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Social Emotional Learning in Early Childhood: A School Improvement Project

Madi Callan

Capstone Project: A School Improvement Plan

Northwestern College, Orange City, Iowa

Abstract

This article looks at how the implementation of a social-emotional curriculum can improve academics, behavior, and school climate at the early childhood level. The articles examine research from twenty research papers to communicate a need for a social-emotional curriculum and outline a plan for the implementation of a school-wide social-emotional curriculum.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, Academics, Professional Development, and School Climate

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Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood: A School Improvement Project

Social-emotional learning affects every part of a person's life to some degree because social-emotional learning is how all individuals acquire and apply the knowledge and skills to manage emotions, feel and show empathy for others, and create and maintain relationships. "Social and emotional skills encourage healthier lifestyles, enhanced life satisfaction, and safer societies," (as cited by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OEC 2015, in Chin Ng and Bull, 2018, p. 337). Because of this, social-emotional learning is not complete once a child finishes elementary school, middle school, or even high school. Rather, this learning will continue well into adulthood and throughout an individual's entire life. "Yet, as fundamental as emotion regulation is to all aspects of psychological development, the educational system remains woefully deficient in teaching children effective strategies for understanding and regulating their feelings and emotions," (Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 2012, p. 37).

While there is no set age for when a child should start learning social-emotional skills, the teaching of these skills should begin before the child starts school. "To be prepared for school, [...] they must be able to understand the feelings of others, control their feelings and behaviors, and get along with their peers and teachers (socio-emotional skills)," (Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 2012, p. 37). Social-emotional skills are difficult for children to learn and understand but the skills must be taught early in a child's life as they help improve academic performance, build character, and reduce dropout rates as these children advance in their educational careers. "As a significant portion of time each day is spent in preschool, teachers play a vital role in facilitating children's learning of social-emotional skills through

appropriate interactions and experiences,” (as cited by Pianta et al. 2005; Sylva et al. 2004, in Chin Ng and Bull, 2018, p. 337).

The need for social-emotional learning skills to be taught at the early childhood level is apparent at the Muskie Early Learning Center in Muscatine, Iowa. For this to be possible, the development of a social-emotional learning program for early childhood is necessary. The lack of a social-emotional program for the preschool students at the Muskie Early Learning Center impacts students as their ability to self-regulate, manage their emotions, and process those emotions is dependent on the social-emotional teaching children have received at home. This problem is extremely apparent with the three-year-old preschool students as most of them do not attend a daycare provider outside of school, and some are only children, so there is a wide variety in the level of skills students have been taught before beginning preschool. It also impacts the teachers and paraprofessionals working with the children as we see crucial time being taken away from academics and play-based learning, such as center time, to focus on these social-emotional skills. Unfortunately, there is not a consistent amount of time being devoted to these skills but rather simply as the need arises throughout the day. Therefore, some classrooms may be receiving more social-emotional learning than others depending on the needs of the different classrooms each day. “The improved teacher performance would influence classroom outcomes (e.g., structural and process quality), which, in turn, foster child outcomes (e.g., cognitive, language, literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional development),” (Yang, Huang, Su, Zhu, Hsieh, and Li, 2022, p. 5).

The purpose of this school improvement plan is to introduce the idea of a social-emotional learning program for early childhood students and will continue to build upon itself

as the children progress throughout three-year-old and then four-year-old preschool. The program would include language modeling to use with students to help develop their understanding of different emotions they may feel, how to manage these emotions, and how to appropriately self-regulate. This program would also include providing families with resources including similar language to use at home to not only further create and develop these social-emotional skills outside of the classroom setting but also further develop relationships with families by providing a team-like approach to best support the child.

Research for this project's literature review was conducted using journal articles available through the DeWitt Library at Northwestern College. All of the journal articles used were peer-reviewed and all of the articles, except three, were published within the past ten years. The authors focused on the activities currently being done in early childhood to support the development of social-emotional skills for preschool and kindergarten students. While there is social-emotional learning happening in early childhood classrooms, this scope of research allows us to consider the benefits of designing and implementing a detailed social-emotional learning program.

The belief is three-year-old preschool students at the Muskie Early Learning Center will develop strategies to appropriately self-regulate, language to appropriately express their feelings, and feel more confident handling situations with their peers. This change will happen because the teachers will use developmentally appropriate language modeling to teach the children how to express themselves and how to handle situations with peers as they arise. When children are taught how to self-regulate at an early age, they can build on those skills as they progress throughout preschool and their educational career; which, therefore, builds character and create and maintain relationships with peers and adults.

Review of the Literature

The Value of Social-Emotional Learning

In the study by Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson, and Tomasino (2012), the importance of social competence and social-emotional learning were discussed. According to the findings, children develop social competence at a young age and use these skills to self-regulate their attention, emotions, and behavior (Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson, and Tomasino, 2012, p. 37). Therefore, social competence is necessary for children to be successful both academically and socially as they develop and progress throughout their education. In other words, social-emotional learning is a fundamental skill in early childhood development and education.

In a study by Chin Ng and Bull (2018), strategies for facilitating social-emotional learning in early childhood classrooms were discussed to further develop these fundamental skills. The results of this study revealed teachers facilitate social-emotional learning by setting a positive tone, suggesting solutions to problems as they arise, task allocation to students, and the extension of student responses and comments. "The [early childhood] learning environment requires children to sit still, follow directions, engage in group play, and complete academic tasks," (Ching Ng and Bull, 2018, p. 337). For children to be successful in this type of environment, and to be able to demonstrate and/or complete these tasks, behavioral self-regulation and social-emotional competencies are necessary. This seems to indicate that social-emotional learning is a critical component in promoting children's engagement and success in the classroom.

Similar findings were uncovered by Oltean (2021) when researching the main factors of social-emotional learning in Russia. In this study, the focus was the cognitive and social-emotional development by "educating prosocial, desirable behaviors, self-control, and empathy," (Oltean, 2021, p. 177). Oltean found the social-emotional domain to have a major impact on the well-being, social

integration, and learning outcomes of the individual child (Oltean, 2021, p. 177). In other words, social-emotional learning is the backbone of development for children.

A study by Yang, Peh, and Chin Ng (2021) researched the need for social-emotional learning in early childhood based on teacher facilitation. "Children could be guided to think and regulate their emotions and behaviors appropriately to minimize negative physical or emotional reactions," (as cited by Arnott, 2018 in Yang, Peh, and Chin Ng, 2021, p. 200) through modeling of skills facilitated by a teacher. According to the findings, "emotional understanding and expression, positive coping behaviors and self-regulation are identified as positive social-emotional competencies young children should be equipped with," (Yang, Peh, and Chin Ng, 2021, p. 201). In other words, teacher facilitation of social-emotional skills supports and furthers the development of skills among early childhood students.

Parental Involvement

In the study by Dermata (2019), the benefit of parents using children's books to encourage social-emotional development in children was discussed. The study discussed how children's books, particularly picture books, can be used to develop empathy within young children. According to the findings, the children's explanation of what happened in the story was a combination of story elements and personal experiences. "A systematic content analysis of the picture books texts in combination with interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith et al., 2009) of the words used by children would provide a deeper understanding of how preschoolers perceive and interpret social-emotional skills," (Dermata, 2019, p. 158-159). In other words, when parents read children's books with their children and discuss the story elements, they are further developing their child's social-emotional skills.

Similar findings were also found by Garces-Bacsal, R. M. (2020) when researching diverse books to incorporate social-emotional learning in literacy instruction. In this study, the teaching of social-emotional skills "is positively associated with an increase in reading achievement (Ashdown and

Bernard, 2012) [and] better academic outcomes and performance (Mayer et al., 2008),” (Garces-Bacsal, 2020, p. 68). The results of the research revealed the books could be divided into five social-emotional learning categories including, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship management, responsible decision-making, and family engagement (Garces-Bacsal, 2020, p. 74). This seems to indicate there is a wide variety of children’s books to explicitly teach both literacy instruction and social-emotional skills at home or school.

The study by Frydenberg (2021) discusses the importance of developing parent programs to teach necessary social-emotional skills to both children and parents. The results revealed the program includes “the elements of the early programs, such as good communication skills, positive psychology principles, coping skills, and mindfulness,” (Frydenberg, 2021, p. 189). In other words, this program allows for the modeling and social-emotional learning happening in the classroom to also be supported at home.

In the study by Schonmoser, Karwath, and Gnams (2022), 532 children were rated by both one kindergarten teacher and one parent on their social-emotional competence in the areas of cooperative behavior, aggressive behavior, and emotional self-regulation. Each area was measured on a four-point scale from 1 = do not agree to 4 = agree. According to the findings, the ratings from the teacher had substantial loadings on the latent trait factors and the respective parent ratings were marked lower. However, the parent ratings showed substantial loadings on the method factors. In other words, teachers and parents do not rate children’s social-emotional competence the same.

Professional Development

The study by Chin Ng and Bull (2018), researched three factors, including group size, type of activity, and type of teaching opportunity (Ching Ng and Bull, 2018, p. 339) that impact the frequency and the nature of facilitation from teachers regarding social-emotional learning in the classroom.

According to the findings, smaller group sizes allow for more positive interactions, classrooms activity types included core lessons, outdoor lessons, mealtimes, and transitions, and lastly, concerning the types of teaching opportunities, planned opportunities to build communication and interaction with children increase instances to facilitate learning seemed to vital. These findings seem to indicate that professional development opportunities related to how to lower group sizes, how to create meaningful activity types, and how to plan for communication opportunities would be beneficial for teachers to facilitate social-emotional learning within their classrooms.

The study by Garces-Bacsal (2022) researched how diverse books allow students to identify themselves in the story, gain an appreciation for those who are different from them, and introduce social-emotional skills. Based on the findings, the books were divided into five categories to further teach those social-emotional skills, including books to target self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. In other words, diverse books can support social-emotional development in early childhood students.

Lam and Wong (2017) researched a study aimed at improving the social-emotional competence of kindergarten teachers in the East Asia region. The kindergarten teachers were trained for two months on how to enhance the social-emotional well-being of early childhood children and then assessed the children's social-emotional well-being through the Social Competence and Behavioral Evaluation Scale both pre-and post-intervention. According to the findings, "all three outcome variables yielded significant results with an increase in the mean social competence scores," (Lam and Wong, 2017, p. 10). This seems to indicate improving the social-emotional competence of kindergarten teachers will also improve the social-emotional well-being of young children.

The study by Yang, Huang, Su, Zhu, Hsieh, and Li (2022) researched 33 studies to determine the effects of coaching as a professional development tool for the instruction of early childhood teachers

and the developmental outcome of young children. The early childhood teachers were coached via on-site coaching and web-mediated coaching through the delivery of knowledge and skills, observation of teacher practices, feedback given, and discussions. According to the findings, “coaching was found effective on various teacher outcomes, including knowledge gains, the quality of teacher-child interaction, the quality of classroom environment, language and literacy instruction, and teacher confidence,” (Yang, Huang, Su, Zhu, Hsieh, & Li, 2022, p. 30-31). Coaching as professional development also proved to improve children’s development by improving language and literacy social-emotional development, and academic skills of the children they were teaching (Yang, Huang, Su, Zhu, Hsieh, & Li, 2022, p. 33).

Curriculum

The study by Connolly, Miller, Hanratty, Roberts, and Sloan (2018) researched how to create an adequate social-emotional learning program for preschool. The study focused on social-emotional learning interventions delivered on a whole-school or whole-class basis and aimed at improving social-emotional skills among preschool and primary school students. According to the findings, an adequate social-emotional learning program must aim to intervene early to address skill deficits and provide children with the social-emotional competencies they need for life (as cited by (Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010; Moffitt et al., 2011 in Connolly, Miller, Hanratty, Roberts, and Sloan, 2018, p. 1).

In the study by Gershon and Pellitteri (2018), the efficacy of four early childhood social-emotional curriculums was researched. The curriculums included Preschool PATHS, Preschool RULER, Incredible Years, and Al’s Pals and were evaluated based on the focus of the program, the target group, the context of delivery, the structure of the curriculum, and the strategies and techniques used within the curriculum. As the findings show, all four of the programs increased social-emotional skills, all of the programs, except for Preschool RULER, reduced conduct problems, and Preschool RULER increased

academic achievement. “Regarding the two major areas that are predictive of preschooler’s academic and social-emotional development, three of the four programs (RULER, PATHS, Incredible Years) have components of emotional knowledge/ recognition and all four have components of regulation/ self-control,” (Gershon & Pellitteri, 2018, p. 37). In other words, any of the four-emotional curriculums researched increase social-emotion skills among preschool students.

Similarly, eight social-emotional curriculums for preschool students were researched in the study by Joseph and Strain (2003). The programs researched include Social-Emotional Intervention for 4-Year-Olds at Risk, Living with Purpose: Self-Determination Curriculum, PALS: Developing Social Skills Through Language, AI’s Pals, Incredible Years, First Step to Success, Promising Programs, and PATHS and were reviewed in the areas of treatment fidelity, treatment generalization, treatment maintenance, social validity of outcomes, acceptability of interventions, replication across investigators, replication across clinical groups, evidence across ethnic/ racially diverse groups, and evidence for replication across settings (Joseph and Strain, 2003, p. 66). According to the findings, problem behaviors decreased from pre- to post-testing. In other words, each of the research curriculums proved to decrease problem behaviors in preschool students.

Yang, Peh, and Chin Ng (2021) conducted a study on how to support social-emotional learning in children through teacher facilitation of conflict resolution. The teachers implemented six steps for facilitating a preschool child’s conflict resolution and conduct pre- and post-tests through the HTT task, observational checklists, and event sampling. According to the findings, the children developed conflict-resolution skills and behavioral self-regulation. In other words, the teacher facilitation of conflict resolution to support social-emotional learning proved to be effective and would be a beneficial curriculum to teach additional early childhood teachers.

School Profile

School Characteristics

Muscatine Community School District is a public school district located in southeast Iowa, between Iowa City, Iowa, and Davenport, Iowa. The district is comprised of one early childhood center, six elementary schools, and a junior high and high school. The Muskie Early Learning Center serves all of district three- and four-year-old preschool programs offers a bilingual four-year-old preschool program, and houses the district's Parents as Teachers Program, a program that works with families in the home with children birth through age five. There are four three-year-old preschool classrooms, each having a morning and afternoon section, and nine four-year-old preschool classrooms.

Student Performance

Teaching Strategies GOLD is the assessment used for social-emotional learning at the Muskie Early Learning Center. Each age group has a specific colored band, green for three-year-olds and blue for four-year-olds identifies the levels that would be considered grade level for the age group. GOLD assessments are conducted three times a year, in the fall, winter, and spring. In the fall, students are expected to be towards the left side of their colored band, in the middle of the colored band at the winter checkpoint, and towards the right side of their colored band at the spring checkpoint, which is at the end of the year. Winter checkpoint was completed on February 27th and showed that while almost all of the three-year-old students were in the green band, only 72% of students were being leveled in the middle to the right side of their band concerning their social-emotional learning. Therefore, 28% of three-year-old students were falling in the correct color band but were still towards expected fall performance levels.

Student and Community Characteristics

The Muscatine Community School District serves Muscatine County which falls within city limits. The district also allows for open enrollment from neighboring districts and towns such as Fruitland, Iowa, Blue Grass, Iowa, Wilton, Iowa, and Letts, Iowa. As of the 2021-2022 school year, the Muskie Early Learning Center enrolled a total of 244 students, 109 male students, and 135 female students. The school makeup of race and ethnicity is 4 Asian students, 5 Black students, 68 Hispanic students, 15 students of two or more races, and 152 White students. 105 students qualify for free lunch and 18 qualify for reduced lunch.

Parent Involvement

The Muskie Early Learning Center uses Class Dojo to communicate with parents and families about upcoming events, student behavior, and concerns. Upcoming events are also posted on the school's Facebook page and communicated with parents through Parent Square. The Muskie Early Learning Center also offers parent-teacher home visits in August, before the school year starts, so the parents, teacher, para-educators, and child can meet before the year starts, along with parent-teacher conferences in both the fall and the spring. There is not a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) at the preschool level so the early learning center has developed a Family Engagement action team in place of a PTO. This action team plans fundraisers and family events throughout the year to increase family involvement, such as a Christmas light tour in December, the Night of the Young Child in April, and a Popsicle Party over the summer.

School Mission and Vision

The Muskie Early Learning Center's mission statement is "At the Muskie Early Learning Center, our team builds positive connections with students and families to promote personal success for all," (Muscatine Community School District, N.D.). The following commitments are provided to all Muskie

Early Learning Center staff and parents upon enrollment and are posted around the building “In preschool, we will be safe, be kind, and do our best,” (Muscatine Community School District, N.D.) The Muskie Early Learning Center also describes the curriculum used as being “designed to meet each child’s social-emotional, physical, and academic learning needs. It provides opportunities for students to learn in a play-based environment which supports whole-child development,” (Muscatine Community School District, N.D.).

Current Student Learning Goals

Every year, the Muskie Early Learning Center creates student learning goals in the areas of literacy, math, and social-emotional learning. The goal for literacy states “85% of 3- and 4-year-old students will demonstrate alphabet knowledge by meeting or exceeding the age-appropriate level of letter-sound knowledge (16b) as measured by Teaching Strategies GOLD Snapshot Widely-Held Expectations Report by May 2023,” (Muscatine Community School District, N.D.). The math goal states “85% of 3- and 4-year-old students will demonstrate knowledge of number concepts by meeting or exceeding the age-appropriate level of connecting numerals with their quantities (20c) as measured by Teaching Strategies GOLD Snapshot Widely-Held Expectations Report by May 2023,” (Muscatine Community School District, N.D.). The social-emotional goal states “80% of 3- and 4-year-old students establish and sustain age-appropriate positive relationships by meeting or exceeding the age-appropriate level of forming relationships with adults (2a) as measured by Teaching Strategies GOLD Snapshot Widely-Held Expectations Report by May 2023,” (Muscatine Community School District, N.D.).

Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment

The four-year-old preschool programs use Teaching Strategies Creative Curriculum and Engage New York Math to meet the needs of the students. However, the three-year-old preschool program does not have a set curriculum for math or literacy. The three-year-old teaching team worked together

to design a learning guide for math and literacy based on the topics assessed through Teaching Strategies GOLD. There are seven literacy topics and five math topics assessed so the team created a spiral review through these topics one math and one literacy topic are being addressed each week and each topic is taught a minimum of three times a year as we spiral back through the learning guide. Each classroom, both three- and four-year-olds, also supplements with Heggerty Phonemic Awareness daily. Teachers utilize Teaching Strategies GOLD three times a year to conduct observation-based assessments of students. Three-year-old teachers also utilize Get Set for School Math and Literacy assessments, while four-year-old teachers additionally utilize Get Set for School Math and IGDIs for literacy.

Professional Development Practices

The Muskie Early Learning Center has weekly Collaborative Teaching Team (CTT) meetings where all four of the three-year-old teachers meet and the four-year-old teachers are split into three groups of three to meet. During these meetings, teachers discuss challenges they see in their classrooms and what next steps can be taken to alleviate some of them. Most months, there is one early-out where all staff, teachers, and para-educators, have professional development learning. The next day is followed by a professional development day for teachers where they devote time to the specially designed instruction (SDI) framework.

Needs Assessment

The Muskie Early Learning Center needs to improve in the area of curriculum and instruction, specifically in the area of social-emotional learning. The Muskie Early Learning Center has social-emotional needs in the areas of emotional safety, school climate, and emotional regulation for both students and staff. The number of students exposed to trauma is rising, the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have caused social and emotional discrepancies among students, and the lingering effects have caused significant stress for teachers and staff in the building. Due to these discrepancies and increased levels of stress, the Muskie Early Learning Center needs to develop a social-emotional curriculum to build upon the social-emotional skills students currently have and work to put in the necessary support to meet students where they are.

Three- and four-year-old preschool are some of the first opportunities children have to be around other children outside of their own house and due to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff at the early learning center have seen a drop in the students who are beginning preschool with well-developed social-emotional skills. When a student is unable to regulate their emotions, an increase in behavioral challenges is often noticed, which has been noted by the staff at the Muskie Early Learning Center. According to the research of Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson, and Tomasino (2012), children who have well-developed social-emotional skills are more likely to have higher intelligence scores, better mental health, and can self-regulate attention, emotion, and behavior.

Data Analysis

Data Summary

The building has a goal that 85% of students will demonstrate alphabet knowledge (objective 16b), 85% of students will demonstrate knowledge of number concepts (objective 20c), and 80% of students will establish and sustain age-appropriate positive relationships with adults (objective 2b). The data from the Muskie Early Learning Center's winter checkpoint for Teaching Strategies GOLD indicates a need for change in curriculum. 100% of students were below the literacy benchmark for the winter checkpoint. Although they fell in the age level band, they fell to the left of the band, or within the expected scores for the fall checkpoint, where we would hope to see student scores in the middle of the age band during the winter checkpoint. An area of strength is mathematics intervention as 15% of students were at the benchmark score and 15% of students were above the benchmark score for the winter checkpoint. 40% of student scores fell below the winter benchmark, but were at the fall benchmark, while 25% of student scores fell well below the benchmark.

The data from the Muskie Early Learning Center indicates that social-emotional learning and emotional self-regulation for students are substantial areas of need among preschool students. The Muskie Early Learning Center's social-emotional goal for the 2022-2023 school year is that 80% of students will establish and sustain age-appropriate positive relationships with adults. As of the winter checkpoint for Teaching Strategies GOLD in February 2023, 35% of students were meeting this goal and were at the benchmark score. 35% of students were approaching the benchmark score and fell within the fall benchmark score; yet 30% of students fell well below the benchmark score. Below is the data from the winter checkpoint for Teaching Strategies GOLD. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, the students have each been assigned a subject letter for this data collection.

Literacy - Objective 16b – Alphabet Knowledge

16b. Identifies letter-sound correspondences.	Subject A Subject B Subject M Subject N	Subject C Subject D Subject E Subject F Subject G Subject H Subject I Subject J Subject K Subject L Subject O Subject P Subject Q Subject R Subject S					
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Math - Objective 20c – Number Concepts

20c. Connects numerals with their quantities.	Subject A Subject M Subject O	Subject B Subject E	Subject C Subject J Subject K Subject N Subject P Subject Q Subject R Subject S	Subject G Subject H Subject I	Subject D Subject F Subject L		
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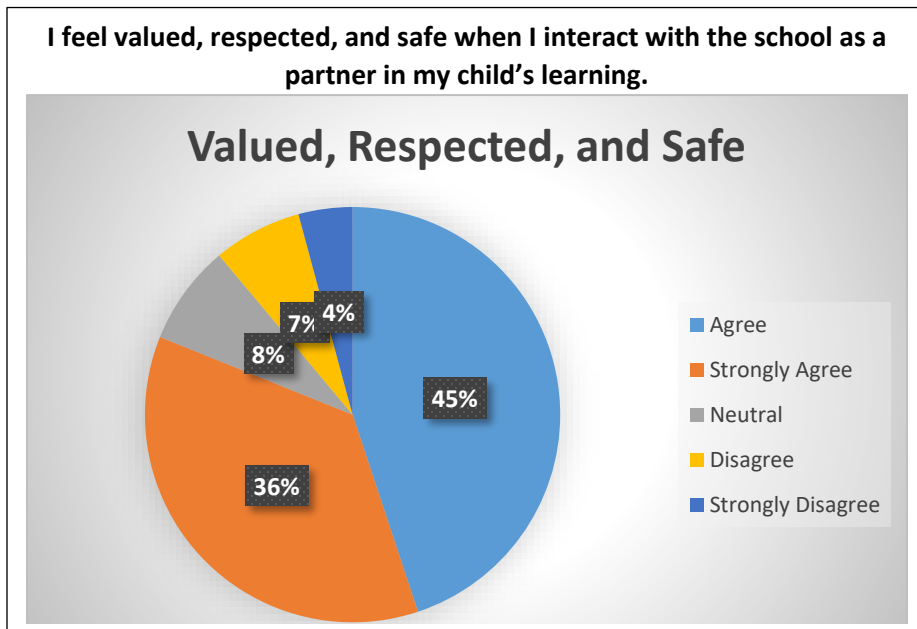
Social-Emotional – Objective 2b – Positive Relationships with Adults

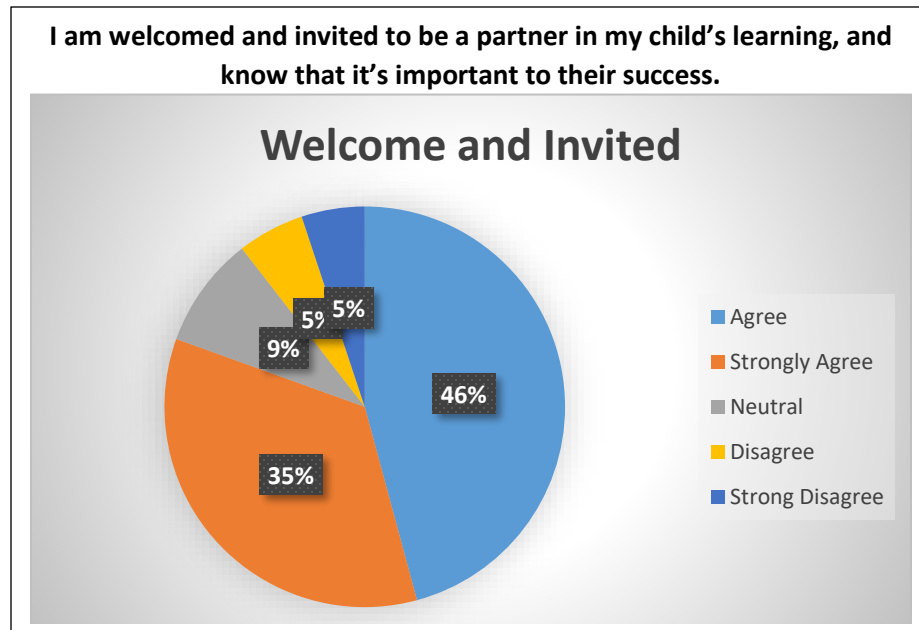
2c. Forms Relationships with Adults.			Subject A Subject M	Subject O	Subject E Subject P	Subject B Subject C Subject F Subject K Subject N Subject R Subject S	Subject D Subject G Subject H Subject I Subject J Subject L Subject Q
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School Strengths

The Muskie Early Learning Center’s biggest strength is building relationships with the families it serves. In the fall of 2022, a Desired Daily Experiences survey was sent to all Muscatine Community

School District employees and families. 81.1% of district families said they either agree or strongly agree with the statement that “I feel valued, respected, and safe when I interact with the school as a partner in my child’s learning,” (MCSD, 2023) and 80.5% of district families said they either agree or strongly agree with the statement that “I am welcomed and invited to be a partner in my child’s learning and know that it’s important to their success,” (MCSD, 2023). While it is unclear how many family responses were from those attending the early learning center, it is evident, and supported by the district data, that staff at the early learning center are building and sustaining relationships with families that are being maintained as the child continues their education with the Muscatine Community School District.





School Weaknesses

The winter 2023 checkpoint data from Teaching Strategies GOLD shows that social-emotional learning is a high-needs area regarding growth and development within the Muskie Early Learning Center. While 70% of students were approaching the winter benchmark score or had met the benchmark score, 30% fell well below the benchmark score. Assisting students in establishing and sustaining age-appropriate positive relationships with adults is an area that needs to be addressed to improve academics.

Assessment Options

To better understand the needs of students at the Muskie Early Learning Center, someone could survey teachers about patterns observed regarding concerns about student social-emotional behavior over the past three school years. These concerns could include both students receiving special education services that have been determined discrepant from their peers in this area and general education students that have shown social-emotional behavior concerns and/or discrepancies compared to peers since starting school.

Action Plan

Purposed Improvement Plan

The first task the Muskie Early Learning Center needs to complete is determining the comfort level each teacher has with social-emotional learning. The school cannot look at implementing a new curriculum if the staff is not comfortable teaching the given content. Because the Muskie Early Learning Centers houses both three- and four-year-old preschools, the developed social-emotional curriculum must be developed as a curriculum that can build upon itself and grow with the children as they move from three- to four-year-old preschool. The next step would be to have the building leadership team look at the professional development calendar for the school year and devote professional development time to training teachers and staff in this new social-emotional curriculum.

Multiple studies have found it crucial to have proper training for the impact of a social-emotional curriculum to be successful. Once the teachers and staff have been trained in what social-emotional learning looks like at the preschool level, the next step would be to have the instructional coach and principal work with each collaborative teaching team, or grade level team, and get teacher input on how the social-emotional skills can build upon each other as the students grow and progress through school. After designing an overview of what a social-emotional curriculum would look like as students progress through their time at the Muskie Early Learning Center, the next step would be to have the teachers start implementing the strategies they have learned within their classrooms for six weeks, with support and modeling from the instructional coach as they implement these strategies. The instructional coach will also conduct coaching cycles with teachers to ensure that fidelity is being met throughout implementation. At the end of the six weeks, the instructional coach and principal should meet with each collaborative teaching team again and discuss the new comfort level each teacher has with teaching social-emotional learning.

Impact on Teaching and/or Learning

Implementing a social-emotional curriculum will have a significant impact on the teaching and learning happening at the Muskie Early Learning Center. Teachers will need to set aside about 15 minutes for a social-emotional mini-lesson during their morning meeting. Once the skill has been taught during the morning meeting, it should be discussed and practiced throughout the day to ensure mastery. A curriculum that builds upon itself and follows the students as they progress through the Muskie Early Learning Center will also give teachers skills to try when misbehavior occurs, using language and strategies that are developmentally appropriate. Social-emotional curriculums have been shown to have a positive impact on academic outcomes (Ching Ng & Bull, 2018, p. 337) and directly relate to the competencies required for academic and social success (Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson, & Tomasino, 2012, p. 37).

Alignment to Research

The research shows that social-emotional learning and development are critical components of early childhood education. Connolly, Miller, Roberts, & Sloan (2018) support that there is a need for teachers to facilitate optimal social-emotional development within every child as it is necessary for learning and constructing knowledge. High-quality social-emotional curriculums provide children with the social and emotional competence linked to academic success (Joseph & Chin Ng, 2021, p. 65).

Summary

The purposed improvement plan for the Muskie Early Learning Center is to be completed in three main phases; the first phase will focus on a team approach to determine the readiness of implementing a social-emotional curriculum. Phase two will be training teachers on social-emotional learning and phase three will be coaching and support during implementation within classrooms. The three phases of the purposed improvement plan will help to improve the comfort level of teachers,

improve the teaching and learning happening at the Muskie Early Learning Center, and ensure the use of quality skills taught through researched based strategies. There will be additional work, preparation, and discussions between the instructional coach, principal, and teaching staff for the plan to be successful.

Implementation of School Improvement Plan

Introduction

When implementing a school improvement plan, there are a lot of important variables to consider including the time it will take to complete the improvement plan, challenges that could arise as the plan is implemented, and what roles everyone involved will need to make the school improvement plan the most successful. When considering the time it will take to implement this plan, it is important to allow sufficient training time for teachers and staff. If teachers and staff members are not given adequate time for training in the area of social-emotional learning, the improvement plan will be unsuccessful as the Muskie Early Learning Center staff will not be equipped with the necessary resources. Training and coaching for teachers throughout this process will help increase teacher readiness and comfort level for implementing this new social-emotional curriculum. The first step of this school improvement plan is training teachers which would take approximately six weeks of professional development training, depending on the availability of training dates, to ensure each teacher at the Muskie Early Learning Center is comfortable implementing this new curriculum. The second step of having collaborative teaching teams work with the instructional coach and principal to discuss how the social-emotional skills being taught will build upon each other will take eight weeks. Then, implementation of these new strategies, with support and modeling from the instructional coach, will take six weeks. Progress monitoring and collaborative teaching team discussions will happen for a minimum of two years to track any difficulties that arise, as well as any changes in behaviors and academics. This school improvement plan does have potential barriers including the need for approval from the principal and teacher readiness to implement the strategies.

Timeline

The total timeline for this school improvement plan would be two academic years. The first step in the plan is to determine teacher readiness where teachers would be sent a survey and given one week to respond. The principal would then spend one week looking over the responses from teachers and looking for any patterns shown in the survey results, while the building leadership team would spend two weeks determining professional development training days for social-emotional curriculum training. Teachers would then spend six weeks in social-emotional curriculum training. Once the teachers have been trained in what social-emotional learning looks like, at the preschool level, the principal and instructional coach would spend two weeks with each collaborative teaching team, so eight weeks total, to determine how the social-emotional skills being taught can build upon each other as the students progress through their time at the Muskie Early Learning Center. Teachers would then implement the strategies they learned within their classrooms for six weeks while the instructional coach conducts coaching cycles with teachers a minimum of once per week for six weeks to ensure that strategies are being implemented with fidelity. This part of the process would take one semester to start program implementation. Following implementation, coaching cycles, and progress monitoring would continue throughout the remainder of the academic year, and for the following two academic years, and then be re-evaluated as needed.

Role Clarification and Assignments

For the Muskie Early Learning Center to be successful in implementing a social-emotional curriculum, multiple people will be taking on additional roles and assignments throughout the process. The first portion of the plan includes the building leadership team, which is a group of teachers made up of one representative from each collaborative teaching team, the special education resource teacher, the instructional coach, and the principal. This team would design the professional development

calendar for the social-emotional curriculum training. The third portion of this plan includes each collaborative teaching team meeting with the principal and instructional coach to determine a hierarchy of skills being taught. These collaborative teaching teams are made up of groups of teachers divided by grade levels. The first collaborative teaching team includes the four three-year-old preschool teachers and then the nine four-year-old preschool teachers are divided into three groups of three to make up the other three collaborative teaching teams. Additional roles of the instructional coach and principal include attending and leading professional development trainings and supporting/ coaching teachers to help improve the implementation of the social-emotional curriculum. The teachers will be responsible for attending the trainings, relaying the information back to their classroom paraprofessionals, and implementing the new curriculum.

Progress Monitoring

Each teacher will take anecdotal records weekly to identify success and challenges with the curriculum, changes in behavior or academics, and to note any need for re-clarification. The teachers will bring these anecdotal records to their weekly collaborative teaching team meetings with the instructional coach and principal to discuss any patterns and determine any change over time. Teachers will submit an additional survey at the end of year one discussing their new comfort level with teaching social-emotional learning and the building leadership team will compare these survey results to those collected before implementation began. All collected data will be analyzed to determine the success of the social-emotional curriculum depending on growth in student academics and social-emotional behavior.

Limitations

The first potential limitation of this improvement plan is the time to adequately train all teachers and still have adequate time left in the current academic year to begin implementation.

Teachers will need adequate training to feel comfortable but also need adequate time to implement these new strategies and skills within their classrooms. Another limitation is the willingness of teachers to take on this new curriculum and devote time in their schedules to teach these new skills. If teachers are not implementing the social-emotional curriculum with fidelity, the results will not be reliable and will not align with what has been found in other studies conducted in this field.

Conclusion

Social-emotional curriculums and learning are greatly supported by research studies and provide multiple benefits of developing long-lasting relationships with peers and positive behavior and school climate. It was found by Bradley, Galvin, Atkinson, and Tomasino (2012) that young children who demonstrate social-emotional competence are more likely to have higher academic scores and positive self-worth. Chin Ng and Bull (2018) found that social-emotional competence directly affects an individual's relationships with others in the immediate environment and in turn, may impact the learning resources available. For a school to see these benefits of social-emotional learning, they need to implement a social-emotional curriculum with fidelity.

Three-year-old preschool is likely the first time children have been asked to follow a schedule, have such high demands put on them, and given so many explicit directions throughout the day. It is also possible that attending preschool is the first time some of these children have been out of the house and consistently away from their parents and siblings. Various research shows that social-emotional learning is a vital component of early childhood education and that a social-emotional curriculum can improve various areas of need observed within the Muskie Early Learning Center.

With the data showing that social-emotional development is an area of need for the students at the Muskie Early Learning Center, and the research supporting that a social-emotional curriculum has the potential to improve skills in this area, the development of a social-emotional curriculum would be a great asset. If this curriculum is implemented with fidelity, it will help raise student scores and also help students outside of school with the multiple benefits social-emotional learning has to offer.

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