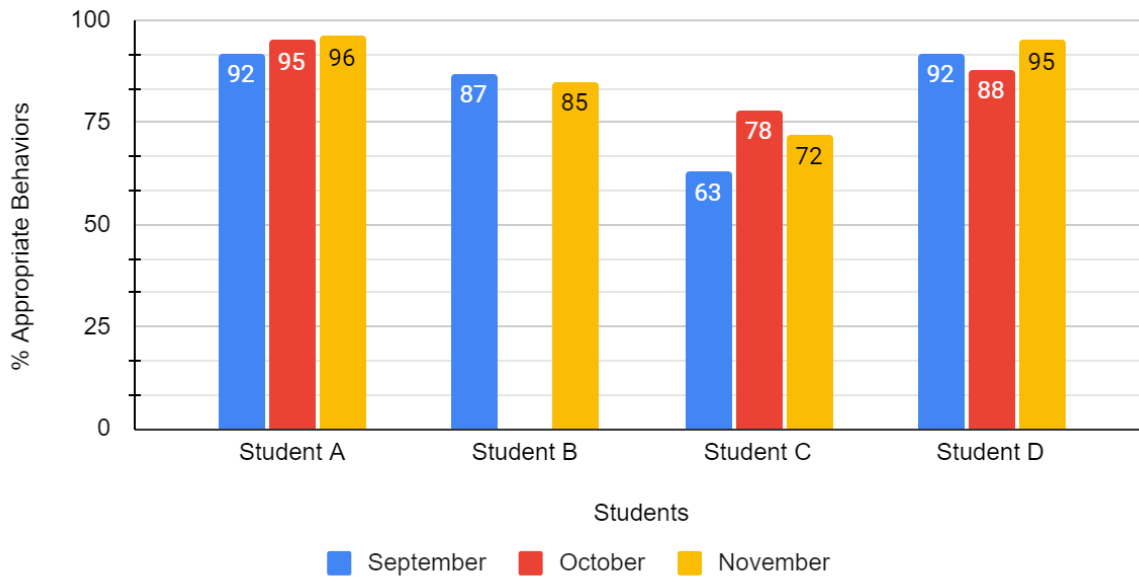


impulsiveness, and worry. The intervention focused on teaching the zones of regulation, when and how to take a break, and how to manage various emotions. The SEL skills most needed include “I can take a break in my classroom or another classroom. I can use my break choices. I use positive words and keep a safe body at school.” Student D reported teachers helping to be the most helpful SEL skill. Student D has two goal areas: independently engaged and respectful, and appropriate social skills. In September, this student earned 92% independently engaged (See Figure 1.) and respectful during 21/21 school days (See Figure 2.) and 83% appropriate social skills. In October, Student D scored 88% independently engaged and respectful (See Figure 1.) and 80% appropriate social skills during 20/21 school days (See Figure 2.).

In the SAEBRS post-assessment Student D scored a 36 (See Figure 3.). This score was the same as the pre-assessment score. This student made progress in learning how to regulate his emotions. He reported how to read the zones of regulation poster, where to take a break, and what it looks like for each color. He also explained that he can ask the teacher for help when he does not know what to do. In November, he earned 95% independently engaged and respectful (See Figure 1.) and 82% appropriate social skills during 16/17 school days (See Figure 2.).

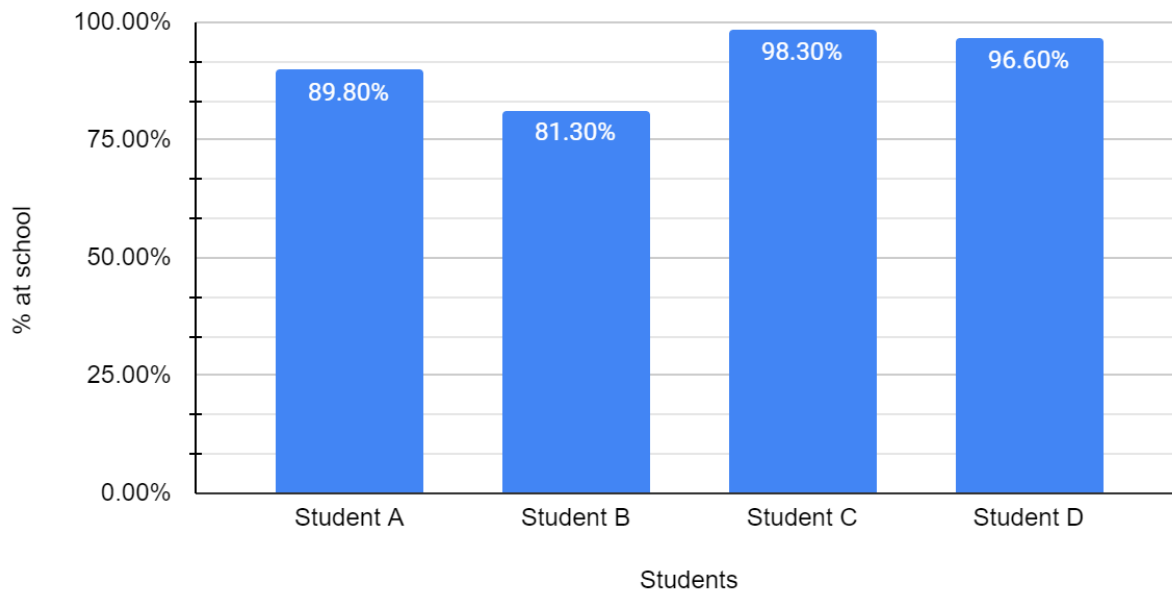
**Figure 1**

*Behavior Data*

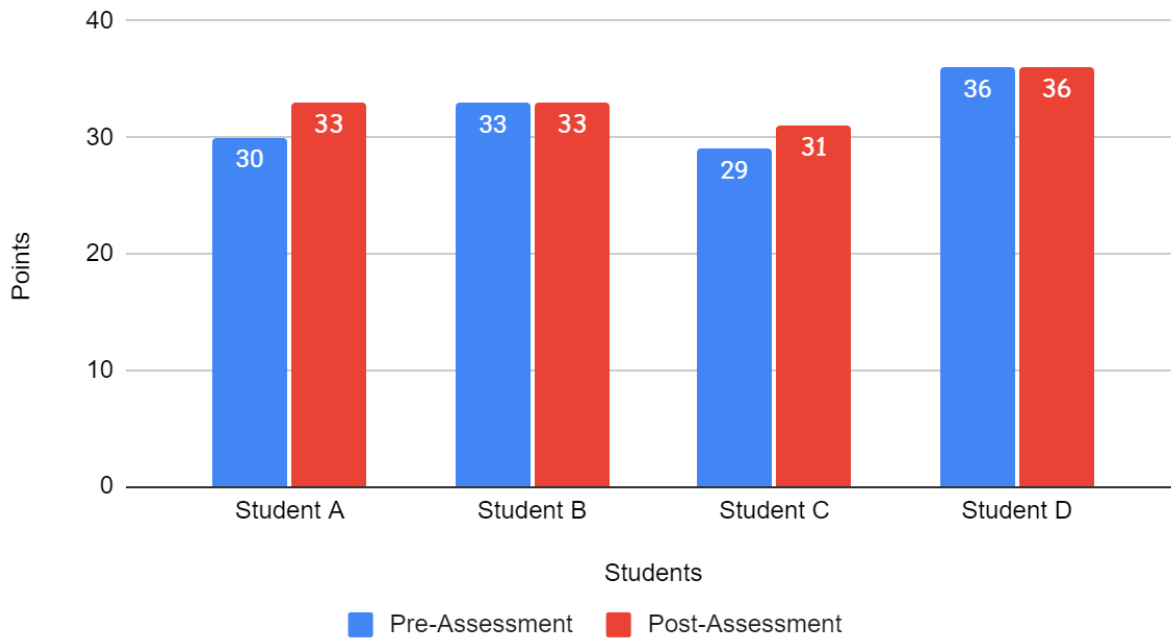


**Figure 2**

*Attendance*



**Figure 3**  
*Students' SAEBRS Scores*



**Discussion**

This action research study consisted of one kindergarten and three first-grade male students participating in a study on the impact of SEL skills in the elementary classroom. The purpose of the study was to find if stronger SEL skills linked to better attendance and behavior, identify which SEL skills students need most, and which SEL skills students report most helpful.

**Summary of Major Findings**

*Behavior & Attendance*

Student A was at school 89.90%, missing six days throughout September, October, and November, the second greatest number of absences between the four students. Student A earned a 30 and a 33 (three-point increase) on the SABERS and moved from 92% to 96% (four percentage increase) on his behavior goal, averaging 94%. Student B missed the most school. He was at school for 81.30%, missing eight days throughout the three months. He earned a score of

33 on both SAEBRS. He also moved from 87% to an 85% (two percent decrease) on his IEP behavior goal, averaging 86% from September to November. Student C missed only one day throughout September, October, and November, earning 98.30% attendance. Student C earned a 29 and a 31 on SAEBRS. He also moved from 78% to 72%, averaging 71% on his behavior goal. Student D missed two days of school in the three-month span for 96.60% attendance. Student D earned a 36 on both SAEBRS assessments. He also moved from 92% to 95%, with a 92% average on his behavior goal and from 83% to 82%, with an 82% average, on his social goal. With this data, the question “are stronger SEL skills linked to better attendance and behavior?” can be answered. In this study, stronger SEL skills were not linked to better attendance and behavior. Further research will help determine the validity of this statement.

#### *SAEBRS/ Skills Students Need Most*

The skills students need most include arguing, temper, disruptive, impulsive, attention, and positivity. When looking at the SAEBRS scores from the pre- and post-assessments, two of the four students demonstrated growth throughout the eight-week study; the other two stayed the same. Therefore, 50% of students demonstrated growth. The average growth was 1.25 points, with the highest growth being three and the lowest growth being 0. The reason for students making little to no progress appears to be assessments. Typically, SAEBRS are given three times during the school year. However, this study presented this assessment two times in just eight weeks or two months.

#### *SEL Skills Reported Helpful*

Students reported the helpfulness of calm-down areas and SEL strategies such as deep breathing, taking walks, using fidgets/sensory items, and teacher intervention. Students learned how to take a break appropriately throughout the eight-week intervention using PATHS SEL

curriculum. Also, students were able to explain where they can go when they are feeling frustrated, upset, or unable to calm down in each classroom. Students were able to teach others how to use this space. More implementation, modeling, and instruction of these strategies will help students develop a deeper understanding. This data shows students need SEL strategies to be successful in the classroom. Extended research can elaborate on needed SEL skills.

### **Impact on Teaching and/or Learning**

This SEL study confirms the need of SEL skills starting at an early age and the value of interventions that teach SEL strategies to students with EBD. Students need the resources, tools, and strategies to be successful, regulate their emotions, and develop intentional relationships. This project has shown there is potential in future studies. Researchers could analyze students with differing disabilities in comparison to those without. Furthermore, taking data for a longer period would allow more time to answer the question: Are stronger SEL skills linked to better attendance and behavior?

### **Alignment to Research**

This action research study in comparison to Panayiotou et al. (2020) shows PATHS curriculum and SEL to be impactful in the development of positive self-esteem, growth mindset, self-control, peer relationships, and emotional and social regulation, while preventing and reducing problem behaviors in children. In addition, each of these students has at least one adverse childhood experience. Research on the ACEs of these students would be impactful for future studies because, as Thompson et al. (2020) stated, the higher the ACE score, the higher odds associated with emotional and behavioral disorders.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There are five limitations to this study. First, the SAEBRS exam is based on a scale of never, sometimes, often, and always. The general education teachers base their answers on current behaviors. There could be bias in these assessments. Second, most SAEBRS exams take place three times per year. In this study, SAEBRS were assessed twice. The third limitation is related to sample size. The sample size of students was small and limited due to rostered students and those available for participation. The fourth limitation is the homogeneity of the participants: all participants were Caucasian males. The fifth limitation presented in this research is the length of time. Eight weeks is a brief time for any intervention to have a significant effect.

### **Future Research**

Regardless of limitations, this action research study contributes to understanding in the education world. Future study is needed to expand on these findings. To improve future research, all genders should be represented; the correlation between SEL could change. Using various demographics and backgrounds of students would expand on this research and give more validity and reliability. Additionally, a follow-up study with a much larger group would allow for a deeper analysis and knowledge.

In addition, effective training for staff will be valuable. Because teachers are not required to have specific curriculum training, there are teachers involved in this action research project who are not fully trained in SEL. Not having certified teachers may impact results as some teachers are more advanced in their knowledge while others are not. In addition, the general education teacher should be asked to answer SABER test questions. This test is likely to be a threat to internal and external validity as some teachers will rate students differently based on behaviors the day of the test.

Students can take a personal reflective assessment starting in second grade called mySAEBRS on the Fast Bridge website. This data would be beneficial for a future research study as it would give students a voice in their education and could increase the development of SEL skills in the early elementary years. A future study could examine students over one to five school years so researchers could analyze the correlations between teacher and student assessments.

### **Conclusion**

SEL provides students with the necessary tools to regulate emotions, foster relationships, and create self-awareness while developing coping measures for students along the way. Ongoing SEL support and instruction is essential for young learners. Therefore, continual research to find correlations between lasting effects of SEL curriculum and the success of students is necessary due to the various challenges that educators face when implementing SEL such as lack of time, budgeting concerns, teacher training and qualifications, and data collection (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 4).

To effectively implement SEL into schools, there are steps to take such as developing daily mantras and affirmations to increase self-talk, confidence, and self-worth in students. Students should set goals and receive class jobs to foster accountability and responsibility. Teacher strategies to promote student independence and foster relationships include sharing growth mindset videos, introducing self-monitoring strategies to practice self-awareness, recording progress monitor goals, using problem scenarios, creating check in/check out with students, displaying appropriate feedback and constructive criticism, and using collaborative learning when possible (Kamei & Harriott, 2021, p. 369). Common student strategies include breathing, direction-based coping skills, and counting. SEL has the potential to help students

overcome and effectively manage life's challenges by increasing their resiliency to what comes their way.

This action research study demonstrated the various SEL skills students need practice developing. Although there was no real correlation between better attendance and behavior to stronger SEL skills, researchers now know which curriculums designed to effectively integrate into the classroom to increase SAEBRS. Teachers can use this assessment to learn more about students and help meet their individual social skills needs. Evidence-based curriculum uses explicit teaching, integration into core academic areas, and organizational strategies to promote SEL in the classroom (Kamei & Harriott, 2021, p. 367). The focus of SEL is to increase social development. For students with disabilities, this development can be challenging. Effective curriculums teach students appropriate things to do when you are feeling a certain way and how to calm down quicker. Students are more likely to succeed when their SEL needs are prioritized (Kaspar & Massey, 2022, p. 2).



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