

School-Based Emotional Wellness Programs for Elementary School Children

by
Holland Sanchez

Submitted to the Department of Psychology
School of Natural Sciences
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May 2020

Sponsor: Carina Vocisano, Ph.D.

Second Reader: Carolyn Cates, Ph.D.

Abstract

Children with strong social and emotional competencies have been found to perform better in school, have more relationships that are positive with peers and adults, and have better mental health. There is increasing recognition that effective education integrates social and emotional skills into academics in order to bolster these skills together. This literature review evaluates innovative school-based emotional education programs provided for elementary school children in the United States. The main aim of this literature review is to address the following research questions: 1) what are the major innovative emotional educational programs for children in elementary school in the United States? 2) What types of teaching techniques and strategies are used in these programs? 3) What is the major content of these emotional educational programs? 4) What are the strengths and limitations of these programs?

Keywords: social and emotional competencies, emotional education, effective education, mental health, elementary school.

School-Based Emotional Wellness Programs for
Elementary School Children

Literature Review

Under New York State law, students in K-12 are expected to have health classes as a part of their education (NYC Department of Education, 2019). The NYC Department of Education website provides a broad list of topics included in the curriculum for health classes, such as social and emotional skills, bullying prevention, health promotion, disease and illness prevention, and alcohol, tobacco and drug addiction prevention. While health classes are offered to all grades, each year the focus varies according to grade and concomitant developmental level. The DOE website states that elementary school children (K-5) must have health instruction every year but does not provide content details other than the list of topic areas that should be taught. Social and emotional skills is the first topic listed on the DOE's website, and yet, elementary school children are not taught about emotional self-regulation, and skills for maintaining social-emotional well-being. Jones and Bouffard (2012) points out that elementary school is a developmental period where children's personalities, behaviors and competencies begin to solidify and may carry on to adolescence and adulthood, underscoring the importance of emotion education in elementary school. This paper will review innovative elementary school-based social and emotional learning programs in the US, and evaluate their effectiveness in promoting social, emotional and cognitive well-being.

Definitions

For the purposes of this literature review, wellness and well-being will be used interchangeably to discuss the importance of social and emotional well-being. Wellness has been

broadly defined as “an integrated method of functioning which is oriented toward maximizing the potential of which the individual is capable. It requires that the individual maintain a continuum of balance and purposeful direction within the environment where he is functioning” (Dunn 1961, 4-5). This balance includes physical wellness as well as emotional, social, cognitive, spiritual and environmental wellness. The current literature review focuses on emotional and social wellness as well as the influences on cognitive wellness through academic performance and achievement. Characteristics commonly associated with emotional, social and cognitive wellness include adequate coping mechanisms and strategies to deal with stress, emotional regulation, maintaining positive relationships, empathy, effective problem-solving skills, and sustained attention and working memory (Albrecht, 2014).

Lastly, strong executive functioning is a core element of emotional, social and cognitive wellness. Executive function and social-emotional well-being also play a role in the academic and social experience children will have in their school environment. Executive functioning is best defined as a set of cognitive processes that include working memory, the ability to absorb and remember information; inhibitory control, the ability to resist temptations and control behaviors; as well as cognitive flexibility, the ability to successfully switch between tasks (Leyland et al., 2019). This literature review will evaluate the effectiveness of school-based emotional learning programs for improving children’s executive functioning.

Literature Review

Social and emotional skills are often associated with an individual’s ability to perform in school, maintain relationships, and maintain psychological well-being. Children with strong social and emotional skills have been found to perform better in school, maintain healthy relationships and have better emotional adjustment and mental health (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

There is increasing recognition that effective education for children targets both social and emotional competencies in tandem with their academic skills (Committee on Defining Deeper Learning and 21st Century Skills, 2012; Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014).

A meta-analysis by Durlak and colleagues in 2011 suggested that children with stronger social-emotional competencies are more resilient when faced with challenging and stressful situations. Social and emotional learning (SEL) programs have been implemented in certain school curricula in order to provide an effective academic experience for children and educators. These programs include emotion management, appreciating the perspectives of others, maintaining positive relationships and using critical thinking to make decisions. Some SEL programs also aim to reduce or prevent behavioral issues, especially with respect to disruptive behavior in the classroom. This literature review will describe school-based emotional learning programs for children in elementary school in the United States and Canada, the curriculum of these implemented programs, the teaching techniques and strategies utilized, and the strengths and limitations of these programs.

The articles used in this literature were identified by using the SUNY Purchase database system for students (i.e. Psych-ARTICLES, PsycINFO, Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection). Journal articles were included if the research was on emotional well-being, social and emotional skills, elementary school children, early childhood development, emotional wellness school-based programs, or academic performance/outcome. Research studies on programs based in Canada and the USA will be included whereas international programs are beyond the scope of this literature review. The focus of this literature review was on research conducted after 2010 (10 years ago), although some earlier studies have been included.

Innovative Emotional Educational Programs

Some SEL programs have specifically targeted reducing student stress and anxiety while introducing and teaching social-emotional skills. Anxiety and stress have been found to interfere with cognitive processes that are essential to the academic experience for all students such as working memory and sustained attention, and the retention of information. Mindfulness is a practice that helps individuals become more aware of themselves and their surrounding environment, through paying attention to the present moment. This practice is often seen in yoga and meditation, helping the individual to feel more at peace and balanced despite external influences. Furthermore, mindfulness reduces stress and anxiety levels for many people including students and teachers. Mindfulness practices help individuals become more aware of, and less reactive to, events and their corresponding thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness-based interventions have the ability of enhancing students' academic performance and outcome due to the reduction of stress and anxiety (Kingrey et al., 2019). Kingrey and colleagues discuss the influence of mindfulness-based interventions on undergraduate college students' academic performance and outcome. Students reported feeling less stress and anxiety due to their 10-minute, daily mindfulness practices at the start of every class. Research shows the influences that mindfulness practices have on college students and adults stress levels, but there is increasing research showing the influence on elementary school children. Mindfulness-based programs are being adopted by schools in order to help improve emotional wellness for young children. These programs promote emotional wellness within the school environment, providing students the opportunity to improve their academic experience, performance and outcome.

In 2015, Schonert-Reichl and colleagues conducted a study about an SEL program that incorporated mindfulness into daily school/classroom routine of randomly selected schools and classrooms. The researchers predicted that the mindfulness program (MindUP) would lead to

improved executive functions (EFs), stress regulation, social-emotional competence, and school achievement in fourth and fifth grade students, compared to a ‘business as usual’ (BAU) social responsibility program as the control group. Four elementary schools of the same size, achievement level, socioeconomic status, and ethnic and racial diversity, were randomly selected for the study. After the research protocol was explained to the four principals and the teachers, only one classroom in each school was eligible for participation.

The MindUP program consisted of 12 lessons, lasting 40-50 minutes, taught once a week. The main mindfulness practices in the program were done for 3 minutes, three times daily and included focusing on one’s breathing and listening to a single resonant sound. In addition, the curriculum provided lessons promoting executive functioning (mindful smelling and tasting), social-emotional understanding (perspective-taking skills and empathy), and positive mood (learning optimism and practicing gratitude). The MindUP program also encouraged students to perform acts of kindness for each other and engage in community service-learning activities as a part of their lessons.

In comparison, the social responsibility program (BAU) followed the guidelines provided by British Columbia’s Ministry of Education. This condition included four categories of common expectations for students: contributing to classroom and school community, solving problems in a peaceful way, valuing diversity and defending human rights, and practicing democratic rights and responsibilities.

A variety of flanker tests were conducted to assess EFs, of both groups, measuring accuracy and response time for tasks demanding inhibitory control, working memory and flexibility from the students. A research assistant collected cortisol samples at 9AM, 11:30AM, and 2:30PM after the students were instructed to place a dental cotton ball in their mouths and

saturate it with saliva for 1 minute. In addition, student's self-reports measured their empathy and perspective taking, optimism, emotional control, school self-concept, depressive symptoms, mindfulness, and social responsibility. Peer-nominations consisted of students nominating their classmates who fit distinct behavioral characteristics, as well as peer acceptance. Finally, math achievement was assessed using end of the school year math grades gathered from school records.

Results for EFs indicated that children in the MindUP program performed significantly better than BAU students, producing quicker response times but similarly accurate responses. Student's self-reports showed significant improvement for MindUP students in empathy, perspective taking, optimism, emotional control, school self-concept, and decreased depressive symptoms. On the other hand, BAU students reported the opposite; their social-emotional well-being measures decreased. Although peer nominations showed no significant difference, MindUP students improved in their pro-social behavior whereas BAU students peer nominations indicated they were liked less by their classmates at the end of the study. Finally, as predicted, MindUP students produced higher end of the year math grades compared to BAU students. These results suggest that the incorporation of mindfulness may help students learn how to focus moment to moment which can lead to improved stress regulation, emotional regulation and better academic outcomes.

This study supports the idea that when mindfulness and social-emotional skills are practiced during the school day, students' academic performance can improve significantly. Improvements may occur when children have a better understanding of their emotions and learn how to control them in order to achieve a goal. Early implementation of SEL programs provides children, in 1-5 grade, the opportunity to practice important social-emotional skills throughout

their academic experience. When these skills are implemented within the school environment, children can practice with their peers and teachers. With the help of mindfulness practices and peaceful problem-solving techniques, students seem to be able to focus more on their academics rather than worrying about their peer relationships. However, this study implemented SEL curricula for the duration of one academic school year and only provided lessons once a week for less than an hour. Jones and Bouffard (2012) point out that SEL programs often provide short lessons, implemented once a week for less than an hour. This insufficient duration and frequency of lessons prevents children from understanding the material and practicing the skills taught. The daily repetition of SEL material is as important as the daily repetition of academic material. Rucinski, Brown and Downer (2018) state, “given that children spend a majority of their waking hours in school and classroom settings, their experiences in these contexts may greatly impact functioning in both social-emotional and academic domains.”

Introducing SEL Beyond the School

While some SEL programs focus solely on the well-being of students, other programs aim to introduce the same SEL curriculum to educators and family members as well. Certain SEL programs bolster students’ abilities to recognize and understand their own emotions in order to regulate them in certain situations, such as in the classroom or even at home. This ability to recognize and understand emotions helps people understand those around them; peers, family members and even colleagues. Emotional intelligence is the ability to identify and manage one’s own emotions as well as others’ emotions, and it is an essential component in the RULER program. Marc Brackett, founder of RULER, states, “Emotional intelligence restores balance to our thought processes; it prevents emotions from having undue influence over our actions; and it helps us to realize that we might be feeling a certain way for a reason” (p.54). Brackett explains

that many educators and schools are hesitant to believe in the SEL approach because they feel as if the academic curriculum will be pushed to the side. However, Brackett clarifies that with the help of emotional intelligence, students can understand the academic curriculum better which can lead to improved academic performance and outcome. Emotional intelligence allows students and educators to understand themselves better in order to help teach and understand others.

The RULER program aims to promote the emotional well-being of students, starting in early elementary school, and teachers as well as the entire school community and students' families. This program has a long-term goal of helping students develop and strengthen their emotional intelligence skills learned in school throughout their entire lives; academically, professionally and personally. Not only does emotional intelligence help students in school but it also benefits their job performance in their future professional careers. Emotional intelligence has been found to be a positive indicator of job performance executed by future employees (Joseph & Newman, 2010). This finding supports the long-term goal of the RULER program and emphasizes the importance of emotional well-being.

In addition, RULER relies on the ecological systems theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. This framework examines the individuals' relationships within their surrounding communities (Ryan, 2001). For example, a child interacts with multiple surroundings daily; their home, the neighborhood they live in, their school and even the neighborhood where their school is located. This theory separates each environment the child interacts with; the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The child interacts with each environment on a different level. The microsystem contains structures the child has direct contact with such as their family, school, and their neighborhood. However,

the mesosystem provides the connection between the child's microsystems such as the interaction between the child's teachers and their parents. When emotional intelligence is applied beyond the school environment, it can provide a better support system for children. Not only can they practice their emotional intelligence during the school day, but they can also practice at home with their family and friends. This outside practice allows students to apply their SEL skills to their everyday personal lives, further developing certain tools learned in school.

RULER is a different approach to SEL programs that involves practices to integrate SEL across an entire school or district. RULER represents five skills: *recognizing* emotion in the self and others, *understanding* the causes and consequences of emotions, *labeling* emotions with a diverse and accurate vocabulary, *expressing* emotions constructively across contexts, and *regulating* emotions effectively. Unlike many other SEL programs, RULER emphasizes the importance of teacher and parental involvement. The RULER program provides resources and material for families to encourage the practice of SEL skills at home in order to cultivate a positive emotional climate. In addition, teachers are required to attend special training to deliver the curriculum properly. Previous research shows that teachers who were highly involved during the training and implementation process had students with more positive academic outcomes, compared to teachers with low involvement and no training (Rucinski et al., 2017). This program aims to create a supportive system within the school and its surrounding communities.

RULER encourages educators to understand how emotions enhance thinking and learning, relationships, decision-making, and well-being; integrating tools, activities, and specific lessons to develop both their own and their students' emotional intelligence (Brackett et al., 2016). This program uses specific anchoring tools that introduce emotional intelligence (EI) into daily classroom and school routines. One of the signature tools is the Mood Meter, a four-

quadrant grid representing core affect; the X-axis represents pleasantness and the Y-axis represents energy level. Older children will plot themselves using numbers and feeling words (“I feel +2, -2; peaceful) and younger children will plot themselves using a color and a feeling word (“I’m in the green; calm”). The Mood Meter provides a simple guide for young children to learn how to express themselves. With more practice, children will begin to build an emotion vocabulary as they grow up, normalizing the conversation of emotions. The Meta-Moment is another anchor tool that bolsters students’ social and emotional competencies. The Meta-Moment is a step-by-step process for extending the time between an emotional trigger and one’s response to it (Brackett et al., 2016). This process encourages students and educators to respond effectively to an emotional trigger by taking a deep breath, envisioning their best self, and responding based on their vision of self. This activity helps students learn to regulate their emotions by taking a moment to themselves before reacting. That moment taken to breathe can help prevent altercations from occurring and encourage peaceful problem-solving. When conflict inevitably arises, the RULER program includes another tool named Blueprint. Blueprint helps students to problem-solve while considering the perspective of the other person. It allows students to sit down and question why they both feel the way they do. RULER does not single one person out and place blame, but instead teaches them to prioritize solving the problem rather than pointing fingers. An early understanding of peaceful problem-solving can help children avoid future conflicts and feel prepared to express themselves properly. This approach helps students use these tools to maintain healthy relationships, think more positively, and adapt to stressful situations. However, more research must be conducted on how each aspect of this program helps both children and adults develop specific emotional intelligence skills, such as effective communication, problem-solving in school and the workplace, and even positive

thinking during stressful situations. Researchers must elaborate on the specific techniques utilized when teaching children and educators these important life skills as well as which strategies are most effective.

Reducing Aggressive Behavior

Similar to the RULER program, the ecological systems theory provides support for the Fast Track PATHS program's approach and its curriculum, involving parental support and home intervention. However, the Fast Track PATHS program also aimed to reduce aggressive behavior in social contexts and disruptive behavior within the classroom for high-risk children. Providing opportunities outside of the school environment to practice SEL skills helps generalize these skills to family members, neighbors and even the community. This outside exposure can offer a support system for students outside the school environment, which may be effective for children experiencing aggressive behavior. In addition, this program also requires teachers to attend special training in order to properly deliver the curriculum. Required teacher training is another essential component in the effectiveness of an SEL program and may help teachers working with high-risk children feel more confident in their classroom environment. This approach is similar to the RULER program in cultivating a more supportive and safe learning environment.

SEL programs aim to promote social-emotional and cognitive well-being in students as well as improve their academic achievement, but other programs also focus on reducing behavioral problems within the school and classroom. Bierman and colleagues (2010) conducted a study in which they observed the effects of a multi-year SEL program, and the impact child characteristics and school disadvantage have on the effectiveness of the program. The Fast Track PATHS program was designed to offer early elementary school children, including high-risk children who have early signs of aggressive behavior, with lessons promoting social-emotional

skills and decreased aggressive behavior. The PATHS curriculum incorporates self-control, emotional awareness and understanding, peer-related social skills, and problem solving to promote social and emotional competence. The Fast Track PATHS, like the RULER program involves elementary school children, families, schools and the community.

The study conducted by Bierman and colleagues included twelve elementary schools in high-risk neighborhoods from three different areas across the country. Delinquency and juvenile arrest rates within the neighborhoods were used to define high-risk. After the program was described to the principals, teachers, and staff of each school, schools were randomly assigned the SEL program or the control group for the following three years. The Fast Track staff consulted the principals to incorporate the ideology of PATHS to the entire school, placing posters in the hallways and implementing new school behavior guidelines. The Fast Track PATHS curriculum was designed for teachers to deliver 2-3 lessons on a regular basis throughout the school year with the support from project staff, and daily activities to promote generalization. The participating teachers attended a 2-day training workshop and received weekly consultation and observation from project staff. The lessons were approximately 20-30 minutes long, two to three times a week, from mid-September to May. The curriculum was implemented in grades 1-3; grade 1 had 57 lessons, grade 2 received 46 lessons, and grade 3 contained 48 lessons. Forty percent of the lessons targeted skills related to understanding and communicating emotions; using feeling words and teaching children the difference between feelings and behaviors to learn appropriate responses. Thirty percent of the lessons focused on skills to increase positive social behavior such as using good manners, taking turns and sharing in games, making up with friends after difficulties, expressing your viewpoint, and listening to others. In addition, during each lesson one child was chosen as the teacher's helper (PATHS's

kid of the day) and they received compliments from the teacher, their classmates and themselves; promoting positive social behavior and positive mood. Finally, thirty percent of the lessons focused on self-control and other social problem-solving skills.

A core tool used in this program was The Control Signals Poster (CSP), designed to resemble a traffic light, red light signaling “Stop-Calm Down”, yellow light signaling “Go Slow-Think”, green light signaling “Go-Try My Plan”, and words at the bottom “Evaluate-How Did My Plan Work?” This tool helps children strengthen their inhibitory control, especially in stressful situations such as conflict with peers. Teachers were encouraged to utilize these tools and help students use the skills outside of the classroom. Although the scripted lessons were a vital part of the program, teachers were encouraged to adjust the delivery based on the level of interaction and responsivity from the students. The PATHS curriculum generalized the content for home situations by updating the parents about the content and suggesting ways for parents to promote these skills at home. Regular homework assignments were also given to the students that require parental involvement in order to continue practicing these new skills outside of the classroom. Teacher ratings of behavior based on authority acceptance, cognitive concentration, and social competence were used to measure the outcome. Peer nominations were also used, nominating classmates that fit the descriptions of aggressive, hyperactive, and/or prosocial behavior.

Results showed that the schools using the Fast Track PATHS intervention program produced significantly more positive outcomes than the control schools. According to teacher reports, students in the Fast Track PATHS program did better with authority acceptance, cognitive concentration, and social competence. The researchers observed that, in low poverty schools, children in intervention and control schools had similar problem behavior levels in

grade 1, but by grade 3 control school children had higher problem behavior rates. However, a gender difference was found in the peer nomination results regarding aggressive behavior. Boys in the control group program were more likely to be peer nominated as aggressive and hyperactive than boys in the Fast Track PATHS program. In addition, results supported the researchers' hypothesis that children exhibiting higher levels of aggressive behavior in the beginning of first grade, who received intervention, would have a larger reduction in aggression by the end of third grade compared to control school children.

Bierman and colleagues further investigated the impact school disadvantage and child characteristics would have on the implementation of an SEL program over the course of three years. The researchers found that child characteristics such as aggressive behavior may influence teachers' involvement with implementation and lesson delivery. In addition, they also suggest that teachers in less disadvantaged school may have had an easier experience with implementation. Teachers in highly stressful situations may feel overwhelmed with the intensity of implementing an SEL program into the school curriculum. Without the proper resources such as funding and overall support from the school community, the SEL curriculum is vulnerable to becoming a side project rather than interdependent with the academic curriculum. These influences must be researched further in order to develop a universal implementation process that provides help for educators and staff to incorporate SEL skills into students' academics, in a cost-effective way.

Strengths and Limitations of SEL Programs

The SEL programs discussed in this literature review produced positive outcomes in elementary school students' academic achievement and improvement, and social-emotional competencies. Researchers predicted that the implementation of an SEL program would improve

the social-emotional and cognitive well-being of students, which would lead to improved grades throughout the school year. Although each program had a different approach, based on different developmental levels, the main goal was to bolster children's social-emotional competencies in tandem with their academic knowledge.

The MindUP program incorporated mindfulness into the SEL curriculum to observe the effects mindfulness would have on students' focus and attention. Daily mindfulness practices (listening to a resonant sound and focusing on one's breathing) were done daily for three minutes, three times a day along with the SEL lessons. The researchers found that student's attention and focus increased throughout the school year, leading to improved end-of-the-year math grades. The integration of mindfulness practices was found to strengthen executive functions, notably inhibitory control which led to improved emotional control and behavior in the classroom. In addition to improved math grades, the mindfulness practices produced increased levels of caring and kindness; with the help of lessons promoting optimism and performing acts of kindness for others. Schonert-Reichl and colleagues found that simply including mindfulness training into SEL curriculum could yield significant outcomes in positive behavior and cognitive changes in children. However, the MindUP curriculum was only taught for a limited amount of time, once a week. If this study were to be replicated in the future, researchers may want to spend more time researching the specific aspects of the program that produced positive social, emotional and academic outcomes. It is recommended that a more consistent approach is used, providing more opportunities for students to practice their SEL skills. The inclusion of mindfulness may have resulted in positive outcomes during one academic school year, but consistency provides more time for more skills to be introduced to children and

educators. The results of this study were positive, but a more consistent approach is also suggested for a more effective experience throughout the school environment.

The RULER program engaged a wider range of relevant people, such as family members and educators, in the curriculum over a wider range of settings than was true of the MindUP program. Brackett and colleagues (2016) explain that RULER encourages educators to teach children about social-emotional competencies while also enhancing their own. Teachers are required to attend training as well as incorporate SEL skills into their daily academic curriculum. In addition, educators and staff are encouraged to generalize the skills being taught in the classroom, to all aspects of their lives. RULER also provides families with resources and strategies to promote social and emotional development at home. *Permission to Feel* (Brackett, 2019) explains why consistency is a vital aspect of the effectiveness of SEL programs. The constant practice of these skills helps students understand themselves better, allowing for a better life experience. Brackett explains that the more students practice SEL skills, the more comfortable and familiar they become with them. Therefore, when problems do arise and their emotions become overwhelming, they will know how to help themselves and even those around them. Similar to the daily mindfulness practices included in the MindUP curriculum, RULER emphasizes daily practice of social-emotional skills throughout the academic experience. The RULER program focuses on social and emotional skills throughout every day rather than limiting it to one lesson lasting no longer than one hour. It is because of this consistency, among other aspects, that RULER has been implemented in thousands of schools across the country; helping students, educators, and school staff. This program cultivates an emotionally supportive system within the school and home environment that helps students strengthen their skills in a variety of contexts.

The Fast Track PATHS program contained the same goals as other SEL programs, and, like RULER, also involved at home support from families to promote the generalization of social-emotional competencies. Along with their lessons and daily activities to practice the skills taught, the curriculum provided parents with regular updates on the content and ways to promote their children's competencies at home. They will be able to apply the skills they learned in school to their personal relationships outside of school and maintain healthy life habits and skills. However, this study considered the differences in the implementation process between teachers in disadvantaged schools and less disadvantaged schools. The researchers observed the impact high-risk student behavior had on teachers, which may have biased their teacher reports. In addition, the study did not include results from students who transferred schools before the end of the third grade. It is plausible that some of these students transferred because they were experiencing difficulties at school. Therefore, the results of the study may have been somewhat inflated by not including students that may have had more difficulties in school.

Recommendations

The benefits of SEL programs have been discussed throughout this literature review, but many schools have not incorporated them into the school environment for many reasons. The main reason being that schools are pressured to improve academic performance while also giving attention to children's social-emotional needs and are expected to do more with decreasing resources (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Schools must find cost-effective ways to implement the routines and strategies provided by SEL programs into the academic curriculum. A benefit-cost analysis compares the monetary value of an investment with the monetary value of its outcomes. In his book, Brackett discusses a benefit-cost analysis of six American schools, done in 2015, finding that the ratio was eleven to one. Brackett states, "This means that, on average, for every

dollar invested in SEL, there is a return of eleven dollars, a substantial economic return” (p. 211). Schools’ budgets may not always provide them with the proper resources for their students and the structure of the school. Even though SEL programs such as RULER are very cost effective, they may be too expensive for certain schools.

A meta-analysis by Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that effective programs included four elements represented by the acronym SAFE: *sequenced* activities led in a coordinated and connected way to skills, *active* forms of learning, a *focus* on developing one or more social skills, and *explicitly* targeting specific skills. The PATHS program follows the acronym through their targeted lessons and activities. Students were aware of what each lesson would be targeting, like increasing positive social behavior through manners and listening to their friends. Their core tool, the control signals poster, encouraged students to engage with one another during conflicts rather than running away or fighting. Lastly, using the “PATH’s Kid of the Day” inspired students to help around the classroom, as well as engage in positive and supportive behavior by complimenting the work done by their peers.

The RULER program is another example of an SEL program following the SAFE acronym. The curriculum emphasizes the importance of teaching SEL and academic skills simultaneously; it acknowledges that emotional wellness can improve the academic performance of students. SEL programs spend a great deal of time promoting empathy and perspective taking. RULER’s students are encouraged to practice these skills every day with each other as well as with their teachers. Educators support the emotional well-being of their students and reassure them that they care. Before starting every day, students are asked how they feel in order to release any stress from the outside that may hinder their focus. Only then are they able to give their full attention and put forth their best effort. When students feel that their teachers care about

events happening in their lives, they may feel comfortable discussing personal difficulties instead of pretending everything is okay. Plenty of research has shown that children who have better relationships with their teachers engage more, adjust better socially, are willing to take on more challenges, improve academically, disrupt less, and focus more (Brackett, 2019; Rucinski et al., 2018; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). The well-being of educators is another key component to the effectiveness of an SEL program. Marc Brackett states, "...teachers who are stressed offer less information and praise, are less accepting of student ideas, and interact less frequently with students. If we want children to flourish, we have to begin taking care of our teachers" (p. 191). Schools must work together as a system for an effective implementation of an SEL program and its curricula, in order to begin a positive change for all students and schools.

For an effective SEL program implementation, the entire school community must be involved and supported. Teachers may not want to participate in the implementation of the program, viewing the new curriculum as a waste of time or getting in the way of the academic curriculum. In order for SEL programs to succeed, exemplary education about the benefits of SEL programs must be provided to teachers, administrators and parents. The implementation of SEL programs relies heavily on the support from teachers, principals, administrative staff, and parents. Belief in the SEL program influences the fidelity and quality of implementation. Brackett and colleagues distributed surveys to more than five thousand teachers, asking what emotions they experience throughout the day; 70 percent reported feeling negative emotions such as "frustrated," "overwhelmed," and "stressed." These negative emotions take a toll on teachers' health and professional careers, causing anxiety, depression and burnout. This is another reason the RULER program requires all school members to receive and attend special training workshops; if they are educated about their own SEL skills they will feel more confident

delivering the material. When adults are working with the students rather than excluding themselves from what is being taught, students feel more positive within the classroom environment. They feel more comfortable practicing the skills being taught and talking about their feelings while learning. However, an expansive implementation involves support from the entire school environment providing students with more opportunities to practice their skills throughout the school day. Expansive implementation includes practicing these skills at home and in the community where students and their families live. This allows everyone to learn about SEL skills together and offers consistent support for students. This systematic approach may be a step in the right direction, providing evidence for policy makers to consider when making decisions regarding the education system.

Teachers in more disadvantaged schools may have had a harder time with implementation because of the high-risk students involved, compared to teachers at less disadvantaged schools who may have had an easier experience with low-risk students. The Fast Track PATHS curriculum can be further developed with more research in order to provide other disadvantaged schools with the framework to implement an SEL program. Perhaps offering disadvantaged schools a chance to customize certain aspects of the curriculum in order to fit their school environment may inspire more schools to consider SEL programs. This literature review recommends that schools begin implementing small routines into classrooms that are both cost-effective and beneficial to schools, students and teachers. Small routines such as “The Charter”, a core tool used by RULER, can be implemented without much cost. The charter is a written document that states how every student in the classroom wants to feel and is signed by all participants. The charter asks three questions: How do we want to feel as students? What can we do to experience these feelings as often as possible? What can we do when we are not living the

charter? Teachers ask their students to create a list of responsibilities and commitments they will keep in order to cultivate a supportive and safe classroom environment. It also includes steps students will take if one of their peers is beginning to feel sad or discouraged in any way. Asking students these questions further ensures their emotional well-being and shows that they are cared for. This simple document is a step that many schools can take in order to support their students in a creative and interactive way. Signing this document helps students understand that they can influence others' emotions and motivates them to work together.

Teachers and principals can work together with the SEL program coordinators to develop a specialized curriculum for their own students and provide resources they know families may be interested in. The new data collected may provide different strategies for disadvantaged schools to implement an SEL program and offer different resources for high-risk students and their households. The implementation of SEL programs in schools does not only benefit students, but also bolsters the school's reputation. However, more research must be conducted to establish an implementation process that is possible for all kinds of schools.

In addition, "The Blueprint" is another core tool used by RULER that can be a cost-effective resource used in many schools. School support staff such as guidance counselors, social workers, and peer mediators can use this tool in order to promote peaceful problem-solving within the school environment. This tool encourages students to discuss the problem at hand rather than placing blame on one person and moving on. It includes questions such as, "how did I feel?", "what caused my feelings?", "how did I express and regulate my feelings?", and "what could I have done and what can I do now?" Both students are required to answer these questions, starting a conversation that ensures a safe space to listen to each other's perspective. This tool teaches students to understand someone else's point of view while also acknowledging their

own. Van Lier and Deater-Deckard (2016) explain that the efforts children use to restore good social relationships may further use up cognitive resources. They continue to explain that when those efforts are unsuccessful, children eventually give up, limiting their interactions with peers and teachers, which may lead to further impairment in cognitive functioning. With the blueprint in place, students can focus more on their academic work rather than worrying about their friendships. This is just another small step that schools can take in order to implement an SEL curriculum.

More research must be conducted in order to find promising approaches to implement SEL programs into more schools, including disadvantaged schools that may not have enough money in their budget. However, this requires more funding for research so school boards and policy makers can review evidence about how SEL programs are beneficial for students and schools. To gain the approval and support from important decision makers, key stakeholders within the school community must come together. In their book, *Creating Emotionally Literate Classrooms* (2011), Marc Brackett and Janet Kremenitzer discuss the steps schools and staff must take in order to begin the SEL implementation process. It begins with a formal presentation for the Board of Education and district level administration, giving a summary of the SEL program and scientific evidence of its effectiveness in student behavior and performance. In addition, a description of the program's curriculum, how it will be delivered, and how the program will meet the goals of the school and school district must be provided. Questions and concerns relating to funding, training, and time taken away from academic learning must be addressed in order to convince key decision makers that SEL is a crucial investment for the success of its students and the credibility of the school.

This book emphasizes the importance of the school and staff working together as a team in order to delegate responsibilities such as training, support from outside resources, lesson planning and communicating with parents. However, parental involvement must be prioritized as well, allowing parents to be more involved with the program and their children. Another cost-effective recommendation is a workshop for parents to attend during the implementation process. Parents and teachers receiving special training simultaneously can help create a more organized support system for students to feel confident and comfortable practicing SEL skills in and out of the school environment. School-based organizations, such as Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) can be utilized in order to help provide the school and SEL program with resources, materials, and even outside funding.

Lastly but certainly not least, SEL implementation is highly recommended to begin in the early elementary school level. Introducing SEL skills to children in elementary schools provides them the opportunity for an easier transition into middle school and high school. Jones and Bouffard (2012) state, "...early childhood and elementary strategies should intentionally lay the groundwork for later interventions, and middle and high school efforts should intentionally build on earlier strategies and skills" (p. 8). This early introduction helps children learn emotion and stress regulation techniques and strategies that can be carried throughout their lives. The RULER program prioritizes their teachers' well-being in order to deliver SEL lessons accurately and effectively for students. However, if schools begin teaching these skills at an earlier age, students can have the proper tools and techniques to manage their emotions and the stress in their personal and professional lives in the future.

Conclusion

Increasing recognition continues to show that an effective education includes teaching academic skills in tandem with social-emotional skills. The combination of both skills has produced improvements in students' behavior, stress levels, engagement in the classroom and their academic performance and achievement. These improvements have occurred due to the implementation of social and emotional learning (SEL) programs into schools across the country. SEL programs prioritize the emotional and social well-being of students in order to help them perform well academically and feel more confident in their efforts, enhancing their cognitive well-being. However, more work needs to be done to help schools obtain the resources necessary to implement these programs for the betterment of students, teachers and the school community. Small routines and tools discussed previously can help schools take small steps to begin the process of teaching students about their own emotional intelligence. SEL programs recognize that students may not put their best effort forward when the school environment does not support them emotionally. However, an emotionally supportive school environment cultivates a safe space for all students to practice being their "best self." School can become a place where students learn math and reading along with how to communicate with their peers and solve problems in a productive and peaceful way; these life skills are important for the success of any person.

The SEL curriculum bolsters students' social-emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-regulation, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making, as well as their academic skills. Research shows that children with stronger social-emotional competencies have been found to be more resilient when faced with challenging and stressful situations (Durlak et al., 2011). Durlak and colleagues' meta-analysis supports the early implementation of these programs in order to promote resiliency and practice stress regulating

techniques throughout their academic experience. In addition, the SEL curriculum expands the emotion vocabulary of students in order to accurately articulate how they are feeling and what they are thinking. Schools that implement SEL programs can help students prepare better for their future academic experiences, as well as their future professional experiences. Therefore, more funding for research can help schools become aware of the scientific evidence showing the positive effects of an SEL curriculum, and may inspire school staff to discuss matters with important policy makers and school district boards.

Evidence-based research is necessary to convince the Board of Education that SEL programs not only benefit students, but also teachers and the reputation of the schools. Schools prioritize test scores and acceptance rates because they represent the credibility of the school. When children are supported emotionally and academically, their academic outcomes improve significantly. Special training for teachers and staff members can cultivate a support system throughout the entire school, and sometimes the community around it. If policy makers and board members see the entire school community come together, including parents and caretakers, they may realize that some changes are long overdue. Schools are meant to inspire children of all ages to dream big and aim for huge goals in life, but many times students' dreams are limited due to the stress of school and lack of support from their educators. The implementation of SEL programs can help students dream big once again and feel prepared to face any obstacles standing in their way.

References

- Albrecht, N. (2014). Wellness: A Conceptual Framework for School-based Mindfulness Programs. *International Journal of Health, Wellness & Society*, 4(1).
- Bierman, K. L., Coie, J. D., Dodge, K. A., Greenberg, M. T., Lochman, J. E., McMahon, R. J., & Pinderhuges, E. (2010). The effects of a multiyear universal social-emotional learning program: The role of student and school characteristics. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 78(2), 156-168.
- Brackett, M. A., Flynn, L. M., Nathanson, L., Rivers, S. E. (2016). Creating emotional intelligent schools with RULER. *Emotion Review*, 8(4), 1-6.
- Brackett, M. A., & Kremenitzer, J. P. (2011). *Creating emotionally literate classrooms: An introduction to the RULER approach to social emotional learning*. National Professional Resources Inc./Dude Publishing.
- Brackett, M. A. (2019). *Permission to Feel: Unlocking the power of emotions to help our kids, ourselves, and our society thrive*.
- Committee on Defining Deeper Learning and 21st Century Skills. (2012). Education for life and work: Developing transferable knowledge and skills in the 21st Century (J. W. Pellegrino, & M. L. Hilton, Eds.). Washington, DC: National Academies Press.
- Ryan, D. P. J. (2001). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. Retrieved January 9, 2012.
- Dunn, H. L. (1961). High-level wellness.

- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development, 82*(1), 405-432.
- Joseph, D. L., & Newman, D. A. (2010). Emotional intelligence: An interactive meta-analysis and cascading model. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 95*(1), 54-78.
- Jones, S. M., & Bouffard, S. M. (2012). Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: From Programs to Strategies and commentaries. *Social Policy Report, 26*(4), 1-33.
- Kingrey, J. N., Lathrop, J. A., Burstein, S. M., & Liu, M. (2019). Mindfulness practices in a developmental psychology class: Students outcomes, practical strategies, and future directions. *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology, 5*(4), 305-311.
- Leyland, A., Rowse, G., & Emerson, L. (2019). Experimental effects of mindfulness inductions on self-regulation: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Emotion, 19*(1), 108-122.
- Rucinski, C. L., Brown, J. L., & Downer, J. T. (2018). Teacher-child relationships, classroom climate, and children's social-emotional and academic development. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 110*(7), 992-1004.
- Schonert-Reichl, K., Oberle, E., Lawlor, M. S., Abbott, D., Thomson, K., Oberlander, T. F., & Diamond, A. (2015). Enhancing cognitive and social-emotional development through a simple-to-administer mindfulness-based school program for elementary school children: A randomized controlled trial. *Developmental Psychology, 51*(1), 52-66.
- van Lier, P. A., & Deater-Deckard, K. (2016). Children's elementary school social experience and executive functions development: Introduction to a special section. *Journal of abnormal child psychology, 44*(1), 1-6.