

## Call for Action: Reflecting Values to Implement Social-Emotional Learning in Early Learning

by Min Hwangbo — July 05, 2018

In February 2014, the My Brother's Keeper initiative (Administration for Children and Families, 2014) emerged as an initiative to address persistent opportunity gaps among students of color so that all young people can reach their full potential. The report (2014) also described the negative effects of suspension and expulsion, including its potential to hinder children's social-emotional, behavioral, physical, and cognitive development and preventing underlying disabilities or mental health issues from being addressed. There is an endless amount of information and recommendations on this topic, but how do we know which strategies, indicators, guidelines, policies, and practices are relevant to the children, families, and school leaders in a specific context? The right data and decision-making tools can help schools and districts identify and implement programs that work for the populations they serve.

### WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW?

Implementing effective social-emotional learning intervention strategies is one of the key ingredients in creating a high-quality early learning environment for children (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2017). The preschool years are a valuable time for helping students build the social and emotional skills that will support them in participating successfully in the classroom community. However, due to the structure of our early learning system, we still suspend and expel even the youngest students. This prohibits the child from becoming a part of the learning community and contributes to the opportunity gap among certain populations. The Office for Civil Rights data center (2014) presented the following information on these issues.

4,401 preschool students in the United States public school system received one or more out-of-school suspensions in the 2013-14 school year.

- Among these 4,401 students, male preschool students were three times more likely to get suspended than female preschool students.
- 2,140 of these students (48.6%) were African-American, which was a considerably higher percentage than any other racial group.
- In the same school year, 127 students were expelled in the system.
- 64 (50.3%) of the 127 expelled preschool students were from African-American, Hispanic, or Latino families.

It wasn't surprising to see our state officials immediately list this issue at the top of their policy agenda. The Collaboration for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning/CASEL (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017) reported that all 50 states' early learning systems have a variety of guidelines, frameworks, competencies, learning goals, and standards regarding social-emotional development:

- Creating a classroom environment conducive to social-emotional development.
- Supporting students' social-emotional development through teaching practices.
- Designing a culturally and linguistically appropriate and relevant classroom.

The indicators above are considered state-level guidelines for our district leaders, principals, and teachers. Yet, to implement practical strategies at a district or program level, sufficient data, a theory of change, and clear steps should be available to all actors, including families within a system, so they can link its program- or district-level processes to teacher-level practices, which will eventually lead to child-level outcomes.

### REFLECTING VALUES AND IMPLEMENTING SEL INDICATORS

If you are a member of an early learning program or district, think about the following questions before we discuss any further issues on social-emotional development (revised from Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2017):

- What data do you currently collect in your program or district?
- How do these data help you to make decisions and develop systematic implementations of intervention processes to promote social-emotional development?
- How do the data collected reflect your own beliefs, your teachers' beliefs, and families' beliefs? Do these data align with the values of your program or your district?

When you look for these data sets, you likely find the following elements from the state-level agency. The National Center for Children in Poverty (Isakson, Davidson, Higgins, & Cooper, 2011) suggests the following indicators of social-emotional support at a state level:

- Percentage of parents of children under age six who are screened and referred for depression.
- Percentage of children under six who receive developmental and mental health screenings.
- Percentage of early care and learning environments that have access to ongoing health or mental health consultation.
- Percentage of programs with good or excellent ratings on the social-emotional component of classroom assessments in state quality improvement initiatives, such as the state Quality Rating System or Quality Rating Improvement System.
- Rate of children under age six who are suspended or expelled from programs due to behavioral problems.

- Percentage of children birth to age six in out-of-home placement (foster care) that had no more than two placements in a 24-month period.
- Rate of substantiated cases of child abuse and neglect among children birth to age six.

Implementation of system-wide social-emotional learning practices should exist as a continuum rather than an all-or-nothing, one-size-fits-all construct (Durlak, 2015). It is common among districts or programs to conduct fidelity assessments to ensure the fidelity of such practices. Damschroder and Hagedorn (2011) refer to fidelity as delivering the active ingredients of an intervention (i.e., curriculum, training, consultation, professional development, etc.) that are crucial to producing intended effects (i.e., improvement in children's social and emotional developmental outcomes).

#### FIDELITY IS NOT ENOUGH

However, focusing just on intervention fidelity may not address what's happening during the process (Hunter et al., 2015). Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI) with actionable goals and plans, which focuses on the process and quality of practice, will provide a better picture of the impact of your program (Meyers et al., 2012). Meyers and his colleagues (2012) provided an example of a CQI process evaluation using the Quality Implementation Tool (QIT).

Six core components exist in the QIT model (Meyers et al., 2012). These include developing an implementation team; fostering a supportive climate and conditions; developing an implementation plan; ensuring training and technical assistance; collaborating in implementation as a practitioner-developer relationship; and evaluating the effectiveness of the implementation (p. 485). Among these six components, I believe the practitioner-developer relationship should be considered the key ingredient to initiate the process. And in this relationship, multiple actors exist, such as practitioners, specialists, support staff, administrators, community partners, and decision makers. As I mentioned in the beginning, these actors struggle to find relevant resources or activities that could potentially bring success to the system. In addition, it is important to understand whether these actors know how to link relevant resources to the families that are part of the system. What if we had a "cultural broker" or a "family advocate" as Kingdon (1995) suggests? Can we theorize that these advocates could use different types of claims or data to not only convince our audience (in this case families), but also identify the best information to provide decision makers?

I believe in the power and good intentions of our early learning system. However, I am concerned that we are focusing simply on the use (or not) of the data or information available for social-emotional learning strategies. We must also consider how we use these data sets to inform practices at a program/site level so that these practices reflect the culture of the families we serve.

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