

Beyond the Curriculum:
The Importance of Social-Emotional Learning in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper will investigate and discuss the importance of social-emotional learning and its impact on students in the classroom. All too often, students are taught the subject-based information required by the state Department of Education and nothing more. However, it is becoming increasingly more important for educators to go further in their classrooms. It is no longer sufficient for teachers to only teach their subjects. It is the teacher's responsibility and obligation to go beyond academics and educate their students in the subject of social-emotional growth. Students need to be taught how to work with others, moderate their emotions, and understand how their thoughts work. Although social-emotional learning is vital to all students, it is especially important for middle school students to develop these skills. Middle schoolers go through intense changes, both physically and mentally, while they develop into young adults. During this time, teachers must reinforce skills such as empathy and understanding so that when the students grow up, they transition into well-meaning citizens who will create a positive impact in the world.

Keywords: social-emotional learning, developmental stages, middle school students

Chapter One

Introduction & Thesis

When people picture middle schoolers, they generally think of awkward and gangly boys and girls who have still not quite developed into adults. It is true that they are much more mature than their elementary school counterparts but far from the people they are eventually going to be. The question, then in turn, is how do the awkward and gangly students magically transform into “real people”? Through a rigorous course of academics, they gain knowledge. But knowledge is only a portion of what students, particularly middle school students, gain from attending school. An equally important aspect of their education is the social-emotional development that is taught. Social-emotional learning goes beyond the academic side of the classroom and is manifested in order to help students develop skills to manage their emotions, self-control, and interactions with others. Social-emotional learning can effectively be divided into five sections: self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. Without a broad development of social-emotional skills, students leave the school system without the vital knowledge of how to go about their lives in a successful manner.

Unfortunately, the importance of social-emotional growth in students is not often acknowledged in schools and it is not utilized and integrated to its fullest extent. There is the misunderstanding that teachers and school districts are meant to solely teach their students the academic requirements set by the state and school district. As well-meaning as this approach is, it leaves an alarming gap in a student’s education. Unless it is directly taught, social-emotional skills are not necessarily acquired by students. It is a teacher’s obligation to educate their students, not just in academics but also in social-emotional skills. It is only through a balanced

education of intellectual growth and social-emotional growth, that a student can reach their full potential and become a well-rounded citizen prepared to enter the “real world”.

Stepping away from the school setting, it is easy to see how social-emotional learning is required by individuals living in a functioning society. More so than past generations, people have more of a fusillade of stress-inducers due to the onslaught of social media and the internet. In result of this constant barrage of information and opinions, there has been a rise in shootings, bullying, suicides, violence, and depression. Therefore, it is now more imperative than ever before that social-emotional skills are taught to children as they grow up. Without these skills in their back pocket, children are leaving the school system unprepared with the reality of living in the 21st century. As the saying goes, you can't teach an old dog a new trick; so why is it expected for young adults to pick up these crucial skills after they exit the school system. When looking at the broader issue, beyond the school and beyond adolescence, the importance of social-emotional learning is more clear than ever.

Narrowing the issue at hand, one must take a closer look at the expectations placed on school systems and teachers alike. The overall consensus of a school's job is for the faculty and staff to create a safe and welcoming learning environment for students to expand their mind and succeed in learning the different subjects taught in each class. What is not expected is that teachers take time out of their busy schedule to teach students social-emotional skills. It is not expected that a teacher step away from academia in order to teach a student how to moderate their emotions and communicate. In far too many classrooms, social-emotional growth is not seen as important as intellectual growth. Unless it is easily integrated into an academic lesson, social-emotional learning is too often left behind. The reasoning behind this deficit is clear: students, teachers, and schools are evaluated by state sanctioned exams that test a child's

academic intelligence and growth. There are no state mandated exams that determine how well a student can communicate with others, manage their stress or understand their own emotions. However, these areas of growth need to occur.

The purpose of the study is to explore the need of social-emotional learning within middle school classrooms in order to help students become well-rounded citizens. The general idea of integrating a curriculum of social-emotional learning into schools is a daunting one so before one can begin to examine the issue one needs a thorough understanding of the background of the topic. In order to provide a clearer sense of this complex issue, it is best to divide the topic into three different subsections. Through focused research of published articles on the subject of social-emotional learning as well as an original survey of practicing teachers, this paper will demonstrate the importance of social-emotional learning, identify the reasons why social-emotional learning is not being taught in schools, and finally it will discuss the different ways social-emotional learning can be successfully implemented into a classroom.

Far too many students go through twelve years of schooling and only receive an academic-based education. It is necessary that students receive a balanced education that improves both their knowledge/intelligence as well as their social-emotional skills. It must become an educational norm, that teachers include social-emotional growth within their curriculum in order to ensure that students will be exiting the school system with an artillery of skills that go beyond the basic academic requirements. In order to ensure this takes place, the importance of social-emotional development as well as methods and techniques in achieving those skills must be more widely known. It is the duty of every school system to educate their students beyond the academic curriculum.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

As American society develops well into the 21st century, it is important that the education system reflects the needs of the students. More so than ever before, there is a need to teach students how to respond to social situations with others and themselves. More often than before, there is a rise in harmful behavior such as bullying, school violence, and suicide. These harmful actions can be attributed to the lack of methods students utilize in order to regulate their emotions and interact with peers. With this rise, it is more important to make sure that social-emotional learning is a part of every student's educational experience. There is a severe deficiency of social-emotional learning taking place in the classroom. Social-emotional learning must be integrated in the average classroom in order to ensure that students are able to learn self-regulation and self-care methods.

A number of sources were utilized to develop a thorough understanding. Although these sources ranged in author and publication date, every source that was used for this paper, expressed the importance of social-emotional learning. Articles published about this topic can fit into the same three sections that will be analyzed within this thesis. Many different sources addressed the importance of social-emotional learning. Studies reviewed, include information on the benefits of including social-emotional learning in the classroom as well as any effects it might have on a student. The second section of literature that was reviewed included sources that explain why social-emotional learning is not a universal staple in schools. Sources reviewed in this section will provide a deeper insight on why teachers do not implement social-emotional

learning into their daily schedule. The final section discussed methods that teachers can use to teach social-emotional awareness to their students without making their lives difficult.

Of all the literature reviewed for the purpose of this paper, there was one author who stood out. Maurice J. Elias published several articles and papers in numerous journals discussing different aspects of teaching social-emotional learning. Of his articles several were particularly impactful. In his 2003 article titled, “Academic and Social-Emotional Learning: Educational Practices Series”, Maurice J. Elias discusses the balance that every teacher should focus on between academic learning and social-emotional learning. In the 2009 article, “Voices From the Field: Identifying and Overcoming Roadblocks to Carrying Out Programs in Social and Emotional Learning/Emotional Intelligence”, Maurice J. Elias along with Linda Bruene-Butler, Lisa Blum and Thomas Schuyler analyzes the issues that prevent teachers from implementing social-emotional learning in their classrooms. Maurice J. Elias also wrote a 2016 *Edutopia* article, “How to Implement Social and Emotional Learning at Your School” in which he provides methods of teaching social-emotional skills.

There are many scholars in the field of education who have begun to research social-emotional learning. It is important that the number of scholars interested in this topic continues to grow. Although there are a decent number of articles and essays written about social-emotional learning, there is still an incredible deficit. This topic is fairly new in terms of research and will hopefully expand in the coming years.

The literature on the importance of social-emotional learning is vast. In his article, “Academic and Social-Emotional Learning. Educational Practices Series”, Maurice J. Elias talks about how it is important to have a balanced education between academic and social-emotional learning. He states that:

aspects of education that have been referred to as character education, service learning, citizenship education, and emotional intelligence can all be expressed in the single term ‘social-emotional learning,’ and it is this form of education, when added to academic learning, that provides educators with the possibility of capturing the balance children need” (Elias 2003).

Students require more than academics in order to become the well-rounded and prepared citizens needed to improve the world after graduation.

When it comes to a lack of social-emotional learning taking place in the classroom, a big offender is lack of support, research, and resources. In an article, “Social and Emotional Learning in Classrooms: A Survey of Teachers’ Knowledge, Perceptions, and Practices”, written by Rohanna Buchanan, Barbara A. Gueldner, Oanh K. Tran and Kenneth W. Merrell, teachers were surveyed about their thoughts on social-emotional learning. It was discovered “that many teachers believe that [social-emotional learning] is important, schools should take an active role, receiving training/support from a variety of professionals would be helpful, and current academic demands decrease the opportunity for [social-emotional learning] (Buchanan 2009). This information proves that the desire for social-emotional learning is there but is not always accessible to teachers.

The final subsection includes methods and techniques that can be utilized in order for teachers to easily implement social-emotional learning within their classrooms. In Brooke Graham Doyle and Wendie Bramwell’s article “Promoting Emergent Literacy and Social–Emotional Learning Through Dialogic Reading”, they discuss the need for social-emotional learning. It is mentioned that dialogic reading is important for the development of students’ reading abilities. But when the dialogic readings are ones with “strong social-emotional content,

teachers can emphasize the overlapping areas between emergent literacy and social emotional learning to create a more powerful learning experience in both domains” (Doyle 2011). This is a prime example of how a teacher can integrate social-emotional learning into their planned academic lessons. Although this is only one example of how social-emotional skills can be taught easily within a classroom, it illustrates the possibility for more methods. The field studying social-emotional learning is fairly new and in that regards, requires a lot of research and development so it can be applied easily into every classroom. There are a number of articles already written about social-emotional learning, yet it is not a universal concept in every school. Until social-emotional skills are taught in every classroom, it is imperative that new research is done to find the best techniques and methods.

Chapter Three

Survey Methods and Analytical Considerations

It is important that any research dedicated to bettering the classroom experience, includes thoughts, opinions, and experiences from real teachers. The lack of social-emotional learning is not immune from this requirement. Within schools, students do not receive nearly as much social-emotional learning as they deserve or need. The change should begin with the teachers who educate their students in academic classes. However, teachers are responsible for more than just the academic success of their students and should also be dedicated to engaging their students in issues that focus on the growth of their social-emotional skills. It is with these vital skills that students develop into well-functioning adults who go on to make a substantial impact on a local and global level.

To generate data for this thesis, a number of teachers were sent a brief survey (see Appendix). Ten teachers of different grades, subjects, and school districts responded with their personal opinions and experiences of the presence of social-emotional learning within their own classrooms and schools. These surveys remain anonymous to allow honest answers from the participants. The participating teachers range from a 2nd grade teacher to a high school teacher. The school districts also range from a very homogenous and not diverse school district to a district with an incredibly diverse range of students. The survey was sent to general education teachers, special education teachers, and teachers of the arts. Although the participants teach many different grades, this thesis will return to the importance of social-emotional learning in middle schools. It is in middle school that the most severe drop-off begins.

This broad range of participants allows a more complete understanding of the subject matter at hand. If the survey was only sent to teachers within a single school or similar schools, the information received would be very similar and would only account for schools similar to the participating schools. Every school district, school, teacher, and student might have a very unique experience with social-emotional learning, so it is imperative that this survey is not taken as factual, but rather it is taken as an example of a few teachers' perspectives. Many teachers might be able to relate to the information found through this survey, but it might not relate to every teacher and many teachers might not be able to relate this study to their own teaching experience.

The number of participants is a limiting factor within this study. Ten teachers were surveyed within this study and they all had varying classroom experiences, but in an ideal situation the number of participating teachers would be increased dramatically. Also, due to availability, all the participants teach within central Massachusetts. This study is best to serve as a reference point to start the investigation of the importance of social-emotional learning. It will best serve to begin the process of questioning and will hopefully lead to a greater investigation of much larger numbers and spanning from a much wider radius. Despite the limitations, this study is a great start to understanding the teacher mindset of social-emotional learning. Once the mindset of teachers is more understood, the next actions can be taken in order to ensure that students across the board are receiving the social-emotional skills that are so crucial to their development.

In order to achieve an understanding of the presence of social-emotional learning in a real classroom, several teachers, in different grades as well as different schools, completed a survey on the occurrence of social-emotional learning in their classrooms as well as their schools.

Although this study will be limited by the number of teachers, it will provide real-life insight of social-emotional learning within a Massachusetts classroom.

Although the survey will include a list of questions to be answered, the findings will ultimately answer a singular question: What are the real-life benefits of integrating social-emotional learning in the classroom? A complete copy of the survey will be attached as Appendix.

This study will be helpful to any educators looking to improve their own methods of teaching social-emotional skills. Furthermore, any educators looking to learn more about the importance of teaching social-emotional skills will benefit from reading this study. The participants of this study will also benefit. It can serve as a self-reflection of their own methods. It is extremely important to any teacher who includes social-emotional learning within their classroom to not become content in their ways. The field of teaching is always adapting and finding better ways to teach students. It is important that teachers often self-reflect in order to continue growing.

The research conducted for this thesis was a survey sent out to different teachers. Although the anonymity of the survey will help ensure truthful answers, there are a few limitations surrounding the survey. One limitation of this survey is the size. There will only be a few teachers surveyed. In an ideal situation, this survey would be responded to by hundreds of teachers. Another limitation of the survey is location. The teachers who respond, are from different schools and school districts but are all located within central Massachusetts. That being said, the results would vary considerably if the data was pooled from teachers around the country, or better yet around the world. The survey will be sent to teachers, but no information acquired will be attached with a name. Therefore, participants will remain anonymous.

Chapter Four

Survey Results

In order to best gather insight from the survey, this results section will review each question asked in the survey and will pull several answers from each question. There was a total of eight questions in the survey, although the first two were primarily to gage the teacher's history and experience and the following questions zone in on social-emotional learning.

Question One

The first question asked was "How many years have you been a teacher?". The answers for the question are incredibly simple as the question is very black and white. The greenest teacher has been in the classroom for eight years and the most seasoned participant has been teaching for over twenty years. The average answer for question one was fifteen years. That being said, the participants all have had a relatively long amount of time in the classroom.

Question Two

The second question was "What grade do you teach?". These answers are similar to the first question, meaning it is basic information and does not yet discuss social emotional learning. The youngest grade taught of the participants is second grade. The oldest grade is high school. There are teachers of elementary school, middle school and secondary school. Beyond the grades, participants also included their specific subject (if applicable). Some of the participants are general education teachers and teachers of the arts. There is also a special education teacher.

Question Three

Question three asked, "Approximately how many students do you teach? What is the demographic of the students you teach? There was a variety of answers ranging from 10-12

upper middle-class students to “120 students, 42% Hispanic, 23% White, 17% African American, 15% Asian, 42 of my students are ELL and 25 are SPED”. Those two responses are the extremes with the rest of the responses falling between them.

Question Four

Question four asked, “Do you integrate social-emotional learning daily in your classroom?”. All of the participants responded that they try to include social-emotional learning in their classrooms. There was a range of examples given within this answer. Several participants mentioned that they do not include social-emotional learning on a formal level but try to make connections with their students. One participant said “. I try to get to know my students – what their interests are, family life, do they work (do they have to?), play sports, in theater, etc... I also try to get to know what helps them when they are struggling.” Another participant is in charge of a social-emotional learning program within their school. Of all of the surveyed teachers, only one mentioned many different activities that they include in their schedule as obvious social-emotional learning activities. This teacher said:

there is a window of time (10 minutes) designated as “Brain Break” where I integrate social emotional learning. There is also time in our schedule to teach Open Circle, our social competency program. During the “Brain Break” time, I typically use “Inner Explorer,” a web program which leads the students through activities around mindfulness. I also use “Cosmic Kids Yoga,” “Go Noodle,” “Class Dojo,” and other websites/videos to teach some concepts. Additionally, I sometimes use “Yoga Pretzels,” cards which can be used to practice mindfulness, breathing, and yoga. (survey)

Where this one teacher had many different activities, others simply said they try to integrate it within the day whenever it seems right.

Question Five

The fifth question asked, “Do you believe that social-emotional learning is important?”. The general consensus for this question is that social-emotional learning is very important as it “helps build trust and meets the needs of the students”. One teacher discussed how the uprising of technology has taken away children’s opportunities to socialize so it is even more important for them to be taught these skills than ever before. Another participant mentioned how social-emotional learning is “the core of each human, we need to build our students up and help them to see the needs of others and to be compassionate citizens. There is a lot of bullying and that relates to not being empathetic or tolerant, this needs to be taught.” There was not one teacher that did not believe in the advantage of social-emotional learning.

Question Six

The following question asked, “Do you think there is an actual link between social-emotional learning and academic achievement?”. Once again, the answers given for this question were very similar, every participant answered positively. It was agreed upon that if students do not have the skills to cope with stress, nerves, disappointment and discomfort they will not be able to rise to their full academic potential. One teacher mentioned that:

students rely on teachers here as a stable force in their life. They look to use for guidance and life advice. We are a positive role model for them and provide them with the support that they need in order to achieve academically.”

By teaching and modeling social-emotional skills, teachers can help students thrive in every aspect of their lives.

Question Seven

The seventh question moves away from the participants opinions and asked about their observations/experiences. This question asked, “Do you think that social-emotional learning is a common occurrence in your school as a whole?”. This question did not receive as consistent answers as the others asked. One teacher responded, “Nope. Teachers who have taught longer than I have refuse to buy into the concept.” Another responded, "that LA teachers have a platform for this topic, it's up to them if they use it.” Perhaps the most in depth response states:

It is in every classroom teachers’ schedule and I know it is the expectation that we are all incorporating SEL into our teaching. I am not sure if everyone is doing this daily, or how much value other teachers see in doing it, but I think most are doing something. We have Professional Development about SEL, we use a school-wide screener (DESSA) and assess all children multiple times each year. We have data meetings about our screener results. In grades 3-5, students complete a connectedness survey which asks them questions about their feelings about school. We also give students in grades 3-5 a chance to write 2 adults with whom they feel they could talk to if they had a problem. Students who do not respond are assigned a ‘silent mentor’ (a teacher who will make a point to check in with/reach out to the student in hopes to make a connection with those kiddos). (survey).

Other responses included a variety of positive and negative responses.

Question Eight

Question eight asks for “Any other comments or thoughts on the general subject of social-emotional learning”. One of the most unique answers within this question is:

“I believe that the digital world has separated us from humanity and this infrastructure alienates people from society. It is sad that we now have to teach "precision partnering"

because [students] don't know how to have a conversation. We need to spend time in classrooms having students make connections with each other outside of using electronics.”

Other responses reiterated the importance of social-emotional learning. A few responses explained how they believed that social-emotional learning is the future of education.

Chapter Five

Discussion/Body

This thesis focuses on discovering some answers and solutions to three problems. These areas are the importance of social-emotional learning, the reasons social-emotional learning is not taught, and the different ways social-emotional learning can be implemented into a classroom. After researching the available literature as well as surveying current teachers, some clarity has been gained within these three areas. For organizational purposes, this section will review each section and comment on new information gained through the research process.

Area One: Importance

The first subarea of discussion is the importance of social-emotional learning in the classroom. The importance of social emotional learning is only just beginning to be known by those in the field of education. A quick look back through the history of education will show the transition from an autocratic classroom into a safe and welcoming learning environment which pushes students to flourish. A part of this development has been the acknowledgment of the importance of social-emotional skills alongside academic knowledge. By teaching students these skills, teachers are equipping the future generations with the ability to relate to others and think creatively.

Many of the survey participants discussed how important social-emotional learning is. There were many reasons in their opinions as to why it is important. One of those reasons focuses on the amount of stress that students have. There is a constant focus on being the best, whether it is within athletics, academics, or any other extra-curricular activities. This pressure comes from their parents, their peers, and themselves. But unlike the competition that

was present in twentieth century classrooms, the students are constantly bombarded with how their peers are doing since social media is so easily accessible.

That being said, teachers believe that now more than ever, students need to develop the skillset to cope with the stress and pressure they constantly face. Joseph E. Zins and Maurice J. Elias's 2007 article, "Social and Emotional Learning: Promoting the Development of All Students", published in the *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* examines the reasons why students need to be taught social-emotional skills. To introduce their topic, Zins and Elias list the stresses that impact school life. Some of these are "High-stakes tests. Substance abuse. Suicide. Academic standards. Delinquency. Media and technology. Teacher retention. Interpersonal violence" (Zins and Elias 2007). They go on to explain how these influential aspects of student life impact students' well-being. If a child is constantly faced with these issues, it is unrealistic to believe that they will be able to focus on anything without being taught the appropriate skills.

Another aspect of social-emotional learning is the relationship that teachers form with their students in order to be a resource for them. According to the survey, teachers believe that they need to make an effort to connect with every student so they can know how they learn and the best ways they can help them carry the weight of everyday life. It was discussed within the survey that it is incredibly important for teachers to use "check-ins" and other non-formal methods of social-emotional learning to best make sure their students are supported.

In the aforementioned article, "Academic and Social-Emotional Learning: Educational Practices Series", Maurice J. Elias explains the need for teachers to find a balance between academic and social-emotional learning. Elias elaborates how social-emotional learning is an important factor in creating a successful academic environment for students. Elias explains

how there are several strategies that must be implemented into a classroom in order to create the balanced environment that students need to be successful. These strategies are as followed:

learning requires caring; teach everyday life-skills; link social-emotional instruction to other school services; use goal-setting to focus instruction; use varied instructional procedures; promote community service to build empathy; involve parents; build social-emotional skills gradually and systematically; prepare and support staff well; and evaluate what you do. (Elias 2003).

Other scholars who discovered the impact that social-emotional learning can have on a student are Kenneth W. Merrell, Michael P. Juskelis, Oanh K. Tran and Rohanna Buchanan. Together they wrote the 2008 article, “Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom: Evaluation of *Strong Kids* and *Strong Teens* on Students’ Social-Emotional Knowledge and Symptoms”, which examines the need for social-emotional learning within a school and the actual impact it has on students

Area Two: The Deficiency

It is not a secret that there is a lack of social-emotional learning in the classroom. The next section discusses the reason behind the lack of social-emotional skills being taught in the classroom. However obvious it may be that social-emotional learning is incredibly important, it still is not a regular occurrence within classrooms. The lack of this learning opportunity may seem obvious, but it occurs because of a several different reasons. As previously stated, social-emotional learning is a relatively new concept within the field of education. That being said, studies of how to properly implement it are still occurring. Another reason why social-emotional learning is not a common occurrence within a classroom is that it is not a part of the state-mandated curriculum. Due to state-mandated tests, teachers are focused on teaching their

students what they will be tested on. This focus on exams forces certain subjects to be taught and others to be left behind.

Based on question seven of the survey, it is clear that there are a large number of teachers who do not integrate social-emotional learning in their classrooms. One of the reasons why teachers do not make an effort to include social-emotional learning is that they are stuck in their ways. As mentioned by a survey participant, some teachers “refuse to buy into the concept”.

Another reason why it is not a universal aspect of classrooms is the lack of knowledge on how to adopt it in the classroom. One teacher surveyed, mentioned that certain subjects have an easier time including social-emotional learning in their lessons. Some consider that humanities have a much easier time seamlessly integrating it into their lessons than STEM subjects like math and science.

Similar to the results of the survey, a 2019 *Education Week* article, “Teachers Support Social-Emotional Learning, But Say Students in Distress Strain Their Skills” by Sarah Schwartz, highlights the same reason as to why students do not receive a proper education in social-emotional skills. Schwartz explains that many teachers believe in the value of teaching these skills to their students but do not feel equipped with a solid foundation on how to achieve this goal. Although colleges are beginning to require their prospective teachers to take a course on social-emotional learning, it is not nearly enough training for teachers. If teachers do not feel qualified to help their students, they might shy away from the task.

Another reason similar to the lack of knowledge is fear. In the 2009 article, “Voices From the Field: Identifying and Overcoming Roadblocks to Carrying Out Programs in Social and Emotional Learning/Emotional Intelligence”, Maurice J. Elias, Linda Bruene-Butler, Lisa Blum and Thomas discuss thoughts that hold teachers back from teaching social-

emotional skills. It is mentioned within this article that a major detraction that holds teachers back is simply fear. The overall task of creating a second curriculum to teach their students social-emotional skills, in addition to creating a vigorous academic curriculum is often too daunting for some teachers to take on. By picking out roadblocks, teachers and schools can begin to work around the issues in order to start the process of creating a social-emotional learning curriculum.

Strangely enough, one common reason found within literature was not mentioned by the teacher participants. Not one teacher surveyed, mentioned the feeling of needing to “teach to the test:”. This is in reference to the overwhelming focus on preparing students for state-mandated exams. There is a much larger emphasis on school/student performance on these exams which can lead to teachers skewing their typical schedules in order to aim for high scores. This lack of a response could be because the teachers themselves adopt social-emotional learning into their classrooms and might not recognize the reason their fellow teachers do not.

However, this particular reason is discussed in detail in W. James Popham’s 2001 article, “Teaching to the Test”. In recent years there has been an overwhelming switch of focus to standardized test scores. Popham has found that “American teachers are feeling enormous pressure these days to raise their students' scores on high-stakes tests” (Popham 2001). This increase in stress to raise their students’ test scores overtakes their focus. So, rather than having teachers worry about teaching the full student, teachers are often more worried about teaching their students what will appear on the state-sanctioned exam. These scores can determine a teacher’s position in a school. With that thought looming over one’s head, it is not hard to imagine that a teacher might not be too concerned with teaching their students how to regulate their emotions as there is no exam that tests their social-emotional skills.

Area Three: Methods

The third and final section provides methods and techniques that other teachers have found helpful within their own classrooms. Students benefit from developing key social-emotional skills but as recorded in the survey, some teachers do not know how to integrate social-emotional learning into their lessons. Although, every teacher will find different methods that they prefer and that work for their classroom and students, teachers can compare methods and adapt them to fit. These methods can also be beneficial depending on age and personalities of the students.

With the emphasis on test scores being a large determiner of what is taught in the classroom, it is important that teachers educate themselves on ways that they can integrate social-emotional learning seamlessly into their daily curriculum. This could be in the form of a short mini-lesson once a week. Social-emotional learning can also be taught by relating the academic lessons to the students in ways to make them think about what they are learning in a different way. Once a teacher develops the habit of teaching their students social-emotional skills, it is much less of a hassle and becomes second nature.

Many of the teachers surveyed, explained how they use more simple techniques to connect with their students. They use daily check-ins to gauge how their students are doing. These teachers also mentioned getting to know their students. This includes knowing their interests and hobbies. One teacher also included that it is helpful to know if a student has a job, as well as if that job is necessary. These methods are more useful when trying to connect with students, so they feel safe and loved in school.

These methods are not unique to the surveyed teachers. In the 2016 *We Are Teachers* article, “21 Simple Ways to Integrate Social-Emotional Learning Throughout the Day”,

Elizabeth Mulvahill provides 21 easy methods for teachers to adopt into their classroom. Some of these methods are starting the day with a check-in, work in partnerships, teach them how to work in a group, and teach how to manage conflict with peer mediation. By teaching these crucial skills within their day, teachers can help students develop social-emotional skills.

It is important to recognize these methods because they are incredibly easy to include within a busy school day. But it is equally important to recognize that these methods cannot be the only social-emotional learning that the students are receiving. Although these methods may help a student in the moment it does not teach them skills that they can utilize themselves when the occasion arises. It is important that students are directly taught different skills such as self-motivation and self-regulation.

Another participant explained how they implement “short video Friday”, which is when a short video is shown at the end of the week which relates to a different social-emotional skill. This leads to a discussion where students can voice their opinions and ask questions. These videos are a great method because it uses technology which is a great way to engage students but also gets them thinking about their own actions.

Neil Humphrey, Ann Lendrum, and Michael Wigelsworth wrote a 2010 article, “Social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) programme in secondary schools: national evaluation”. This article explains the effectiveness of SEAL which is Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning. SEAL is another method of teaching social-emotional learning. The SEAL design breaks social-emotional learning into five domains. These domains are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. This program is very similar to the “short video Friday” method, as it tackles different skills and discusses them as a group. However, this method is an organized program where “short video Friday” is simply one

teacher's unique technique to integrate social-emotional learning within their weekly curriculum.

One of the participants listed many different activities that they adopt into their classroom to teach students these social-emotional skills. Brain Breaks can be used as de-stressing times where students can unwind by reading a book, coloring, or chatting with friends. By allowing students this ten-minute period to pick their own method of relaxing, they can figure out methods that help them best. The same teacher also referenced Open Circle which is used to teach social competency skills. This teacher also includes activities to help with mindfulness such as yoga and breathing activities.

In the previously mentioned 2016 *Edutopia* article, "How to Implement Social and Emotional Learning at Your School", Maurice J. Elias discusses how to properly and effectively teach social-emotional skills. Elias recognizes how most social-emotional programs are disorganized and can actually have negative effects due to its discord. In order to prevent this from happening, Elias points out five essential skills to teach to students. These skills are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. After outlining these five skills, Elias continues to give seven different activities that teachers can adapt for their classroom.

One realization gained from the answers provided through the survey is the unclear qualifications for social-emotional learning. It became startlingly obvious that the majority of teachers surveyed believed that simply greeting students and asking about their interests qualified as social-emotional learning. These are great habits for teachers to have. However, these habits do not teach students skills for self-regulation as well as working with others. Social-

emotional learning should be giving students methods for them to employ in future instances when they find themselves in a situation that they previously would not know how to handle.

Limitations and Recommendations

As mentioned before, there are two major limitations that hold this study back from its full potential. These limitations are the number of survey participants and the location of the participants. If this study was to be done again, or recreated, it would be best if the size of the survey is increased as much as possible as well as include different regions to get even more diversity. Although the participants are all from different school systems, they are all within the same geographical area, so the answers are different than if the study crossed state borders.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

It is clear that social-emotional learning should be a part of every classroom from kindergarten through high school. The modern-day student needs to be able to regulate their own emotions as well as be able to work well with others. In an increasingly technology-based world, these once normal skills are fading and need to be specifically taught. But there is an extreme lack of social-emotional skills being directly taught in the classroom. This dearth has had consequences in an increase of violence, depression, anxiety, and bullying. Without being taught, students do not know how to interact with one another and are not able to find healthy coping mechanisms.

The participants of the survey as well as the existing literature unanimously agreed that social-emotional learning is of utmost importance. They were able to list off many different scenarios where social-emotional learning is beneficial to their students. It was also agreed upon that social-emotional learning had an impact on student academic success. This information seems predictable. It is unimaginable that a student who is under immense stress and is unable to cope, would be able to focus fully on completing assignments and understanding concepts. Students also interact often behind a screen and have lost the social skills that come from playing outside with friends. To be socially developed and ready to enter the workforce, students need to learn how to interact and work with others. The need for social and emotional competency cannot be stressed enough.

However, the people who are in charge of educating students, are not all on board with the idea, nor confident in their ability to teach these skills. Although every survey participant

agreed that social-emotional skills are critical to possess, they could not all agree that social-emotional learning was taught throughout their schools. Of course, if teachers do not embrace the benefit of social-emotional learning, students will not receive the social-emotional education that is so crucial to their development. The next step in educational reform will be to give teachers across the board the information, skills and resources to make sure that they can satisfactorily teach their students.

Based on the survey, there is some discrepancy about what qualifies as social-emotional learning. Some teachers in the survey, responded with methods that completely qualify as social-emotional learning, such as mindfulness, Brain Breaks, and short video Friday. Other teachers seemed to be under the impression that simply forming relationships with their students was a solid amount of social-emotional learning. However important it is for teachers and students to form relationships it is not enough. Students need direct instruction of these skills so they will have an artillery of tools to use in a plethora of situations. If school districts look into educating educators of the benefits of social-emotional learning, they must make sure that there is an understanding of what counts as social-emotional learning.

As mentioned earlier in this thesis, social-emotional learning should be present in every grade of schooling. But, perhaps one of the most crucial ages for students to gain this knowledge is in middle school. Unfortunately, with students having several teachers at this age, social-emotional instruction drops off dramatically.

An important discovery to reference is Piaget and his four major stages of development. Jean Piaget, a twentieth century Swiss psychologist, developed a theory of the four different stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. According to Piaget, every child advances through these four stages at their own

rate, but generally speaking, students in middle school are entering or will be entering the final stage. As explained in W. Huitt and J. Hummel's article "Piaget' Theory of Cognitive Development", in the formal operational stage, people can demonstrate the "logical use of symbols related to abstract concepts" (Huitt &Hummel 2003). People who have reached this stage of cognitive development can understand concepts of real and possible events.

That being said, a student at this cognitive stage can fully understand hypothetical and possible situations. This newfound ability allows them to increase their awareness of situations that could happen. In previous stages, a student might only be able to grasp concepts and situations that they have faced in real life. It is important that social-emotional learning occurs throughout the middle school years and throughout the formal operational stage as this is the first time in a student's life that they can fully grasp foreign concepts and relate them back to themselves (Huitt and Hummel 2003).

Another reason why social-emotional skills are so vital to the development of middle school students is simply their own lives. In the middle school years, a student usually begins puberty which can bring an onslaught of hormones and emotions. It is important that these students feel prepared to deal with these changes. In middle school, students also feel a rise in conflicts between friends and peers. If these skills are not taught, they might not be prepared to work through their issues.

School districts should be putting an emphasis on integrating social-emotional learning into the curriculum, so it is seen as the norm, rather than a teacher going above and beyond. This claim does not mean every student will have a class dedicated to dealing with stress that meets for forty-five minutes, five days a week. Simple lessons emphasizing specific social-emotional skills can be offered in short five- or ten-minute periods. Even more beneficial is the seamless

integration of social-emotional skills within an academic-based lesson. This can be done more easily within the humanities which allows students to step into the perspective of characters from a novel or a historical figure. By doing this, teachers can model to their students different skills such as empathy. When lessons such as these become the norm, students will benefit immensely.

The field of education is constantly adapting and advancing to meet the everchanging needs of the students. It is vital that educators work just as hard to continuously educate themselves, so they do not fall behind. One of the most up and coming topics in education is the need for social-emotional learning in the classroom. This study was able to shed a small light of insight of a teacher's perspective of social-emotional learning. It is nowhere near as universal as it should ideally be, but one teacher at a time, the need for social-emotional learning will be met. When the day comes that social-emotional learning is seen as equally important as the academic curriculum, students will finally receive the balanced education they deserve in order to become fully functioning adults in the twenty-first century world.

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Appendix

Please answer the questions as thoroughly and honestly as possible. All information will remain anonymous. All data collected from this survey will be used in a thesis paper discussing the importance of social-emotional learning in the classroom.

How many years have you been a teacher?

What grade do you teach?

Approximately how many students do you teach? What is the demographic of the students you teach?

Do you integrate social-emotional learning daily in your classroom?

Do you believe that social-emotional learning is important?

Do you think there is an actual link between social-emotional learning and academic achievement?

Do you think that social-emotional learning is a common occurrence in your school as a whole?

Any other comments or thoughts on the general subject of social-emotional learning: