

The Relationship Between Implementing Universal School-Based Social-Emotional Learning
Programs and Behavioral Changes, Academic Achievement, and Social Functioning

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Introduction and Problem Statement

Social and emotional skills are crucial in child development considering these skills lead to the foundation of achievement in later life. The discovery of social-emotional learning became imperative when educators began to observe an individual child rather than just a cognitive mind that must meet the standards of an academic hierarchy. Social-emotional learning lends itself to be embedded in diverse classrooms with children who develop in various backgrounds and provides children the opportunity to guide themselves into their identity and strengthen their skills in all aspects of later life. In addition to the benefits of social-emotional learning programs for students, educators receive the improvement of teaching methods and practices for students due to the foundation that is being developed within the classroom in an early childhood development stage.

However, the problem is that there is little data that suggests possible changes in students' academic achievement, classroom behavior, and social functioning as a result of teaching positive affective strategies in a fifth-grade elementary classroom in a Central Texas school. The problem exists due to the immense amount of pressure students receive based on state standards they must achieve in their academics at a young age and in addition to at-risk environments that children are immersed in at such a young age. The purpose of this study is to determine if implementing universal school-based social-emotional learning programs by encouraging positive affective strategies with a group of fifth-grade students will enhance positive behavioral changes, academic achievement, and social functioning as evidenced by increased motivation and productivity, enhanced social and emotional competencies, reduced negative behaviors, and growth in academic achievement within the classroom.

Research Questions

Key Questions

1. What data, as collected in this study, provides evidence that encouraging positive affective strategies with fifth-grade students may change behavior, academic achievement, and social functioning?
2. What data, collected in this study, reveals possible challenges and processes encountered by an educator/researcher when implementing positive strategies?

Supporting Questions

- What is a key component when implementing a universal school-based social-emotional learning program?
- What are the characteristics of an effective universal school-based social-emotional learning program?
- How often should positive affective strategies be implemented within the classroom?
- Should the universal school-based social-emotional learning program be embedded in the classroom or be considered a pull-out program?

Literature Review

Embedding effective social-emotional learning programs within a school district is proven to enhance the academic achievement for all students ranging from pre-K – 12th in all academic subjects. All students identified with different labels within the education system who are immersed in a classroom with a social-emotional learning program benefit from its teaching methods due to the results of positive engagement and reduced behaviors. Additionally, students begin to learn positive behaviors such as increased self-esteem, and motivation, and promote effective problem-solving skills. Studies have found that implementing a social-emotional program within a school district can improve student academic achievement in all subjects by

creating a standard effective social-emotional learning intervention with specific characteristics that hone focus on the child rather than seeing the child as just a student who objectively needs to meet academic standards of a school district (Corcoran, Cheung, Kim, & Xie, 2018).

When childhood educators implement social and emotional curriculum lessons within a classroom, results proved that children had an overall improved social-emotional competence as it develops the foundation for a child's well-being and academic achievement. Long-term benefits occur for young children when universal mental health prevention programs are utilized appropriately within a public school system. Social and emotional curriculum lessons help students improve on positive behavior, academic achievement, and social functioning in daily interactions in the community. Researchers found that utilizing and teaching explicit and direct instructional practices three times a week from a social and emotional curriculum lesson such as You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program (YDCI) can maintain a positive effect of reduced negative behaviors and academic achievement for lower achieving students (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012).

Encouraging universal school-based social, emotional, and behavioral programs within a classroom can have an overall positive effect on any child, especially children identified with an at-risk environment. Students who are identified with at-risk environments generally have a challenging time with social, emotional, and behavioral skills due to the lack of support that they do not receive at home. With these universal school-based social, emotional, and behavioral programs, children receive guidance to enhance their skills in all aspects of social-emotional learning. Researchers have found that school-based universal social, emotional, and behavioral programs impact these skills with the results of academic achievement, attitudes towards self, prosocial behavior, and reduction of antisocial behavior. These effects were prominent within the children when educators went beyond cognitive instruction by connecting activities with

objectives related to skill development and focused on social and emotional learning rather than targeting positive development (Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravestijn, 2012).

Promoting social and emotional learning programs within a classroom can effectively encourage children in not only social and emotional competencies but also in emotional regulation that leads to reduced economic and social burden in adolescent life which builds a foundation in social functioning. Regarding social-emotional learning within the classroom, these positive effects have proved to increase the self-esteem of students which allows them to participate in positive decision making which can lead to beneficial and productive futures in adolescents later in life. Researchers have found that educators and administrators who promote school-based social-emotional learning programs such as KoolKIDS, provide an appealing approach for children to become engaged in the process of developing social and emotional competencies which can lead to academic achievement and social regulation which affects social functioning (Carroll, McCarthy, Houghton, & O'Connor, 2020).

Enhancing students' social and emotional competencies is crucial when encouraging students in social functioning and academic achievement. The educators' and administrators' role in teaching social-emotional learning through the SEL curriculum or programs is imperative to student success when promoting positive behaviors for social functioning and academic achievement. Incorporating lessons on emotions and emotional-related content within the existing curriculum for 5th and 6th grader aids in achieving school goals and increasing academic performance in a diverse set of students within the classroom. Researchers have found that educators and administrators who focus and invest in non-cognitive skills such as emotional and behavioral benefits, can lead to an effective increase in academic success, quality of relationships

between educators and peers, and productivity in the workforce that promotes motivation, perseverance, and self-control (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2010).

Academic achievement is prominent in a student's academic career when there is a student-teacher relationship present within the classroom. When educators invest in student relationships and create a motivational environment within the classroom, they can have a massive impact on the students in the social and emotional aspects of functioning due to the presence and encouragement of the educator. Students who are identified with at-risk environments tend to have a challenging time with relationships due to the lack of social and emotional support that is not provided at home. Researchers have found that when educators immerse themselves in daily student-teacher relationships, academic achievement is promoted due to the engagement of the student during lessons based on the trust that both the educator and student had developed (MacDonnell, McClain, Ganguli, & Elias, 2021).

Implementing social-emotional learning programs within a classroom not only enhances the social functioning of a child but also improves academic achievement in terms of academic motivation and performance. Students immersed in at-risk environments and those identified with special needs struggle with academic achievement and social interactions which leads to behavioral issues within the classroom. Social-emotional programs teach students to improve their social skills to participate in daily interactions with other individuals. Researchers found that their social-emotional learning program, School Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Programme (SSIS-CIP), encouraged academic achievement and the student's overall well-being. To maintain this positive outcome, educators must teach and assess ten important social skills using an instructional approach via SSIS-CIP (Davies, Elliot, Frey, & Cooper, 2021).

Providing social and emotional learning services to students has proved effective in the increase of academic development, social skills, and student-teacher relationships. Additionally, social and emotional learning opportunities reduced negative behaviors within the classroom. Educators and administration play a crucial role in social-emotional learning intervention to promote a positive environment of mutual respect, effective conflict resolution, and violence prevention all while obtaining engaging academic instruction. Researchers have found that there were positive associations between universal SEL services and academic achievement along with social skills when a social-emotional learning program such as Head Start was present in a general education classroom with students who were identified with low-income families (Zhai, Raver, & Jones, 2015).

Research Methodology

Site Selection

The school is considered a Title I in a suburban area that includes a 5th-grade classroom in a public elementary school in Central Texas. The socioeconomic status is predominantly low class and the study consists of a general education classroom with students that live within 1-10 miles from the school.

Project Participants

The study has a total of nineteen students in a 5th-grade general education classroom. Eight of the nineteen participants are identified with at-risk environments; two of them are identified with both individualized education plans and behavioral intervention plans, four of them are identified with just individualized education plans, and two of them are identified with 504 plans. Eight of the nineteen participants are identified as gifted and talented; one of them being identified with an individualized education plan. Three out of the nineteen participants are identified with

504 plans; two of them are identified with at-risk environments. All participants have exhibited a regress in academic growth based on MAP assessments and benchmark assessments provided by the school district. In addition, participants have shown regression in emotional regulation based on behavioral intervention plans and further documentation from prior years of being enrolled in the school. The school has to increase academic achievement among these students along with increased social and emotional functioning skills. The school varies in race and ethnicity; in order from highest to lowest is Hispanic, White, African American, two or more races, Asian, and Pacific Islander. The socioeconomic range is 61.4% economically disadvantaged and 8.4% are emergent bilinguals. (The Texas Tribune, 2021)

Research Ethics

Permission will be sought from the school district, principal, and the parents/guardians of the students being observed before the study is conducted. Permission slips (Appendix A and Appendix B) will be provided to all fifth-grade student's parents/guardians as the permission slip will explain the purpose of the study and the ethical practices that will be utilized during this study. Parents/guardians will receive the results after conducting the study. In addition, the permission slip will seek parent/guardian permission to observe students in their natural classroom environment. Participants' names will automatically be anonymous to protect the safety of their identities.

Data Gathering

Data will be gathered from previous and current student assessments and benchmarks to gauge academic achievement, observational field notes, parent/guardian surveys, student samples of assignments, daily check-ins, and teacher reflective journaling. Before the study, data on students' academic progress will be collected from previous assessments, benchmarks, and

previous year's grades. Field notes will be created as students are being observed in their natural environment of education after the implementation of a universal social-emotional learning program as they interact with their peers and teachers within and outside of the classroom. I will monitor the students and engage with them throughout the day by asking them questions about their emotional well-being, positive behaviors, academic growth, and social interactions with other students. These field notes created by observations of students in their natural environment in a public education setting will then be reviewed, evaluated, and will be incorporated into my reflective journaling. This reflective journaling will include both a description of the responses the students provided and my reflection on students' social engagement with others, their behaviors, and social functioning. I will utilize a parent survey (Appendix C) at the beginning and end of the study to determine the growth of the student. The parent survey will provide data regarding parental beliefs on students' emotional competencies, social functioning, and behavior.

Data Analysis

Observational field notes, descriptions from a reflective teaching journal, student assessments from the previous year and current year, current student sample work, and parent/guardian surveys will be the products of this study. Qualitative data will be analyzed into recurring themes and ideas, and patterns. Some patterns I expect to observe are positive decision-making regarding behavior, positive social interactions between peers and teachers, and emotional regulation inside and outside the classroom.

Archival data collected from previous student assessments will be utilized to generate a baseline of academic abilities for each student before conducting the study. Student academic assessments conducted towards the end of the study in addition to student sample work will be used to compare the students' academic growth. Classroom observations will be reviewed and

evaluated by reflective journaling. This provides analyzation of information into categorical themes throughout the study. I will finalize a report based on the data collected during the study to ensure the analysis of the data upholds validity, reliability, and dependability within the study.

Timeline

The data collected for this study will be done over a nine-week grading period to allow enough time for growth in positive behavior, social functioning, academic achievement, and emotional regulation. For the first three weeks, there will be observations of behavior, social functioning, academic achievement, and emotional regulation before the implementation of a universal school-based social-emotional learning program. Each week, social functioning, behavior, academic achievement, and emotional regulation will be observed and noted.

Before the study: Seek permission from the school district and principal. Communicate with the fifth-grade team the purpose of the study and their roles in the observation data collection. Determine a fifth-grade class that will incorporate the universal school-based social-emotional learning program. Obtain documentation of signatures from teachers who will aid in conducting the study and include the program for observation.

- Week 1: Send home permission slips and surveys for parents/guardians. If a parent/guardian declines, permission slips and surveys do not need to be returned.
- Week 2: Observe students' behavior and social interaction in class as soon as permission is granted (before the social-emotional learning program). Register results of parent surveys in the journal.
- Week 3: Observe students' academic growth in class (before social emotional learning program). Record class observation notes in a journal. Record fellow teachers' observations.

- Week 4: Observe students in class after the implementation of the program. Record class observation notes in a journal. Record fellow teachers' observations.
- Week 5: Observe students' behavior after the implementation of the program. Record class observation notes in a journal. Record fellow teachers' observations.
- Week 6: Observe students' social interactions with other peers and teachers after the implementation of the program. Record class observation notes in a journal. Record fellow teachers' observations.
- Week 7: Observe students' social functioning after the implementation of the program. Record class observation notes in a journal. Record fellow teachers' observations.
- Week 8: Observe students' emotional regulation after the implementation of the program. Record class observation notes in a journal. Record fellow teachers' observations.
- Week 9: Observe students' academic growth after the implementation of the program. Record class observation notes in a journal. Record fellow teachers' observations.
- Week 10: Send the same parent/guardian surveys home with students who participated in the study. Record fellow teachers' observation notes in a journal.
- Week 11: Convert observational notes into cohesive charts and transcribe data.
- Week 12-13: Analyze data and finalize conclusion.
- Week 14: Finalize report.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Dear _____,

I am writing today to request permission to conduct a research study in my classroom. This study will reflect on a small group of students in my classroom over a nine-week grading period. I want to study the use of a universal school-based social-emotional learning program and observe its results regarding academic achievement, positive behavior, and social functioning. Please see the attached form for the consent form I will distribute to students if approval of the research study is given.

I hope that you will allow me to conduct this research study. All information will be kept confidential. If approval is given, the parent/guardian of the student participants will complete a survey. I will observe the students throughout the school day and take notes.

At the end of the research study period, I will gather my notes and detail my findings in a paper. If I decide to publish these findings, I will keep all participants' information confidential and anonymous. I feel this research will not only help me as an educator help my students but might also help other educators. No costs will be incurred by the school or the study participants. Your approval to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated. If you give permission, please sign below, and return the signed form.

Sincerely,

Dani Herrera

Approved by:

Print your name and title, then please sign and date.

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Dear Student,

Throughout my time as an educator, I have come to see areas in my teaching where I would like to research ways to better help my students. I am researching a universal school-based social-emotional learning program and observing its results regarding academic achievement, positive behavior, and social functioning. At this time, my research is exclusively for determining how I can better help these students in the classroom stay on-task and hopefully see an increase in student academic performance and behavior. However, there may come a time when I would like to publish my research to give other teachers a chance to benefit from the findings of this research. If this is the case, I would like to include the questionnaires and observations I collect. Please know all information collected throughout the research study will remain confidential. If you have any questions about this research study, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Dani Herrera

Please sign and return this portion:

I, _____, consent to take part in an observational research study over the course of nine weeks.

- ☐ I do permit to be observed in school for this research study.
☐ I do not permit to be observed in school for this research study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C

Parent Survey

This is the parent data collection portion of my research project. This information will be confidential. After my action research is complete, I will have you fill out the same survey again to see if there are any changes. I will share all results with you. I appreciate you taking the time to fill this out! Thank you!

*** Required**

Follows house rules *Shows respect for others. *

1 2 3 4 5

Never shows respect ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Always shows respect

Has self-control over their actions. *

1 2 3 4 5

No self-control ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Always in control

Follows directions the first time given *

1 2 3 4 5

Follows Directions (1st time) ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Needs multiple reminders

Able to self-regulate *

Able to calm themselves down and cheer themselves up when upset

1 2 3 4 5

Easy to self-regulate ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Difficult to self-regulate

Is depressed (or sad) *

1 2 3 4 5

Never ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Always

Shows anxiety *

towards school, friends, family, etc.

1 2 3 4 5

Never ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Always

Shows empathy for others *

1 2 3 4 5

Concerned more with their own
feelings
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Always shows
empathy**Your child's social life ***

1 2 3 4 5

Has no friends or only 1
friend
☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Has many good friends and
acquaintances**Your child's emotions ***

1 2 3 4 5

Hardly ever cries or does not cry

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Cries often

What is your child's name? *

Submit