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Supporting Special Education Online Learners' Social and Emotional Wellbeing

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Supporting Special Education Online Learners' Social and Emotional Wellbeing

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Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools closed for in person instruction and began remote learning. All students were impacted by the school closures but no students were as heavily impacted as students with disabilities. Parents reported a rise in tantrums, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation among young children during remote learning. The social and emotional wellbeing of children promotes increased participation, positive outlook about school, improves peer relationships, and increases the likelihood of academic success. The purpose of this school improvement project is to detail the importance of supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of online learners, specifically students with disabilities. This school improvement project details a professional development seminar where teachers will learn about the importance of social and emotional development, will receive strategies to support the social and emotional wellbeing of their online learners, and will learn about a protocol to address the needs of students on IEPs who are struggling with behaviors that may result from an issue with a child's social and emotional wellbeing.

Keywords: remote learning, social and emotional wellness, disability

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Supporting Special Education Online Learners' Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Social and emotional wellbeing is critical to children's readiness and motivation to learn. When children are socially and emotionally healthy, they are motivated to participate in classroom activities and display higher academic performance compared to their less mentally healthy peers (Ho & Funk, 2018). Within the last two years, the social and emotional wellbeing of online learners with disabilities has been an area of concern. In March of 2020, schools in the United States closed to minimize the spread of COVID-19, and children began to attend school fully online for a period of time. Not only were children adjusting to their new learning environment, but their parents were also stressed working remotely while managing children at home. Researchers from the Early Learning Study at Harvard reported a rise in tantrum, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation among young children during remote learning as reported by parents (Anderson, 2022).

Whereas the pandemic impacted the education of all children, it was not an equitable impact. Children who were particularly affected were children with disabilities, and many students had to cope with remote learning without access to the same services and accommodations that they would have received if they were attending school in person (Averett, 2021). While schools were closing, teachers were entering "uncharted territory"; many educators did not feel supported or prepared to teach fully online (Ulla & Perales, 2021). Not being adequately trained on how to teach online or how to use the education tools required to teach online impacted teachers' social and emotional wellness (Bukko, 2019). Ensuring that students, parents, and educators feel supported during remote learning is imperative to student success and teacher retention.

The purpose of this school improvement project is to provide strategies that teachers and staff can use to promote social and emotional wellbeing in their virtual classrooms during remote learning. Providing intervention that is collaborative without delay is the most critical step in supporting the social and emotional wellness of children with disabilities (Frederick et al, 2020).

Research for this paper was drawn from the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) database, the World Cat discovery tool through DeWitt Library, and Google Scholar. All of the articles were published within the last 10 years, between 2012-2022. Some of the articles contain information about social and emotional learning and wellbeing in children with and without disabilities. In addition, some of the articles contain information on the social and emotional learning and wellbeing across multiple settings: in the home, in person, hybrid, and online learning environments. There were articles covering some of the challenges to learning online, parents' and students' experiences with online learning, best practices for social and emotional learning, as well as different types of therapies and interventions that support children with disabilities.

The following review of literature is organized by these topics: the importance of social and emotional health for students, COVID-19, impacts and challenges during remote instruction, students with disabilities and remote learning, and strategies to support the social and emotional wellness of students. Each topic will include information pertaining to the social and emotional wellness of elementary aged students with and without disabilities. In addition, information about the social and emotional wellness of teachers will be included as it pertains to the overall educational milieu, which has an influence on students and their learning.

Review of the Literature

Significance of SE Health for Students

The social and emotional health of students plays a significant role in how students perform academically, and how they relate to themselves and others. In the qualitative research study by Averett (2021), in-person interviews were conducted with 112 parents of children in grades K-12 in various parts of the United States. Of the 112 people interviewed, 31 had at least one child with a disability. The interviews were done in two waves, and during the first wave, 88 parents were interviewed. The interview consisted of the following questions: “How are parents experiencing remote learning during the pandemic?” “What challenges and successes are they experiencing? What is their perspective on how their children’s school and school districts are approaching remote learning, and “How is the family coping with remote learning, work, and family life during the pandemic?” The study aimed to learn what the impacts of the pandemic were on remote learning, work, and family life. The findings of the study showed that most families struggled with learning online. Students with disabilities faced further challenges of not receiving adequate accommodations and services remotely. The study reveals that children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to increased challenges during a pandemic. Students requiring intensive support, such as 1:1 aides and behavior support, were often missing these supports as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Averett’s (2022) findings were similar to those Anderson, (2022), where parents reported a rise in temper tantrums, anxiety, and inability to manage emotions.

Having a positive classroom climate where teachers employ strategies to support the social and emotional needs of students, is crucial in promoting mentally healthy students. In a qualitative research study by Ho & Funk (2018), observational data was collected on seven preschool classrooms in the United States led by seven different teachers. The researchers looked for two important practices among educators: building trusting relationships and conducting intentional teaching. Teachers have the power to promote social and emotional health in their classroom in many ways—from the physical environment in their classroom to providing many opportunities to create social interactions among students. According to Ho & Funk (2018), “students who are mentally healthy tend to be happier, are motivated to learn, are more willing to participate in class, and perform better academically than their peers who are less mentally healthy”. The research study concluded that loved ones, caregivers, and educators all help to promote children’s social and emotional health when they create trusting relationships. To build trusting relationships, teachers need to express warmth, affection and respect. Of the teachers who were observed, the teachers who made social and emotional learning a priority were happy, and engaged students who avoided and resolved conflicts, engaged in turn-taking, and expressed their emotions appropriately. If students learn to resolve conflict and express emotions appropriately, behaviors that drive children to choose online education, like bullying, could be mitigated (Tonks, et al., 2021).

When students learn online and have limited opportunities for social interactions, they may experience a shift in self-perception. In the qualitative research study by Vaillancourt et al. (2021), student surveys were collected from 6,578 Canadian students in Grades 4 to 12. The aim of this study was to compare student’s perceptions of mattering during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When in-person and online learners were compared, the findings showed that the students who felt they mattered least were those who learned online during the pandemic. Children who learned in person felt that they mattered more when compared to online learners. Attending school in-person, seems to help students to feel like they matter more than children who attend school online. Children who feel they matter are more resilient, and engaged than children who feel that they don't matter. Mattering is often communicated to students with small but crucial things like a smile, pat on the back, conversations at school, or even shared enjoyment over something that is funny in class (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). These gestures are often spontaneous and are difficult to do during online instruction. However, there was no data available about perceived mattering before online instruction began: Vaillancourt et al. (2021) noted that students who chose to learn online since the start of the pandemic may have had feelings of not mattering before the start of the pandemic.

One of the measures used to assess the degree to which the students felt they mattered was the General Mattering Scale. The scales have five items that assess mattering and are rated on a four-point scale. In addition, school climate was measured using a sense of community scale consisting of 14 items using a four-point scale (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). The results were that regardless of grade, overall, students learning completely online felt like they mattered less compared to students who learned in person. Since online learning didn't stop for everyone after schools began to reopen in August of 2020, there should be a focus on healthy relationships, and investment in social emotional learning programs for students, whether learning online or in person, to promote optimal development (Vaillancourt et al., 2021).

In addition to healthy relationship building in the classroom, there are programs with structured activities which can create an improvement in social and emotional health. In a qualitative research study by Lantieri (2012), a battery of surveys was collected from 57 teachers of grades 3-5, as well as 855 students (aged 9-13) in New York City public schools. The student surveys aimed to find out what caused stress for these students and what they used as coping strategies to manage their stress. Reviewing the coping strategies that students used, not one of the top 10 strategies was focusing their attention inward to better manage their stressors. Teachers and students were then put into the Inner Resilience Program (IRP), where they participated in activities intended to reduce stress as well as increase concentration, attention, job satisfaction, and relations with their colleagues. The coping strategies included yoga classes, nurturing inner life meetings, a weekend residential retreat, and training to support the use of a SEL curriculum for students. Lantieri (2012) found that social and emotional learning not only helps students with academic competence, but it also helps them to become engaged life-long learners who are self-aware, caring, and connected to others.

COVID-19: Impacts and Challenges During Remote Learning

Mentally healthy students are caring, self-aware, and feel connected to others. Students with social and emotional issues on the other hand, lack the ability to regulate their emotions. In a qualitative research study by Anderson (2022), part of a study tracking the development of young children at the Early Learning Study at Harvard, parent interviews were conducted to track the changes in behavior of young children who participated in remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents reported a rise in temper tantrums, anxiety, and inability to

manage emotions (Anderson, 2022). One of the findings was that remote learning itself was not the cause for these behaviors but rather that the behaviors were a manifestation of the strain that families experienced when remote learning is necessary and children need to be at home (Anderson, 2022). In addition to monitoring children during online learning, parents may have to work from home, in addition to managing all of the household duties. This scenario causes stress in families, which may cause challenging behavior among children (Anderson, 2022). As in the study by Averett (2021), parents reported that coping with the pandemic was difficult because of all of the other things that parents were responsible for during the pandemic. One of the interventions that was recommended by Anderson (2022) was to give children routines and talk to them about their feelings. The findings of the Anderson (2022) study confirms the findings of Ho & Funk (2018), who also found that taking the time to build relationships improves social and emotional wellbeing.

In a qualitative study by Bukko (2019), the topic of nurturing teachers' social and emotional wellness was studied. Teacher-reported satisfaction surveys were reviewed from 1985-2012. Back in 1985 teachers reported that their stress level was at 35%, and in 2012 teachers reported that their stress level was 59%, several days of the week. This rise is significant because emotional stress, burnout, and lack of support are often cited as reasons for teachers leaving the profession (Bukko, 2019). Anderson (2022) reported that if an adult is feeling stressed and frustrated they may respond in a way that feeds into children's undesired behavior. If a child is displaying undesirable behavior, it may cause an escalation in adult's behavior, which loops back into and impacts the child's behavior. If caregivers' stress causes their child to escalate, then perhaps teachers' stress level may impact their students' behavior (Anderson,

2022). Schools are developing social and emotional support programs as a response to the increasing numbers of students who are exhibiting behaviors that impede learning and teaching. More often than not, teachers are asked to implement the support programs on top of their growing lists of "must do's," which overwhelms teachers' emotional capacity and self-efficacy (Bukko, 2019). If teachers with high social and emotional competency are more efficacious (Bukko, 2019), then investing in social and emotional support for teachers is just as important as investing in those supports for students. Helping teachers to become confident, supported, and committed to professional growth can make their work less stressful and more enjoyable. Instead of learning another new program, teachers can adjust some of the conversations that they are already having with students. One of the suggestions is to build emotional awareness by being transparent with students. For example, if a teacher is having a bad day they can share this with their students in order to model appropriate ways to communicate emotions and needs. Another suggestion was to engage in perspective taking. Acknowledging a student's background is essential to building classroom environments where students feel valued (Bukko, 2019). Building relationships in the classroom is crucial to each teacher and student's social and emotional wellbeing, aligning with the findings of Anderson (2022) and Ho & Funk (2018).

A quantitative study by Calamlam et al. (2022) examined the perception of research methods course's online environment and self-regulated learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants of the study included 174 students aged 16 to 17 who were attending a Catholic school in the Philippines during the 2020-2021 school year. They were taught completely online to avoid the dangers of the pandemic during that particular school year. Self-perception surveys were given to the students and recorded four times after two-week intervals.

The findings were that students experienced a regression in their academic performance as time went on due to deficits in self-regulation learning skills. Online learning is perceived as a suitable, effective, alternative for delivery instruction (Calamlam et al., 2022). One of the considerations that the researchers suggest is to teach students specific interventions to improve self-regulated learning skills (Calamlam et al., 2022).

In a qualitative study by Rice (2022), special education teachers use of technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic was studied. The four participants were special education teachers in New Mexico in 2020-2021. They were asked interview questions regarding their use of technology in the classroom. Overall, teachers share that they lack the support to maintain the use of digital technologies and all resources they liked (Rice, 2022). According to this researcher, it is important that teachers feel supported for online teaching at all times in order to prepare to transition between modalities (Rice, 2022). It is simply not enough that teachers learn a new technology and then stop using it when school resumes in person. The COVID-19 pandemic taught schools that things could change from day-to-day and that it is important to be prepared to limit learning loss and have a more streamlined transition between in-person and online learning in the event that it is required in the future. In addition, teachers need to be proactive in learning to use and modify digital resources to promote access and equity because teachers are in the strongest position to interact directly with learners (Rice, 2022). Another area of support noted is that students and teachers need transition support, especially when returning to the in-person setting (Rice, 2022). Teacher-reported instructional adjusting included adjusting instructional delivery, student groupings, parent communication routines, and technological supports (Rice, 2022). In addition, teachers used technology to monitor student progress, provide

emotional support, recruit parent help with instructional tasks, and provide support like graphic organizers and teacher-made presentation slides (Rice, 2022). Overall, special education teachers shared that online learning for students with disabilities is challenging due to its lack of efficacy since the teachers cannot be in person to support their learners. The findings of this study conflict with the Calamlam et al., (2022), who found that online learning can be as effective as in-person learning. However, the study by Rice (2022) specifically focused on the narratives of special education teachers as opposed to Calamlam et al. (2022), who collected data from typically developing students.

In a qualitative study by Ulla (2021), researcher-made self-report surveys were obtained during semi-structured individual interviews. The participants included 33 university students ages 19-21 enrolled in an English class. The study observed students' perception of using Facebook as a learning management system during online learning. Students reported a positive perception towards online learning but they encountered some issues (Ulla, 2021). Internet connectivity issues were reported by 75% of participants, 61% reported lack of familial support, 40% of students reported difficulty understanding online lessons, and 79% of students reported an increased amount of homework (Ulla, 2021). Additionally, the researcher identified teacher support as an area for future research. Since another health or social-political issue may arise in the future necessitating online learning, it is important to give teachers the training and education to support learners online.

Students with Disabilities and Remote Learning

In a qualitative study by Anaby et al. (2020), researchers sought to clarify the actual roles of school staff in order to optimize school-based service delivery for students who receive special education students. Ninety-five staff members in Quebec were asked to complete a 14-question survey (Anaby et al., 2020). The questions related to adapting tasks, offering individualized support, and being available to teamwork. The general consensus among the staff surveyed was that they would like as few interruptions to teaching as possible and that they needed more support staff in order to better support students who receive special education. One of the common things that educators keep raising is their desire to learn more behavioral strategies in order to better support their students with social and emotional difficulties. Some of the areas where staff members felt that needed improvement were sufficient time, knowledge, resources, and more shared responsibility (Anaby et al., 2020). The findings of the study indicated that there needs to be clearly defined roles for all staff members who work with students with disabilities to make sure that they are receiving quality instruction and support. To connect with the study by Averett (2021), perhaps some students were not receiving the required services, modifications, or accommodations due to a deficit in staff's understanding of their responsibilities as service providers.

In a qualitative study by Casey et al. (2016), a high school Algebra 1 class participated in two case studies about best practices of special education math instruction over the course of the school year. The data that was collected came from teachers, and the qualitative case study information from the teacher who was implementing the intervention. The findings suggest that when students with disabilities receive one-on-one help with mathematics, positive feedback, and conversation that links new concepts to familiar topics, students can relax and think about

the material presented more effectively (Casey et al., 2016). The aforementioned strategies help students develop positive experiences with academics. In the study by Ulla (2021), 40% of students reported difficulty understanding online lessons. If the complexity of lessons causes students stress, why not try to mitigate students' stress by providing an engaging and relaxing strategy during instruction?

In a qualitative study by Efstratopoulou et al., (2021) ten parents in Greece of students with autism who received remote instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic were interviewed. All of the children were verbal and considered "high functioning," and of elementary age. Data Interview transcripts were collected on a Word document. That transcript was then divided into themes and analyzed. All of the parents shared that if their children could not be in school in person, they should continue to work remotely (Efstratopoulou et al., 2021). However, nine out of ten parents share that face-to-face learning is the most beneficial type of learning for their children because physical presence is the most beneficial for children with autism (Efstratopoulou et al., 2021). Parents shared that face-to-face learning offers social advantages that are crucial for their children who often struggle with social skills and communication. Parents preferred face-to-face learning but if remote learning was the only option given, they are open to continuing their children's learning remotely (Efstratopoulou et al., 2021).

In a qualitative study by Kaplan-Rakowski, (2020), surveys were analyzed from the work of Borup, West, and Thomas described in their 2015 Educational Technology Research and Development paper entitled "The Impact of Text Versus Video Communication on Instructor Feedback in Blended Courses," (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020). The researchers sought to determine

how educators can ensure social and emotional wellness and social presence (online) during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020). They found creating social presence and providing emotional feedback to be helpful over video or Zoom. Typically, when learners are in person, teachers get to know their students through informal conversations and shared experiences. Creating a teacher-student relationship may be difficult to emulate naturally online, so there needs to be time set aside to help students get to know each other and their teachers. In addition, setting up a learning environment that encourages mind and body balance (meditation, yoga, exercise) is important during daily instruction (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020). Using these approaches could have implications that benefit all people who are in home-office settings (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020).

In a qualitative study by Supratiwi et al. (n.d.), 226 participants consisting of 140 special education teachers and 86 inclusive school teachers were given questionnaires via Google. The teachers were asked about the challenges in distance learning for students with disabilities. They shared that the lack of coordination and communication with service providers was an area of difficulty. Parents not having enough time to monitor/support their children during remote instruction was another area of concern. Students who lacked the ability to participate in the general education curriculum became bored in the classroom (Supratiwi et al, n.d.). Difficulty adapting to online learning, difficulties with monitoring, and evaluating student progress was an area that teachers felt they needed to strengthen. In addition, technical barriers, like poor internet signal and hardware malfunctions, were another challenge during online learning (Supratiwi et al, n.d.). These findings confirm similar findings by Anderson (2022) and Ulla (2021), where one

of the most common challenges to online learning is the technological barriers like internet connectivity issues.

In a qualitative study by Tonks et al. (2021), 30 students and parents completed surveys that were analyzed qualitatively. The researchers sought to find emerging themes about the motivations behind special education students and their parents switching to an online school. The questions asked in the surveys were “Why did students with specific special education needs and their parents choose online school?” and “Why or how is it working for them?” Some of the findings were that students were looking for a safer, more accessible option for learning, and the target school provided these opportunities. The target school provided online learning experiences, devoted teachers, and flexibility (Tonks, et al, 2021). They also shared that there was bullying happening where they went to school in person. They felt that their students were being supported in the online environment and that the education was parent driven (Tonks, et al, 2021). Parents stated that flexibility, teacher availability, and support were the top reasons why parents and students choose online education. Children feel safe because there is virtually no bullying behavior occurring in the remote learning environment.

Strategies to Support Social and Emotional Wellness

In a qualitative study by Casciano, & Jobson-Ahmed (2019), The New York City (NYC) Department of Education and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) took observational and interview data from teachers to gain insight into the effects of arts integration on social-emotional learning among special education students. Over the course of the 2014-2015 and 2016-2016 school years, music therapy, art therapy, and social emotional programs and

curriculum were implemented with special education students in these school districts. The results of the qualitative data analysis found that there was evidence of student growth in communication, socialization, following directions, time on task, and overall engagement. Although not all schools have access to these programs and curriculum, teachers can implement simple, art-based activities with students and garner similar gains. In addition, allowing students to engage and explore fun and engaging activities and materials at their own pace builds interpersonal skills, self-control, and leadership skills (Casciano, & Jobson-Ahmed, 2019).

In a qualitative study by Murray (2018), a survey was shared with three teachers in Greeley, Colorado to learn about how video self-monitoring can help students with emotional behavioral disorders. Video self-monitoring refers to teacher-created videos that show students desired skills or behavior (Murray, 2018). A student is typically the participant in the video, and they are modeling a skill that is at a higher level than they typically display on a daily basis (Murray, 2018). Making these videos is an inexpensive way to support students with behavior management. It is a strategy that can be used both in person and online with minimal training (Murray, 2018). The study's findings showed that video self-monitoring may help teachers work around some of the challenges in an inexpensive way (Murray, 2018). The strategy of video self-monitoring requires minimal directions and instructional time on behalf of the teacher. It is also something that can be used by parents in the home setting if needed. If a student does not wish to participate in the video, a staff member could model the appropriate behavior and play it back to the student.

In a qualitative study by Scott & Temple, (2017), researchers at the Virginia Commonwealth University developed a conceptual framework for building a University Design for Learning (UDL) in special education long distance courses. The findings of the study concluded that UDL is a good tool to use during distance learning. The UDL framework merges special education and online pedagogy for the design and delivery of special education in an online course. The UDL is a framework that sets guidelines to allow students to access learning based on their needs and interests. The UDL is based on three main neural networks involved in learning: recognition networks, strategic networks, and affective networks. Addressing these neural networks allows educators to address student needs through providing multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression, and multiple means of engagement (Scott & Temple, 2017). Allowing students with disabilities to access curriculum in multiple ways conveys knowledge in a medium of their choice and seeks multiple ways to engage them during instruction, minimizing some of the barriers that may cause them to experience anxiety.

In a qualitative study by Sher-Censor & Nahamias-Zlotolov (2019), data was gathered from 40 special education elementary classrooms and teachers. The interventions assessed were social and emotional support (positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspectives) using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System-K-3. Teachers completed the Experience in Close Relationships Scale to evaluate their attachment styles (Sher-Censor & Nahamias-Zlotolov, 2019). The study found that avoidance and negative valence of teachers' narratives correlated to lower teacher regard for students' perspectives. The higher avoidance, lower complexity of narratives of teachers' experiences and negative valence correlated with less positive classroom climates. In addition, higher education correlated with

higher complexity of narratives, which correlated with a higher regard for student perspectives. They also found that teachers with more anxiety and higher avoidance taught at the lower grade levels. Teachers who showed higher avoidant behavior were less responsive to children's needs, moods, interests, and emotional and academic abilities. In addition, those teachers tended to show less positive affect and displayed lower levels of warmth and physical affection towards children. Teachers' behavior and affect can impact the climate of the classroom. These findings coincide with the findings of Ho & Funk (2018), where teachers' warmth, affection, and respect resulted in building trusting relationships with students.

In a qualitative study by Xia, T., & Li, Z. (2022), two classrooms were selected that included seven children with autism, who were observed during music classes. The findings were from the behavioral analysis of three children during the music teaching activities; they were able to comfortably sit, were aware of their musical ability, were aware of the rules, and had a reduction of inappropriate behaviors and negative emotions compared to students who did not participate in musical activities (Xia & Li, 2022). These findings proved that music education could improve the social and cognitive skills of children with autism (Xia & Li, 2022). The researchers suggested that when teachers select songs to explicitly teach, they should choose songs that are familiar, favorite, and simple for the child to learn (Xia & Li, 2022).

School Profile

Royal Oaks Elementary School in Visalia, CA, educates children from preschool to eighth grade. There are two programs housed at Royals Oaks: a traditional in-person program with grades preschool to 6th grade, and an online program with grades kindergarten to 8th grade. There are

663 students attending Royal Oaks; of that total, 49% are female students and 51% are male. Royals Oaks is a Title 1 school, and 74% of students are economically disadvantaged students and qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Royal Oaks Elementary is in the agrarian town of Visalia in the San Joaquin Valley of California. The population of Visalia is 437,000, and it is the 42nd most populous town in California. The school has a small Parent Teacher Association, and there are approximately 35 parent volunteers at the school. The school hosts a fall carnival, a literacy night, a book fair, as well as food and clothing drives throughout the year. The school and the PTA budgets for field trips in every grade level, including trips to the local planetarium, pumpkin patch, the Clemmie Gill School of Science and Conservation, musical performances, plays, and trips to local farms.

The school is part of Visalia Unified School district which has 26 elementary schools, a newcomer language center, five middle schools, four comprehensive high schools, a continuation high school, an adult school, a charter independent study school, a K-8 charter home school, an online program, and a charter technical early college high school. Over 32,000 students in grades Pre-K to adult-aged are served through Visalia Unified School District. The district motto is “We Create Futures.”

The school’s mission statement is the following: “We exist to provide students with an education that affords them limitless opportunities for the future.” (Royal Oaks Elementary, n.d.).

The school’s focus for the past few years has been to improve student literacy. Recently, the school’s focus has shifted to improving math competency among students in all grades. A new math curriculum that allows for differentiation of the core curriculum for diverse student

populations has begun implementation in all grade levels. Additionally, the school has a very supported social and emotional behavioral team that includes school counselors, school psychologists, behavior intervention technicians and aides, and school social workers. That team, as well as every other staff member, strives to provide a safe and caring learning environment.

The school was built in 1980, and the only updated classrooms are the portable classrooms installed in the 2021-2022 school year to house the virtual program. The school, like other California schools, is made up of multiple buildings with no enclosed corridors. There are buildings separated by grade level. All parts of the school are wheelchair accessible, and there are tables and benches throughout the school. There are designated student restrooms that are for the use of students with disabilities only. There are students at the school with mobility issues that require a large, private restroom in order to meet their personal needs; there are three restrooms that accommodate these students' needs.

Students in Visalia Unified School District on IEPs who have mild to moderate disabilities are expected to participate in the general education curriculum. In conjunction with the district-provided curriculum, teachers use California Common Core standards within their lessons in order to meet their grade level's minimal expectations. Students are expected to have sufficient support from their IEPs accommodations and modifications to access the general education curriculum. Although a majority of students on IEPs are not meeting grade level standards; goals are created to meet them at their level in order to make progress towards meeting grade level standards. These students are graded every trimester with a report card and progress noted regarding their IEP goals.

The school uses the following curricula: Wonders for ELA by McGraw Hill and Go Math by Houghton Mifflin. This curriculum is supplemented with the following two tier 2 and 3 intervention programs (Do the Math, Fountas and Pinnel leveled literacy intervention, and SPIRE). The ELA curriculum is standards based and focuses on reading and written composition. The tier 2 curriculum is used during small-group instruction in grades K-3 for students who are below grade level. The curriculum is also used in the reading intervention teacher's classroom where she sees students who have been referred to tier 2 interventions by the student success team. The special education (resource classroom) at Royal Oaks uses the Fountas and Pinnell leveled literacy intervention program which is a multi-text approach for struggling readers in grades K-6. The SPIRE curriculum uses the Orton Gillingham approach to target readers with dyslexia.

The math curriculum that is used schoolwide is called Go Math. This curriculum supports the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and the NCTM Curriculum Focal Points. Each student receives a write-in book that allows students in every grade level to solve problems in their own book. The tier 2 and 3 math programs used in the classroom and in the Learning Center is called Do the Math. Students are assessed before intervention begins and are placed into a group that is not grade based but skills based. The lessons are fun and use game-based instruction. There are ongoing assessments and when students reach a certain level of proficiency, they are dismissed from the groups. To date, students receiving tier 3 interventions continue to use this curriculum, along with the Go Math reteach lessons.

The schoolwide assessment is called iready for both reading and mathematics. It is a program that provides a level of proficiency as well as a path for teachers to support students based

on their individual needs. After the initial assessment, students receive individualized self-paced lessons in the areas where they lack proficiency. Throughout the school year there are other diagnostic assessments where teachers can track progress that students are making and can adjust their instruction based on the findings. For each student, there are individual lessons generated that teachers can implement 1:1 or during small groups with students. In addition, students participate in the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress, which monitors student progress in the areas of English Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science. Students on IEPs receive accommodations during these assessments.

In terms of professional development, teachers attend staff meetings every Monday where we review important school events and information. We also participate in professional development to support English Language Learners, learn about the new ELA and Math curriculum, and develop best practices. At the beginning of the school year, there is a week dedicated to professional development of new teachers called the “New Teacher Academy.” Throughout the school year there are “staff development days,” where children have a break from school and teachers attend various professional development events. We also have Keenan Safe Schools training where teachers are required to sit through a lesson and take an exam pertaining to important job-related components. There are no mandatory professional development opportunities that focus on social and emotional wellness.

Needs Assessment

Royal Oaks Elementary’s greatest need at the moment is professional development for teachers to support online learner’s social and emotional needs, especially online learners who

are on IEPs. Currently, class sizes in the online program are below 25 students. Teachers use Zoom as the main platform to deliver synchronous classes. There are times throughout the school day where students are put into Zoom breakout rooms in order to receive small-group support with an aide. However, aides are not available to all teachers, and when there is support in the classroom, it is limited to a few hours a few times a week. There is a school psychologist able to offer support to students online three times a week, a school counselor, and soon a behavior intervention technician who will be available to assist with behavior support exclusively to online learners. Since support staff cannot support as quickly online as they could in person, teachers need access to strategies that they can implement even when behavioral team specialists are not available.

The required training that all staff members take (Keenan Safe Schools) has an optional component that includes how to support students with disabilities. Teachers could begin by taking this additional training. Additional professional development could be provided during weekly staff meetings. Sometime could be used to give teachers information, resources, and strategies to support the social and emotional wellness of students, particularly students on IEPs who are online learners. In addition, a monthly informational email could be sent to staff that includes strategies to support the social-emotional needs of their students.

Typically, when there is a behavioral issue in an in-person classroom, support is requested via radio or the phone. Someone from the behavior team will typically respond within minutes. Behavior support is provided in or out of the classroom based on student need. However, in the online program, there is not an efficient way to address how behavior support is

provided to students. There is the option of breakout rooms or the student joining the school psychologist, social worker, or school counselor's Zoom room. However, leaving a Zoom meeting to join another Zoom meeting could be time consuming and inefficient. Those staff members' time is not only limited to behavioral intervention; they may be in meetings or in small groups when a behavior crisis arises. Giving teachers the tools to intervene themselves would be efficient, save instructional time, build relationships, and improve the social and emotional wellbeing of students.

Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, there are 663 students who attend Royal Oaks either in person or online and approximately 5.4% of those students are on academic IEPs. There are also students on IEPs for exclusively speech and language services, and there are a number of students on 504 plans; these students are not reflected in the data due to their plans being out of the scope of special education teachers.

According to Serfass et al. (2018), 28% of students who qualify for an IEP under the criteria of Other Health Impairment have behavioral needs and require at least one IEP goal to address one or more behaviors. For students who qualify for services under autism, 31% have behavioral needs that require an IEP goal. Consequently, there are students with disabilities mainstreamed in general education classrooms for the majority of the day who have significant behavioral challenges.

Addressing these challenges with adequate knowledge and support is crucial to ensuring that students with disabilities stay in their classrooms. In 2018, approximately 15% of students with disabilities were suspended from school, despite making up only 8% of enrollment in Visalia Unified School District (Yeager, 2019). This statistic shows that students with disabilities are

disproportionately suspended at higher rates than their non-disabled peers. District administrators have shared that special education teachers need more support in place to better serve students with disabilities who display behavioral challenges (Yeager, 2019). However, students on IEPs in Visalia Unified School District spend the majority of the day mainstreaming unless they are in a special program. It is important for all staff working with these students to have the tools to support the social and emotional needs of students and to be proactive about addressing behavioral challenges.

One of the strengths of Royal Oaks Elementary is that it has essentially two separate behavior teams that collaborate together in weekly team meetings. The team consists of two school psychologists, two school counselors, two behavior intervention technicians, two behavior intervention aides, and two school social workers. In addition to their individual job responsibilities, they run groups, provide direct intervention, and provide parents with resources to support their children in the home setting. They also provide support to teachers who request it. They provide social and emotional support, but they cannot always be available to provide behavior support because there are more classrooms than there are support staff in the school.

Royal Oaks Elementary's challenge is serving the social and emotional needs of students with disabilities in the online program. There are more opportunities to build relationships with students when teaching students in person. These opportunities are often spontaneous and difficult to replicate online (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). Thus, opportunities to build social and wellbeing must be purposefully integrated into part of the daily classroom schedule. Students who are online learners may feel as if they don't matter (Vaillancourt et al., 2021); those feelings may be exacerbated by limited opportunities for socialization and relationships in virtual settings. It is

essential to build a classroom community based on trust and shared positive experiences in order to promote social and emotional wellness among online learners.

Further assessment can be conducted to determine the social and emotional wellbeing of students using surveys, interviews, and observations of online learners at Royal Oaks Elementary. Baseline data could be taken prior to starting professional development, and post- intervention data could be collected following six weeks of intervention. Data would be analyzed after all data is collected.

Action Plan

It is important for teachers to have knowledge about how they can support their students' social and emotional wellness in the classroom. When students are in school in-person, there are more opportunities to connect with students. Teachers can show them warmth and build trust from shared experiences spontaneously. Since there are fewer opportunities to build students' social and emotional development online, it is particularly important to create designated opportunities throughout the instructional day to support these needs. Giving teachers access to professional development will allow them to learn strategies to support online learners' social and emotional development. Allowing teachers to be proactive and be the first responders to classroom behavioral issues will forge deeper bonds with their classroom and will reduce the need to seek outside support. When teachers take the time to create learning environments where there is trust, warmth, and respect, a positive classroom culture is built. Safe and positive school climates and cultures positively affect academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students (Thapa et al., 2013). Following professional development, additional strategies and behavior data can be shared via a monthly email newsletter. This continued communication will

allow the support to continue and will serve as a way for all teachers to track the success of their classroom interventions. Additionally, data could be categorized to reflect incidents that involve students on IEPs, students in general education, and incident occurrence by grade level.

Students with disabilities may have additional needs that may impact their social and emotional wellness. Students with autism have impaired ability to engage or to create or maintain social relationships. Although in-person education for such students is ideal, it is not always an option for some students. Educating staff about strategies to support these students' individual needs may decrease behavioral issues that could arise in suspension. Strategies for supporting online student's social and emotional wellness can be found in Appendix A.

Teacher-implemented strategies for supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of students with disabilities in the online learning environment will create a more equitable and inclusive learning environment. Providing a safe and positive classroom climate will promote improvements in academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students. In addition to Educational benefits, children who are mentally healthy tend to be happier, show a greater motivation to learn, have a positive attitude towards school, and eagerly participate in classroom activities than their peers who are not mentally healthy (Ho & Funk, 2018).

Supporting the social and emotional development of online learners with disabilities will require a multi-layered approach and collaboration. Administration would provide opportunities for professional development and approval of a monthly newsletter. Support staff will provide professional development and strategies. Teachers will implement strategies, will share strategies with parents via Class Dojo, serve as advocates, and will remain in communication with parents to increase the effectiveness of the interventions. Parents will participate in communication,

advocate for their children, provide an environment conducive to successful online learning, and will frequently monitor their child for the duration of their online instruction. Collaboration between the school and the home environment will involve review of historical data, review of a parent survey (related to support needs and concerns), and a review of teacher survey (related to support needs and concerns). The aforementioned information would be reviewed in an amendment meeting where the IEP team would share their vision for support during online instruction (Frederick et al., 2020). Collaboration between home and school will likely result in the most meaningful educational benefit (Frederick et al., 2020).

In short, it is crucial for teachers to have the knowledge of how to serve their students' social emotional needs, especially for their online learners. Having this knowledge would allow them to create an equitable and inclusive learning environment, contributing to a positive classroom climate that will promote improvements in academic, behavioral, and mental health outcomes for students.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

The author of this school improvement project will create a professional development seminar to give teachers information about how social and emotional wellness presents in students, the additional barriers that children with disabilities may face when learning in an online environment, and strategies for promoting social and emotional wellness of students who learn online. The information and resources for the professional development seminar will originate from The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the American Educational Research Association (AERA), *Reclaiming Children and Youth Journal*, *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, Harvard EdCast, Techtrends, *National Association for*

Special Educational Needs Journal, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, the *European Journal of Special Education Research*, *Educational Technology Research and Development journal*, *International Journal of Pedagogy and Teacher Education*, *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, *Behavior Analysis in Practice journal*, *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *Journal of Educators Online*, *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, and *Occupational Therapy International*. Teachers will receive a handout with all of the strategies discussed during the presentation to keep in their classroom for reference.

In the professional development seminar, the author of this school improvement project will ask the participating teachers to write down the name of a student in their class that is on an IEP and is exhibiting behavioral challenges such as struggling to stay engaged, engaging in aggressiveness, not communicating, logging off before their class is over, muting their microphone, or turning off their camera during class time. One limitation during the professional development seminar is that the teacher may not have a student with a disability in class. If the teacher is not able to identify a student with a disability, they may choose a student without a disability who engages in the aforementioned behaviors. The author of this school improvement project will share what social emotional wellness looks like in students and share behaviors indicating that a student could be struggling with their social and emotional development. Once the teachers have their student in mind, they will write down the behaviors that the student is engaging in during class time. The presenter will then share information about additional barriers that students with disabilities may encounter as a result of participating in online instruction. Following this portion of the seminar, teachers will be asked to share what strategies they have implemented to mitigate some of these behaviors in their classroom. The last portion of the

seminar will be used to share strategies for promoting social and emotional wellness of students who learn online. The strategies shared with the teachers can be found in Appendix A. The professional development seminar's runtime will be approximately an hour, which includes 10 minutes at the end for questions or comments.

After participating in the seminar, teachers will choose at least two strategies from the professional development to implement with their student of focus for the next three weeks. Since the seminar will take place on a Monday, teachers will have until Friday of that week to complete a survey, where they will answer questions (related to support needs and concerns related to their focus student). Support staff and special education teachers will review the survey and will send a parent survey to the parents of those students. Support staff will then do a check in (phone, email, text, or conversation) weekly to support teachers' implementation of the strategy and collect data. In addition, support staff will observe the students and will report their findings in an amendment IEP meeting with the IEP team. This meeting will include sharing progress of the intervention through data analysis of the observational data and anecdotal data from teachers. It is important to use the surveys as soon as possible to drive teacher's accountability and buy-in (Davis, 2015).

After teachers have completed the interventions and participated in amendment meetings for their students, teachers will participate in one more professional development where they will share what strategies they used, how they implemented them, what worked, and what they struggled with. Teachers will complete a survey giving the author of this school improvement project feedback about what they liked, what they didn't like, what they would change, and any

additional comments and questions they may want to share. In addition, a monthly newsletter will be distributed to teachers, sharing strategies based on the analysis of student need (incident report on the district-wide data reporting tool called PowerSchool). As a result of participating in this professional development, teachers will have access to a multitude of interventions they can implement in class to support their learners' social and emotional wellness, creating a more inclusive and positive climate in the online program for students and teachers alike.

Conclusion

Promoting the social and emotional wellbeing of students has been an area of concern in the school setting for a number of years. However, in March of 2020, schools closed in order to minimize the spread of COVID-19, and children began to attend school fully online for a period of time. The pandemic forced schools to consider the implications of online learning on students. Students with disabilities were particularly impacted (Averett, 2021). A rise in tantrums, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation among young children during remote learning was reported by parents (Anderson, 2022). A study conducted by Vaillancourt et al., (2021), found that regardless of grade level, as a whole, students learning completely online felt like they mattered less compared to students who learned in person. Things that make children feel like they matter (relationships, connections, shared experiences, smiles, pats on the back, etc.) happen spontaneously in day-to-day interactions in schools. Though these gestures are not easily replicated online, teachers can select designated times to connect with students and use strategies throughout the school day to create inclusive, welcoming, and positive classroom climates to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of online learners. Teachers need professional

development aimed at serving the social and emotional needs of online learners. Purposeful professional development on strategies to help students with disabilities learning online with social and emotional development, followed by accountability and data collection, is likely to decrease unwanted behaviors and improve academic performance.

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Appendix A

The following strategies are evidence-based strategies that have been selected for their flexibility of use in both in-person and online environments. The strategies are separated into six themes and each theme has specific examples of strategies to support the overarching themes.

- Establish trusting relationships
 - Display a pleasant facial expression throughout the day (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Smiling during greetings in the beginning of class and at the end of class (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Acknowledge when students are displaying appropriate behaviors (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Using an appropriate pitch, tone, and volume of voice; remaining calm and warm to convey concerns with the behavior not with the student (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Use touch as appropriate (pats on the back, handshake, high fives) (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Use warm comments to show students that you care: “I am so happy to see you this morning” or “We missed you yesterday.” make sure to acknowledge all students in this way (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Take opportunities to build rapport with students (Frederick, et al., 2020).
 - Listen to students with your full attention.
 - Provide opportunity for parent training so that caregivers can provide more specialized support for students with disabilities (Averett, 2021).
- Teach social and emotional skills intentionally
 - Use books to teach social skills; have students identify the character's emotions and relate the character's experiences to their own (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Plan activities to work on social and emotional skills: Book Nook guides, created by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (<http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/strategies.html#booknook>), can be used to embed activities in daily classroom routines (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Coach on the spot; give praise and model appropriate behavior when appropriate (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Praise should not be a general “good job” but rather reflect exactly what the teacher is seeing immediately after the desired behavior occurs (Ho & Funk, 2018).
 - Implement simple, arts-based activities with students (Casciano & Jobson-Ahmed, 2019).
 - Allow students to explore activities and materials at their own pace (Casciano & Jobson-Ahmed, 2019).
- Model appropriate behavior

- Model appropriate, warm, and respectful behaviors throughout the day and offer reminders as needed (Ho & Funk, 2018).
- Use non-verbal reminders like thumbs up, nodding, etc. (Ho & Funk, 2018).
- Teacher-created videos demonstrating desired skills or behaviors where the student is the video model performing the skill at a level higher than his or her typical display (Murry, 2018).
- Use Google Docs to create e-books to teach social skills. Students can assist in the planning of these books (Murry, 2018).
- Provide cues
 - Provide verbal cues to help the student participate in activities. For example
 - Billy, who are you going to talk to during our chat break?
 - Visual cues could be used in person or online to show quiet, or help (Ho & Funk, 2018).
- Additional considerations
 - Communicate with the special education teacher (case manager) to ensure that all services are being provided to students (Frederick, et al., 2020).
 - Provide times to check in with parents and students (Frederick, et al., 2020).
 - Collaborate with parents and service providers to meet with students in person when possible, ideally once a week, even for a brief chat during material pickup days. In-person support should be offered to students with disabilities when feasible (Averett, 2021).
 - Allow students to provide multiple means of expressing what they learn (eg., video responses, audio recordings, presentations, illustrations) (Scott & Temple, 2017).
 - Give students multiple means of representing concepts taught (eg., videos, visual displays, audio recordings, PowerPoints) (Scott & Temple, 2017).
- Incorporate music whenever possible during class time.
 - When people enjoy music, it produces benign regulation and balance on the motor system, cardiovascular system, immune system, and endocrine system, making children feel happy and tranquil (Xia & Li, 2022).
 - Learning songs with educational meaning can help improve the abilities of children with autism in various aspects (Xia & Li, 2022).
 - Setting up a learning environment that encourages mind and body balance (meditation, yoga, exercise) (Kaplan-Rakowski, 2020).

Appendix B

Parent Questionnaire:

What is your experience with distance learning with a child with a disability?

When does your child meet with their service provider (e.g., special education teacher, speech therapist, physical or occupational therapist)?

How do you support your student during distance learning?

What are some of the specific challenges that your child is experiencing at the moment?

What concerns do you have for your child's education?

Appendix C

Teacher Questionnaire:

What are the challenges that _____ is experiencing during distance learning?

What are some of the interventions and supports that you have implemented to support this student?

For how long has this support been in place?

What support do you need at the moment?