

The Effects of Innovating an Evidence-Based Dual Approach to Teaching Social and Emotional Learning on 5th Grade Student Engagement

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Abstract

Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) spent over two decades researching the importance of social and learning (SEL). CASEL's (2020b) research revealed that the implementation of evidence-based SEL programs led to an 11% gain in student achievement, fewer behavior issues, reduced dropout rates, and decreases in mental health issues. SEL helps students thrive in school and life by teaching our youth to manage emotions, solve problems, and get along with others. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) reported millions of American children live with depression, anxiety, attention/hyperactivity disorders, behavioral disorders, or other mental health issues. Currently, school-aged children grappling with COVID-19-related trauma—including the loss of routine, reduced social contact, and the negative economic impact on themselves and their families—may benefit from a well-developed SEL curriculum and support system. This study describes evidence-based approaches for SEL, explores supports 5th grade teachers receive through partnered district and county office-run teacher education, disseminates findings of the perceived effects reported by personnel engaged in providing an evidence-based approach to teaching

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SEL, and informs future recommendations for implementing a comprehensive wellness program within the educational setting. Findings reveal SEL competencies are perceived to yield positive benefits to students and teachers. Data indicates the evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL is a vital component of student engagement and academic success. Social-emotional learning skills are found to increase emotional intelligence, foster a positive school culture, establish healthy relationships, and improve student engagement.

Keywords: social and emotional learning (SEL), trauma, student engagement

Introduction

"Mom, I don't want to go. My chest hurts. Don't leave me."

—4th grade student, April 2021

This is the heart-wrenching plea of a young girl clinging to her mother's waist. Returning to school can be stressful for any child, especially for young children living amidst the COVID-19 global pandemic. Worry, anxiety, and fear crippled this young girl's ability to self-regulate her emotions. Many school-aged children, like this young girl, were overwhelmed by returning to the classroom. Children worldwide experienced high levels of stress as the sense of normalcy was stolen from their lives, and the residual effects of a worldwide crisis wreaked havoc on school-aged students bombarded with ever-changing responsibilities. Throughout the pandemic, families were directly affected by the virus or by economic recession. With an unfamiliar way of living that impacted students' lives much longer than first projected, an added disruption was losing physical interaction with friends and teachers (Kamei & Harriott, 2021). Now more than ever before, students need social-emotional support when returning to school. It is imperative to provide school-aged children with social-emotional learning skills and support to navigate through this difficult time.

Social and Emotional Learning

While the concept of social and emotional learning (SEL) existed well before the onset of COVID-19, targeted missions of particular organizations who were already partnered with schools during the pandemic became paramount to supporting the overall well-being and success of students during school closures. As the goal of educators worldwide is to provide students with a well-rounded education and to support students to become productive members of society, partnerships with external agencies can prove helpful to accomplishing this

goal. One such agency is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) whose mission is:

To help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school. Our work is critical at a time when educators, parents, students, and employers increasingly recognize the value of SEL. Together, we are united in our call for schools to educate the whole child, equipping students for success in school and in life. (CASEL, 2021b, para. 2-3)

CASEL has spent over two decades researching the importance of SEL. CASEL's (2020a) research revealed that the implementation of evidence-based SEL programs led to an 11% gain in student achievement, fewer behavior issues, reduced dropout rates, and decreases in the areas of mental health issues.

SEL helps students thrive in school and life by teaching our youth to manage emotions, solve problems, and get along with others. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) reported millions of American children live with depression, anxiety, attention/ hyperactivity disorders, behavioral disorders, or a host of other mental health issues. Currently, school-aged children grappling with COVID-19-related trauma—including the loss of routine, reduced social contact, and the negative economic impact on themselves and their families—may benefit from a solid, well-developed SEL curriculum and support system. Students with strong social-emotional skills are better prepared to address daily challenges, make informed decisions, and build positive relationships.

Although schools are primarily charged with providing instruction to facilitate students' academic achievement, there is growing recognition among those involved in education that student social-emotional well-being is instrumental to academic success (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Extensive research confirms that social-emotional skills can be taught and measured, promote positive development, reduce problem behaviors, and increase student academic achievement. Findings indicated significant improvements in students' social-emotional skills and an average 11 percentile increase in academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). The specific findings noted by Durlak et al. (2011) indicate that SEL programs are associated with positive results such as improved academic performance, increased prosocial behaviors, decreased problem behaviors, lower levels of emotional distress, and improved attitudes about self and others. The research base continues to grow exponentially each year.

Thousands of schools nationwide have adopted and implemented SEL programs to promote academic and social-emotional outcomes

of children (CASEL, 2020a). Many of these frameworks share three distinct and interrelated dimensions: the learning context, students' SEL, and teachers' SEL. It is imperative that all three components are included, as each dimension influences and is influenced by the others (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Social-emotional skill development is most effective when taught in a safe, caring, supportive, participatory, and well-managed environment. Children and teachers who are actively acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage their emotions create a space where warm child-teacher relationships promote deep learning for all (Schonert-Reichl, 2017).

Due to the impact of COVID-19 on education, social-emotional concerns are predicted to become a rising problem, which directly affects student engagement. Yoder et al. (2020) noted that throughout the 2020–21 school year, educators, parents, and administrators across the country continued to cite social and emotional wellbeing as major challenges facing their students. Due to school closures and potential learning loss, school districts must increase teacher training and support and increase student support to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on student learning.

School Reopening & Student Support

In a review of school reopening plans due to closures caused by COVID-19, Yoder et al. (2020) stated that schools must be proactive in addressing trauma, such as isolation, economic hardship, and stress, caused by the current pandemic. Effective SEL instruction can lead to safe, caring classrooms in schools characterized by a welcoming school climate, positive relationships, effective teaching practices, constructive classroom management, quality learning experiences, engaged students, and reduced behavior issues (Merritt et al., 2012).

Disrupted learning between 2020–2022 took an emotional, mental, and developmental toll on school-aged children. Many students fell behind in their studies, suffered from a lack of peer interaction that helps develop crucial social skills, and missed out on big milestones. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2020), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2021), and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) (2020) provided guidance around varying decision points that school districts must make as they reopen. One clear message from all three entities is that student and adult social-emotional well-being is central to each decision. Supporting student and adult social-emotional competencies is a critical step in navi-

gating a global pandemic, and this step must not be overlooked (Yoder et al., 2020).

Emotions can advance or hinder children's academic engagement, commitment, work ethic, and ultimate school success. Students lacking social-emotional competencies are at risk of becoming disconnected from school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance. Extensive research shows that mastery of social-emotional competencies is linked to greater well-being and higher school achievement, whereas the failure to develop these skills may lead to personal, social, and academic problems.

In education, Roffey (2016) explained that student resiliency is nurtured through teaching social-emotional skills, building positive relationships with peers and teachers, working collaboratively with families, holding high expectations with clear and consistent boundaries, supporting student agency, and providing opportunities to participate and contribute to the school community. Additionally, Roffey (2016) argued that a whole-child, whole-school framework for wellbeing is the best way to support children through adversity. Schools that are effective at promoting overall well-being and positive behavior embed the core principles of resiliency and engagement in everyday practices.

Engaging students in their own learning has challenged educators for years. Seminal work from Finn (1993) stated that engagement in the classroom leads to academic achievement and contributes to students' social and cognitive development. Klem and Connell (2004) noted a strong empirical support for the connection between engagement, achievement, and school behavior. Over the last several decades, researchers exhibited a rising interest in the concept of engagement to increase student motivation and involvement in school events, to promote successful student achievement levels, to prevent student boredom, and to improve overall discontent with school (Appleton et al., 2008).

Engagement does not occur in isolation, as personal beliefs, positive student-teacher experiences, and the students' ability and motivation in their educational environment all affect student achievement. Teacher behavior and attitude along with an inclusive learning environment have a positive impact on student achievement (Finn, 1993). A growing body of research continues to explore the impact of engagement on student achievement, with data consistently indicating that teacher support and increased engagement enhances student academic attainment. Teacher support can be defined as academic or interpersonal support for students (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Research indicates that teachers are the most crucial factor in terms of influencing the achievement of their students. Klem and Con-

nell (2004) noted that students with caring and supportive interpersonal relationships in school report more positive academic attitudes and values, more satisfaction with school, and are more academically engaged. Lei et al. (2018) reported that several empirical studies specified that high levels of teacher support was significantly positively correlated with academic emotions such as enjoyment, hope, interest, and pride; conversely, lower levels of teacher support was significantly negatively correlated with academic emotions such as boredom, worry, anxiety, anger, and depression. Positive student-teacher relationships lead to improved student achievement, reduction in chronic absenteeism, long-term educational successes, and increased intrinsic motivation to learn (Lei et al., 2018).

Trauma Associated with COVID-19

Concerns about the global pandemic, worry and anxiety of contracting the COVID-19 virus, public health mandates, school closures, enforced quarantine periods, limited social interactions, and physical distancing may be traumatic events for young children. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2021) reported trauma is an emotional response to a dreadful event like an accident, sexual assault, or natural disaster. These experiences cause damage to the social-emotional and overall well-being of individuals due to the injuries suffered physically or emotionally (APA, 2021, para. 1). There are various psychological indications as a result of a pandemic. Cénat and Dalexis (2020) explained the following about trauma brought on by COVID-19:

From a mental health perspective, fears that family members or one-self may be infected, social isolation, significant changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the death of grandparents and other family members, parental job loss and multiple interpersonal traumas to which millions of youth are exposed are likely to have both immediate and long-term impacts. (para. 3)

A study conducted by Sprang and Silman (2013) investigated the psychosocial responses of children during global pandemics, specifically measuring traumatic stress responses from isolation and quarantines. The results of the study concluded that quarantine and isolation may be traumatizing to a significant percentage of children. Furthermore, Sprang and Silman (2013) noted the lack of psychological support to young children during and after the pandemic. During previous pandemics, the lack of mental health services for those affected by isolation and quarantines led to an increased risk of psychological suffering.

Traumatic events, such as isolation due to a worldwide health crisis, are emotionally damaging experiences that can cause long-term negative consequences on the overall well-being of an individual. Even though trauma affects each person differently, there are two areas in schooling most likely to be affected: classroom behavior and academic performance (Cole et al., 2005). The ability to self-regulate emotions and behavior is a pre-requisite in an educational setting. Many traumatized children struggle with considerable challenges that hinder progress in school. Traumatic experiences can deplete student motivation and academic engagement. Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) found that academic engagement is a powerful predictor of academic success.

Further studies on trauma-informed teaching practices recognize the need for trauma-sensitive schools. The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative declared the need for schools to address the negative consequences of trauma by providing a culture of inclusion and safety for all students (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI), 2016). A trauma-sensitive school embraces the paradigm shift required to ensure all traumatized students receive continuous support from all school staff (Flatow et al., 2015). Additionally, Flatow et al. (2015) stated that one of the core components of a trauma-sensitive classroom and school is that the focus is on providing a safe environment for all students, as well as implementing interventions to meet all academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. One of the main goals of teachers in a trauma-sensitive school is to avoid the likelihood of retraumatizing students with inappropriate classroom interactions, unaccommodating reactions, and obstructive procedures. The type of culture school leaders are trying to achieve when building a trauma-sensitive school culture is the same type of school that Hattie (2012) claimed was an effective school model. The effective school model described by Hattie (2012) was a school that embraced trust, empathy, and psychological safety.

Impact of COVID-19 Global Pandemic on Education

The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally disrupted schooling in most countries around the world, with young children affected by national and local school closures. According to Viner et al. (2020), the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization estimated that school closures affected 862 million school-aged children. When schools closed, a child's education became dependent on their home environment, which raised issues of equity and access to online learning. Distance learning placed a significant burden on families, requiring time, availability, and support of parents to monitor their

child's education. Around the world, time constraints, lack of confidence, and little familiarity of subject matter were barriers among parents during remote learning (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2020). School closures intensified already existing inequalities that contribute to educational achievement gaps.

Many working parents struggled to educate and care for their children. According to OECD (2020), the current concern is the fact that most parents were not professional educators, and many were unfamiliar with the academic content and educational strategies and tools needed to provide effective instruction. Parents were less likely to provide optimal learning experiences for their children; thus, learning loss and a lack of social-emotional skill development were exacerbated with school closures due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The COVID-19 global pandemic has negatively impacted young people's mental health and emotional well-being. When schools closed, there were many aspects of children's lives that were disrupted. The day-to-day challenges created by school closures included the loss of structure and support, the loss of routine, the loss of social connection, and feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and isolation (Nearchou et al., 2020). The impact of long-term disruption placed on young children's lives directly affected their mental and physical health. Research shows that when children are out of school, they are less motivated, have decreased physical activity, spend more time on screens, have more irregular sleep patterns, and less favorable diets (Brazendale et al., 2017). The adverse effects are likely to be worsened when safety guidelines result in children being confined to their homes with limited outdoor activity and restricted in-person interaction with peers and friends. A study conducted by Loades et al. (2020) evaluated the impact of social isolation and loneliness on the mental health of children in the context of COVID-19 and determined that there would be higher levels of anxiety and depression, both during and after enforced quarantine periods came to an end.

Research indicated that the physical and emotional distress on children was related to the new social situation due to COVID-19, which possibly introduced new difficulties to young people in addition to the developmental challenges of their age (Nearchou et al., 2020). Studies indicate that positive relationships with trusted adult(s) or engagement with community activities can serve as informal sources of help and support, which in turn help children cope with physical and mental health problems (Nearchou, 2017). Loades et al. (2020) reported that children who experienced enforced isolation in previous pandemics had increased mental health problems and presented higher

levels of posttraumatic stress. The uncertainty and stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic has had substantial harmful effects on children's physical and mental health.

Around the world, people recognize the traumatic times children were continuing to undergo as they navigated an evolving impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized SEL as a vital part of education: highlighting resiliency, relationships, and collective problem-solving as important elements to teaching and learning. As young children continue to be impacted by COVID-19 in a multitude of ways, experts and educators continue to realize that SEL is essential to re-engaging students, rebuilding relationships, and creating a foundation for academic learning. The concept of SEL is not new, but the current crisis has sparked a need for schools to take action. Educators must provide comprehensive support to address the social-emotional needs of children. Since the disruption caused by the global pandemic, research has continued on the importance of SEL to help children manage hardship in their lives.

Elevated Need for Social-Emotional Learning

In a recent study completed by Yoder et al. (2020), surveys were sent to CASEL's 45 state contacts, and responses were received from 37 states. Yoder et al. (2020) reported that 25 (67.5%) states mentioned that SEL was one of the top priorities apart from COVID-19, and 31 (83.8%) states said SEL has increased in priority since COVID-19 (with the remaining six saying it has stayed the same). Reporting states responded to the increasing need for social-emotional support through the following strategies: addressing mental health needs, including trauma and anxiety (89%), supporting adult social-emotional needs and mental well-being (81%), providing professional development for SEL (78%), and implementing social-emotional curriculum during school closures (73%). Furthermore, reporting states identified the top challenges for schools and districts: the need for more training within schools (51%), more trained staff on social-emotional within the school (46%), secure funding for SEL (38%), and lack of understanding of how to implement SEL strategies during distance learning (38%). The findings from Yoder et al. (2020) reveal the immediate need to define, coordinate, and disseminate social-emotional practices, as well as provide professional learning and support for adult social-emotional competencies, capacities, and wellness.

Student engagement is essential to academic achievement. Engaged students are focused and participate in class activities, contrib-

ute to class discussions, and show interest and motivation to learn (Fredricks et al., 2004). A key characteristic of student engagement relates to the teacher's ability to cultivate an emotionally supportive classroom climate (Battistich et al., 2004). The quality of social and emotional interactions in the classroom between and among students and teachers sets the tone for the classroom emotional climate. According to the *Teaching through Interactions Framework* (Hamre & Pianta, 2007), classrooms characterized with a high classroom emotional climate have:

1. Teacher–student relationships that are warm, caring, nurturing, and congenial.
2. Teachers who take their students' perspectives into account.
3. Teachers foster student comfort and enjoyment by regularly expressing warmth toward, respect for, and interest in students and by encouraging their cooperation with one another.
4. Teachers who are aware of their students' emotional and academic needs and respond to their students by choosing age-appropriate activities that both encourage self-expression and cater to their interests and points of view. (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 2)

Educators who foster a learning environment to include the characteristics listed above are creating a classroom that is psychologically safe for all students. In a study conducted by Reyes et al. (2012), findings were consistent with previous evidence that shows that when teachers create a sense of community, respond to students' needs, and foster positive relationships—all of which are indicators of a psychologically safe learning space—students become more engaged and enthusiastic about learning, leading to greater academic success.

Research confirms that there is a positive relationship between feelings of psychological safety and student engagement. Research shared by Edmondson and Lei (2014) proposed that when individuals feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to engage in self-regulated strategies such as asking for help, admitting and learning from mistakes, offering ideas, engaging in learning opportunities, and providing feedback to others. Further, Beigpourian et al. (2019) stated that a psychologically safe environment was shown to be vital for student growth because such an environment provides students with the opportunities to feel supported and confident to participate in their education.

With the issues facing children today, and most recently with increased needs caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic, the necessity for SEL skills is greater than ever. Global concerns shifted to the

overall social-emotional well-being of all adults and students. Students may have experienced trauma during school closures, ranging from being isolated from peers, losing a loved one, or living in an unsafe or unstable home to coping with family financial struggles or enduring greater stress than normal (Chambers et al., 2020). These potential adverse effects brought about by a global pandemic have highlighted the heightened need for SEL, interventions, and support.

Social-emotional learning helps students thrive in school and life by teaching our youth to manage emotions, solve problems, and get along with others. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021), millions of American children live with depression, anxiety, attention/hyperactivity disorders, behavioral disorders, or a host of other mental health issues. Currently, school-aged children grappling with COVID-19-related trauma—including the loss of routine, reduced social contact, and the negative economic impact on themselves and their families—may benefit from a solid, well-developed SEL curriculum and support system. Students with strong social-emotional skills are better prepared to address daily challenges, make informed decisions, and build positive relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic has a far more widespread impact on the everyday lives of children around the world than MERS, SARS, or H1N1 (Nearchou et al., 2020). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization estimates that school closures affected 862 million children, an estimated half of the global student population (Nearchou et al., 2020). The concern over the anticipated social-emotional impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and adolescents revealed a need for this study.

Methodology

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the effects of an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL on 5th grade student engagement during a global pandemic.

Research Questions

1. What are the perceived effects of an evidence-based approach to teaching social and emotional learning on 5th grade student engagement during a global pandemic?
2. What are the perceived effects of a California County Office of Education partnered wellness program on 5th grade social and emotional learning?

This study investigated the above two research questions utilizing a grounded theory approach while engaging purposive sampling to explore the perceptions of district and County Office personnel who provided services to 5th graders and their teachers within an evidence-based SEL curriculum, *The Toolbox Project* (n.d.), coupled with a county-run wellness program in three public elementary schools in Northern California. The implementation of wellness centers in a Northern California school district happened at an opportune time as The Mental Health Student Services Act Grant allowed the local county office of education, which oversees the district in which this school operates, to fund a wellness center on four campuses. In June 2020, during the COVID-19 school closures, the county office of education hired school-based mental health staff to provide a continuum of integrated mental health services within these four schools serving students in transitional kindergarten through Grade 8. Of these four schools, three were elementary schools serving students in transitional kindergarten through 5th grade, and one was a middle school serving students in 6th-8th grade. Staffing included mental health specialists and family support specialists to work at each school site, one project coordinator, and one clinical supervisor. These staff members led each wellness center project to provide on-site clinical intervention and prevention services such as individual counseling, group counseling, and other interventions to engage youth and family members.

Additionally, this study was conducted using convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Convergent parallel design is best used when the researcher wants to understand or develop a more complete understanding of the research problem by obtaining different but complementary data. “Convergent design occurs when the researcher collects and analyzes both quantitative and qualitative data during the same phase of the research process and then merges the two sets of results into an overall interpretation” (Creswell, 2014, p. 77). Convergent parallel design allows for both types of data to be compared and/or combined, resulting in an interpretation.

Population and Sample

The population for this study was limited to seven 5th grade teachers, three mental health specialists, two family support specialists, three elementary school principals, one director of student services, one assistant superintendent, and one superintendent from one school district in California. A questionnaire and a focus group interview protocol were designed to gather 5th grade school staff's beliefs and per-

ceptions regarding an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL and its effect on 5th grade student engagement during the 2020-2022 COVID-19 global pandemic school years. Both questionnaires and focus group interviews were selected in that, according to Kagan (1992), educators' perceptions affect academic success, students' awareness of their aptitudes, and learning environments. Probing questions were asked to clarify incomplete or unclear responses.

In the questionnaire, Likert-scale questions represented the quantitative data, and open-ended interview questions from the focus group represented the qualitative data. The questions were centered around student engagement and inquiring about staff perceptions of student engagement. Questionnaire respondents were invited to participate in a focus group interview through convenience sampling.

Findings

Section A of the questionnaire consisted of basic background information. Analyzing Section B of the questionnaire revealed an overwhelming majority of teachers support and believe in the academic and behavioral benefits of teaching social and emotional learning skills, as well as 100% of the school staff agreed that wellness centers support the development of children's social-emotional skills and promote social-emotional competencies for students. The questionnaire respondents predominantly reported that wellness centers positively complemented the SEL Curriculum, *The Toolbox Project* (n.d.), as well as wellness centers positively impacted student engagement.

Section C of the questionnaire revealed that most of the school staff feel positive about the effects of an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL on academic engagement and behavioral engagement. According to Greenberg et al. (2017), SEL can support a public health approach to education because "school-based SEL programs can improve students' competence, enhance their academic achievement, and make them less likely to experience future behavioral and emotional problems...[and] evidence-based SEL interventions in all schools—that is, universal interventions—could substantially affect public health" (p. 13).

In response to the open-ended question in Section D of the questionnaire, school staff reported overall positive perceptions of the effects of an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL on 5th grade student engagement, specifically academic engagement and behavioral engagement. Specifically for academic engagement, respondents shared that "without the wellness center as a place to take a break, I believe a lot of students would have a hard time learning in the class-

room when they are upset, tired, or frustrated”, and “wellness centers and *The Toolbox Project* have been essential elements to social-emotional well-being for students as they returned to school during a global pandemic.” For behavioral engagement, respondents noted that they “observed improvements in student behavior as related to SEL” and “the data [from the Wellness Center] shows that students are utilizing the centers and I’ve seen positive evidence of Toolbox Tools working to improve behaviors.”

During the focus group interviews, school staff were asked to share perceptions of the effects of SEL on 5th grade student engagement, to discuss the benefits of wellness Centers, to describe the effects of the district’s wellness programs on the development of social-emotional skills in 5th grade students, to list the necessary components for effective implementation, to describe the short-term and long-term benefits of SEL, and to share recommendations for implementation. All school staff emphasized the importance of students learning how to regulate emotions and learn better ways to handle issues inside and outside of the classroom. The school staff reported a noticeable improvement in student academic and behavioral engagement due to increased levels of emotional intelligence among students.

The research data revealed overall positive support for implementing a dual approach to teaching SEL skills in an educational setting. According to Gayl (2017), social and emotional learning is the missing piece to America’s education system for long-term success. The quantitative data revealed the majority of school staff agreed that an SEL curriculum coupled with wellness centers supports the development of children’s social-emotional skills and promote social-emotional competencies for students. CASEL (2013) concluded that educators help students develop social-emotional competencies through direct instruction of social and emotional learning skills and should use engaging resources. Melnick et al. (2017) recommended schools develop social, emotional, and academic competencies by promoting an inclusive climate that supports physical and psychological safety.

Participants agreed that their school expects teachers to address children’s social-emotional needs, and all teachers should receive training on how to teach social-emotional skills to students. CASEL (2013) agreed that schools should provide support through coaching and follow-up training. According to the quantitative data, 88% of the school staff feel confident in their ability to provide SEL instruction. Additionally, CASEL (2013) recommended teacher-focused SEL programs should train teachers to focus on positive discipline practices to be preventive rather than reactive. According to the data, 93% of

respondents expressed an interest in receiving training and improving their ability to teach SEL skills. Schonert-Reichl (2017) explained that teachers are the most important component of effectively implementing SEL practices in schools.

According to the teacher responses, 50% of respondents stated that students are unable to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in order to focus during class. Jones et al. (2017) argued that student learning increases when children are equipped with proficient SEL competencies to persevere during difficult times. “Young people’s abilities to manage their attention and feelings, collaborate well with others, show perseverance, build strong relationships, and learn from challenging experiences are the building blocks for future success” (Melnick et al., 2017, p. 1).

The qualitative data revealed commonalities among the participants in both the questionnaire and the focus groups. All participants were consistent with their support for implementing an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL skills. While coding the qualitative data, several themes emerged including support for students and staff, emotional intelligence, academic engagement, affective engagement, cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement, consistency, collaboration, and training.

While it was anticipated that the four types of engagement—academic, affective, cognitive, and behavioral—would emerge, the data is reporting that a dual approach to SEL has paved a solid pathway to improving students’ emotional intelligence. There were three significant findings centered around the themes of academic engagement, behavioral engagement, and emotional intelligence.

Academic Engagement

During the analysis of interview responses, the school staff noted that an evidence-based dual-approach to teaching SEL skills is beneficial for student engagement. Brotto (2018) noted that, according to ‘*Ready to Lead*,’ a report for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) based on a national principal survey on how SEL can prepare children and transform schools, there is data to support the importance of embedding social and emotional development in schools. The report cites a 2011 meta-analysis that found that students who receive high-quality SEL instruction have achievement scores on average of 11 percentile points higher than students who did not receive SEL instruction. The qualitative data revealed that the school staff stressed how often *The Toolbox Project* tools are used

throughout the school day and discussed the success in supporting students to reengage academically in the classroom. Johnson and Wiener (2017) stated integrating social and emotional learning skills into pedagogical approaches increases engagement in learning.

Behavioral Engagement

The analysis of interview responses revealed that an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL skills has positively impacted the students' ability to understand and manage their behaviors inside and outside of the classroom. One respondent noted that, "The Wellness Center bolsters supports for our students and gives them more opportunities to practice *Toolbox* and gain other skills." According to Melnick et al. (2017), "Students with strong social-emotional competencies contribute to a positive school climate because, for example, they are better able to peacefully resolve conflicts and to adhere to positive behavioral norms" (p. 7).

Emotional Intelligence

Marchesi and Cook (2012) defined emotional intelligence as the ability to recognize and comprehend emotions. "In this era of high-stakes accountability, educators are increasingly interested in exploring, developing, and applying emotional intelligence as a tool to increase student engagement and academic performance" (p. 2). When asked to describe perceptions regarding the effects of an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL on 5th grade student engagement, one respondent claimed that "overall, giving students the skills to reflect on and name their emotions is very important." Jones et al. (2017) defined emotional process as regulating emotions and understanding the emotions of others: "Without the ability to recognize and regulate your own emotions or empathize with others' perspectives, it's very difficult to maintain and focus attention (cognitive regulation) and to interact positively with others" (p. 51).

Implications for Innovative Design of Practice

This study resulted in valuable insight regarding the heightened need for an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL skills to be taught in schools to ensure students are emotionally ready to learn (Tate, 2019). Without necessary social and emotional learning skills, students can't be positive contributors to their academic success (Tate, 2019). The school staff who participated in this study offered similar,

supportive responses regarding the dual approach to teaching SEL. The vast majority of staff agreed implementing the evidence-based SEL curriculum, *The Toolbox Project*, coupled with a county-run wellness program, will increase academic engagement, foster healthy behaviors, increase levels of emotional intelligence, and promote long-term wellbeing. According to Gayl (2017), “SEL interventions can be powerful components of positive school change” (p. 1). The following implications for innovative design of practice provide guidance on promoting and sustaining an evidence-based dual-approach to social-emotional development in all schools.

Gain Adequate and Sustained Support and Funding

Based on the data collected in this study, schools should implement and maintain an evidence-based SEL program, coupled with a comprehensive program, in educational environments. According to the research conducted during this mixed-method study, the first step to establishing a dual approach to teaching SEL skills should be to gain support and funding (Hinton, 2021). Without adequate and sustained funding, schools can’t effectively train staff, provide resources, and purchase supplies (Hinton, 2021). The CASEL (2013) suggested state assistance for implementation should include resources such as curriculum, manuals, staff training, ongoing consultation, and productive feedback.

Every Student Succeeds Act, signed into law in December 2015, allows states and local education agencies to reassess current policies and goals in place for public education (Gayl, 2017). “This paradigm shift allows policymakers to develop comprehensive strategies that take into account all aspects of children’s learning and development, including social-emotional skills, that are instrumental for success in school and in life” (Gayl, 2017, p. 1). According to Melnick et al. (2017), Every Student Succeeds Act permits schools to expand their definitions of student success to include social-emotional skills.

Hinton (2021) stressed the importance of schools “broadening their SEL research vocabulary” (para. 6). Schools looking for funding should keep in mind the wide range of terminology that describes the many different aspects of SEL: school climate, school culture, social and emotional competencies, character education, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), resilience building, equity, and restorative justice (Hinton, 2021). Gayl (2017) reported Every Student Succeeds Act also allows for state discretion in how they allocate school improvement funds,

providing a potential funding source for SEL implementation. Additionally, Gayl (2017) provides another possible funding source, the new Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants program in Title IV, Part A, which ensures that all students have access to a comprehensive educational experience.

Select an Effective SEL Curriculum

Based on the data collected in this study, schools should implement and maintain an evidence-based SEL program, coupled with a comprehensive wellness program, in educational environments. The participants in this study encouraged school staff to visit other schools to see the curriculum and program in action. The CASEL (2013) recommended selecting an SEL program based on grade range coverage, classroom approach, assessment tools, review of material, training and support, program costs, and program evaluations.

Additionally, the participants in this study recommended staff need to be properly trained on integrating SEL within the classroom. Gayl (2017) added, “Students learn social-emotional competencies in the classroom when teachers model appropriate behavior and provide them with opportunities to learn and apply such skills” (p. 2). According to CASEL (2013), effective SEL programs include high-quality training for staff. The CASEL (2013) suggested that schools select a program based on student and school needs.

Collaboration Amongst the School, Families, Community, and Local Organizations

The data collected highlighted the necessity for the school to develop partnerships with the families, community, and local organizations, including the county office of education. The qualitative data revealed that collaboration and communication are key factors of successful implementation. Oberle et al. (2016) claimed system-wide strategies are equally significant to classroom-based programs when successfully implementing and sustaining SEL programs.

The whole-school approach to implementing SEL programs requires collaboration and support from all stakeholders within the community (Oberle et al., 2016). Community partnerships for SEL leverage relationships with external organizations or groups that have the potential to reinforce social and emotional skill development, whether the setting is during the school day, before or after school, inside the school, or out in the community. For some community partners, social and emotional learning may be a primary part of their mission, while

for others it may be a fortunate byproduct (CASEL District Resource Center, 2022). Borowski (2019) agreed to a comprehensive method of integrating SEL programs guides educators while developing a symbiotic relationship among school, family, and community.

Implement and Assess the Wellness Program with Fidelity

The qualitative data collected in this study highlighted the importance of school-wide implementation with clear communication and open collaboration among all stakeholders and across all partnerships. Jones and Doolittle (2017) advised schools to implement SEL through direct instruction, strong student-teacher relationships, positive classroom climate, and clear school expectations. CASEL (2013) claimed the effectiveness of evidence-based SEL programs is reliant on commitment and ongoing support.

Borowski (2019) noted that CASEL identified four focus areas of systemic implementation titled “The District and School Theories of Action”: (1) Build foundational support and plan; (2) Strengthen adult SEL competencies and capacity; (3) Promote SEL for students; and (4) Practice continuous improvement. Poor program implementation can hinder student achievement and negatively affect the program’s success (CASEL, 2013).

Borowski (2019) explained that teacher training is the top priority during the first year of implementation. Several participants in this study recommended that vocabulary used within SEL curriculum, and the qualitative data revealed the need for “crossover so that students are hearing the SEL vocabulary from the teacher, the school staff, and from the Wellness Team...it is universal.” CASEL (2013) identified essential elements of implementation including modeling SEL language and behaviors and administrative support to endorse SEL skills.

The readiness of a school is essential to the success of an evidence-based SEL program, coupled with a comprehensive wellness program. According to the CASEL (2013), schools must secure sufficient funds, hire adequate staffing, develop initial plans, create program goals, and implement ongoing progress monitoring and evaluation. Yoder (2014) noted adopting standards, such as the CASEL Framework, developing a curriculum with accountability measures to ensure consistency, and providing sufficient teacher training are critical factors to a successful SEL program.

Under Every Student Succeeds Act, Gayl (2017) asserted that local education agencies are required to share annual reports that provide information on state, district, and school performance. These data

points serve an important role in ensuring transparency for the educational outcomes and progress of all students. Additionally, these reports provide an opportunity for schools to shine a spotlight on learning that focuses on social and emotional competencies. Schools may use several sources of data (student surveys, attendance, suspension rates, observations of students and teachers, or school quality reviews) that assess practices within schools. The CASEL (2021a) stated the following:

As the field of social and emotional learning has evolved, a variety of helpful and important ways to assess students' social-emotional competence have emerged, including strategies for how teachers can monitor their students' progress on social and emotional development in the classroom, and how schools can assess quality of implementation. (para. 1)

This data can be a useful diagnostic tool for assessing the degree of student engagement, positive relationship building, and other factors. In addition to increasing public transparency, regular examination of these data can help school leaders to adjust planning and support to make sure that all students are making continuous improvement.

Recommendations for Further Study

The findings of this study highlighted additional inquiries worthy of further investigation including a dual approach to teaching SEL skills and attendance, a dual approach to teaching SEL skills and academic achievement, impact of school leadership on implementing a dual approach to teaching SEL, and the impact of a dual approach to teaching SEL skills post-pandemic.

Dual Approach to Teaching Social-Emotional Learning Skills and Attendance

During the Focus Group Interviews, participants discussed the effectiveness of the dual approach to a comprehensive wellness program and the positive impact it has on student attendance. One participant recognized that the "The wellness center has helped students re-engage with school and peers after being away due to school closures." Yoder et al. (2020) stated the following:

It will be important for states to work with multiple agencies and stakeholders, bringing in community support so the most vulnerable students have the academic, social, emotional, physical health, and mental health support they need as we return to school with potential ongoing distance learning and intermittent closures. (p. 9)

The impact of school closures and distance learning justifies the need

for additional research to determine the potential negative impact on student attendance.

Dual Approach to Teaching Social-Emotional Learning Skills and Academic Achievement

Based on the quantitative data from the questionnaire, 55% of respondents disagreed, or strongly disagreed, that students are able to meet or exceed grade-level standards in ELA and Math. The school staff expressed concern about school closures due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and the potential negative impact on student achievement. Yoder et al. (2020) stated the following:

The pandemic has caused isolation, economic hardship, and stress, creating a heightened risk for young people and adults to experience trauma. Although a traumatic experience, or set of experiences, is not necessarily associated with mental health problems, the impact of trauma can hinder academic success and lead to social, emotional, and behavioral challenges. (p.7)

Transitioning from a physical setting to a digital setting without prior planning presented several challenges for teachers, students, and families. The impact of school closures and distance learning warrants future research to determine the potential negative impact on student learning.

Impact of School Leadership on Implementing and Sustaining a Comprehensive Wellness Program

Based on the qualitative data responses, two of the three schools included in the study had a new principal for this school year. The dual approach to teaching SEL skills is an essential component at all three schools; however, participants expressed the need for strong principal leadership for the program to succeed. One participant noted, “The curriculum and the [Wellness] Program do not demonstrate effectiveness unless there is a strong leader to model, hold [staff] accountable, and provide structure and support.” The variation vindicates future research to determine effectiveness of a dual approach to teaching SEL and to document differences among schools based on the school leaders’ support and involvement with the program. According to Kendziora and Yoder (2016), even minimal implementation of SEL programs progressively improves school culture, social-emotional competencies, academic achievement, and behavior.

Impact of a Dual Approach to Teaching Social-Emotional Learning Skills Post-Pandemic

During the Focus Group Interviews, participants discussed multiple benefits reaped from the evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL competencies. One participant shared that the comprehensive Wellness Program is “not only beneficial to students, but it is also beneficial to staff...we have resources, counseling, and early intervention for all.” Additionally, the quantitative data revealed that 100% of respondents strongly agreed, or agreed, that Wellness Centers support children in developing social-emotional skills. “It is critically important to position evidence-based SEL programming and practices as a universal, Tier 1 support because of how it can help to cultivate positive development, resiliency, and well-being, with long-lasting outcomes for all young people” (Yoder et al., 2020, p.7). As the pandemic transitions to an endemic, the importance of SEL right now continues to be at the forefront of education as we heal from a pandemic.

The negative impact of trauma caused by the global pandemic may be lessened with the explicit teaching of social-emotional competencies and universal interventions, which may decrease the academic, social-emotional, and long-term health effects for students. As the world continues to respond to the global pandemic and tremendous social upheaval, an evidence-based dual approach to teaching SEL is necessary for student success in school and in life.

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