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THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BY
RYAN M. NESVOLD

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BETHEL UNIVERSITY

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN MENTAL HEALTH AND THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF
SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Ryan Nesvold

May 2020

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Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to my wife and my soon-to-be-born child, for giving me the motivation to better myself for our family.

Abstract

Students across America are struggling with mental health issues and their ability to maintain adequate performance in school. Teachers pass them in the hall without ever noticing that they might be suffering. They wear a smile on their face, and never give any attention to the fact that they need help. As a result, students are failing, becoming socially withdrawn, and experiencing behavior changes.

In today's classroom, teachers are using Social-Emotional Learning to address an overall well-being of students. In order to adapt teaching methods to meet the needs of students who might be struggling with mental illness, teachers need to adapt their methods. There have been numerous benefits for students who have been introduced to Social-Emotional Learning in the classroom.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Research

In my years of teaching, I have witnessed students who struggle with mental health and I have seen the effects it has had on their academic performance, behavior, and overall well-being. I have first-hand experience struggling with mental health issues and the topic of mental health is an interest of mine that should be heard by those interested in promoting social-emotional skills. More specifically, I am interested in learning how we, as teachers, can adapt our methods to meet the needs of the students who might be struggling.

After being invited to join my school culture and equity team, I was briefly introduced to Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) (CASEL, 2019). I immediately became drawn to this way of teaching that allowed teachers to focus on the well-being of students. Currently, two staff personnel are using Social-Emotional Learning in our school. The health teacher at our school began using this approach when she noticed her students getting test anxiety. Our school social worker stepped in and created a survey for students to participate in. The survey was created with four questions: How stressed do you feel about school?, What is your biggest stressor at school?, and How do you cope with stress? The survey results indicated that at least 28% of students often feel stress or anxiety most days (5 out of 7 days)(Kothrade, 2019). The next result indicated that tests and quizzes were the biggest stressors at school with 52% of students agreeing. The final result indicated that students cope with stress by talking with a friend or trusted adult, exercising or playing sports, engaging in artistic ways of expression, overeating, and using drugs and/or alcohol. After the results were measured, the school social worker did a

calming classroom activity with the students and followed up with another survey, asking if they felt less stressed after the activity. It was found that 83% of the students said the activity helped them feel less stressed. Overall, the survey found that almost one-third of students were experiencing stress and anxiety everyday at school and the majority of those students found that a 2-minute stress relieving activity benefited them in the classroom.

By focusing on social-emotional learning, students benefit in their overall performance at school (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011). I have only had a glimpse of what Social-Emotional Learning has done through personal experiences on the job, and I want to educate myself on the foundations of what the learning entails. I would like to learn more in order to find out if this is something that would benefit students at my school and whether this is something I could encourage other teachers to try in their classrooms as well.

The Current Mental Health of Adolescents

A large number of high school students are faced with mental health challenges in today's school systems (Oldenbring, 2017). High school is a pivotal time in students' lives and it fosters vital development that is needed to become a successful adult. Suldo, Thalji-Raitano, Kiefer and Feron (2016) found that "adolescents develop their academic and social identities through meeting the demands of high school" (438). Adolescence is a time of becoming more autonomous, and often students will struggle with this. This is a time of self-discovery and figuring things out on their own, and some students need more support than others in order to successfully accomplish this (Nicolai, Laney, Mezulis, 2013).

An alarming number of youth with unmet mental health needs in the US is a significant social problem (Powers, Edwards, Blackman, and Wegmann, 2013). Along with this statistic, the

number of high school students with a disability measured that almost half of them (48%) are experiencing some sort of mental health issue (Poppen, Sinclair, Hirano, Lindstrom, Unruh, 2016). As a special education teacher who supports students on Individual Education Plans (IEP), this number is quite alarming to me. Based on these statistics, the majority of the students I support on IEPs are struggling with some sort of mental health issue. I believe that by doing research in Social-Emotional Learning, I can support their issues more effectively.

According to Odenbring (2017), studies show that an increasing number of students are struggling with various forms of anxiety and need to seek out therapy. The key term is that mental health is “increasing” among adolescents in high school. This leads me to believe many schools do not have a proactive, or effective program available to students who are suffering. Given these data have been increasing, high schools are developing teaching strategies, such as Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in order to benefit students’ overall performance in school.

The Effects of Mental Health on Students

High school is a vital time to examine the relationship between stress, mental health, and how it affects students (Nicolai, Laney, Mezulis, 2013). As a special education teacher, I have witnessed the effects of mental health on students in regards to classroom behavior, social skills, and academic success. I’ve seen students who reach their breaking point in class, and destroy classrooms or physically harm another student because they cannot rationalize their feelings at that moment. Some students will shut down and become socially withdrawn from all their teachers and peers. When a student shuts down their brain, they do not have the capacity to take in any new information. The stress and anxiety students face during school, reduces their overall functioning, and negatively impacts their ability to perform academically (Nail, et al, 2014).

Students who do not have the coping mechanisms to deal with stress and anxiety not only shut down, but may also react with aggression. As educators, we need to learn to teach in a way that prevents students from reaching that point of withdrawal or aggression. According to Nicolai, Laney, and Mezulis (2013), students would benefit from learning coping mechanisms to a variety of stressors that trouble them. These researches stated, “Adolescents who are capable of referring to multiple positive coping strategies in response to a wide variety of events may be more resilient in the face of stress during this developmental period, and into adulthood” (p.1192). If teachers were to create a classroom environment where students felt calm and safe, they would be more likely to improve their overall performance.

Social-Emotional Learning

Definition

Dowling, Simpkin, and Barry (2018) define Social-Emotional Learning as “learning programs that aim to provide students with the skills they need to deal with life challenges, thereby enhancing their social and emotional wellbeing, academic outcomes, and reducing their risk of mental health difficulties.” (p.405)

Students often learn in collaboration with their classmates, their teachers, and with the support of their families. Their emotions during adolescence can determine their academic performance, work ethic, and overall success in school (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011). It has been proven through research that learning programs such as this can benefit student’s academic success and overall well-being.

Effects of Social-Emotional Learning

It comes as no surprise that stress and anxiety are impacting adolescents throughout high school and their everyday lives. Whether the root of the anxiety comes from stressors in school, or dealing with stressors outside of school, students need to be made aware of coping strategies and resources available to them. Current findings suggest that Social-Emotional Learning programs have had positive effects on students' attitudes about school, others, and themselves. The programs also helped students' behavioral issues regarding conduct and internalizing problems. The biggest take away from the programs was that it increased students' academic performance on grades and achievement tests (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011).

Social-Emotional Learning has been proving its worth in schools all around the world. It's been shown to decrease behavioral issues, and has proven to boost academic performance. Mental health can hinder and impede students' ability to exceed and meet their full potential. I believe this way of teaching not only helps students cope with their stress and anxiety, but it helps the overall morale of the school. If this research continues to show advantages, I look forward to becoming an advocate for Social-Emotional Learning, and would like to provide resources and teaching tips for anyone interested in creating a learning environment where students can perform to their best of their ability.

Purpose of Thesis

With mental health issues on the rise in today's high schools, many students are struggling to meet the demands of academic performance. As educators, we have valuable resources to offer students who need extra help. These resources come in the form of developing

Social-Emotional Learning in the classroom. Through my initial research, I found information that could possibly make a difference in the lives of many students who are battling mental health issues. Much of the information that I will be discussing in my research will hopefully lead to educators promoting a classroom environment where students are able to increase their overall performance. I want to answer the following questions: How does mental health affect school performance? What strategies or curricula exist to combat the negative effects of mental health? What impact does Social-Emotional Learning have on students?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

To locate the literature for this thesis, searches of Academic Search Premier were conducted for publications from 2010-2019. This list was shortened by only reviewing published empirical studies from peer-reviewed journals that centered around the connection between mental health and the positive effects of social-emotional learning. The key words that were used in these searches included “social-emotional learning,” “effects of mental health on students,” “relationship between anxiety and school performance,” “current statistics on mental health,” and “curriculum.” The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on social-emotional learning in three sections in this order: The Effect Mental Health has on School Performance, Strategies and Curricula Used to Combat Mental Health, and The Positive Effects of Social-Emotional Learning on Mental Health.

The Effect Mental Health has on School Performance

“The alarming number of youth with unmet mental health needs in the US is a significant social problem” (Powers, Edwards, Blackman, & Wegmann, p.651, 2013). These unmet needs are affecting adolescents’ ability to perform in school. Several researchers have studied the effect of mental health and how it relates to school performance.

Oldenbring (2018) looked at high school students who are suffering from mental health and using drugs as a form of self-medication to combat these issues. The study was conducted through a combination of interviews and making observations of students’ well being from nine different urban high schools; however, the study draws on the data of the two most significant cases of students’ well being. The qualitative study was a combination of observations from

previous team meetings that met once a week, and interviews with school personnel. According to the research, “students who were suffering from different forms of mental health problems tried to find their own solutions to the problem” (371). Students who use drugs or antidepressants as a way of dealing with their issues, will not cope with the reality of school because they feel happy. In one of the five interviews conducted, the teacher explained that they could not reach many of the students in class due to a suspicion of drug use. As a result, the class was shut down for the day as a concern for safety among the remaining students and staff in the room. In another interview, the school nurse mentioned a student sleeping in class, and when she approached her she would not respond to her attempt in waking the student up. When the student woke up, they began acting very rowdy and yelling. This interview suggests that students who are using drugs as a solution to their mental health issues are experiencing unpredictable behaviors and it can be a safety concern in the classroom. In another interview conducted with a local police officer, he mentioned that students begin smoking cannabis and later become depressed and have trouble sleeping. They go to the doctor and are prescribed antidepressants, which also has an effect on their mental health because they feel happy and they are not coping with their problems at school. The study reveals that more adolescents are using drugs to escape their mental health issues. Society has a responsibility to meet the needs of students who are struggling with their wellbeing, and it’s vital that schools are given the necessary resources to help them (376).

Nicolai, Laney, and Mezulis (2013) researched students from three urban high schools and looked at how different stressors and strategies can have various outcomes in relation to depression. The study consisted of using a 8-week diary that asked 111 high school students aged

14-19, about their most stressful events during the week and then they rated their depressive symptoms. When students mentioned that they felt stressed, they dealt with their feelings by employing maladaptive responses such as rumination and co-rumination. The results showed that adolescents' response to stress in social and dependent events were "differentially predictive of depressive symptoms" (1192). Researchers found that students who tried to combat these feelings with maladaptive strategies were at higher risk for developing depression. Also, students who used coping responses such as rumination, co-rumination, or had negative cognitive appraisals about different stressors were also at higher risk for depression. The study reveals that depression can be predictive upon how students deal with their stressors.

This study also helps to highlight which students are at higher risk for depression. Nicolai, Laney, and Mezulis suggest that adolescents would be able to benefit from learning a variety of coping strategies that combat stressors that are important to them (1192). Students who try to find solutions to their stressors by themselves, end up engaging in maladaptive strategies that negatively affect their mental health. It's important that students are aware of positive coping strategies they can use when they are faced with stress. If and when students are presented with stressors, they can refer to effective coping strategies that make them more resilient to stress, and more successful in school.

Nail, et al (2014), examined the data of 488 primarily caucasian youth and how anxiety disorders affect academic performance and whether treatments impact functioning. Twenty-five percent of students were from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The Child Anxiety Impact Scale-Parent version was used to assess the relation between anxiety and academic impairments. The test looked at seven areas of academic impairment: completing assignments, concentrating

on work, doing homework, getting good grades, giving oral reports, taking tests, and writing in class. The results showed that students with anxiety disorders had academic impairments in 6 out of the 7 categories. Overall, the results showed that anxiety reduces overall academic functioning, especially in the areas of concentrating on work and giving oral presentations.

Nail, et al (2014) also examined how treatment for anxiety affected academic performance. The results showed that students who received treatment for their anxiety demonstrated “fewer academic difficulties at post-treatment” (339). Treating anxiety with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and medications, often leads to improved academic functioning. Given this information, schools should work towards finding solutions to helping students with strategies to improve academic impairments such as concentration and giving oral presentations. Special education evaluations are also in place for schools to assess students for anxiety who are struggling academically to rule out ADHD or a specific learning disorder.

The Effect on Adolescents with Disabilities

Haft, Duong, Ho, Hendren, and Hoeft (2018) compared anxiety between students from private San Francisco Bay area schools with a learning disability (LD) and students with non-LD. There were 48 participants ranging in ages 9-16 with a specific learning disability (SLD) compared to 33 non-LD. The participants were given the BASC-2 (Behavior Assessment System for Children Second Edition). This test is typically used to assess emotional and behavioral issues in students and the self-reporting anxiety scale has solid validity and reliability when looking directly at anxiety. The results indicated that students with a learning disability experience considerably higher anxiety than other students. Students with a specific learning disability struggle with academics and social stressors based on their disorder, and this may

cause them distress (493). If anxiety is specific to students with a learning disability, there is the question of whether it is due to struggling with academics or the stigma that goes along with being labeled as a student with a learning disability.

Nelson and Harwood (2011) also collected data on 1,788 students with learning disabilities and compared their depressive symptoms to students with non-LD. Participants for the study were found through searching three databases for applicable studies. Students with learning disabilities (LD) are a particular group of students who have long been associated with increased risk of depression. It's important to study depression among students with learning disabilities because of the impact it might have on the well-being of the student. The biggest impact of depression among youth, is suicide. Along with suicide, depression has a destructive impact on cognition and academic performance (373).

In order to determine the results, Nelson and Harwood (2011) examined scores from 31 teacher and parent reports. Due to the nature of depressive symptoms among students with a learning disability, any student who is being assessed for a learning disability, should also be assessed for other needs, which may include depression. It's important to stay on top of mental health issues in order for each student to have opportunities to address their issues before it affects their performance at school.

Although the previous two studies explored the effects of anxiety on students with a learning disability, Poppen, Sinclair, Hirano, Lindstrom and Unruh (2016) take a look at students with disabilities who are transitioning to adulthood. The study consisted of a national survey sent out to 648 educational professionals from 49 states to collect data on transition age students regarding mental health, behavioral issues, and how schools are handling these concerns. The

results showed that 48% of students were dealing with some sort of mental health concern. Of those 48%, the most frequently observed challenges included peer relationship problems (96.5%), anxiety (95.7%), attention deficit (95.8%), alcohol and drug abuse (61.9%), and suicidal thoughts or behaviors (61.4%) (230). After the data was collected regarding mental health, participants were asked about how they went about addressing the mental health concerns. The participants responded with the following strategies that were used: “increase access to services; develop student skills; involve parents and families; build positive student/teacher relationships; and increase professional development” (234).

Mental health is a barrier to students who are transitioning into adulthood (Poppen, et al, p.238, 2016). With mental health challenges being as prevalent as it is in today’s school systems, teachers and students need effective strategies in order to combat the issues of mental health. The learning environment of the classroom needs to center itself around calming strategies and coping mechanisms to provide students an emotional outlet to focus on achieving greater academic performance.

Strategies and Curricula Used to Combat Mental Health

Students who struggle with mental health need some sort of outlet to cope with their issues. Aside from outside services that provide therapy, schools should be presenting a variety of resources for these students. The following research offers a variety of programs and strategies that schools have provided to help students cope with the struggles of mental health.

School-Based Mental Health Project

Powers, Edwards, Blackman, and Wegmann (2013) explored a pilot program that offered mental health services to elementary, middle, and high school students through a partnership of

an urban school district located in the Southeast region of the United States, a mental health agency, and a university. The program ran for one year and the data was collected by interviewing the administrators who were involved with the program. The results of the program exhibited that early intervention and having access to mental health services benefited students. The program identified vulnerable students who were at-risk in the classroom, and helped them be more successful with the help of mental health professionals. The program administrators explained the importance of addressing mental health in regards to academic success: “We put so much emphasis on what happens in the classroom, but we have to begin looking at what happens before the child even gets to the classroom if we want to see success in the child” (660).

The main goal of this project was to increase awareness of mental health and help students meet their mental health needs (665). The success of this program was significant and it provided many benefits to students and their families. It’s important that schools take immediate action in providing students with mental health services in order to provide them with valuable resources.

Teacher-Student Relationships

Conner, Miles, and Pope (2014) evaluated teacher-student relationships in schools and revealed outcomes of student achievement when they had a teacher who cared for them. The authors wanted to prove that students showed less symptoms of stress and anxiety when they had a strong rapport with teachers, compared to their counterparts who did not. The results indicated that over 50% of students either often, or always feel stressed. Additionally, 81% of students felt some sort of physical symptoms of stress, such as a headache, and an alarming 82% of these students reported that they felt hopeless or depressed. Given this information, 71% of these

students mentioned that they had a trusted adult to turn to when they were feeling stressed out. Students who were supported less from their teachers were identified as having more mental and physical health problems than their counterparts. They suffered more from academic performance anxiety, experienced more internalizing symptoms, and higher levels of stress (36).

Though most teachers care for their students, the current study reveals that teachers also have to take steps to make the students believe that they care about them (39). If a student does not feel like they are cared for, they will have nowhere to go when they need someone. Teachers should all have a responsibility to reach out to students who appear to be struggling in an attempt to alleviate stress and improve academic performance.

After School Programs

Durlak, Weissberg, and Pachan (2010) studied after-school programs and whether they enhanced the social skills of students and attempted to increase their academic achievement and reduce their behavioral issues. The data was taken from evaluating 69 different after-school programs from the United States. These programs included 4-H clubs, Boys and Girls clubs, and a variety of other local initiative groups. They found there was a significant impact on students who attended the programs compared to those who did not. Students who attended after-school programs saw significant increases in their own perceptions, positive social behaviors, academic achievement, test scores, reductions in behaviors, and an increase in their bonding to school(302). The study also showed that students who attended after-school programs had an average of 12 percentile points higher on tests.

An important attribute to mention about the study was that not all after-school programs were effective. One important finding of the current study, reveals that after-school programs

should implement components that foster social and personal skills of students because they can benefit them in many ways (294). The study found that the most effective programs used practices that were centered around sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (SAFE) skill training.

Emotional Awareness and Regulation

Van Beveren, et al (2018), investigated the role of maladaptive Emotional Regulation (ER) strategies vs. adaptive ER strategies and the relationship it has on depressive symptoms in youth. The results indicate that students who had a higher emotional awareness, were more apt to learn and utilize an adaptive ER strategy to combat negative emotions. Without identifying the specific emotions the student is experiencing, choosing an effective strategy would be inadequate; therefore, increasing the students' awareness of their own emotions would be beneficial in facilitating Emotional Regulation (395). Interestingly, students with a lower emotional awareness did not have higher depressive symptoms using maladaptive strategies. However, maladaptive Emotional Regulation could be activated without a student being aware of their emotions (394). These findings suggest that students would benefit from learning how to become more aware of their emotions. Teaching students how to regulate their emotions and use coping strategies is an important practice to consider when trying to decrease depression in adolescents.

Resilient Families Program

Singh, Minaie, Skvarc, and Toumbourou (2018), studied the effectiveness of a Resilient Families program in Melbourne, Australia. Throughout a two-year time frame, Singh and fellow researchers examined twenty-four secondary schools, and whether the program enhanced

social-emotional skills and led to reduced symptoms of depression among adolescents. The results of the study show that the Resilient Families Program did not directly enhance adolescents' social-emotional skills and symptoms of depression. However, the data reveals that the participation of the students' parents in the program, impacted the reduction in depression. Although the study did not support the program's hypothesis that symptoms of depression were affected by social-emotional skills, it's valuable to understand and evaluate the role parents have in reducing depression among their children. Parental involvement with the program might be the primary influence on the effectiveness of treating depressive symptoms. The data reveals that mental health prevention programs should continue to include parents (1110).

Mindfulness

Wisner and Starzec (2015), examined the experiences of 19 high school students from a rural city in northeastern United States who were actively engaged in a program that supported mindfulness skills. Students participated two-times per week during their class period for 7 months. They practiced breathing awareness, and various forms of meditation through walking, lying down, and sitting. Students were then asked to fill out questionnaires, journal about their experiences of the program, and participate in a follow-up interview. The results show that students gained intrapersonal, and interpersonal benefits from the program. Students who gained intrapersonal benefits showed greater self-awareness and signs of positive self-regulation of their emotions, behavior, and their thinking. Also, students who gained interpersonal benefits, built stronger, and more positive relationships with their friends, families, and teachers.

Adolescence is a period of self-discovery and developing their identity (251). Implementing mindfulness skills into the classroom gave students an opportunity to relax, and

become more aware of their emotions. The program improved students' relationships, their ability to cope with stressful situations, and transform themselves into happier adolescents. In order for a mindfulness program like this to be successful for students, it's important that administrators and teachers support positive skills within the classroom.

Book Club

Tijms, Stoop, and Polleck (2018), evaluated the effects of a book club intervention program that fosters comprehension and social skills among adolescents. The book club's purpose is to convey social competences and improve students' academic success. Reading and social-emotional skills are important for long-term academic achievement and quality of life (525). The intervention consisted of 100 low socioeconomic status students from the Netherlands that read books relating to concerns and problems they face in their own lives. "An important feature of the intervention program is that it attempts to make a strong personal connection between the young adolescents and the particular books they read" (529). The results of the program reveal significant positive effects among the students. First, reading attitudes improved possibly related to students reading content that was applicable to their lives. Secondly, the outcome of students' reading comprehension skills increased because they were engaged in reading and discussion. Finally, students' social-emotional skills improved while taking part in the discussions they had during the book club. The discussions aided students in strengthening their social-emotional skills in the areas of conflict resolution, listening to peers, resistance skills, expression of beliefs, expression of their emotions, self-awareness, acceptance of others beliefs, and thoughtful decision making skills (539).

Yoga

Fishbein, et al, (2015), conducted an experiment that tested whether yoga intervention had any impact on high-risk adolescents' emotional health. The intervention consisted of 20-sessions that were 50-minutes long. The classes were offered three times a week, and 85 at-risk students around the age of 16 would participate from a mid-size city. Many of the students struggled with attendance, family issues, and academic problems. The results of the yoga intervention show positive results among adolescents. Students who participated showed a decrease in alcohol use and their teachers rated them as having increased attention in stressful situations and having improved social-emotional skills. Students who took part in the yoga intervention had an increase in prosocial behaviors, such as encouraging others, complimenting others, and offering help (525). Practicing yoga helped students feel less stressed, and more calm, which in turn promoted improvements in their social skills. The mindfulness of yoga helped students identify negative emotions and gave them the power to let them go, rather than being impulsive. It's important to understand the positive effects that yoga and mindfulness have on students' overall functioning. Improving the social-emotional skills of adolescents in high school through the use of yoga "not only decreases problem outcomes, but also enhances positive outcomes" (525).

The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning

The strategies and curricula referenced earlier provide information on how to combat mental health issues through a variety of research-based programs. However, Social-Emotional Learning is relatively new on the landscape, and may have more significant outcomes. The

following research offers a variety of data on the topic of Social-Emotional Learning and the benefits it has on students and teachers.

Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011), conducted a meta-analysis of a large school-based Social-Emotional Learning program. The study involved 270,034 students all over the world, ranging from kindergarten through high school. Researchers explored the positive effects of Social-Emotional programs across multiple outcomes such as attitudes, positive social behavior, emotional distress, conduct problems, social-emotional skills, and academic performance (407). They found positive effects on students' attitudes about themselves, school, and other people (i.e. teachers and peers). The program reduced internalizing behaviors, increased social behaviors, and improved academic performance and achievement tests. The importance of this program was successful based on whether or not the teachers were able to effectively teach, and implement the curriculum into their classroom. The results of the study suggest that the interventions can be implemented into educational practices and do not require any outside personnel for the delivery of the content (417).

Additionally, Dowling, Simpkin, and Barry (2019), investigated the effects of a Social-Emotional Learning program for older, disadvantaged adolescents. Baseline data was taken 1-2 weeks before the program was implemented, and then it was taken again after the program at 13 weeks. The target population for this study were 497 students who were considered educationally disadvantaged and ranging from the ages of 15-18 years old. The schools that participated in this program, sent teachers to a one-day training to implement the content of the curriculum. The results show that the program significantly affected students' social-emotional skills and their overall wellbeing. More specifically, the program successfully

reduced students' levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. The presence of depression, anxiety, and stress during adolescence could have serious effects on a student's life (1256). Therefore, programs that focus on the development of social-emotional learning can positively affect adolescents' mental health. This is an important time in adolescents' lives because they are experiencing developmental changes and are trying to figure out new stressors. Students who have to cope with these stressors can experience significant impact on their overall mental health and wellness (1258). These skills that adolescents are learning, may help prevent the debilitating effects of mental health.

Equally important, Yang, Bear, and May (2018) studied the associations between students' perceptions of three components that align to Social-Emotional Learning (teaching social-emotional competencies, teacher-student relationships, and student-student relationships) and their emotional and cognitive-behavioral engagement. They examined the effects across elementary, middle, and high school grade levels in Delaware. The data was collected from 25,896 students in grades 4-12 across 114 public schools. The results found the associations between teaching social-emotional competencies (TSEC) and student engagement to be positive. When students learn effective Social-Emotional Learning instruction from their teachers, they are able to develop positive relationships and prosocial skills with their peers and teachers, which in turn leads to positive emotional engagement (57). The association between teacher-student relationships (TS) and student engagement found more positive results among middle school and high school students than elementary. The demands of activities at middle and high school require more support from teachers; therefore, teacher-student relationships have a stronger influence on students' cognitive-behavioral engagement in adolescence than in elementary age

children (57). The association between student-student relationships (SS) and student engagement found significant effects on emotional engagement among all students. The way students perceive emotional engagement is influenced by the positive relationships they form with their peers, and the way they perceive the quality of those relationships (57).

Overall, the effects of teacher-student relationships, student-student relationships, and teaching social-emotional competencies promote student engagement. The significant effects of these three components suggest that engagement is not only influenced by the students' experiences, but more so their perceptions of the components. Any school that has the intentions of implementing Social-Emotional Learning into their curriculum should promote positive perceptions for the student.

Low, Smolkowski, Cook, and Desfosses (2018) researched the impact Social-Emotional Learning has on elementary students after a two-year implementation of the program. The study consisted of 8,941 participants in grades K-3 from six different school districts across urban and rural settings from Arizona and Washington. The student results were collected by ratings from the students' teachers that measured their social-emotional skills, academic testing, and problem behaviors. Teachers were asked to collect data in the fall after getting to know the student, and then again in spring. After the first year of implementation, results showed that students improved their relationships with peers, their conduct, emotion management, and skills for learning (429). However, after summer break, teachers began noticing regression during the start of year two in the fall. The program appeared to operate as an effective tool for intervention to students who had relative skill deficits (431). In order for this program to be a continued success,

schools should offer parental involvement, or extension components for the summer to avoid a regression of skills.

Similarly, Ashdown and Bernard (2012), investigated whether the instruction of a social-emotional learning program can benefit the academic success and social-emotional development of young children. The program involved 100 participants from early childhood up to grade one and the content was taught three times a week, for 10 weeks. The students received instruction from their teachers on persistence, organization, confidence, and emotional resilience. The results of the program indicated equal success among males and females of English speaking students and non-English speaking. First, students made significant gains in social-emotional competence and social skills. Students“were more apt to manage their emotions, engage in their learning, and get along with their peers (403). Second, students showed gains in their emotional well-being. Teacher’s began noticing a reduction in behavioral issues and negative emotions. Lastly, students showed improvements on reading levels. Half the students who had the lowest reading levels before the program, showed an increase in their reading achievement levels when the program was finished (404).

Although I was not seeking to answer this question, a natural result from my literature review identified that many studies involving Social-Emotional Learning have found positive effects on teachers. Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2012) investigated how teacher’s perceptions of school climate and SEL relate to their experiences of stress, teaching efficacy, and job satisfaction. Also, they look at how these three outcomes interrelate and affect one another (1191). Participants were gathered from 17 school districts with a total of 664 teachers participating in an online survey in which they had 3 weeks to complete it. The results showed

that Social-Emotional Learning benefits teachers as well as students. Teachers' perceptions of students relates to their experiences of job satisfaction, stress, and teaching efficacy (1198). Teacher's reported greater teaching efficacy and job satisfaction when students were able to manage behavior stress. The research reveals the importance of teachers learning these skills to effectively work with students in the classroom and manage the levels of the students' stress (1199). The study also found that student behaviors affect teachers differently depending upon whether the teacher feels inadequate or has a low sense of confidence in managing the classroom. A teacher's level of confidence can oftentimes reduce the level of stress, and increase teaching efficacy and satisfaction.

Although a lot of research indicates that Social-Emotional Learning benefits students, Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2012) proved that it has valuable outcomes for teachers as well. The success of the program relies on whether or not the teacher feels competent teaching the content. "If a teacher does not believe he or she is competent in teaching SEL, then this will impact that teacher's ability to teach SEL" (1191).

CHAPTER III: APPLICATION

This chapter provides information regarding my research on Social-Emotional Learning and how I plan to apply the knowledge I've gained. After exploring many research articles and working towards my thesis, I want to share the importance of Social-Emotional Learning with other teachers and administrators at my school. My hope is that this research could spark enough interest among staff members, that it could possibly lead to implementing a pilot program at our school. This information will be shared through an informative brochure that points out the positive effects of Social-Emotional Learning.

Successful Social-Emotional Learning Programs

Through all of the research that I studied, there were many successful Social-Emotional Learning programs that had proven results (Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B, 2011; Dowling, K., Simpkin, A. J., & Barry, M. M., 2019; Yang, C., Bear, G. G., May, H., & Curby, T., 2018). My goal is to address the characteristics that would create a successful program in my school. The following information was gathered from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) website.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2019) is a leading organization for social-emotional learning and believes that any successful program should include five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011), studied the outcomes of self-awareness and found that Social-Emotional Learning significantly improved students' attitudes toward school. Students who had better attitudes toward school had better attendance, higher morale, and higher motivation. Also,

students who participated in a Social-Emotional Learning program had a 11% gain in achievement (413).

Dowling, Simpkin, and Barry (2019), studied the impact of self-management on social-emotional learning and found that Social-Emotional Learning programs reduced students' levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. The presence of anxiety, depression, and stress on an adolescent can have negative effects on their lives. Social-Emotional Learning programs can provide students with support in managing stressful situations, which reduces their chances of developing psychological difficulties and improves their overall wellbeing.

Yang, Bear, and May (2018), studied the impact of social awareness and relationship skills on social-emotional learning and found that students who participate in an effective Social-Emotional Learning program are able to develop positive relationships and prosocial skills with their peers and teachers. Students who develop these social awareness skills, develop positive recognitions of emotional engagement with others. Social awareness is an important competency in Social-Emotional Learning because it promotes school-wide engagement and develops unity among students.

Lastly, Dowling, Simpkin, and Barry (2019), studied the outcomes of responsible decision making on social-emotional learning. They found that students who participated in a Social-Emotional Learning program reduced avoidance coping and showed higher levels of social support coping. Social-Emotional Learning programs can provide adolescents with skills that are needed to increase their ability to make life decisions.

CASEL believes that these five competencies can be reached through a variety of approaches that involve explicit skills instruction, teacher instructional practices, integration into

the academic curriculum, or through organizational strategies that create a positive school wide initiative. The approaches to teaching Social-Emotional Learning often incorporate Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit (SAFE) elements to support the students: Sequenced elements involve coordinated activities that connect to and foster development of skills; Active elements allow students to be competent in attaining new skills and attitudes; Focused elements work towards fostering new social and personal skills; and Explicit elements target specific social-emotional skills. Ideally, in order for schools to be successful, they should use these SAFE approaches to enhance the social-emotional development of the students. Schools can use these approaches in a variety of ways: teach decision-making by having the students set the rules for the classroom, have students pair up and practice reflective listening, teach cooperation by having students participating in team games, and teachers can model and coach students to recognize their emotions and how others might be feeling.

Teacher and Administrator Support

At a recent School Improvement Plan (SIP) meeting, the topic of mental health was brought up in regards to academic achievement scores. The school social worker began talking about Social-Emotional Learning and I suggested that there were programs out there for staff members to learn and understand how it could be implemented in their building. The next day, the school social worker and I filled out a request to attend a two-day Social-Emotional Learning conference in Minneapolis and our administration approved it. This approval is a beginning step to accomplishing my goal of implementing a pilot program in our school. In order for a program like this to work, I will need continued support from administration, and teachers who are willing to implement these strategies into their classroom.

Application Process and Materials

This application is provided as an informative resource that can be referenced by teachers and administration. The information I'm sharing will provide an opportunity for staff members to see the positive effects Social-Emotional programs have on students. The provided slides and brochure will inform staff members on what Social-Emotional Learning is, and the compelling data that shows the impact it has on schools. I have already been approved to attend a Social-Emotional Learning conference in October. My plan is to attend the conference and bring back compelling information that can be used to present my case to our administration. If approved by the administration, my intended plan is as follows:

- Form a collaborative Social-Emotional Learning team with the school social worker.
- Attend the Social-Emotional Learning conference in October, 2020.
- Talk to the administration about the knowledge I acquire from the conference and ask to present the information to my colleagues at a staff meeting.
- Create a Google Slides presentation for staff members.
 - I will gather their attention by asking: "How many of you have students in your class that are hard to reach?"
 - Additionally, I will provide a brochure that can be a supplemental resource to my presentation (included in Appendix A).
- At the end of the presentation, ask teachers if they have any interest in trying Social-Emotional Learning strategies in their classroom.
- Get training and/or certified to teach Social-Emotional Learning strategies in the school, and begin teaching other colleagues.

CHAPTER IV: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

The positive effects of Social-Emotional Learning research has been shared by many members (Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B., 2011; Dowling, K., Simpkin, A. J., & Barry, M. M., 2019; Yang, C., Bear, G. G., May, H., & Curby, T., 2018; Low, S., Smolkowski, K., Cook, C., & Desfosses, D., 2018). Overall, many of the studies have shown that Social-Emotional Learning is necessary for students to show an increase in social behaviors and improved academic performance. The literature collectively focuses on the development of social-emotional learning and how it can positively affect adolescents' mental health.

After exploring Social-Emotional Learning programs, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011), found that Social-Emotional Learning instruction had positive effects on students' attitudes about themselves, school and other people. The program reduced students' internalizing behaviors, increased social behaviors, and improved academic performance and achievement tests. Additionally, Dowling, Simpkin, and Barry (2019), found that Social-Emotional Learning programs had positive effects on disadvantaged adolescents' mental health. The program successfully reduced students' levels of stress, depression, and anxiety. The skills that students are learning from Social-Emotional Learning programs may help in preventing the debilitating effects of mental health. Yang, Bear, and May (2018), contributed to the positive effects of Social-Emotional Learning by finding that students who learn effective Social-Emotional Learning instruction from their teachers, are able to develop positive relationships with their teachers and peers, which in turn has positive effects on their emotional

engagement with others. Lastly, Low, Smolkowski, Cook, and Desfosses (2018), researched the effect Social-Emotional Learning had on elementary aged students. After a two-year implementation program, they found that the program improved their relationships with peers, their conduct, emotion management, and skills for learning.

While there were several articles that found positive effects for Social-Emotional Instruction, there were also many other programs that contributed to the success of students' well being. Programs such as yoga, book clubs, mindfulness, and after school programs have also shown positive results on students' social-emotional skills. Although these programs have shown success, Social-Emotional Learning may have more significant outcomes in regards to academic performance and mental health.

Limitations of the Research

While there is an abundant amount of research on Social-Emotional Learning programs, there are specific areas that lack information. The limitations in the research pertains to adolescent-aged students, age of research, and studies conducted in other countries.

It was difficult to find relevant articles that were conducted within the last 10 years. Some of the articles I initially researched were more than 10 years old, and the information was too outdated to use. Research in educational programs is constantly changing, and using outdated articles would not have been helpful in finding the answers to my thesis questions.

I struggled to find articles that primarily focused on adolescent-aged students. Some of the research studies consider students at an elementary-age level. Although it helped my research process to gain insight how the programs affect elementary-aged students, I set out to find information that was related to the age of students I work with everyday, adolescents.

Lastly, it was difficult to locate articles that were solely based in the United States. Several of my articles were conducted in other areas of the world. Although the articles provided valuable information, research results that focus on students in the United States would be more helpful in gaining perspective for building a program in my school.

Implications for Future Research

I believe that there are areas of research that still need to be explored in Social-Emotional Learning. Of the literature I have reviewed, I would like more information regarding the adoption and implementation of Social-Emotional Learning programs. Along with that, I'd like to see research done in the area of an evaluation process that monitors the effectiveness of the program. According to Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011), addressing issues concerning how Social-Emotional Learning programs work, will increase the chances of these programs being supported in more schools, which in turn will benefit the overall well being of students.

Research on how to adopt a Social-Emotional Learning program, and how to successfully implement such a program could be explored more in depth. Throughout my research, I have found significant information regarding the effectiveness of a Social-Emotional Learning program; however, the process of carrying it out is lacking. A study could look at developing a specific program in schools, the steps needed to make it work, and the roles of teachers and administration.

Another area of research that would be beneficial to explore is a study on the evaluation process of a Social-Emotional Learning program and how a school could monitor goals. It would be important to measure the effects of the program with students participating against their

counterparts who did not. This type of research would take an ample amount of time to conduct, but the results over time would be worthwhile to a school who is considering the implementation of a program.

Implications for Professional Application

As a teacher who works with adolescents, I see the way mental health affects their academic performance, and overall well being. Our school continues to set goals for academic achievement and what we can do to close the gap. I believe that mental health issues are a roadblock to their academic performance, and it needs to be addressed. I chose to research Social-Emotional Learning because I believe it has the potential to be a solution in combating mental health, and reaching higher levels of achievement. According to Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011), educators can successfully contribute to the overall mental health of adolescents if they can implement Social-Emotional Learning content into their curriculum. Their findings add to evidence that Social-Emotional Learning programs have a positive impact on students' academic performance, attitudes, social-emotional skills, and behavior.

With the articles I've researched, and information I've gained, I'd like to pass this along to my colleagues and administration with the hopes of developing a pilot program for our school. I have brought up the topic of Social-Emotional Learning to my colleagues on our School Improvement Plan (SIP) team, and I believe we are moving in the direction of the beginning steps to implementing a plan. The school social worker and I will be attending a two-day conference on Social-Emotional Learning, and we will be reporting our findings to the team. My hope is that we will have a significant amount of information to persuade our administration

team to allow us to adopt the beginning stages of a Social-Emotional Learning program in our school.

Conclusion

Research shows that Social-Emotional Learning programs improve students' academic performance and overall well being. Teachers working with students who are struggling with mental health issues need to implement strategies to combat the barrier that holds them back from reaching academic goals. Students also need to be offered resources outside of school that would allow their families to help them become more successful. My goal for researching this topic was to educate my colleagues on the importance of implementing a Social-Emotional Learning program in our school. We have too many students in our school who struggle with mental health issues, and it affects their academic performance. Schools are constantly trying to close the achievement gap and to raise their scores on standardized testing, and I believe Social-Emotional Learning can help. I would like to be an advocate for implementing a pilot program at our school, and begin reaching out to those students who need our support. The resources and information is out there, we just need to be proactive in implementing the first steps. Social-Emotional Learning will not only help students with the skills they need to be successful in school, but will also prepare them to be successful in life.

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APPENDIX A



**"Educating the mind
without educating the heart
is no education at all"**
- Aristotle -



Resources

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. Wiley-Blackwell. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

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Social-Emotional Learning
Empowering students for life.

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INFORMATION VISIT
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What is Social-Emotional Learning?

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to:

- Understand and manage emotions
- Set and achieve positive goals
- Feel and show empathy for others
- Establish and maintain positive relationships
- Make responsible decisions.

Teacher Benefits

Teachers who utilize social-emotional learning competencies in their classroom, are more likely to prevent burnout and stress because they are able to work effectively with the skills they have.



Social-Emotional Learning Works!

- Better social-emotional skills.
- Improved attitudes about self, others, and school.
- Positive classroom behavior.
- 11 percentile-point gain on standardized achievement tests.
- Fewer conduct problems.
- Less emotional stress.
- Lower drug use