

C. Social and Emotional Learning

Group Members

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Definition of Research Area and Terms

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the development of broad set of social and emotional competencies including resilience, cooperation and negotiation skills, a positive self-identity, a sense of self-worth, empathy for others, decision-making and problem-solving skills, impulse control, anger management, stress management, and self-regulation. Social and emotional learning also refers to one's ability to effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills and enable them to manage their emotions in their day-to-day interactions with others and to understand and feel and show empathy for others, and make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2013, p. 6).

Literature Review Process

Our workgroup on SEL in middle grades education began to refine its focus during the Association for Middle Level Education conference in Columbus, Ohio in October, 2015. Although including SEL part of the young adolescent development research group was proposed, the complexity and breadth of SEL ultimately was recognized as warranting its own investigation.

As work group members, we began by considering our own prior scholarship on SEL in the middle grades and identifying a number of key points. First, we recognized that early adolescence is a key period of development with increasing complexity in relationships and educational demands. This was coupled by the fact that SE skills have been identified in the literature as being critical for academic success, and that these skills are competencies rather than character traits that can be developed

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through explicit teaching. We noted that there are a number of empirical studies about how to effectively teach SEL and a large number of SEL programs available ranging from whole school to individual classrooms. Finally, we observed minimal but growing empirical evidence regarding effective programs for young adolescents (CASEL Report, 2013).

Given the task of identifying the research priorities in SEL for the next three to five years, we considered responding to the findings of the CASEL Report, 2013 by examining whole-school and single classroom SEL programs in middle grades contexts and gathering more empirical evidence around effective programs. However, we felt the scope of this task was beyond the current workgroup and instead we chose it as a starting point for our literature search. With SE skills seen as critical core competencies that are necessary to meet the broader educational goals of local, state, and national governments, our discussions raised questions about the importance for SEL for all students, where SEL was positioned within the curriculum, and what capabilities of middle grades teachers possessed to teach SE skills.

A 40-hour search of literature from approximately the last 10 years regarding social and emotional programs that targeted young adolescent learners revealed that most studies on SEL were focused on younger learners, with only a limited literature available where programs targeted young adolescent learners. Identified through a range of databases including ERIC, JSTOR, Scopus, ProQuest, ScienceDirect and Google Scholar, the studies confirmed that, for the most part, SEL is taught through a variety of whole-school or individual classroom programs and that programs are not universally applied across regions, states or countries. The search also confirmed that effective implementation of SEL programs occurred where there was evidence of extensive professional development throughout the entire

school system and that there is limited empirical evidence on teacher training for teachers to teach SEL in schools. The majority of the literature was based in the US. Keywords included combinations of the following: social and emotional learning, social skills, social skilling, programs, young adolescent, middle years, middle grades, middle level, junior secondary, junior high.

The workgroup therefore decided to focus on teacher preparation programs and the training, if any, teacher candidates receive around social and emotional learning in middle grades classrooms. A further search of the literature was conducted by the workgroup members using the same databases but with combinations of the following keywords: teacher preparation programs, preservice teacher, teacher candidate, teacher training, social and emotional skills, SEL, emotional intelligence, emotional competence. Although not exhaustive, the search identified limited literature that specifically addressed the need for social and emotional learning to be part of teacher candidate preparation programs (Palomera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Brackett, 2008; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). The existing literature was theoretical and posed the justification for the inclusion of SEL training for teacher candidates and in-service teachers rather than reporting on the implementation of a program. Further searching needs to be undertaken to include terms such as mental health and student wellbeing. Most articles focused on the need for the development of SE competencies in teacher preparation with few acknowledging the need to build their capacity or preparedness to teach SEL.

As such, our recommended research focus is threefold: (a) understanding the literature around effective SEL programs for young adolescents, including a theoretical review of studies conducted to date; (b) teaching SE skills; and (c) the inclusion of SE skills in teacher preparation programs.

Research Questions

Structure of SEL Programs

1. What SEL programs are currently being used in schools?
2. What are the core features of SEL programs?
3. How are schools implementing SEL programs (i.e., whole-school, individual classroom, embedded in curriculum)?
4. What are the key features of effective programs for young adolescents?
5. How is the effectiveness of an SEL program measured?

Pedagogy Associated with SEL

6. Who are tasked with teaching SEL programs in schools?
7. What competencies do teachers need to be able to effectively teach SEL to students?
8. Is there empirical evidence of effective pedagogies for teaching SEL to young adolescents?

Teacher Candidate Preparation for SEL

9. Is there any evidence of explicit training in middle grades teacher preparation programs to prepare teacher candidates to teach SE skills for young adolescents?
10. What level of awareness of the importance of SEL for young adolescents do teacher candidates have?
11. How confident do teacher candidates feel about teaching SE skills?
12. What additional training would be necessary for to build their sense of efficacy to teach SE skills?
13. How could the teaching of SE skills be embedded within teacher education programs?

Teacher Professional Development

14. What professional development is available to prepare teachers to teach SE skills for young adolescents?
15. What level of awareness of the importance of SEL for young adolescents do middle grades teachers have?

16. What level of efficacy do teachers have for teaching SEL?
17. What additional training would be necessary for to build their sense of efficacy to teach SE skills?
18. How might the teaching of SE skills be embedded across the curriculum?

Influential Readings

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