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The Impact of the Pandemic on Social Emotional Learning

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic declared in March of 2020 disrupted the landscape of education and presented students and teachers with unforeseen impacts and obstacles. Notably, negative social and emotional issues arose as these changes drove students into isolation from peers and school staff amid concerns about the health of themselves and the people they love. Social emotional learning (SEL) supports academics, mental health, and healthy relationships (Rosenbalm, 2021). The pandemic caused a decline in each of these areas, as well as an increase in anxiety and depression among students, and limited the ability of educators to support social emotional learning. As anxiety and depression rose alarmingly in students, educators worried about how to support their mental and social health. Teachers had difficulty simply contacting students, regardless of the technological inequities, difficulties, and adaptations they were required to implement without standardized training on an incredibly short notice. As a result, educator morale, efficiency, and passion also waned. Despite these challenges, researchers have provided existing evidence-based solutions as well as general recommendations to implement stronger SEL programming to support students both during this crisis and in the future.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The week of March 9th, 2020 was one that would change the world forever. News headlines were ablaze with the latest Hollywood scandal, involving Harvey Weinstein and the Me Too Movement, as COVID-19 bubbled below the surface. Rumors were abundant as students asked their teachers concerned questions about schools closing and the health and safety of their loved ones. Educators shared with students what they knew to be transparent and supportive, though most had few facts to share about what was to come. On Friday, March 11, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022b). That same day at school, teachers unknowingly said goodbye to students in person for the last time, as two days later, Minnesota Governor Tim Walz announced that schools would be closing due to the pandemic. While original closure plans were initially created for two weeks, the pandemic escalated, and school buildings remained closed until spring of the following year.

Rationale

Social emotional learning is a necessary component of human development and education. It impacts academic achievement, personal interactions, life skills, mental health, and financial wellness (Rosanbalm, 2021). When schools closed in March of 2020, students experienced an unprecedented change in their lives. While longer-term effects continue to be studied, early research correlates the stressful impact of the

COVID-19 pandemic with negative effects on students' mental health. Rosanbalm (2021) suggests that 14 percent of parents in the United States reported a decline in their children's behavioral health, with 40 percent of parents indicating the same for their quarantined children. Data from the Centers for Disease Control shows a 24-31 percent increase in mental health emergency room visits for school age children from April to October in 2020 compared to the previous year (Rosanbalm, 2021). The dramatic increase in these categories suggests the importance of addressing social emotional learning in the schools during a pandemic in order to best support student success.

Mahoney et al. (2018) found that Social Emotional Learning (SEL) can positively impact emotional regulation, goal attainment, establishing positive relationships, practicing empathy, and responsible decision making. The five key areas of SEL impact are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Mahoney et al. (2018) further suggests that teaching these skills in schools builds positive internal and external attitudes, which leads to longer-term benefits in behavior, academics, and mental health. Support for SEL in school comes from parents and educators alike. Atwell et. al (2021) found that 99% of parents surveyed deemed "developing good character and integrity and finding happiness" more important to their children's success than getting a job or preparing for college (p. 5). Additionally, Schleicher et al. (2019) found that approximately 80% of educators believed that social emotional learning was critical to success in academics, foundational literacy, and communication skills.

To address these concerns, the following question must be answered: how is social emotional learning impacted by a pandemic? Three components will make up the basis of the answer. First, the change in social emotional learning during a pandemic relative to pre-pandemic must be analyzed. Rosanbalm (2021) suggests that the pandemic has negatively affected students' social emotional learning, which raises the question of what schools must do to improve it. Second, current barriers to social emotional learning in schools must be identified. Zieher et al. (2021) put forward that in order to successfully implement changes in social emotional programming, schools must be prepared to address and overcome potential planning and funding challenges. Finally, opportunities to improve social emotional learning for students need to be explored. Teaching proven social emotional learning skills cannot be effective without a plan to initiate, maintain, and evolve programs to meet the current needs of students. The intent of this literature review is to assess the need for social emotional learning changes as well as to examine how changes can be made.

Definition of Terms

This paper includes important terminology, defined as follows:

Academic achievement: The current level of a student's learning (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022a).

COVID-19: A virus with a wide range of mild to severe symptoms (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022a).

Curriculum*:* the resources and plans that educators need to present the content to students (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022b).

Distance / Virtual / Remote Learning*:* The process of acquiring knowledge from a location remote from the teaching source (Zieher, 2021).

Mental health: Ability to reach developmental and emotional milestones, learn healthy social skills and how to cope when there are problems (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022c).

Pandemic: A global outbreak of a disease or illness (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022d)..

Social Emotional Learning: Education concentrating on a broad range of skills to support healthy development and relationships.

Special education*:* Learning mode for students who have a disability and are in need of specialized instruction (Minnesota Department of Education, 2022c).

Statement of Guiding Question

The guiding research question for this thesis is: how is social emotional learning impacted by a pandemic? Consideration for this research will focus on three factors. First, it is important to consider the changes in social emotional learning due to variables influenced by the pandemic. Second, it is central to identify and understand the current barriers to social emotional learning in schools. Third, it is important to explore opportunities to improve school-led social emotional learning for students.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

Literature reviewed for this thesis was compiled through the use of two primary databases; ERIC (EBSCO Host) via the Bethel University Library and Google Scholar. Google Scholar articles were cross-references with ERIC to ensure reliability. Search parameters to specify results included only peer-reviewed articles from 2017-2022 found using combinations of the key terms "social emotional learning," "SEL," "well-being," "mental health," "electronic learning," "special education," "COVID-19," and "pandemic." This chapter is structured into the following three categories to review literature on the impact of the pandemic on social emotional learning: social emotional of the pandemic, barriers to social emotional learning, and opportunities to improve social emotional learning.

SEL Effectiveness

As Social Emotional Learning programming in school becomes more prevalent, so do questions regarding its impact. Mahoney et al's (2018) report compares four meta-analyses of significant size to address the question of SEL effectiveness in relation to student outcomes. The combined analyses include reviews of a total of 459 studies of a total of over 400,000 students, with two reviews focusing on the short-term outcomes of and two reviews focusing on the long-term (4-48 months) outcomes of SEL. Each of the four meta-analyses included an assessment of these SEL-related components: SEL skills, attitudes, positive social behaviors, conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance.

The four studies shared common themes regarding benefits and challenges of SEL programming in the classroom. Each study illustrated "positive benefits for participating students on a range of behavioral, attitudinal, emotional, and academic outcomes that are evident both immediately after the intervention and during various follow-up periods" (Mahoney et al., 2018). Mahoney et al. (2018) noted that the impacts were less significant in the studies focusing on long-term impacts, but were quick to defend this by stating that most academic outcomes generally plateau over time and that the benefits did continue, albeit reduced. One related key finding is that an 11% gain in achievement was measured in the long-term studies for students who had participated in SEL compared to those who had not. Another key finding was a strong correlation between short-term SEL progress and long-term progress.

Another common theme noted throughout the studies was the importance of well-planned implementation of SEL in schools. For these reasons, Mahoney et al. (2018) suggested that SEL programming yields the best results when "implemented in planned, ongoing, systematic ways from preschool through high school" (p.7, as cited in Berman et al., 2018; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2017; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Weissberg et al., 2015). They further suggested that based on the quality and quantity of the studies contained in the four meta-analyses, there is "strong support that well implemented SEL programs are beneficial for children and adolescents" (p. 5), and as such, SEL programming and teacher training should be expanded to improve performance in schools. Mahoney et al. (2018) noted that further research should be conducted to determine best practices for specific programming, policies, funding,

implementation, and successful communication between researchers, educators, and politicians in order to make this concept a reality.

The Pandemic's Impact on Social Emotional Learning

Implementation Challenges

Social emotional learning is an important focus for students during a pandemic. Zieher et al.'s study (2021) looked at how social emotional learning (SEL) was implemented and utilized by educators during the second half of 2020, when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. In March of that year, many schools were forced to transition to distance learning due to the outbreak. Zieher et al. (2021) briefly addressed the importance of SEL on academics and behavior while highlighting the importance of implementing quality SEL education within the school setting in order for it to be effective. The goal of the study was threefold: to determine variables impacting difficulty in executing SEL during distance learning as reported by educators, identify relationships connecting the use of SEL practices by students and educators and its implementation, and correlating the emotional burnout, internal rating, implementation challenges, and SEL practice of educators.

Zieher et. al (2021) predicted that an inverse relationship would exist between the difficulty of implementation and a school's ability to prioritize and encourage SEL, as well as self-application of SEL by educators. They hypothesized a direct correlation when comparing SEL instruction and self-application to emphasis on SEL guidance and educator support from leadership. Finally, they predicted an inverse correlation of internal rating and self-implementation by educators when compared to engagement of

leaders. Educators would present mutual relationships of their self-analysis and burnout, as well as burnout and implementation difficulty.

The 219 educators surveyed were dispersed relatively evenly throughout the United States, while the majority were white (67%) and identified as female (91%). Instructional and non-instructional educators were represented equally. Additionally, 65% were employed at elementary schools, with the remainder split between middle and high schools. Educators aged between 24 to 68 and had one to 41 years of experience (Zieher et al., 2021). The primary criteria for selection was being an educator, and participants were gathered through Twitter accounts and a direct email campaign. Quantitative data was obtained through a 63 question Emotion-Focused Educator SEL Survey. The researchers note that the survey was kept intentionally brief to relieve impact on already overstressed educators.

Key findings first indicated that less difficulty implementing SEL through distance learning directly correlated with educator awareness of SEL support from leadership, which aligns with the researchers' hypothesis. Results, secondly, showed that levels of SEL guidance from leadership corresponded with both self-use and successful program execution of SEL by educators. This matched Zieher et al.'s (2021) predictions. Finally, data represented a direct correlation between educators' implementation challenges and emotional burnout. The study indicated that leadership support of SEL practices improved SEL implementation and self practice while reducing challenges and emotional exhaustion.

Student Participation and Performance

Bond's (2020) literature review titled *Social Emotional Learning in a Time of Chaos* also aims to highlight the importance of social-emotional learning for students during the pandemic. The goal of the literature review is to reiterate how student performance is impacted by social-emotional education and to generate dialogue regarding an increased focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) for the future. Bond (2020) uses literature review to summarize SEL's correlation to student learning, importance during the pandemic, and propose a new path for SEL. He states that SEL improves student academics and assists them in meeting their personal needs, that student social interactions are drastically different during remote learning, and that the students most impacted will be those that SEL benefits the most (p. 2). Bond (2020) cites scholarly research suggesting that students who receive SEL instruction show increased academic growth and performance.

He also notes the recent shift in schools' focus to prioritize SEL in tandem with academics and curriculum, even prior to the pandemic. However, his research suggests that concerns for the safety and mental well-being of students are at the top of mind for students, teachers, and parents alike. Bond (2020) suggests that the drive for increased SEL will not only serve students during this stressful time, but will positively impact learning outcomes and better prepare them for uncertain times ahead. For these reasons, he suggests we continue to adapt and increase SEL programming to broaden our views of student success beyond the confined scope of academics and into one of overall student growth and development.

Similarly, a literature review by Huck et al. (2021) sought to better understand the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on education in the United States. Huck et al. (2021) summarized that the literature focused on remote learning during this time as experienced by families and school staff, highlighting the challenges that they faced. Technology was noted as one of these challenges, where a study by RAND corporation showed schools reported that 90% had some students without access to the internet, and 40% cited technology as a hurdle for educators. Approximately 74% of educators noted that student engagement was "much" or "somewhat" lower since the beginning of the pandemic, with almost 25% of their students being "essentially truant" (Huck et al., 2021, p. 54). Finally, morale dropped sharply among students, educators, and administrators at the beginning of the pandemic. Huck et al. (2021) noted that teaching online presented educators with new obstacles; not only the transition to an effective implementation of technology, but continuing to build relationships with students in this environment to support them academically, socially, and emotionally.

Huck et al.'s (2021) research suggested that family communication and technology played a vital role in learning. They found that parent communication with their children and their children's teachers promotes engagement, effort, and academic performance (p. 4). Addressing technological access for continued communication, they state that as of 2021, around 75% of Americans have high-speed internet at home (Huck et al., 2021). However, families who are less educated, have lower income, or are in the racial minority are less likely to both have high-speed internet and the language or technology familiarity to obtain its full benefit as presented by schools (Huck et al., 2021.

Smartphones are more commonly the primary internet channel for these groups, as well as younger families. Related findings show that 64% of parents were concerned about their students' ability to keep up when transitioning to online learning.

Huck et al. (2021) also cited research on the negative impacts of SEL. Their research found that around 90% of high income students were actively participating in online learning, while only 60% of students in low income households were logging in regularly. Huck et al. (2021) noted a common theme that the biggest negative academic impact will be in students who are Black, Hispanic, and in "vulnerable populations." Their research also suggests that online learning makes it more difficult to support students socially and emotionally, primarily because relationship environments shifted and interactions were generally less frequent or personal. They also found that students' study skills, such as time management, self-efficacy, and self-motivation were generally negatively impacted. A recurring theme among students was that they were more frequently distracted at home and unable to engage as effectively.

Educator Challenges

Huck et al. (2021) also note difficulties educators faced. During the initial transition, many teachers reported having difficulty contacting students, especially newer teachers. This challenge was more prevalent among students of color and in lower income homes. Educators reported that they struggled more with lesson planning, assessment, and differentiation. Compared to in-person teaching, educators also reported a "lower sense of success and self-efficacy" , and 37% of teachers responded that they needed "significant support" during the transition to online teaching (p. 69). Huck et al.

(2021) suggest that due to the challenges during transition, SEL was not implemented as effectively as it could be in the future.

Overall, Huck et al. (2021) suggest that certain populations face greater challenges during remote learning, though the majority of teachers and students struggled in some way with technology and SEL instruction, which negatively impacted both academics and social emotional well-being. When researching academic achievement, Huck et al.'s (2021) findings were inconclusive. One study showed that schools which did not have physical classrooms and normally practiced online learning had slightly lower scores than traditional in-person schools prior to the pandemic (as cited in Ahn & McEachin, 2017; Gill et al., 2015; Woodworth et al., 2015). Another showed that while grades went up in schools, college readiness declined (as cited in Hart et al., 2019). A third study cited the potential cost-savings and increased teaching quality while at the same time noting a decline in math scores, which also noted that three things greatly improved online learning outcomes: "prior high achievement, self-discipline, and technological support at home and school" (Huck et al., 2021, p. 54, as cited in Heissel, 2016.)

SEL in Remote Learning

In relation to changing learning environments, Duckworth et al.'s (2020) study used student survey data to identify differences in social, emotional, and academic well-being between students who were learning remotely compared to students who were learning in person at school. The 6,576 students surveyed were learning in person in 8th through 11th grade during the pre-pandemic questionnaire in February of 2020 and had

advanced to 9th through 12th grade during the pandemic when surveyed in October of 2020. Approximately two thirds of students had opted for remote learning in October, 2020, which Duckworth et al. (2020) said contributed to isolation. The survey used response scales and yes or no questions that asked students about fitting in, support, moods (happy, sad, relaxed), and perception of class performance.

The results showed that students who were learning in person had more positive responses in each category than those learning remotely based on a 100-point scale, with a social difference of 2.4 percent, an emotional difference of 1.7 percent, and an academic difference of 1.1 percent. Duckworth et al. (2020) pointed out that social and emotional well-being were more significantly impacted than academics and suggested that this was due to being away from teachers and peers. Demographically, ninth graders had the smallest change, which the researchers suggested could be due to the group not attending high school prior to the pandemic and not knowing what they might be missing. Groups were statistically similar across other demographics, such as race, gender, native language, academic performance, and socio-economic factors. Duckworth et al. (2020) noted that though they could not account for all possible external factors, the data suggested that remote learning has a negative impact on social, emotional, and academic well-being, and regardless of how small, would be a significant challenge for students and teachers in the future as the situation was exacerbated by the pandemic.

In like manner, DeArmond et al.'s (2021) study sought to better understand how students' social emotional needs were being met by school districts during the pandemic. The researchers began monitoring trends in virtual learning environments in 477 school

districts across the country in March of 2020, consisting of over 20,000 students in grades 5-12. They used this data to analyze SEL awareness, instruction, and data tracking in the districts' post pandemic planning. Key findings showed that one third of districts chose SEL as a component of their plans.

DeArmond et al.'s (2021) study suggested the importance of SEL when summarizing the hurdles students face in virtual learning environments. Schools in the survey responded that more than half of students listed depression, stress, and anxiety as factors that negatively impacted mental health. The two biggest subcategories of these plans were creating safe environments and teaching SEL, at 47% and 31% respectively (DeArmond et al., 2021). This gap suggests that schools are more concerned with the overall safety of student environments (such as sickness prevention) than building SEL skills in their students. Despite SEL planning being considered in most districts, only seven percent included district-wide data tracking as part of their plans. Geographically, urban and suburban schools were 8 to 15 percent more likely to address SEL (DeArmond et al., 2021). Common themes across districts arose when asked about their approach to SEL, with advisories or morning meetings being the most popular. Other common tactics included restorative justice initiatives, culturally responsive training and teaching, and trauma informed teaching. The researchers drew a correlation between students' exposure to violence and their need for a safe, consistent, and supportive school setting, in that both can negatively impact student learning.

When considering the link between mental health and SEL, researchers found that only 54% of districts provide mental health support for their students, despite the

suggestion of a higher concern for social and emotional well-being. Additionally, the study found that teachers were about 34% less likely to receive social emotional support from districts than students. The researchers suggest that this may negatively impact students as well, as lack of SEL competence from teachers reduces their student support skills in this area. Overall, the researchers suggest that data management and leadership are two of the biggest obstacles when managing the social-emotional well-being of their students, stating that informative data, strong district-wide direction, and support of teachers are the key components to success.

Educator and Parent Perspectives

A similar study conducted by Atwell et al. (2021) focused on the importance of educator and parent perspectives on SEL and the increased needs for SEL during a pandemic. The goal of the research was to answer the question of whether or not educators and parents definitely approve of social emotional learning as necessary for their students' success. Atwell et al. (2021) hypothesized that both educators and parents would deem SEL an important or essential factor in their students' education, emphasized by the current pandemic.

The research began immediately prior to the pandemic in February 2020, when Hart Research Associates surveyed 1,609 parents and educators in public middle and high schools. It was initially a quantitative survey, but later expanded to include qualitative data based on the pandemic, resulting in a mixed-methods approach. The groups made up equal halves of the respondents. Educators joined an opt-in panel before being pre-screened for qualifications. Data from the National Center for Education

Statistics was applied to a raking methodology to certify the sample accurately portrayed teachers in middle and high schools, which were evenly represented. Of note, 78% of educators identified as white and 63% identified as female (Atwell et al., 2021).

Parents of middle and high school students were also recruited via an online panel and pre-screened. The same methodology was utilized to depict accurate representation of parents with students aged 13-17. Of the parents, 57% identified as white, with 45% male and 55% female respondents (Atwell et al., 2021). Following the survey and in the wake of the pandemic, 36 additional educators and parents were randomly selected via opt-in for an online discussion board in order to gain additional perspective on the impact related events had on families and schools.

The results of both the survey and discussion board confirmed Atwell et al.'s (2021) prediction that educators and parents placed significant value on social emotional learning. For example, over 70% of respondents indicated social emotional learning is "foundational to a student's success later in life" (Atwell et al., 2021, p. 5) of educators responded that SEL would improve a student's good citizenship, along with 85% of parents. This suggests that the benefits extend beyond public schooling and apply to communities as a whole. Demand for increased in-school SEL programming was also indicated by 63% of parents and 70% of educators, with less than 25% of educators stating they had holistic SEL programming within their school (Atwell et al., 2021). The benefits of SEL were also highlighted throughout the survey. The majority of teachers believed that SEL can decrease bullying, help create better student-to-student and student-to-teacher relationships, help students learn, increase student engagement, reduce

absences, and improve the overall atmosphere and community of the school. SEL does not only apply to students; the survey showed almost 75% of educators had lower morale during the pandemic, with 85% acknowledging a general decrease in teacher morale. (Atwell et al., 2021) Based on this data, parents and educators believe SEL can improve engagement, attendance, and academic achievement in all students.

Moreover, a 2020 study conducted by Schleicher et al. sought to better understand the perception that K-12 educators had of emotional well-being and students' ability to learn. This included the following factors: developing "skills, attitudes, literacies and disposition" in their students, SEL and technology, SEL implementation, and challenges related to instruction. Educators, administrators, and support staff from 15 countries comprised the 762 survey respondents, which was created using literature review and an expert panel. Educators taught a variety of subjects, including reading, writing, math, technology, and foreign language in grades K-12. The survey measured SEL factors such as "a person's sense of purpose and meaning, autonomy and control, resilience, and relatedness to others" (p. 2).

Schleicher et al. (2019) suggest that educators must adapt their approach to SEL as technology rapidly advances, as their results described two objectives: a link between academic learning and SEL, and SEL implementation. Key findings that suggest a connection between learning and SEL showed that more than 79% of respondents "believe that positive emotions are very or extremely important for academic success," (p.5) highlighting reading and math, communication skills, and critical thinking skills. Similarly, over three quarters of educators surveyed by Schleicher et al. (2019)

recognized the benefits of "positive, stable relationships, engagement in challenging activities, a feeling of community and belonging" (p. 5). Approximately 97% of those surveyed said their schools currently have plans in place or are formulating plans to support SEL in school.

A common theme was that educators acknowledged that effective SEL must be supported building-wide and requires work outside of school hours. Schliecher et al.'s (2019) analysis of SEL implementation noted that those with more experience in SEL are 22% more likely to have a "formal well-being policy" and 27% more likely to have a "measuring and monitoring strategy" (p. 7). The researchers highlight that gathering data around individual well-being is difficult, and often not standardized across the school or is gathered using ad hoc methods. Additionally, the survey showed that around 77% of participants stated that a teacher's "mood and well-being in the classroom is very or extremely influential on student outcomes" (p. 8) suggesting that SEL is critical for educators to self-apply in order to best support students. Overall, Schelicher et al.'s study suggests that SEL is vital to student success and will be inevitably linked to technological advances in the classroom. They suggest as these capabilities improve, technology can facilitate improved data management and SEL implementation to promote an increase in successful SEL execution, but it requires a formal and descriptive approach.

Focusing on educator challenges, Stacki and their team of researchers' (2021) study combined a literature review with open-ended surveys of seven middle school teachers in New York to gain perspective on the challenges of teaching during the pandemic, with a focus on the social emotional impact it has had on students. The seven

educators in the surveys were contacted via email with a list of 13 questions in April of 2020, when the transition to virtual learning was in its infancy. The researchers highlighted the importance of SEL for middle schoolers, citing studies that suggest that interpersonal relationships between peers and teachers are critical components of their social emotional growth. They showed that enabling students to utilize SEL skills helped them manage sadness and anxiety more effectively.

Stacki et al. (2021) suggested that the pandemic makes SEL more important than ever, as relationships change due to COVID-19, and the related stress and isolation may increase the prevalence of these feelings. The survey found that despite their complete lack of virtual training prior to the pandemic, the teachers were able to prioritize social and emotional components separately from their academic curriculum, primarily through the use of videoconferencing. They used strategies such as class meetings, read-alouds, and book clubs. One teacher wrote that "emotionally, this is affecting students because of disruption to their routine", while another wrote "the feelings of isolation and loneliness are prevalent right now" (p. 152). Most of the teachers utilized class meetings for the dual purpose of academics and community building to address student isolation. Stacki et al. (2021) stated that though some level of success was experienced, the lack of training, consistency, routine, and technological difficulties increased the burden on teachers, suggesting that these components need to be quickly and formally addressed by leadership to improve remote SEL. Finally, they suggested that teachers need to be flexible, be self-motivated, discover new resources, and carefully plan for their SEL to be effective.

While school closures during the pandemic were a major disruptor for families, Egan et al.'s (2021) study aimed to determine the impact these events have had on children's SEL. No formal hypothesis was made, but it can be inferred that the authors believed there to be a negative impact on children's SEL and sought to learn specifics. The data was gathered through mixed-methods. Their survey, which was approved by the institutional ethics board, focuses on COVID-19's impact on children's play, learning, and development. Through newspaper, internet postings, and social media advertisements, parents with young children were invited to participate in a survey. After agreeing, they were prompted with survey specifics and time requirements to complete. A group of 506 parents with children between approximately one and 11 years old responded. Of the parents, 93% identified as mothers, while the children's gender was split evenly between male and female. The average age of the parents was 40 years old, while the children's average age was approximately six and a half. The study specifically selected data for children eight and under to meet their own criteria. The survey included a Likert scale for responses. Researchers analyzed open-ended answers, categorized, and sorted them by themes and sub-themes (Egan et al., 2021).

Since the beginning of the pandemic, data indicated that children had increased levels of social-emotional stress. Nine out of ten parents stated their child missed their friends, school, and playing with classmates. Children between the ages of one and five had much higher scores than ages six to eight for missing school (Egan et al., 2021). Common themes also rose from the qualitative data in Egan et al.'s (2021) survey. Most parents indicated that school routines and structure were missed by children, specifically

noting comments children had made that they had more fun at school and missed social opportunities. Directly correlated to these sentiments were parents' comments about their children feeling lonesome and isolated (Egan et al., 2021). Responses from concerned parents also indicated a connection between these feelings and the social-emotional behavior of the children. Common themes connecting the two included wanting to sleep more, increased attachment to parents and detachment in social interactions, overall sadness, increased agitation and shortened tempers, and academic regression in speech. Egan et. al (2021) noted that although families had varying experiences, the common themes should warrant an increased effort in addressing unique and holistic experiences through social emotions learning support.

Absenteeism

The pandemic has brought about many changes in students' lives, key among these absences from school. The goal of Santibanez et al.'s 2020 study was to highlight the effects that absences can have on student test scores and social-emotional outcomes. The researchers collected and examined administrative data from a group of school districts in California called the CORE Districts, which comprises six districts from Los Angeles, Long Beach, Fresno, Garden Grove, Santa Ana, Sacramento, Oakland, and San Francisco. The data included information on students based on grade level, ethnicity, and free-and-reduced lunch eligibility. Santibanez et. al (2020) used a "fixed effect model" to "isolate the effect of absences on outcomes on each individual student" in order to minimize the impact of unseen variables that may affect these outcomes (p. 5). Due to cited limitations, test score data was analyzed from students in grades 3-8. The model

extrapolates on existing data that correlates increased absences with these negative impacts to predict outcomes for up to 60 days. Categories of the SEL analysis include growth mindset, social awareness, self-efficacy, and self-management.

Santibanez (2020) states that in the population studied, students in grades K-12 missed an average of 7.4 days of school per year. Though this varies by grade level and other demographic factors, the study assumes that when most schools closed nationwide in March of 2020 for safety measures that this number increased as schools managed the crisis. Key findings from the study include lower test scores, decreased social-emotional outcomes, and concern for specific demographics. It showed that overall test scores dropped between 10 to 30 points after 10 days of absence, with more significant declines in math than English Language Arts, as well as a larger decline in middle school compared to elementary school.

Each of the SEL categories also dropped notably as absences increased, with social awareness being impacted the most and growth mindset the least. (p. 8). The study noted that this curve plateaus at around 40 days absent. When broken down by grade levels, the model showed that social-emotional development was most negatively impacted in elementary and middle schools, with self-efficacy, self-management, and social awareness declining the most. At the high school level, social awareness was most impacted. The researchers cited their concern about not only student well-being, but the compounding effect lower SEL has on their academics, citing a previous CORE study that suggests academic and behavioral scores directly correlate to social-emotional outcomes (p. 5).

Also of importance is the higher impact absences have on certain subgroups. They reference a report that showed between March and May of 2020, school participation was lower in students that were categorized as low-income, English Learners, having disabilities, and homeless (p. 7). With this data, Santibanez (2020) suggested that COVID-19 had a deeper impact on various groups of people. The model also showed that test scores in these groups were generally impacted more than students not falling into these categories, with the exception of English Learners math scores. Overall, the study suggests that the increased absences due to the pandemic will result in a continued decline in both test scores and SEL, with a particular concern for disadvantaged students.

SEL-Related Mental Health Concerns

Obstacles brought about by the pandemic affected more than the teaching staff. The goal of Weir's (2020) literature review was to examine the increased need for mental health services in school due to the pandemic. They state anxiety, depression, and other emotional or behavioral issues are found in 20% of children in the United States, but mental health providers only account for one in five receiving care (p. 1). Additionally, a recent study by the CDC showed an increase in major depressive disorder in teens and suicide rates in ages 10-24 over the last decade, even prior to the pandemic (p. 3). The majority of children receive help in schools, if at all, but most schools have very high ratios of students to care providers and little additional funding to add staff to meet these needs.

Wier's research showed experts predicted that additional stressors caused by the pandemic, such as economics, safety, and isolation will result in further increased levels

of mental health challenges in students. She suggests that this will stretch student supports in the 100,000 schools in 14,000 districts nationwide even thinner (p. 3). Weir addresses some potential solutions, including one psychologist's recommendation to incorporate social and emotional intelligence into core curricula like math and language arts. This could be modeled through targeted readings or anxiety management strategies (p. 5). Multi-tiered support systems have shown to be 75% effective at treating or preventing depression in students (Weir, 2020, p. 5, as cited in Arora, et al., 2019), and although these systems are gaining in popularity, many students are still underserviced. She also highlights the work of Weissberg et al. (2021) meta-analysis, which showed an overall improvement in SEL skills and an 11% gain in academic achievement across 213 schools (p. 5). Weir cites one study that shows an increased focus towards academics during the pandemic as SEL support decreased, suggesting that much more needs to be done to change these trends. She suggests that identifying mental health issues remotely is far less effective than in person, further compounding the issue. Overall, Weir suggests that increased focus, funding, and staffing are required to mitigate the potentially significant negative impacts the pandemic will have on students' social and emotional learning.

Impact on Special Education

With a focus on Special Education, the goal of Morando-Rhim et al.'s (2021) study of almost 400 reports, studies, and news articles was to better understand how students with disabilities had been impacted by the pandemic. Of the 400 pieces of literature reviewed, fewer than 20 percent referenced impacts to students with disabilities,

with none of the studies providing categorical data regarding types of disabilities. The researchers noted that more data is required to draw actionable conclusions, but the data collected provided several key findings.

The first is that many students with disabilities had significant disruptions to not only their academic services, but their special education services, and that this represented a lag or regression in progress. Morando-Rhim et al. found that these services were reduced in both quantity and quality due to remote learning and shortened school days, despite many schools prioritizing return to school plans for students with Individual Education Programs (IEP). Their research also found that students with disabilities had more absences, missing work, and failed classes than their peers. One study showed that while 51 percent of students completed most of their work, that number dropped to about 30 percent in students with disabilities, while participation was similarly impacted with 67 percent of students contributing to class but only 53 percent of students with disabilities did the same. Attendance for students with disabilities dropped 12 percent in the year of the pandemic in another study. Morando-Rhim et al. found that teachers and parents were concerned, as 82 percent of teachers responded to one survey that they were not confident in their ability to support IEPs and 44 percent of parents responded that their children's access to valuable and required support had been removed by the transition to remote learning.

The researchers noted that they found very little data to show the social emotional impact the pandemic had on students with disabilities, but drew possible conclusions based on their research. One survey of parents showed 48 percent had higher anxiety and

negative behaviors, and 60 percent said their child was a year behind as a result of the pandemic. Their research showed that elementary age children were most negatively impacted overall and suggested that this was a vital part of social emotional development, so that correlated impacts would occur in SEL. Morando-Rhim et al. further suggested that lower attendance and engagement, combined with higher anxiety and less time in school, would increase the SEL impact on students with disabilities. They also pointed out that many students with disabilities have social emotional support or goals that were not being met due to the circumstances and these students would be impacted more deeply. Overall, while the data specific to impact on social emotional learning in students with disabilities is limited, Morando-Rhim et al. (2021) suggested that based on correlating factors found in studies of all students, the negative impact would be significant.

SEL Opportunities and Recommendations

SEL Benefits During a Pandemic

Rosanbalm's (2020) literature review also sought to answer questions about the importance of SEL during the pandemic and to understand how to implement SEL instruction effectively. Highlighting the importance of SEL to academic achievement, the author cites a study that shows an 11% increase in test scores among students who received SEL support compared to those who did not. Additionally, Rosenbalm's research indicated improvements in "self-esteem, attitudes about school, and positive social behavior" with a "reduction in conduct problems, bullying, delinquency, depression, and anxiety" (p. 3, as cited in Durlak et al., 2011; Smith & Low, 2013).

Students' futures are positively impacted as well, with 6-11% increases in graduation from high school and college, six percent fewer criminal instances, and improved earning potential and job security (p. 3). Economically, Rosenbalm's research states that for each dollar spent on SEL, there is an $11 benefit to the receiver or economy.

She correlates the significance of SEL during the pandemic to studies that show significantly increased depression in students, increased behavior problems, and increased hospital visits for students related to mental health issues, suggesting that SEL will help mitigate or reduce some of these challenges. Rosenbalm's recommendations for improving SEL include defining SEL support, making the support district-wide, and improving resources to help facilitate growth of SEL programming, such as funding, human capital, data management, and implementation. She further provides resources to improve SEL during virtual learning, such as mobile applications, online calm down spaces, and increased staff development and communication. Overall, Rosenbalm suggests that SEL should be a top priority for schools in order to support students and their futures during a time of increased stressful changes and challenges.

Similarly, the goal of Hamilton et al.'s June 2021 literature review was to review and consider recent research on the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on students' social emotional development and well-being in order to provide recommendations for future research and educational practices. This group of researchers note that the data analyzed was limited as it included mostly students aged 11-18, does not provide insight into the impact on students with disabilities, and "most of the research is based on white, middle-class perspective" (Hamilton et al., 2021, p. 11). More

significant to their inquiry, the researchers suggested data shows a negative impact on mental health, but offer few specifics on social emotional development in students.

For example, between 30-40% of students surveyed during the pandemic cited a decline in mental or social emotional health. Hamilton et al. (2021) cite surveys that showed that 36% of teens were "more concerned than usual about their emotional health" during the pandemic and over 40% noted pandemic-based detriments to their happiness. Conversely, a survey of over 2,000 teens actually showed a reduction in anxiety and depression during the first two months of schools closing. Hamilton et al. (2021) suggested that the positive emotional outcomes were limited and began to decline as the pandemic progressed. The researchers acknowledge that subjective surveys of school staff are the most common data sources, citing studies in which 77% of staff said students were lagging in SEL skills relative to pre-pandemic, 33% of staff were more concerned about social emotional health, over 46% increased the time spent on SEL, and over 60% knew students worried about their social emotional health (Hamilton et al., 2021).

General Recommendations

As a result of their concern over the lack of available data, Hamilton et al. had four primary recommendations. First, they recommended that researchers expand survey focus to include broader demographic and cultural context and opportunities for growth in light of the pandemic. Second, they recommended exploring technologies, training, and funding avenues to improve data and increase SEL support. Third, they advised more collaboration with communities to support parents, families, programming, systems, and policies for more student support. Finally, they recommended better metrics for cultural

climates, school-based relationships, sociocultural context, and SEL well-being for both teachers and students (Hamilton et al., 2021). Overall, Hamilton et al. suggest that the existing data tools limit the quality and breadth of data to provide informed decisions, and significant improvements need to be made to facilitate the quest for meaningful data on the impact of social-emotional health in all students so that schools can respond and support them accordingly.

Teacher Support

During the pandemic all educators faced unique challenges, but Wardrip et al.'s (2021) study chose to focus on how they implemented lessons that traditionally involved hands-on activities (referred to as "maker-based") in a remote learning environment. The goal of the study was to determine how these teachers were assessing remote students. Based on a "values-based perspective on assessment" (p. 952), they sought to determine what teachers valued in their students' learning and how this correlated to their assessments. To narrow the focus of their study, Wardrip et al. focused on three areas: how teachers' based their assessments on these values, how they measured and addressed engagement, and how they planned their lessons and assessments accordingly. While no formal hypothesis was given, Wardrip et al. state that they were aware of the increased challenges during distance learning, especially when translating hands-on activities, and they wanted to better understand how these types of assessments were changing along with learning environments.

The study used field notes, interviews, and student work samples from teachers in a collaborative learning group called Agency by Design Pittsburgh. The group consisted

of 30 teachers, but during this time period, data was gathered from 15 of the teachers, with an average of 12 teachers in attendance at regular online meetings. These teachers had experience with both in-person and remote learning. Six meetings were observed by the researchers during the 2020-2021 school year, in which field notes were collected. Four technology teachers from this group, who worked with students in grades K-5, were selected for a series of 30-60 minute in-depth interviews. Additional demographic information regarding participants was not provided. A total of 31 student work samples were collected from these four teachers to provide additional insight.

Educators in the survey responded with values closely tied to Social Emotional Learning, including "intentionality and resilience, patience, perseverance, experiential learning, collaboration, communication, adaptation, independent curiosity, and emotional and physical well-being" (Wardrip, 2021, p. 956). The teachers stated that although the learning environment shifted from in-person to virtual learning, their values stayed the same; they just needed to rethink their implementation. They also shared experiences in diminished emotional states for students, with one teacher describing her students' mental health as "where they're at is just not great" (p. 956). Most teachers also noted that their values broadened to focus more on increased student happiness and engagement. The implementation of hands-on activities necessarily relied heavily on digital interactions such as Google Classroom and FlipGrid for participation, engagement, and submission. Live online classrooms allowed them to monitor progress, as compared to observing the students in a classroom. Teachers noted some positive outcomes of the online formats; they enabled new ways for students to express themselves, such as using props or accents

that they did not use previously when in person, and that this, in turn, enabled teachers to learn more about students as individuals.

Equity

Another common theme was equity among students in regards to materials available at home, and the cost-prohibitive nature of supplying materials for hands-on activities sent home. This limited assessments and required many teachers to redesign low-cost alternatives. Despite these challenges, the study found that teachers adjusted their various approaches, but continued to implement hands-on assessments that were still rooted in their learning values. Overall, Wardrip et al. (2021) noted that a key finding was a shift in teacher focus (based on their increased concern for student social-emotional well-being) to create and assess students on social-emotional ideas and theories intertwined with their technology and engineering assessments.

Intervention Strategies

A similar study by Kamei et al. (2020) focused on intervention strategies for social emotional learning in remote environments. The goal of the research was to learn more about the benefits of SEL in this setting and best practices for educators. Kamei et al. highlighted the importance of SEL during the pandemic and the related stressors it brings. They narrowed their SEL focus to three primary categories: cognitive regulation, emotional competencies, and social skills.

Evidence from their literature review cited the benefits of SEL on students' ability to learn, succeed academically, solve problems, and manage relationships with others. Notably, SEL in kindergarten was strongly tied to future well-being (including reduction

in criminal and drug related behaviors), graduation, college attendance, and job outlook. Kamei et al. correlate children in the pandemic to the children that suffered through Hurricane Katrina, in that they are more likely to experience a negative impact on emotional control and academics as well as a stronger likelihood for post-traumatic stress disorder. In both cases, family economics, regular social interactions with peers and educators, and living situations were disrupted; the pandemic compounds this with the fear of COVID-19. Kamei et al. write that SEL is more crucial than ever because virtual learning means students manage all of these factors, in addition to learning technology, managing their learning style online from home, and dealing with both isolation and shared family space.

When researching how to support students, they provided examples for "explicit SEL instruction" and "ongoing teaching practices that are designed to promote SEL" (p.369) in the three primary categories of SEL they defined. Cognitive regulation ideas included instruction for online time management tools, virtual problem sharing and solving, growth mindset videos, readings that illustrate people overcoming hardships, self-monitoring progress, daily affirmations, and digital progress or reflection tools. Emotional regulation ideas included strategies for stress reduction, emotional identification during problem sharing, one to one check-ins, individual class jobs or responsibilities, and positive messages from the teacher about their individual future. Social skills ideas include real-world problem projects, collaborative learning experiences, "get to know you" games, kindness notes, and real-time class recognition or cheers. Overall, Kamei et al. provided this information primarily to educators, as they

suggest that teachers must lead SEL proactively and immediately during times of crisis like the pandemic, and continue to grow in this area to support their students now and in the future.

Specific SEL Programming

More narrowly focused, Li et al.'s (2021) study used 37 randomly selected third grade classrooms across the globe (United States of America, Mexico, China, and Vietnam) to study an SEL program called *Adventures Aboard the S.S. Grin (Adventures)* to determine its effectiveness and draw conclusions on the impact of SEL during the pandemic. Totaling 537 students, 17 classrooms implemented *Adventures*, 18 remained as a control, and two did not complete the study. Data was collected by researchers using surveys, observations, and interviews. The five SEL pillars of *Adventures* are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. The video and game-based program was selected because of its brevity, ease of training, and ability to enhance existing curriculum. Originally intended as an SEL study beginning in December 2019, the scope expanded as schools transitioned to remote learning in March of 2020. Of the 17 teachers using the program, 14 were able to successfully adapt to online implementation and discussions in order to complete the program remotely. Generally, the teachers were able to use the same implementation with the exception of virtual discussions rather than in-person.

Li et al. suggested that the study is important because it addressed SEL needs during a time of heightened need for students, enabled mostly successful execution despite the transition to virtual learning, and produced positive results on student

outcomes. Three primary challenges cited for incompletion by students were "lack of devices, internet, or in-person supervision by their teacher" (p. 9). These challenges suggest both a gap in technological access for all and a stronger need in some students for more traditional support than can be offered in a remote environment. The program itself was correlated to positive results in students' interpersonal strength, communication skills, and social skills when compared to those that did not implement it. The researchers also note that engagement measurements both in class and at home were in the 98th percentile. Overall, Li et al. suggested that *Adventures* is an effective tool,and that engaging, game-based SEL curricula can be successful as long as it allows for simple implementation, limited training, provides engagement to students, and is flexible for use in both at-home and in-person learning.

Leadership Recommendations

Broader recommendations come from Summers' (2020) literature review, which combined research on effective leadership in schools, the changes that schools face, and the importance of SEL during a pandemic to provide recommendations for school leaders to better support their staff. She cited studies highlighting the importance of SEL regardless of the learning environment and is crucial for the success of students and teachers alike. Summers noted another study that showed that stress management, resilience, and optimism are three keys to effective education, and the need for these skills has risen as COVID-19 changed the landscape of education.

Her four primary recommendations for supporting teachers during virtual learning are to build collaboration online, offer choices of varied formats, build relationships on

trust and community, and inspire and enable long-term commitment (p. 35). Summers

applied practices found in her research to recommend using breakout rooms, combining

online and offline activities, keeping activities around 15 minutes with breaks in between,

using messaging applications to enable authentic and informal conversation, creating

virtual professional and learning communities for collaboration among teachers, and

allowing for flexibility of PLC meeting times to accommodate teachers' schedules.

Overall, she suggested that teachers need to "understand, model, teach, and support" SEL

skills for students as they would any other subject, and it is the responsibility of school

leaders to both support them and model these behaviors.

      Likewise, Ferren's (2021) literature review emphasized the importance of

teachers' needs for social emotional support in light of the pandemic. She wrote that

since teachers are the primary social emotional instructors or supports, their own social

emotional needs must be met. Ferren noted that teacher stress was already an issue prior

to the pandemic, as the top five emotions for educators are "frustrated, overwhelmed,

stressed, tired, and happy" according to a 2017 survey, and 85% of educators felt their

teaching abilities were negatively impacted by work-life balance in a 2018 survey (p. 1).

She suggested that these sentiments increased during the pandemic, as almost fifty

percent of teachers who left their profession after February of 2020 cited the pandemic as

the primary reason; although the majority hadn't considered leaving before the pandemic,

twenty-five percent of teachers in an October 2020 survey responded that they planned to

leave before the end of the year. Those who left said they were overworked, undertrained

in technology, and challenged with virtual learning.

Ferren (2021) found that supporting SEL for educators not only improved the well-being of their students and themselves, but it reduced stress, absences, and turnover among teachers as well. Conversely, if teachers poorly taught SEL, it decreased their students' SEL abilities. Ferren recommended that in order to improve SEL support for educators, they should be included in ongoing discussions about returning to school and which SEL supports are needed, as well as receive continuous professional development for SEL. She also suggested allocating available government funding for increased staff, educator pay raises, in-school SEL programs, and networks for educators. Overall, Ferren suggests that the pandemic has elevated stress and lowered morale among educators, and her recommendations will help to reduce turnover and improve educational experiences for students and staff alike.

Rather than focus on current teacher development, Hill et al. 's (2020) research centered on the needs that prospective educators have based on the changes in education due to the pandemic, with a focus on social emotional learning. The researchers conducting the literature review and proposal are members of the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in British Columbia, Canada; they sought to identify adaptations to teacher preparation that would be beneficial following the pandemic. While prospective teachers at SFU were faced with the same challenges inherent to remote learning as K-12 students around the world, Hill et al. found that the most common inquiries were related to their preparedness to handle student social emotional needs that were burgeoning due to the pandemic.

Their research led them to focus on three key changes in their teacher preparation related to social emotional learning. First, they correlated an increase in pandemic-related stressors in students to increased stress in teachers, including secondary trauma being more prevalent. As a result, they recommended increased instruction for educators on managing their own well-being. Second, recognizing an increased need for social emotional learning in schools, they recommended an expanded social emotional learning curriculum for aspiring teachers to be better prepared to meet these needs in their students. Finally, Hill et al.'s (2020) research showed "heightened acknowledgement and respect" for educators as they were deemed essential workers and families worked to manage remote learning. Based on this, they proposed increased leadership training so that teachers cannot only be better recognized and referred to as leaders in the community, but also so they have the proper training to assume this role. A focus of the potential training was on prioritizing mental health in schools to help foster more caring and support in the communities that they steward. Overall, Hill et al. suggest that the decline in the social emotional state of students due to the pandemic requires teachers to improve their own well-being so that they can instruct others to do the same, helping lead communities through collective recovery.

In support of educators now and in the future, Hough et al.'s (2021) research brief addressed concerns about lack of SEL metrics tools by reviewing emotional trends during the pandemic and providing evidence-based instructional strategies to address them. These researchers used Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Hough et al., 2021) (physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization

needs) as a foundation for determining the degree of increased need for SEL during the pandemic; they cited rising fear, anxiety, bullying, suicides, depression, illness, and abuse in school-age students as factors that negatively impact these basic needs (Hough et al., 2021). Hough et al. suggested that SEL can facilitate students in addressing these needs so that they can better meet the "necessary preconditions for higher-level learning" (Hough et al., 2021, p. 2). They also point out that due to the pandemic, teachers cannot address or monitor student well-being as they could in the past, using school as a foundation for social support - the strength of which correlates with trauma and disruption management (p. 3).

Hough et al. suggested that existing, research-based, free, simple tools and strategies are readily available to teachers, and that these tools are valuable, adaptable, and measurable. The tools listed are the SEL framework by CASEL, the California School Climate Health and Learning Surveys, the CORE Rally Instrument, EdInstruments, and the Copilot-Elevate Survey (Hough et al., 2021). They write that the surveys in these tools can be used to gather valuable data on social-emotional well-being in five to fifteen minutes. Hough et al. stated that this data can then be used to illustrate common trends to focus on when using the tools for specific SEL programming. In order to be effective, the tools should be brief, address equity issues, align with school priorities, inform instructional strategies, and provide anonymity. Despite their effectiveness, Hough et al. cautions educators that stereotype and bias reinforcement can occur if not structured properly. Overall, Hough et al. write that the rising social emotional impact in students exacerbated by the pandemic can be assessed and

approached using existing tools that are evidence-based, easy to use, and free for educators.

Organization-Specific Recommendations

Yoder et al.'s (2020) report conducted in collaboration with CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) took a broader approach by analyzing the educational pandemic response plans for 37 states in the U.S. to understand common themes in the nationwide approach and make recommendations for SEL programming during the transition from virtual learning back to a traditional in-school environment. Key findings showed that about 84% of states made SEL a high point of focus while the rest maintained their current prioritization. Requests for additional SEL support from individual districts rose in about 74% of the states that participated.

This suggests a significant increase in expanded SEL support as a direct result of schools' concerns for supporting their students socially and emotionally during the pandemic. The most common approaches states used to address these needs were "addressing mental health needs…(89%); supporting adult SEL and mental health (81%); providing/supporting professional learning of SEL (87%); and engaging SEL strategies within distance learning (73%)" (p. 3). The biggest obstacles encountered by states were staff training, academic focus, and funding. Notably, 38% responded with uncertainty as to how to utilize SEL during virtual learning.

Based on this data, Yoder et al. recommended six strategies for supporting SEL during the transition between the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school year: highlighting the importance of SEL for all, descriptive planning of SEL and mental health support,

best-practice sharing, SEL focus in professional learning, utilization of data to improve

SEL processes, and obtaining or allocating more funds to support SEL. Overall, the

researchers suggested that SEL should continue to improve in order to better support

students, and that the proper training, communication, and funding are requisite for

ensuring its success.

Also focusing on recommendations for educators, the Education and Society

Program of The Aspen Institute (2020) collaborated with nationwide leaders in a

multitude of various educational roles to make recommendations to state leadership

regarding best practices for supporting social emotional learning in schools in response to

the pandemic. The report outlined 10 actions the state could take to accomplish this,

noting that funding would likely need to be acquired or reallocated to support them.

Though not specific, the report suggested that increased social emotional learning support

is needed by schools due to the negative impact the pandemic has had on students.

The first recommendation was that communication should be more explicit and

collaborative within communities through the formation of student councils on

COVID-19 policies. The second and third recommendations were to gather data on

pandemic-related stressors on students and teachers, respectively, in order to properly

formulate a strategic response. The fourth was to improve data collection, and redefine

as necessary, what it means for students to be engaged and safe. This suggests that since

the learning environment has changed due to the pandemic, engagement and safety have

new meanings and methods, and must be approached accordingly. The fifth

recommendation was to prioritize social emotional recovery and community over

academic performance, relating closely to the sixth recommendation, which was to cancel required statewide assessments for 2020-2021. This suggests a possible avenue to reduce stress among students.

The seventh recommendation is to restructure roles of educators in order to lessen the increased burden of social emotional support for students through increased staffing and collaboration with government agencies. In light of the drastic changes in environment and teaching methods, the report then suggested increasing flexibility and exploring new approaches to school hours, spending, credit attainment, and data collaboration to facilitate the transitions faced by schools and students. The Aspen Institute's (2020) ninth recommendation was for staff to focus on the most urgent needs of students, rather than prioritizing academics, as the needs would likely be social emotional in nature and therefore critical to address if students are expected to learn. This suggestion is similar to Hough et al. 's (2021) focus on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Hough et al., 2021). Finally, the report recommended that state resources be allocated to increase preparedness for future support, specifically for school response plans and for addressing marginalized student groups such as students with disabilities or English learners. Overall, the report stressed the dramatic change in social emotional support required, and thoroughly highlighted specific areas of focus for states to address during and after the pandemic.

The goal of Bland et. al's (2021) study was to get a detailed understanding of the strategies that Tulsa Public Schools planned to use to reopen in-person classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. While they reviewed physical safety, such as cleaning procedures

and distancing measures, the primary focus was on student social and emotional safety. Tulsa Public has 77 schools, over 33,000 students, and almost 6,000 staff members. Of the 33,000-plus students, 37% were hispanic/Latinx, 23% were Black, 23% were White, 10% were Multiracial, 5% were American Indian, and 2% were Asian/Pacific Islander; with 26% English learners. Approximately 81% of these students were economically disadvantaged.

As the district pursued efforts to improve SEL so that students were safe from a COVID-19 perspective, but also "emotionally and mentally safe," (p. 5) they focused on three things. The first was funding, where they planned to utilize federal funds to support SEL in schools. The second was lengthening their school day in order to maintain academic focus while increasing SEL time. The third was incorporating SEL into "all of Tulsa's work." (p. 5), because as Deputy Superintendent Paula Shannon stated, students ``can't have cognitive work happening without a real focus on social and emotional well-being and skills" (p. 5). The reason stated for their shift in focus was pandemic-based, as leadership correlated it with more staff and student concentration on the benefits of SEL and its "healing power" (p. 6). Key strategies planned by the district for implementation included leveraging data collection to analyze effectiveness of their SEL programming, creating wellness teams that focus on non-academic support for students and staff, dedicating time to relationship building, and extending advisory time to build community. Overall, the study highlights how one district realized the importance of SEL to their schools and illustrated specific strategies planned to improve the SEL experience district-wide.

Also examining smaller communities, Chu et al.'s (2021) study assessed two charter schools' approaches to the changes in SEL consideration that the pandemic has brought about, the related obstacles that schools face, and recommended ideas to help manage SEL more efficiently and effectively. Distinctive K-12 Schools have about 12,000 students across nine schools located in Chicago and Detroit. Uplift Education has over 21,000 students in the greater Dallas area. Around 80% of students in both systems qualify for free and reduced lunch. The demographic makeups are approximately 19-32% English language learners, 7-13% receiving special education services, 61-68% Hispanic, 20-26% Black, and 12% white, Asian, or multi-racial.

Chu et al. (2021) noted that Uplift leadership saw a rise in SEL importance when approximately one third of their students surveyed replied positively that they "would like to talk privately with an adult from school about how you're feeling" (p. 4). The CEO of Uplift stated the three most common themes from students in the survey were fear of getting COVID, family or economic stress, and missing friends and teachers. Chu et al. cite a survey of 10,000 students by NBC News that stated 56% of students were "more stressed about school than they were before the pandemic," and stress related to mental health had risen 23% since the beginning of the pandemic (p. 4).

Data from both the schools and additional literature suggested that SEL is a possible approach to managing rising levels of student stress and mental health challenges, and Chu et al. use information from the charter schools to provide recommendations for other schools to emulate. They suggest that schools should have common approaches, such as emotional check-ins or warm greetings, leverage data via

SEL surveys to manage trends and address areas of need, and staff strategically so that students have the resources they need. One such approach deemed effective at Distinctive was that each student had an adult mentor whom they met with for 15 minutes each week to promote connections and community. Chu et al. (2021) summarized the leadership approach to SEL into four common categories: aligning SEL to the schools' values and goals to make SEL a priority, investing in SEL for adults to care for staff and develop them as SEL educators, promoting SEL from within leadership so that SEL is incorporated into decision making discussions and strategies, and incorporating SEL into existing routines in order to "reinforce its' importance and value" (p. 12). Overall, Chu et al. suggests that in order to experience the success that these two schools have had, leadership needs to incorporate common SEL practices school-wide both directly and indirectly, utilize and share data collaboratively to support decision-making, and support clear direction on SEL from the highest leadership.

SEL in After School Programs

Through a more expository lens, Benavides et al.'s (2020) study focused on SEL support in after school programs in a critique of current SEL methods due to a lack of focus on equity. Their study analyzed peer-reviewed articles, policy, research, and educator evaluation reports to correlate SEL, out-of-school time (OST), inclusion, and equity with a goal to better understand effective SEL and equity practices, as well as the intersection of the two, in OST settings. The focus of their research was on OST programs, as they suggested that there is an opportunity to improve and expand SEL time within these programs in order to increase SEL in many students, especially those in the

historically underserved populations of racial minorities and lower income homes. Benavides et al.'s research suggested SEL improves attendance, grades, and graduation, which could strongly benefit children's futures.

Through their research, they found three common themes: "customization and specificity, standardization and measurement, and equity and trauma-informed practice" (p. 3). First, they suggested that by coordinating with school partners, implementing proper training, maintaining consistency while adapting to change, and aligning SEL to OST program values, SEL programs will be effectively specific. Further, Benavides et al. wrote that "they must have authentic youth development experiences that are facilitated by people who represent their cultural and contextual backgrounds" (Benavides et al., 2020, p. 3), suggesting that educators must share life experience and incorporate cultural differences in order to be successful. Second, they stated that data is limited and therefore difficult to measure, with less than 30% of 273 surveyed programs providing information required for improved decision making (p. 4). Further, they found that few collection tools are specific to OST, suggesting that additional tools need to be created or validated by research. Finally, they suggested that universal SEL may be biased, so OST programs should focus on culture, climate, bias reduction, addressing stereotypes, and staff training to improve accessibility for all students. Overall Benavides et al. suggested that while there is significant potential for SEL in OST programs, it must be aligned with program values, include program and participant specific metrics, and be approached through a lens of equity in order to be successfully implemented.

Challenging SEL

Research Criticism

Overall, Finn suggested that based on the subjectivity of much of the existing SEL data and the multiple external factors influencing this data that SEL is not yet evidence based, and as such, SEL research and schools' eagerness to implement, even in challenging times such as these, should be questioned. Finn (2016) questioned the ability to apply concise metrics to SEL, and therefore its measurable effectiveness, citing the inherent risks with implementing SEL without this information.

His primary claim is that "SEL needs more reliable instruments" (Finn, 2016, p. 2), supporting this by analyzing the subjectivity of SEL metrics. Finn's research showed the primary source of SEL data is based on survey results from educators and students. He cited SEL tools such as GreatSchools that use self-reporting metrics, and questioned factors such as transparency and honesty from students. Finn's research showed that 91% of an average American's life is outside of school, leaving only 9% for time in school. He suggested that of that nine percent, much less is spent on SEL and that this allows for too many variables to definitively show that SEL has a positive effect on students. He stated that external factors, such as cultures, prior experiences, IQ, study habits, economics, ages, passage of time, and even the time that assessments are given are all things that can influence academics and SEL, making it challenging to reliably correlate the two (p. 3). Finn's research showed higher academic scores but lower self-esteem and positivity in Asian students when compared to American students, suggesting that SEL skills and

academics are not necessarily correlated. It also showed many younger Americans had very high self-esteem scores but poor math and English scores, again suggesting no correlation between the two (p. 5).

Similarly, Effrem et al. 's (2019) white paper reviewed SEL research to question the validity of evidence-based effectiveness for SEL supported by SEL leaders, CASEL, and The Aspen Institute. One key finding was a common theme that SEL experts not only had, but acknowledged, was varying definitions of SEL and related skills, which Effrem et al. suggested questions the scope, training, implementation, application, and objectiveness of SEL programs and results. Another key finding were statistics that contradicted Durlak et al.'s (2011) oft-cited research that increased SEL skills correlate to an 11 percent improvement in academic achievement. In Durlak et al.'s (2021) research highlighted that longer term data, noted math, reading, and attention as the strongest predictors of academic achievement, while SEL skills were "generally insignificant" (Effrem et al., 2019, p.20). Another study by Duncan et al. (2007), also included in Durlak et al.'s review showed that most SEL interventions were not evidence-based for validity, and therefore did not provide objective evidence to support the correlation of SEL as an academic predictor.

Effrem et al. also questioned the Aspen Institute's (2020) commonly cited research that used brain scan images to represent the value of SEL skills when problem solving. Researchers noted the software was found to yield false positives, therefore making the over 40,000 studies conducted with it unreliable. Another review found that of the approximately 100 studies The Aspen Institute used to support SEL, only 39 could

be successfully replicated, which Effrem et al. suggested questions their validity. Overall, Effrem et al. (2019) cautioned against the validity of existing SEL data based on varying SEL definitions and contradictory or overly subjective research, suggesting that clearer understanding of SEL programs and their metrics are required before valid conclusions about its effectiveness can be drawn (Effrem, 2019).

Government Criticism

Rather than effectiveness, Greene's (2019) literature review criticized the United States' current approach to SEL in a different way, suggesting that the expanse of federal government regulation has hindered the effectiveness and potential of SEL in public schools. He began by suggesting that the focus on SEL has become more science-based, compared to its moral and religious beginnings. They stated that "there is a nearly one-to-one correspondence between the cardinal virtues and the core SEL competencies as identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning", (p. 2). The cardinal virtues he referred to were published by Socrates and later adopted into Christian ideals. Greene suggested that core competencies such as conscientiousness and honesty are religious, or at least moral, ideals, and that the data cannot be separated from this foundation.

He also questioned the priority of SEL, stating that a student will not succeed in math if the instruction is poor, regardless of their SEL skills and positive attitude (p. 2). He cited a decline in total school districts from more than 100,000 in 1940 to fewer than 14,000 today as an example of a more centralized government, and with this centralization comes a less-specific direction of values that is further and further removed

from local communities (p. 3). Greene stated that while state and federal governments infer rewards or punishments for standardized testing, there is no such accountability for character education. Overall, Green suggested that by changing the approach to SEL from centrally managed to locally managed, communities will be able to more clearly define SEL concepts in ways that are morally meaningful to them, which in turn will improve character education through SEL.

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Summary of Literature

This literature review investigated the impact that the pandemic has had on students' social emotional learning (SEL), including barriers to successful SEL implementation and opportunities to improve SEL. The transition to remote learning and eventual return to school cast a light on how students' social and emotional needs were traditionally met and managed in school, and as school environments changed, so did these needs and educators' varied approaches to addressing them. The pandemic highlighted the importance of SEL and presented new obstacles to student support while encouraging those involved in the education of children to improve its availability and effectiveness.

When the pandemic caused school closings, the educational system was faced with unprecedented challenges that altered its foundation. SEL was a critical area negatively impacted by these changes. The benefits of SEL have been correlated to improved academics, social behavior, citizenship, future well-being, overall student growth, and even the economy (Atwell et al., 2021; Benavides, 2020; Bland et al., 2021; Bond, 2020; Kamei, 2021; Li, 2021; Mahoney, 2019; Rosanbalm, 2021; Schleicher, 2019; Weir, 2020). However, as students transitioned to remote learning, schools scrambled to deliver instruction with limited preparation, planning, and support through the use of new technologies (Bond, 2020; Stacki et al., 2021; Weir, 2020). Along with school closures came reduced engagement, participation, and attendance from students

(Atwell et al, 2021; Huck et al., 2021; Zieher, 2021). Teachers struggled to implement new technology, methods, and routines while they strove to connect with students whose well-being they worried about (Atwell et al., 2021; Ferren, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2021; Huck et al., 2021; Morando-Rhim et al. 2021; Zieher, 2021). Parents expressed concern over not only their children's academics, but their mental health, and rightfully so (Atwell et al., 2021; Egan, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2021; Huck et al., 2021; Morando-Rhim et al., 2021). Students in relative isolation from their teachers and peers showed alarming declines in their mental health, including increased depression, anxiety, stress, and suicidal thoughts (Chu, 2021; DeArmond, 2021; Duckworth, 2021; Egan, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2020; Hough et al., 2021; Kamei, 2021; Rosanbalm, 2021; Summers, 2020; Wardrip, 2021; Weir, 2020). Basic SEL skills declined in key areas as well, such as time management, self-efficacy, self-motivation, social awareness, and relationship management (Duckworth, 2021; Huck et al., 2021; Santibanez, 2021; Stacki et al., 2021). These changes in students' lives were only compounded by the correlation between social-emotional healthiness and academic success (Duckworth, 2021; Santibanez, 2021), making a logistically challenging academic environment even more harsh.

As educators implemented new teaching methods and recognized the importance of their students' well-being during the crisis, significant barriers to supporting their students were presented. As with all other subjects, technology became a focal point, as inequitable distribution of resources was brought to light through limited hardware and internet access for many (Wardrip, 2021). Though teachers sought to increase their focus

on social emotional aspects and relationships with students to improve their well-being, the availability of SEL programs and access was limited (Huck et al., 2021; Li, 2021). Schools provide the majority of students' mental health care, yet mental health support staff and availability were strained by the increased needs, leaving much of the responsibility to teachers (DeArmond, 2021; Weir, 2020; Zieher, 2021). Unfortunately, the majority of teachers lacked professional development and training on how to implement successful SEL programs for students and often worked in silos on ad hoc solutions (Rosenbalm, 2021; Yoder, 2020; Zieher, 2021). Lack of evidence-based research including objective, measurable, and actionable data, combined with unclear direction and limited funding from leadership, left many teachers to work outside of school hours to find solutions on their own, despite SEL being a pandemic priority for the majority of school leaders (Benavides, 2020; DeArmond, 2021; Rosenbalm, 2021; Weir, 2020; Yoder, 2020; Zieher, 2021). This increased responsibility added to the already rising stress levels of teachers in the pandemic, who further questioned their ability to successfully support their students and even their desire to continue teaching, without significant and explicit support from their schools for their own well-being (DeArmond, 2021; Zieher, 2021).

Despite the many obstacles, researchers have provided guidance and recommendations to improve social emotional learning at a time when it is needed more than ever. Schools can integrate SEL into their academic classes (Wardrip, 2021; Weir, 2020) or use one of several proven SEL programs such as *Adventures* or the CASEL SEL Framework (Hough et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). As technology adaptation improves,

educators can implement SEL skill tools, virtual real-world problem sharing, digital progress trackers, and calming tools to increase SEL access (Hamilton et al., 2021; Kamei, 2021; Rosanbalm, 2021). To address Finn Jr. (2019) and Effrem et al.'s (2019) concerns about limited or subjective data on the effectiveness of SEL, improved data gathering and monitoring tools should be utilized in order to provide more focused and strategic information for schools. In response to Greene's concerns that SEL is lacking local direction and moral alignment, communication from the community to policymakers should be improved in order to provide increased definition and guidance (Aspen Institute, 2020; Ferren, 2021; Hamilton et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2021; Mahoney, 2019; Stacki, 2021). This would simultaneously facilitate improved districtwide direction and training, while providing a stronger case for staffing changes, increased teacher support, and funding (Aspen Institute, 2020; Benavides, 2020; Bland et al., 2021; Chu et al., 2021; Ferren, 2021; Hill et al., 2020; Mahoney, 2019; Rosanbalm, 2021; Schleicher, 2019; Stacki et al., 2021; Summers, 2020; Weir, 2020).

Limitations of the Research

Schools around the world closed due to the pandemic in March of 2020, and although they have been reopened, COVID-19 still looms as a threat for further disruption. This research was conducted about two years after initial closures, and as such, robust data on the impact that the pandemic has had on social emotional learning remains limited in the short term while long-term studies are non-existent. More quantifiable and evidence-based short-term research would have been beneficial to better understand the impacts, and long-term research would show how these impacts evolve

over time. Though social emotional learning is not a new concept, data collection and tracking remains largely subjective. Additional objective research would help further substantiate both the short- and long-term benefits of SEL.

The United States, in particular, was faced with what many referred to as a "dual pandemic"; as COVID-19 swept the nation, so did a tumultuous period of racial tension and significant civil rights tragedies, as high profile police brutality cases such as the death of George Floyd in Minnesota shook the foundation of equal rights. This caused many researchers to simultaneously investigate racial inequities in the educational system along with social, emotional, and mental health. The research in this paper was narrowed in scope to exclude the focus of racial inequity and the impact on underserved populations, although some overlaps in affected historically underrepresented populations were present in technological access and remote learning impact. Each of these factors limited the quantity and quality of research available to answer the primary research questions at the time of writing.

Implications for Future Research

Due to the relatively recent events that were the catalysts for the research, limited research was available in several key areas. First, short-term studies should continue to be conducted, with improved universal metrics and more specific demographic information. Much of the existing research was anecdotal and survey based, and although it was cross-referenced with hard data such as attendance and test scores, the research needs additional grounding in objective measurements. Future research should be founded in long-term studies of evidence-based SEL programs tracked in detail to identify additional

correlations to their impact on student growth and performance. Obtaining more information on specific demographics will facilitate more in depth understanding of how distinct populations were affected. For example, there is little evidence on the social emotional impact on students with disabilities, who often have increased social emotional needs and learning objectives. Finally, long-term studies should continue to be developed and reviewed against new and existing short-term studies to obtain a more comprehensive view of the true impact that COVID-19 has had on social emotional learning in students. The pandemic had not ceased at the time of writing, so the existing data painted only a partial picture of early impacts. Without having more detailed information, it is difficult for educators, administrators, and policymakers to be strategically prescriptive in their social emotional support for students.

Implications for Professional Application

Educators were caught flat footed by the pandemic, at an extreme disservice to both themselves and their students. Research has shown that social emotional learning can greatly benefit students' mental health, academics, and future. Combined with the social emotional climate brought about by the pandemic, these benefits are much needed. To improve SEL, educators need to responsibly research, communicate, advocate, and implement the necessary changes. Additional research is needed to solidify stronger cases to enact more robust, adaptable, and proven SEL in schools. Educators could participate in research, conduct their own research, and continue independent research to contribute to these improvements. A better understanding of SEL could also lead to stronger school communities that provide more support for educators themselves. Advocating for this

priority in schools will help keep teachers a part of necessary conversations about change and direction, and enable school leaders and policymakers to make more informed and strategic decisions about improving SEL.

However, educators do not need to wait for these decisions to be made. They have an opportunity to continue to be pioneers of change in their communities. Teachers can use existing, proven SEL tools to continue to support their renewed focus on improving the mental well-being of students. They can adapt their teaching approach to include both direct SEL instruction through these programs and indirect SEL instruction by integrating social emotional concepts into their existing curricula, knowing that research has shown it will also benefit their students academically. In order to be effective, teachers must be properly trained in SEL. This requires a commitment to professional development, whether led by schools or teachers as independent thought leaders, which will require additional work and effort from teachers as they shuffle priorities or make sacrifices and expand work hours to invest in SEL.

Finally, as teachers expand their responsibilities, they must also take care to manage their own well-being. The pandemic negatively impacted a teaching force that already felt strained and questioned their own value and effectiveness. In order to mitigate these negative impacts, teachers should explore SEL as both a personal tool and one to be used with their peers. Acknowledging and addressing the struggles that teachers have continuously faced, which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic, is vital to the continued effectiveness of their teaching.

The pandemic has brought unprecedented changes and stressors to educational systems worldwide. At the front line throughout have been educators, whose experiences must be learned from and whose voices must be heard. Educators have a responsibility to support their students to the best of their ability, and by making these changes, they can not only improve current student support, but prepare for future turmoil in hopes that it will be better managed in the future.

Conclusion

How has the pandemic impacted social emotional learning in students, and what can educational systems do to better support them? Overall, the research showed that students' social emotional needs have been negatively impacted by the pandemic, as mental health declined through factors such as increased anxiety and depression (Chu, 2021; DeArmond, 2021; Duckworth, 2021; Egan, 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Hill et al., 2020; Hough et al., 2021; Kamei, 2021; Rosanbalm, 2021; Summers, 2020; Wardrip, 2021; Weir, 2020). SEL programs have been shown to mitigate negative mental health impacts and support student growth towards effectively social and productive citizens (Atwell et al., 2021; Benavides, 2020; Bland et al., 2021; Bond, 2020; Kamei, 2021; Li, 2021; Mahoney, 2019; Rosanbalm, 2021; Schleicher, 2019; Weir, 2020). Though there will be challenges along the way, schools have a path to making significant and valuable changes to SEL programming that will benefit the students and communities of the future.

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