

Placing Social Emotional Learning at the Forefront of Public Education

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Abstract

In order to fully prepare students in the public-school system for a successful, healthy future the public-school system needs to place a trauma-informed, social emotional learning program at the forefront of our education system. This thesis examines the short-term and long-term effects that childhood trauma has on a person's body and mind. Additionally, it examines the history of social emotional learning and why the skills it emphasizes are so important for students to learn alongside academics. In this discussion, strong data facts are addressed to support the implementation of SEL across the public-school system. However, it also explores some challenges that those in education need to be aware of when implementing SEL and discusses why SEL is best paired with a trauma-informed approach. Finally, this thesis provides tangible suggestions for how classroom teachers can start to implement SEL into their own classroom even if their school does not have a program in place.

Keywords: SEL, social-emotional learning, trauma-informed teaching, trauma, educators, public-school system

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Placing Social Emotional Learning at the Forefront of Public Education

Introduction

In any school there are numerous children who are carrying the burden of at least one traumatic event. Childhood trauma is more common than most people realize, The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that “more than **two thirds of children** reported at least 1 traumatic event by age 16” (*Understanding Child Trauma*, 2020, *Understanding Child Trauma*). Children carry the effects of trauma everywhere they go. It is important to understand that something can be traumatic to one person and not to another. Trauma cannot be easily defined; however, “The National Institute of Mental Health (USA) defines childhood trauma as: ‘The experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects’” (Definition of Childhood Trauma, 2016, para. 1). I personally define trauma as an event experienced that affects a person’s emotional and/or physical health, and that potentially changes a person’s behavior for a particular time or, even forever. I believe the only person who has the right to say if something was traumatic is the person who experienced the event themselves as only they know how the event affected them.

Being that trauma cannot be easily defined it is the job of educators, policymakers, school administrators, and school districts to provide an environment where all children feel comfortable, safe, calm, and welcome. In order to provide such an environment, social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed regulations must be in place in all schools. Once schools have properly put in place a school-wide social emotional learning program, and all staff are on board with the program, their students will begin to gain the skills they need to combat the effects of trauma and grow into productive leaders in society.

Teachers are under an immense amount of pressure to teach state standards and follow unrealistic pacing timelines in order to meet the deadline of state tests. With states and policymakers focused on academic standards, little to no time is left to teach students skills for coping with real life struggles such as trauma, conflict, and their emotions. Often, educators are either too lenient and let students behave however they want or they are too strict, and in turn students acted out more. I found myself in both those situations in my first two years of teaching, and in doing my own research on classroom management and how to effectively run a classroom I found social emotional learning. As I started to implement more of aspects of social emotional learning and trauma-informed teaching into my classroom I saw huge positive changes in my students and my classroom environment. While I have found success in my own classroom using social emotional learning techniques, once the students were out of my classroom behaviors would escalate quickly. I often had to spend the first few minutes after getting my students back into my classroom to allow them to decompress and unpack what happened outside of the room. Until all teachers and schools have the ability and desire to incorporate and take time to teach social emotional skills to students, academic skills will continue to fall short of expectations and negative behaviors will continue.

This thesis addresses why social emotional skills need to be at the forefront of our educational system and discuss ways that educators and schools could implement these skills in order to provide an environment where all students are able to feel safe and learn. In addressing why social emotional skills needs to be at the forefront of education, the thesis provides tangible suggestions to implement social emotional learning for teachers. However, teachers can only do so much until school districts and policymakers change the expectations and standards as a whole. When policymakers and districts decide to make the needed changes, it will be critical

that they consult and listen to advice from classroom teachers. Teachers have already started to implement SEL in their classrooms and have found what is successful and what is not. If policymakers listen to, and take into consideration teacher feedback, the policies that will hopefully be put in place soon will be beneficial to everyone in education.

The topic of social emotional skills in schools is important to me as a Christian scholar. First, as a Christian scholar and educator it is important to make sure I am representing Christians in a positive light in a secular world. Often Christians are considered close-minded and often are seen as judgmental by non-believers. As a Christian scholar I believe that understanding how and why to implement social emotional learning into the classroom is important. After all, God calls us to be a good example of Him, care about our neighbors, and offer support and love to help grow strong Christian leaders. Implementing social emotional learning is important for Christian educators.

By implementing social emotional learning in schools, students are taught how to be strong leaders and positive, productive citizens. Social emotional learning is best broken down by “The CASEL [The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning] 5 [which] addresses five broad and interrelated areas of competence and highlights examples for each: *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making*” (SEL, 2020, para. 5). Self-awareness is the ability to be aware of one’s emotions and internal thoughts and understanding how they affect self-actions. Learning to be self-aware can increase one’s ability to adjust their behaviors. Self-management goes right along with self-awareness. When a person understands themselves, they can work to change themselves for the better and handle their behaviors in a more effective way. Social awareness allows a person to understand others’ cultures, backgrounds, and situations. When a person is socially aware they

approach others with an open mind and a willingness to learn about things they are unfamiliar with without judgement. Relationship skills relate to being able to “maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals” (SEL, 2020, Click on Our Interactive). When people have strong relationship skills they are able to work collaboratively, debate respectfully, and be strong leaders in diverse groups of people. Finally, responsible decision-making allows a person to evaluate the environment or situation they are in and make the best decision in that particular moment by weighing the pros and cons of their multiple choices. These five areas can each be supported by multiple Bible verses which explain the importance of this topic to me as a Christian scholar.

The first of the five areas is self-awareness. In Romans 12:3 Christians are told to “... not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgement, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). Additionally, in Galatians 6:3 the Bible states “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). These two verses show that as Christians we need to be self-aware. By implementing social emotional learning, we are teaching others how to be self-aware and leading them by example.

The second of the five areas is self-management. Proverbs 14:29 states that “a patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). In that verse Christians are told to manage their temper which is a key lesson in social emotional learning. Additionally, in James 1:19-20 Christians are told that a “...Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). Again, as with Proverbs, James is commanding us to be aware of our anger and

reaction in response to anger. In Galatians 5:22 it states “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). With just these three verses it is clear that self-management is an important quality of a Christian and of social emotional learning.

The third of the five areas is social awareness. James 4:12 states “there is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy. But you – who are you to judge your neighbor?” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). This verse is clearly stating that Christians should not judge people based on their choices. Being socially aware is being aware of people’s different cultures, backgrounds, experiences, and beliefs. While Christians can believe differently than others, judging others is not what we are called to do. In Titus 3:2 it is stated that Christians should “...be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). In Titus 3:2 it does not say Christians should attack or judge those who are different, it calls us to show humility to all people. Social emotional learning teaches students how to love others, even those they have nothing in common with or those who have different beliefs.

The fourth of the five areas is relationship skills. In Galatians 5:13 Christians are told to “...serve one another in love” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). Additionally, in Ephesians 4:32 it states “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). These two verses clearly state that having good relationship skills is important as a Christian. Teaching students how to have good relationship skills through social emotional learning is following God’s word.

The fifth and final area of the five areas is responsible decision-making. In James 1:5 it is said “if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without

finding fault, and it will be given to him” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). In Proverbs 11:14 it says “for lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure” (*New International Version*, 1973/1997). These verses make it clear that responsible decision-making is an important skill. In social emotional learning responsible decision-making is also an important skill. Therefore, this area also is relevant to Christian scholars.

It is clear through these verses that teaching social emotional skills and implementing social emotional learning in classrooms coincides with Christian beliefs. In fact, in 2 Timothy 1:7 the Bible states “for God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (*New International Version*, 1997/1999). This verse wraps up why the research of social emotional learning is relevant to Christian scholars. As a Christian scholar it is my duty to represent the Christian faith positively and implementing social emotional learning in schools helps with that expectation.

Thesis Chapter Descriptions

This thesis contains five chapters. Each chapter focuses on a specific piece of the study into social and emotional learning in schools. The first chapter focuses on the statement of the problem that children are experiencing trauma and that schools need to implement a social emotional learning program to help combat the possible effects of trauma. This chapter is broken into four sections. The first section in this chapter addresses the history of social and emotional learning and how it came to be such a hot topic in education. The second section addresses what trauma is; however, it is important to remember that no one can determine what was traumatic to an individual. While only the person who experienced the trauma can decide if it was traumatic, there are research-based methods for determining trauma that is discussed in this section. The third section in this chapter discusses how trauma affects the brain and the

body. The fourth section lays out how SEL, together with, trauma-informed schools will help minimize the effects of trauma experienced by students.

The second chapter is a review of the literature that is relevant to SEL and solving the problem being addressed in this thesis. The second chapter is broken into three sections. The first section discusses general SEL research. The second section discusses important studies and findings from those studies related to SEL. The third section addresses important points and challenges be aware of with regards to SEL.

The third chapter provides the methodology for implementing SEL in schools. There are two sections in this chapter. The first section helps schools determine the right program for their school. The third section is how to implement an effective program. These sections in chapter three give tips and guidelines for finding a program and implementing an effective program.

The fourth chapter provides the methodology for teachers to implement SEL in their classroom. There are six sections in this chapter, each focusing on a specific part of implementing SEL in the classroom. Prior to the first section is a short introduction to this chapter. The first section focuses on the teacher themselves since self-understanding must come prior to helping others understand themselves. The second section focuses on how to create a safe environment in the classroom and gives tangible examples of simple things that can be done easily in any classroom. The third section focuses on creating an equitable environment. This third section is a continuation of creating a safe environment because if the classroom environment isn't equitable, then it isn't a safe environment for all students. The fourth section discusses how to build the SEL foundation in the classroom. This section gives examples of how to start each day with SEL as the focus. The fifth section discusses why SEL and the growth mindset should be used while teaching academics. Finally, the sixth section discusses how to

implement SEL even during big behaviors or disruptions. This chapter is directed at teachers who are interested in starting to implement SEL into their classrooms.

The final chapter, chapter five, is the conclusion to the thesis and includes a discussion on my findings. There will be two sections for this chapter. First, I discuss what the next steps should be in regards to SEL and trauma-informed teaching being implemented in the public-school system. Finally, I end this chapter with a conclusion that neatly wraps up the thesis and has a strong call to action.

Chapter 1: Statement of the Problem

The History of Social Emotional Learning

Rogers (2019) states that “SEL is focused on developing self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills” (p. 2) but how did social emotional learning get its start? While Plato was actually the first to discuss social emotional learning (Beaty, 2018, p. 68), SEL really started gaining momentum and interest in the 1960s when “the CSDP [Comer School Development Program] was founded on the idea that there are extreme values in the relationships that children form as they grow up, particularly bonds that are built with adults” (Beaty, 2018, p. 68). This program came about when “child psychiatrist James P. Comer, MD, MPH and a team of Yale Child Study Center colleagues worked with the two schools that eventually rivaled the city's highest income schools, had the best attendance record, and no serious behavior problems” (Comer School Development Program, 2019, para. 1). This program is still used in some schools today and utilizes three structures. The three structures are the “school planning and management team,” the “student and staff support team,” and the “parent team” (How it Works, 2019, Three Structures).

After the 1960's, SEL reemerged in the late 1980s. The K-12 New Haven Social Development program was established between 1987 and 1992 (Beaty, 2018, p. 68). In May of 1997 this program stated that “the goals [of their program] are to educate knowledgeable, responsible, and caring students who acquire a set of basic skills, values, and work habits for a lifetime of meaningful work and constructive citizenship” (Weissberg, et. al., 1997, p. 38). In their study of creating a social development project for schools, the New Haven Social Development Project recommended that “districts must develop systemwide practices and

infrastructures to support social and emotional development programs” (Weissberg, et. al., 1997, p. 39).

At the same time that the K-12 New Haven Social Development program was being researched and established another group was researching and establishing a different idea. This group, “the W.T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence (1992) was established and chaired by Weissberg and Elias” (Beaty, 2018, p. 68). This consortium provided information on how to implement SEL in schools. According to Beaty (2018) this program “...listed skills such as being able to assess the intensity of feelings, controlling impulses, delay gratification, express, identify, label, and manage emotions, along with reducing stress are needed for students to have emotional competence” (p. 68).

Before 1994, the term “social and emotional learning” had not been used; however, “in 1994 the Fetzer Institute gathered educators, researchers, and child activists to a meeting to develop ideas in assisting children in becoming positive citizens” (Beaty, 2018, p. 68). Two important things came out of that meeting. First, the term “social and emotional learning” was formed and second, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was formed (Beaty, 2018, pp. 68-69). From that point forward “CASEL has been leading the charge since 1994...” in social and emotional learning. In fact, in 1997 the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) joined forces with CASEL and the first book of SEL strategies was written (Beaty, 2018, p. 69).

Moving forward from the 1990s, SEL has become a hot topic in education. In 2004, “Illinois was the first state...to create an SEL framework which includes goals, learning standards, and benchmarks for kindergarten to high school” (Beaty, 2018, p. 70). As of 2020, 29 out of the 50 states had provided SEL standards (Social-Emotional Learning, 2020, How Many

States). While all 50 states do not have SEL standards, many schools have started to implement their own SEL programs as the research has shown that SEL benefits students in many ways but our education system is still far from where they should be in terms of SEL.

What is Trauma?

Trauma does not fit into a neat box, nor can it be determined by a checklist. There are many working definitions of trauma. One way trauma can be defined is by Greenwald's (2015) belief that "to qualify as traumatic, an event should be subjectively perceived as threatening to a person's life or physical integrity, and should include a sense of helplessness along with fear, horror, or disgust" (p. 9). Greenwald (2015) continues to say "although not every child will be exposed to one or more traumatic events, most will" (p.9). However, just because someone goes through something traumatic does not mean they will experience negative effects of trauma. In addition, it is important to note also that just because an event is traumatic to one person does not mean that same exact event will be traumatic to another person. Greenwald (2015) claims "personality, social support, and other factors...also help to determine whether a child can handle an event or will be overwhelmed" (p. 11). Being that trauma is dependent on each individual person and that schools will not always know who has experience trauma, it is imperative for schools to know how to provide support for all students knowing that many strategies for dealing with trauma can also be beneficial in everyday life.

While only the person who experiences the traumatic event can determine if the event was actually traumatic there are many ways of assessing people for trauma. Assessments can be found on many websites such as The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and The National Child Traumatic Stress Network; however, the most well-known and used criteria to determine childhood trauma is the "CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)

Study” (Centers for Disease, 2021, para. 1). While this is the most commonly used assessment, this study was conducted between 1995 and 1997 and many find that it is outdated in today’s society. Additionally, Adna, et. al. (2020) write that “The questions from the ACE study cannot fully assess the frequency, intensity, or chronicity of exposure to an ACE or account for sex differences or differences in the timing of exposure” (p. 1). It is also important to note that the ACE study is not a diverse study with the subjects studied mainly falling into the categories of older, educated Caucasian individuals. There have been some other studies done since on other groups of people; however, we are in need of a new, diverse study. Measures are being taken to improve on the ACE study but for now it is what the majority of people use to assess childhood trauma. Due to the lack of diversity and many other factors of the ACE study schools need to move away from educating educators using this information and the checklist and work on educating educators instead on how to make their classrooms safe, trauma-informed places for all students with or without trauma, as we often cannot pinpoint who has experienced trauma or not.

Trauma, the Brain, and the Body

According to Ward-Roncalli (2020) “students can better respond to the effects of trauma by developing social-emotional competencies” (para. 3). In order to have a better understanding of how developing social-emotional competencies helps students better respond to trauma one must understand how trauma affects the brain. Ward-Roncalli (2020) writes that “we know that early experiences shape a child’s developing neurological and biological systems for better or worse...” (para. 1). The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2021) states that “systems relating to brain development, heart and lung function, digestion, energy production, fighting infection, and physical growth are all interconnected and influence each other’s

development and function” (p.1). Additionally, The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2021) writes that “when hardships or threats are extreme or persistent...multiple biological systems can be disrupted” (p. 2). Social-emotional skills can help mitigate the effects of trauma on the brain and body.

Trauma affects the brain, which in turn affects the body. When a child experiences trauma parts of the brain change form and size and development is often damaged. This prevents the child’s brain to grow as a normal, healthy brain having long-term effects into adolescence and adulthood. Children “experience the most changes in the microarchitecture of their brain as a result of experiencing trauma” because their brain is not finished developing at the time the trauma was experienced (Evans & Coccoma, 2014, p. 49). Children who experience trauma and do not get the support they need to work through the effects of the trauma experienced have the possibility of having more severe life-long struggles. According to Bremner (2006) “traumatic stressors such as early trauma can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), ... as well as depression, substance abuse, dissociation, personality disorders, and health problems” (p. 445). When given coping mechanisms and support, the effects of trauma can be reduced.

There are three parts of the brain most commonly mentioned when discussing how trauma affects the brain. These areas are the amygdala, hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex. The amygdala is where our brain determines if we should fight, flight, or freeze. (Momentous Institute, 2019, Amygdala). The hippocampus is the memory part of our brains and the prefrontal cortex helps with decision making. Bremner (2006) states that “stress results in acute and chronic changes in neurochemical systems and specific brain regions, which result in long-term changes in brain “circuits,” involved in the stress response” (p. 446). Two critical neurochemical systems in the brain’s stress response are cortisol and norepinephrine (Bremner, 2006, p. 448).

Bremner (2006) claims that there are “lasting effects of trauma on the brain, showing long-term dysregulation of norepinephrine and Cortisol systems, and vulnerable areas of hippocampus, amygdala, and medial prefrontal cortex that are affected by trauma” (p.447). In summary, Bremner (2006) states “traumatic stress has a broad range of effects on brain function and structure, as well as on neuropsychological components of memory” (p.455). These effects can show up in many different ways from mental health issues, physical health issues, and emotional issues.

The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2021) claims that “if stress responses remain activated at high levels for long periods, this can have a significant wear-and-tear effect on the brain and other biological systems” (p. 5). This can lead to children being constantly exhausted or unable to focus in school. Additionally, “when stress responses are activated frequently, intensively, and persistently during early childhood, the systems involved can become permanently calibrated to activate more easily and may not turn off as readily as they should” (National Scientific Council, 2021, p. 5). This effect can be seen in children who exhibit hypervigilance. When a child is hypervigilant they are constantly waiting for the next traumatic event and afraid to let their guard down for fear of being unprepared for the event. Hypervigilance and other effects on the brain from trauma can “lead to poor behavior, which can result in reduced instructional time, suspensions, and expulsions” (*How Does Trauma*, 2014, para. 8) in the school setting. Students who are hypervigilant need teachers, classrooms, and schools that teach them how to effectively manage these big emotions and help them feel safe while in the building.

In addition, “exposure to violence and other traumatic events can disrupt youths’ ability to relate to others and to successfully manage emotions” (*How Does Trauma*, 2014, para. 8) due

to the change in brain chemistry. Social emotional skills teach children how to build relationships and manage emotions in a positive, effective manner. While trauma affects the brain and body there are ways to help mitigate the effects of childhood trauma, teaching social-emotional skills in schools is an effective way to do this.

Trauma and SEL

Social emotional learning is an effective way to help mitigate the effects of childhood trauma. Pawlo et. al. (2019) write that “in recent years, many K-12 educators have turned to social-emotional learning (SEL) as a means of providing support to students who suffer from trauma” (p. 37). However, Pawlo et. al. (2019) go on to state that “...SEL programs themselves are not necessarily designed for this purpose” (pp. 37-38). The best way to for SEL programs to help students who have experienced trauma is to make sure the program is trauma-informed (Pawlo et. al., 2019, p. 38). A trauma-informed SEL program will be beneficial for all students, but especially those who have or are dealing with trauma.

According to Pawlo et. al. (2019) “for SEL programs to be trauma-informed, then, they must take into account that many learners are experiencing strong and overwhelming emotions that may be connected to an acute traumatic occurrence or ongoing chronic stressors, both of which will limit students’ information processing ability and social-emotional functioning” (p. 38). Luckily, most SEL principles overlap with trauma-informed instruction so implementation of a trauma-informed SEL program shouldn’t be too difficult. SEL programs focus on creating a positive school climate which helps students who have experienced trauma. Pawlo et. al. (2019) says that “children who’ve suffered traumatic experiences often benefit from highly predictable routines, which can be effective in promoting a sense of safety and reducing fear” (p. 38). Providing a positive, predictable school environment will help students with trauma know what

to expect and allows them to feel safe in the school building. This allows their brain to relax from the fight, flight, or freeze situation they can often be in.

Additionally, “traumatized youth often experience poor self-concept and have difficulty developing a positive identity” (Pawlo et. al., 2019, p. 39). Implementing a SEL program that “seek[s] to improve school culture and climate by highlighting student strengths and helping them develop a sense of positive purpose” (Pawlo et. al., 2019, pp. 38-39) can help those students who have difficulty developing a positive identity. In fact, a part of SEL is self-awareness which can help students be aware of their strengths and what positive qualities they bring to their school, class, and community. A SEL program that can focus on “...extracurricular activities and electives that promote student capacity in areas other than traditional academics (e.g., arts, music, and sports)” (Pawlo et. al., 2019, p. 39) can help those students who are struggling in traditional academics due to traumatic experiences. By focusing on non-academic skills, all students, even those who struggle with academics can find a place where they feel confident in their ability to succeed. This can lead to students having more self-confidence.

While SEL programs strongly focus on emotions, how to identify them, how to talk about them, and how to exhibit them, Pawlo et. al. (2019) claims that “the problem [with this] is that students’ receptiveness to social-emotional learning can be complicated by their personal histories” (p. 39). However, Pawlo et. al. (2019) write that “SEL instructors can’t afford to give up on teaching these skills” (p. 39). While teaching these skills to trauma affected students may be difficult, learning these skills is a vital part of helping students in and out of the school building. In fact, Pawlo et. al. (2019) say “it is essential to teach nonviolent conflict-resolution and decision-making skills explicitly and continuously, allowing for the time and repeated

practice that it will take for some students to improve” (p. 39). Even children who have experienced trauma need to be taught how to identify, talk about, and properly exhibit emotions. While it may take those children longer to feel comfortable with their emotions, being taught these skills will ultimately help them in the long run.

As Pawlo et. al. made clear, SEL programs are not necessarily trauma-informed; however, by making a connection between the two, students can benefit greatly. Wall (2021) found that “a thorough review of literature on the trauma-informed approach [TIA] revealed five distinct core components” (p. 122). These components are “(1) safe, supportive relationships, (2) structure and stability, (3) shared agency, (4) self-awareness and self-regulation, and (5) social-emotional learning and skill building” (Wall, 2021, p. 122). Not only is social-emotional learning a core component but two of the five CASEL competence areas, self-awareness and self-regulation, are also a core component for a trauma-informed approach. By implementing TIA with SEL those who have dealt with trauma will have a better chance of having the effects of that trauma reduced and living a positive, healthy life.

The first core component Wall (2021) found for a trauma-informed approach was “safe, supportive relationships” (p. 122). Wall (2021) wrote that due to trauma-impacted students often having their own relationship struggles within their families but “when caring teachers make students feel safe and supported, students learn to construct successful human connections and take healthy steps toward building trust with adults” (p. 123). In the literature of TIA Wall (2021) reviewed, “relationship-building is heavily emphasized” (p. 122). In addition, Wall (2021) found that “not only are supportive adult relationships important, but supportive peer relationships are critical as well” (p. 123). Understanding that not only are teacher-student relationships important but that peer relationships are important to a trauma-informed approach,

it is clear that the relationship-skills competence area of SEL can aid in the connection of trauma-informed teaching and SEL programs in schools.

The second core component Wall (2021) found necessary for a trauma-informed approach was “structure and stability” (p. 123). Wall (2021) wrote “predictability provides a sense of safety and stability for students whose lives are often unstructured and tumultuous” (p. 124). Any unexpected change in their environment can make a student who has experienced trauma “feel endangered” (Wall, 2021, p. 123). While “structure and stability” doesn’t fall neatly under one of the five SEL competence areas set by CASEL, it is able to be seen in CASEL’s SEL approach in that “SEL instruction is carried out most effectively in nurturing safe environments” (SEL: *What are the Core*, 2020, Classrooms). Therefore, to carry out effective SEL instruction and use the trauma-informed approach, a safe, predictable environment is a needed ingredient.

The third component Wall (2021) found to be necessary for a trauma-informed approach was “shared agency” (p.124). This component is important as “trauma-impacted children often feel completely powerless to alter their circumstances” (p. 124). Since these children do not feel as though they are in control of their environment in any way, schools should utilize the TIA, which “seeks to empower children with agency over their environment by giving them opportunities to negotiate, express ideas, share opinions, and allow their voice to be considered” (Wall, 2021, p. 124). This component can be paired with CASEL’s belief that the implementation of SEL should “foster youth voice, agency, and engagement” (SEL: *What are the Core*, 2020, Key Settings). Allowing students to have a voice and be active participants in their school environment will help them feel as though they belong and have control of some part of their life.

The fourth component Wall (2021) found to be necessary for a trauma-informed approach was “self-awareness and self-regulation” (p. 124). Wall (2021) stated “the body of literature on the TIA underscores the importance of identifying trauma triggers which are stimuli that remind people of painful past experiences often accompanied by the emotion experienced at the original event” (p. 124). TIA teaches students to be aware of their own triggers and when triggered to be able to use exercises taught to them to deescalate the emotions brought on by the trigger (Wall, 2021, p. 124). This component aligns perfectly with the self-awareness and self-management competence areas of SEL. These two competence areas are a strength of SEL in how it aligns with trauma-informed teaching. Students who become aware of their triggers can communicate with others what actions, sounds, scents, etc. trigger them to help reduce those around them from triggering them. Additionally, students who learn coping mechanisms to help them manage their emotions when triggered will have a healthier reaction to the trigger.

The final component Wall (2021) found to be necessary for a trauma-informed approach is “social-emotional learning and skill building” (p. 125). There is no clearer way to say that in order to be trauma-informed schools must teach SEL than to have it included in the five components necessary for a trauma-informed approach. Wall (2021) writes “by teaching students to name their emotions and bodily responses (such as an increased heart rate, sweating, or upset stomach), they begin to understand their brain and the connections between external events, internal emotions, and triggered responses” (p. 125). These skills are a focus of SEL so that students can have strong self-management, responsible decision-making, and self-awareness. Wall (2021) states that “direct instruction on social-emotional skills like affect modulation, problem-solving, and reading the cues of others, can help break the cycle of relational

dysfunction and improve social competency” (p.125) and that is exactly what an effective SEL program will do.

SEL has shown to make a positive impact on trauma affected students. While SEL programs can benefit from the addition of trauma-informed approaches, there are already some connections between the two. Pawlo et. al. (2019) state that “by creating an explicit connection between SEL interventions and trauma-informed approaches, educators can increase the effectiveness of both types of interventions” (p.40). As SEL programs continue in schools, implementing trauma-informed practices and approaches along with the SEL program will help students who have experienced trauma learn lifelong skills to help combat the effects of the trauma they experienced.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

General SEL Research

Rogers (2019) writes that “the goal of most SEL interventions in schools is to provide proven programs to improve skills and strategies for youth and those who serve them” (p. 19). These “programs focus on student behavior and SEL benefits for students and teachers while supporting classroom learning” (Rogers, 2019, p. 19). SEL skills are just as important as academic skills. Just as a teacher teaches a student how to correctly solve a math problem, SEL skills are taught to help students solve a social or emotional problem properly. SEL should not take over education to the point where academic skills are pushed out, SEL should be taught alongside, and in addition, to academics. SEL skills help students calm down, work through hard tasks, and collaborate with other students. All these skills can be taught during academic teaching.

Rogers (2019) writes that “researchers, school administrators, teachers, counselors, community leaders, and child advocates are all a part of moving this effort forward” (p. 19). There are many teachers who have already started implementing their own idea of SEL into their classrooms. There are also school-wide SEL programs that some administrators have started to implement. Everyone needs to be involved in implementing SEL programs into our public-school systems.

Currently, CASEL is the leading group in SEL research. From their years of research into SEL CASEL has found that “social and emotional competencies can be taught, modeled, and practiced and lead to positive student outcomes that are important for success in school and in life” (*Benefits of SEL*, n.d., para. 1). CASEL lists four main categories where SEL has shown benefits. First, SEL leads to “improvement in students’ social and emotional skills, attitudes,

relationships, academic performance, and perceptions of classroom and school climate” (*Benefits of SEL*, n.d., para. 2). Secondly, SEL leads to a “decline in students’ anxiety, behavior problems, and substance use” (*Benefits of SEL*, n.d., para. 2). Third, SEL results are not only short-term benefits, CASEL states that SEL results in “long-term improvements in students’ skills, attitudes, prosocial behavior, and academic performance” (*Benefits of SEL*, n.d., para. 2). Finally, CASEL states that SEL is a “wise financial investment according to cost-benefit research” (*Benefits of SEL*, n.d., para. 2).

The framework CASEL has set out “fosters knowledge, skills, and attitudes across five areas of competence and multiple key settings to establish equitable learning environments that advance students’ learning and development” (*SEL: What are the Core*, 2020, para. 1). Previously stated, the five competence areas are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. However, there is much more than just those five areas that CASEL believes goes into SEL implementation. In fact, “CASEL’s framework takes a systematic approach that emphasizes the importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across key settings of *classrooms, schools, families, and communities* to enhance all students’ social, emotional, and academic learning” (*SEL: What are the Core*, 2020, Key Settings). Just as SEL does not belong only in one physical setting, SEL instruction does not belong only in one section of the school day. CASEL “believe[s] it is most beneficial to integrate SEL throughout the school’s academic curricula and culture, across the broader contexts of schoolwide practices and policies, and through ongoing collaboration with families and community organizations” (*SEL: What are the core*, 2020, Key Settings). Overall, SEL belongs in all aspects of our schools, communities, families, and societies.

In addition to the five categories by CASEL, Harvard researchers found “there are two additional skills that have been found to increase positive outcomes for youth” (Rogers, 2019, p. 20). These two additional skills are character and mindset. Jones et. al. (2017) state that “Character represents a set of skills, values, and habits that support children to be able to live and work together as friends, families, and citizens” (p.17). By implementing SEL in schools, students will learn to have good character as the five competence areas of SEL teach students how to build their character as they learn how to have effective social emotional skills. Jones et. al. (2017) state that “Mindset consists of children’s attitudes and beliefs about themselves, others, and their own circumstances” (p. 17). Again, as with character, mindset can be fostered through teaching the SEL core competence areas. In addition, “having a growth mindset” falls under the competence area of “self-awareness” on CASEL’s website (SEL: *What are the Core*, 2020, Self-awareness). Growth mindset is the belief that one can learn anything and succeed at anything but it takes time and determination. These two additional skills align with the five core competence areas that CASEL states improves students’ learning and their development.

Studies & Findings

While school districts implement SEL in different ways, one factor is needed in all implementations to make SEL effective. Teachers must know how to effectively implement the SEL instruction and have positive feelings and perceptions of SEL skills. In Poulou’s (2018) study, researchers “examined teachers and students’ perceptions of students’ emotional and behavioral difficulties and the degree of agreement between them” (abstract p. 146). Poulou (2018) found that “since teachers’ perceptions can affect the implementation of SEL programs, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers should take a particular interest in assessing these perceptions, and the ways in which they integrate with teaching practice” (p. 151). Additionally,

Poulou believed that teacher-training is necessary to help “develop personal and professional skills” so that teachers can “focus on teacher-student relationships, and their students’ social and emotional skills as well” (p. 151).

Poulou’s study makes it clear that in order for SEL to work, teachers must believe in it. If teachers don’t believe in the program, students will be able to tell and they won’t buy into the program or process as well as if their teachers do believe in the program. Students are usually very attuned to teachers’ feelings and whether they are excited about what they are teaching or not. Once teachers have the skills they need to implement SEL in their classrooms and believe in the process of SEL positive student-teacher relationships will form and more effective SEL and academic teaching will be done.

Teacher training and teacher buy-in are two necessary factors for teachers to implement a successful SEL program; however, before those two factors can effectively be completed, what most people call “teacher burnout” must be addressed. Carter (2013) defines burnout as “a state of chronic stress that leads to: physical and emotional exhaustion, cynicism and detachment, and feelings of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (What is burnout?). Some causes of teacher burnout are “poor funding,” “high emotional demands,” “inadequate preparation,” and “challenging teaching situations” (American University, 2021, Causes of Teacher Burnout). Due to the overwhelming causes of burnout, “both the number and instability of beginning teachers have been increasing in recent years” (Ingersoll & Kappan, 2021, Changes in the Teaching Force). In fact, it is “estimated that between 40% and 50% of new teachers leave within the first five years of entry into teaching” (Ingersoll & Kappan, 2021, Changes in the Teaching Force). The first year of teaching is the most difficult year for teachers; however, the amount of support given to a new teacher will drastically affect the amount of burnout they experience. Any

teacher, first year or not, who is experiencing “burnout” is not able to provide the emotional support for their students during SEL lessons, or at all.

Burnout is a common term in the education field but, instead of calling it “burnout,” Santoro (2019) writes that this problem is actually “*teacher demoralization*” (p. 28). Santoro (2019) claims that “calling it ‘burn out’ tells the wrong story about the kinds of pain educators are experiencing because it suggests that the problem lies within the teachers themselves” (p. 28). This is not the case, in fact, Santoro (2019) goes on to state that “many teachers become dissatisfied not because they’re exhausted and worn down but because they care deeply about students and the profession and they realize that school policies and conditions make it impossible for them to do what is good, right, and just” (p. 28). Many teachers enter the education field to make a difference in children’s lives or to “change the world” but quickly find out that the restrictions and expectations of the education system do not allow for such moral or ethical goals. This issue must be addressed to provide students with teachers who do not feel defeated and “demoralized” in order for SEL programs to be effective. In order for teachers to provide effective SEL instruction and implementation in their classroom teachers must first take care of themselves and be aware of their own social emotional skills and needs.

No matter what you call it, teacher “demoralization” or “burnout,” the problem affects the quality of education students receive. Rankin (2017) writes that “stressed, overworked, frustrated teachers are less able to connect in positive ways with students and to offer students the best instruction” (How Does This Impact Students). Additionally, an effective SEL program provides a safe, predictable school environment, which is not obtainable with teachers leaving the profession as often as they do, due to “burnout.” Students cannot build strong relationships with teachers when the teachers in the building are constantly changing. Finally, Jennings &

Greenberg (2009) state that “the lives of teaches and their concerns with personal and professional improvement have long been put on the “back burner” of education policy and research” (p. 515) and in order “to improve the conditions of schooling, support the caring and commitment of teachers, and improve the academic and social-emotional growth of students, these critical research, policy, and practice questions demand greater attention” (p. 515).

When teachers have the necessary information, and emotional capacity, to implement effective SEL skills into their classrooms it results in positive outcomes. Kanopka et. al. (2020) found that “when SEL improves, so does academic and behavioral outcomes” (p. 3). In their study, Kanopka et. al. (2020) wrote “the key observation is that students who experience greater gains in self-reported SEL relative to their peers also experience greater gains in ELA and math test scores and, to a lesser extent, attendance” (p.4). This finding shows that SEL, combined with academics, provides a well-rounded, successful education. As students improve in their SEL skills, their academics will improve as well. By increasing students’ SEL skills they build the skills they need to push through difficult math problems, stay focused on a reading assignment, and/or challenge themselves academically.

Additionally, Kanopka et. al. (2020) found that “improving SEL is associated with roughly equal improvements in outcomes for all students, regardless of demographics” (p.5). Finding 3 in Kanopka et. al. (2020) study stated “while the relationship between changes in SEL and changes in other outcomes does not vary by student demographics, it does vary somewhat by students’ SEL level” (p.7). Kanopka et. al. found, SEL student demographics does not factor into improvement made by gaining SEL skills. All students, no matter their demographics, benefit from SEL. This is why SEL should be implemented in all schools nationwide. A student from a small-town can benefit from SEL just as much as a student in an inner-city area, just as

one race does not differ from another in how much they will benefit from SEL skills. However, while demographics do not play into the improvement in students' SEL skills, the level of SEL skills the student had prior to coming into a program, does affect the final outcome. Once again, the fact is that all students can benefit from SEL in their school not just specifically labelled students.

The final finding in Kanopka et. al. (2020) study was “for students with low test scores, improvements in growth mindset and self-management are associated with the largest gains in future outcomes” (p.8). Students who understand that their brain can learn difficult topics, academics, or any other task, but that it takes time and practice will have a larger gain in their outcomes. Additionally, students who learn skills for self-management will also show great growth. Self-management and growth mindset are both big parts of SEL programs. This research shows that “the predictive power of the SEL measures demonstrated in this study provides initial support for continued investment in both the measurement of SEL and, more importantly, the development of social-emotional skills for school-aged children” (p. 10).

According to Durlak & Mahoney (2019) “adding an SEL program is likely to be a wise choice, academically and otherwise, compared to students receiving current school services” (p.2). Durlak & Mahoney (2019) found that “current data collected from many studies indicates that adding a SEL program to the school curriculum can lead to several real-life benefits for students” (p. 2). The data showed an increase in academic performance, skill levels, “improved social behaviors and lower levels of distress,” improved attitudes, and showed less conduct problems (Durlak & Mahoney, 2019, p. 2). When students start to show improvement in these categories, they start to succeed in other areas outside of the school environment. A goal of SEL is to grow healthy, productive citizens and help students better understand themselves and those

around them. With these results it is clear, SEL programs being implemented in schools are showing improvements in students.

In another study, Cramer & Castrol-Olivo (2016) focused on “the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and how to address these needs using evidence-based SEL interventions” (p. 120). Each student brings in their own diversity to the school environment. In discussing the unique needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students, Cramer & Castro-Olivo wrote that in 2001 the surgeon general “stated that ethnic minority youths are at a higher risk for developing social, emotional, and behavioral problems” (p. 120). Additionally, “further research has found that ethnic minority youths tend to face more complex challenges as they develop in our society and interact with mainstream culture” (Cramer & Castro-Olivo, 2016, p. 121). Any program or intervention put in place in the school environment must be culturally responsive to include all cultures so that all students feel included, important, and relevant. All students have different needs, a good SEL program will address the unique needs of all students and allow them to gain the tools needed to reduce the effects of trauma if they have/do experience it.

The research into SEL programs has shown that SEL programs have a positive impact on students. In order to be the most effective the SEL program needs to be trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and teacher buy-in.

Important Points & Challenges Regarding SEL

As with all programs in education, there are key points and challenges that people must be aware of when implementing said program. Shriver & Weissberg (2020) “address four main areas of concern” in their article “A Response to Constructive Criticism of Social and Emotional Learning” (p. 52). These four main areas of concern are ambiguity, hype, equity and culture, and

impatience. Ambiguity is the first area of concern, while CASEL has a definition of SEL, it is not the only definition nor is it the only framework. In fact, Berg et. al. (2017) found in their research for social and emotional competency frameworks, “a total of 136 frameworks” (p.13). Having this many different frameworks makes it difficult for teachers, schools, parents, and citizens to be able to fully understand what SEL is and how to implement it effectively.

The second area of concern that Shriver & Weissberg (2020) mention is hype. SEL has gotten so much hype that people often believe this is the solution for all of education’s problems, student problems, and community problems. This point is especially important to note in this thesis as Shriver & Weissberg (2020) write “it pains us to see educators and policy makers make overblown claims about SEL writ large or about the efficacy of their favored programs” (p. 53). While, implementation of SEL in public schools is definitely important, helpful, and necessary, implementation does not mean that it will solve all the problems the public-school systems face but implementation is needed to start the movement towards improving our schools and helping students get a better education.

The third area of concern mentioned is equity and culture. Shriver & Weissberg (2020) state that “SEL researchers, practitioners, and advocates have long emphasized that *all* students... can benefit from opportunities for social and emotional development” (p. 54). This fact, that all students benefit, often is overlooked and specific students, such as low-income and students of color become the focus of SEL. Starr (2019) states that “to date, the discourse around SEL has been dominated by White researchers and reformers, though much of the programming has been directed at Black and Brown students in urban districts” (pp. 70-71). SEL must be aware of this area of concern so that as the movement moves forward implementation of SEL programs continue to focus on benefiting all students and does not

become a way for educators to “save” specific students, as is so often the sentiment from some in the education world.

Finally, the fourth area of criticism that Shriver & Weissberg (2020) mention is impatience. This area is more of a warning than a criticism. Nussle (2019) warns that SEL advocates need to “resist the allure of speed and scale” (p.2). Shriver & Weissberg (2020) go on to say “school change is tricky and uncertain” (p. 55). With the warning from Nussle and the recognition of the challenge of school change, people must be patient with the implementation and movement of SEL and not try to rush it.

Another potential concern is that a simple Google search will bring up lists of SEL programs for purchase. Two concerns mentioned previously were hype and implementation. A school that wishes to implement a SEL program needs to do research into the program they wish to use. However, often, school districts tell schools what program they must use and it is up to teachers to manipulate the SEL program into a well-rounded, successful, beneficial program. This is why teachers’ opinions and input are so important to build a successful school district. Often teachers are told what to do when they are the ones with the first-hand experience and can provide strong feedback and data to help find the best fit for the school. In my experience each district uses a different SEL program and gives you a one-day training on it prior to stepping into the classroom. I have worked at a school where they wanted teachers to implement SEL with no direction or program, a school where it was only mentioned for morning meeting, and am currently in a school where it is immersed school-wide from the lessons a teacher teaches to the expectations that students are held to. If each school district has different expectations, how can students and teachers be expected to grow in their SEL skills when the skills or practices change depending on the school district.

While there are many criticisms of SEL, implementation of SEL has overall shown to be effective in helping all students improve in one way or another. Students who have experienced trauma are being taught strategies to help them cope with their experiences. Students who struggle to express themselves in effective ways are being taught skills to help them express themselves in a more acceptable way. Many students struggle with low self-esteem in the public-schools and they are being given skills to help them start to believe in themselves. As with any movement, there will be downfalls, challenges, and criticisms but with the right research and implementation SEL can be a positive addition to our school system.

Chapter 3: Methodology for Implementation for Schools

Determining the Right Program

SEL has proven to be successful in helping students deal with trauma, learn life-long skills, and become well-rounded citizens. For this reason, there are an overwhelming number of SEL programs out there being advertised to school districts trying to make money off this “hot-topic” idea. Being that CASEL is the leading group in SEL research, the CASEL SElect programs help narrow down programs that are better than others. Additionally, Jones et. al.’s (2017) resource titled “Navigating SEL from the Inside Out” took a look into 25 leading SEL programs and wrote a report comparing and contrasting them. Each school may have different needs from a SEL program; however, the overall premise of SEL should still stay in tack to make transient students’ moves smoother.

On their program guide webpage (2021), CASEL states “the adoption of evidence-based programs is key to providing consistent, high-quality SEL opportunities for all students” (para. 1). For this reason, the CASEL SElect program site gives a short program snapshot listing four categories. These categories are program approach, significant evaluation outcomes, student characteristics, and school characteristics. These categories help guide the search for the right SEL program. The search for the perfect SEL program should be thorough and consider the needs of the individual school.

To help guide a school to the SEL program right for them, CASEL provides a three-step process to follow. The first step is to “determine your SEL team and goals” (“Program Guide,” 2021, Step 1). This step requires including many different perspectives in determining the goals for one’s school. CASEL provides guiding questions and an easy to use document to help the school determine the right program. Step two is to “connect your needs to our metrics”

("Program Guide," 2021, Step 2). In this step the school learns about CASEL's "evaluation metrics," "design metrics," and gets an understanding of the different designations given by CASEL ("Connect Your Criteria," 2021, Jump to Section). Once the school understands the metrics, they can choose which ones their goals align with to help with step three. Step three is "identify and compare SEL programs" ("Program Guide," 2021, Step 3). This is the final step of CASEL's three step process to finding the best SEL program for your school. This step provides a list of "all CASEL-designated SEL programs" ("Program Guide," 2021, Step 3). The programs are broken down by the metrics found in step 2 and the website allows you to compare and contrast three programs at a time. This database is a helpful tool for schools looking to implement the best fitting SEL program for the specific needs of their school and students.

Implementing an Effective SEL program

Once a school chooses their program, how effectively it is implemented affects the outcomes they will see from it. Jones et. al. (2018) state that "it is not uncommon for schools and organizations to see less powerful results than expected" (p. 1). Jones et. al. (2018) claim that "research suggests that this issue may be due in part to inconsistent or ineffective implementation practices" (p. 1). This is why properly implementing a SEL program is so important. Additionally, "disorganized approaches to SEL programming have been shown to have negative effects on staff morale and student engagement, and therefore may risk doing more harm than good" (Jones et. al., 2018, p. 1). Teachers and staff must have a good understanding of the program and the reasons behind implementing the program so they can buy-in to it. Administration needs to provide the necessary information to their teachers and staff and have an organized plan to implement it as to not overwhelm everyone involved. Effective implementation will lead to better results of the SEL program for all involved.

Jones et. al. (2018) have outlined “a set of recommendations for effective implementation” (p. 3) in their brief, *Preparing for Effective SEL Implementation*. The first recommendation by Jones et. al. (2018) is to “allot the time required to implement the program sufficiently and effectively” (p.3). This recommendation is, in my opinion and experience, the most important. In fact, Jones and Bouffard (2012) wrote that a limitation of effective implementation is “insufficient dosage, duration, and effectiveness” (p. 7). Jones et. al. (2018) state that “lessons and other program activities are often abridged or skipped due to tight schedules and competing priorities such as academic content” (p. 3). Some schools designate a set SEL time for all teachers to teach the lesson; however, this time is not seen as necessary as other instructional time and is taken away from teachers or shortened so that other tasks can be completed. On the other hand, Jones and Bouffard (2012) state that “sometimes schools adopt programs without setting aside time in the daily scheduled, leaving it to teachers to find extra time or adapt the curricula” (p. 7). A SEL program cannot be effective if the lessons are not seen just as valuable as other subjects. To prevent this, Jones et. al. (2018) recommend that “throughout the planning and implementation process, it is important for schools and organizations to consider how programs or programmatic features will support effective implementation and align with the structures and routines already in place in the setting” (p. 4). As a school implements a SEL program, making sure there is specific time or lessons that will be implemented consistently will help increase the positive outcomes of the program.

The second recommendation that Jones et. al. (2018) recommend in their brief is to “extend SEL beyond the classroom” (p. 4). This is another relevant recommendation as some schools will teach the SEL lesson in the classroom and that’s the end of the SEL teaching, which does not leave room for much student growth or understanding. In fact, Jones and Bouffard

(2012) write that “most SEL programs focus solely or primarily on what goes on in the classroom, but SEL skills are also needed on playgrounds, in lunchrooms, in hallways and bathrooms – in short, everywhere” (p. 7). Staff in schools can attest that any unstructured time throughout the school day is the time that most incidences of fights or other disruptions occur. These types of behaviors lead to students feeling unsafe at school, which is the opposite of the goal SEL programs are trying to reach. Jones et. al. (2018) state that “students need support to navigate these spaces and make the entire school environment one that is safe, positive, and conducive to learning” (p. 4). The more support and practice students have, the more opportunities they have to grow in their own SEL skills resulting in more positive outcomes from the SEL program.

The third recommendation that Jones et. al. (2018) recommend in their brief is to “apply SEL strategies and skills in real-time” (p. 4). Two of the goals of SEL is to support students in building healthy relationship skills and for students to build responsible decision-making skills. Jones et. al. (2018) state that “teachers and other school and out-of-school-time (OST) staff often struggle to use program strategies in real-time “teachable moment” situations to help students transfer and apply these skills more broadly to their daily interactions in the classroom and other settings (e.g., playground, hallway, lunchroom, etc)” (p.4). Effective implementation of a SEL program will help staff learn how to help students implement SEL skills in real-time. Staff understanding of how to use real-time conflicts to strengthen student SEL skills is extremely important as “students are most likely to benefit from SEL when they have opportunities to use and practice skills in everyday interactions and routines” (Jones et. al., 2018, p. 4). Jones and Bouffard (2012) state that “just as children must learn to read before they can read to learn, they must be able to effectively read social cues in order to make sound judgements about how to

react to challenging social situations” (p. 8). By providing real-time practice, many students will learn to read social cues and therefore have positive results from the SEL program in place.

The fourth recommendation from Jones et. al. (2018) in their brief is to “ensure sufficient staff support and training” (p. 4). This follows up on the previous paragraph in which it is stated that staff struggle to use real-time situations to help foster students’ SEL skills growth. Jones et. al. (2018) write “for SEL to be effective, adults need support both in pre-service training and in their ongoing work” (p. 4). Teachers do not often get information on SEL programs in their teacher preparation classes, except for some examples of how to manage behavior and even that is usually only a small part of one class. Additionally, Jones and Bouffard (2012) point out that “staff members other than teachers receive even less training and support, despite the fact that cafeteria monitors, bus drivers, sports coaches, and other non-teaching staff are with children during many of the interactions that most demand effective SEL strategies and skills” (p. 8). An effective implementation of a school’s SEL program will provide tangible, informative training for all staff help promote strong SEL skills within the students of the school so they have the ability to experience the positive outcomes research shows SEL instruction can result in.

The fifth recommendation Jones et. al. (2018) recommend for implementing an effective SEL program is to “facilitate program ownership and buy-in” (p. 4). In order to “facilitate program ownership and buy-in” Jones et. al. (2018) state “when making decisions about SEL programming, it is important to include staff and other key stakeholders” (p. 4). Additionally, “schools ...should select programming that is developmentally and culturally aligned to the needs of their students” (Jones et. al., 2018, p. 4). When staff feels included and that their voice matters, the buy-in and ownership of a program is prevalent. To effectively implement a SEL program, all staff needs to feel as if their voice matters and is heard. Additionally, staff will buy-

in to the program if they see that it will satisfy the needs of the students and include all students represented at the school, if not all cultures. An effective SEL program will be diverse and include all students and staff's needs. When such a program is implemented it will result in positive outcomes for all.

Finally, the sixth and final recommendation Jones et. al. (2018) recommend for effectively implementing a SEL program is to “use data to inform decision-making” (p. 5). This recommendation should come as no surprise to anyone involved in education, as everything put in place in education recommends that data is used to affect the decisions made. Implementing a SEL program is no exception to this. Jones et. al. (2018) state that “despite the general trend toward data driven decision-making in schools, few schools employ data to guide decision-making about the selection, implementation, or ongoing assessment of the programs and strategies they use” (p. 5). Jones et. al. (2018) do not believe a school needs to rely on new data, but to use “data that are already collected, such as school climate surveys or behavior referrals, to identify their needs and make decisions about programming, as well as to monitor implementation and results” (p. 5). Without data, there is no way to show staff, the community, or even students the progress being made with the SEL program implemented. Goal setting is part of SEL and therefore, should be part of the implementation of the SEL program as well. Data should show positive results after using these recommendations from Jones et. al. (2018) for implementing an effective SEL program.

With proper implementation of a SEL program, a school should start to see some positive changes. Jones and Bouffard (2012) write that “although there are many ways that SEL efforts can influence the broad systemic school context, one of the most visible and potentially most meaningful ways is by influencing school culture and climate” (p.10). By using the

recommendations laid out in this section by Jones et. al. (2018), schools should have a strong foundation to continue building effective SEL skills in all students, staff, and the school as a whole.

Chapter 4: Teacher Implementation

Even with the recommendations from Jones et. al.'s (2018) brief *Preparing for Effective SEL Implementation*, some schools still do not effectively implement a SEL program.

Additionally, even with all the research on the effectiveness of SEL programs, some schools do not have a SEL program in place. These situations are why it is so important for teachers to have knowledge on SEL and how they can implement it in, at least, their own classroom. Once teachers understand how to implement SEL and see the benefits for their students I believe that all teachers will be implementing SEL in their classrooms and eventually those beyond the classroom will see the benefits for the implementation of SEL in schools.

Self-Understanding

All evidence shows that “SEL instruction is carried out most effectively in nurturing, safe environments characterized by positive, caring relationships among students and teachers” (SEL..., 2020, *The Key Settings: Classrooms*). The first step to providing a nurturing, safe environment is for teachers to be aware of themselves, their emotions, and what they are bringing into the classroom. In fact, research shows that “social and emotional competencies influence everything from teacher-student relationships to classroom management to effective instruction to teacher burnout” (Jones et. al., 2013, p. 62). So, before an educator can implement effective SEL into their own classroom they themselves must implement SEL into their own lives.

A teacher who understands themselves well will ultimately be able to run a better classroom and have better relationships with people around them. Teachers who have a high EQ, or emotional intelligence, will be able to implement strong SEL into their classroom easier. Emotional intelligence is a term defined by Salovey & Mayer (1990) as “the subset of social

intelligence that involves the *ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions*" (p. 189). Daniel Goleman wrote for the Harvard Business Review Press (2015) that emotional intelligence is "a group of five skills that enable the best leaders to maximize their own *and* their followers' performance" (p. 3). It's no surprise that these five skills are similar to the CASEL five. The five skills for EQ are: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. Therefore, a teacher who has a high EQ will have skills that overlap with social emotional skills and will be able to teach their students the same skills.

In order to help people understand their emotional intelligence (EI), Freedman (2020) created the Six Seconds Model of EQ. In his model there are "**three important pursuits**: to become more aware (noticing what you do), more intentional (doing what you mean), and more purposeful (doing it for a reason)" (Freedman, 2020, para. 3).

Martinez (2015) used the idea of the Six Seconds Model of EQ and the three pursuits to explain how teachers could develop their SEC. In Martinez's (2015) article, she states that teachers should know themselves, choose themselves, and give themselves. To "know yourself means clearly seeing what you feel and do, knowing your strengths and challenges, and recognizing your behavior patterns" (Martinez, 2015, How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). A teacher knowing themselves allows them to understand what makes them react in certain situations, what they do well and where they can ask for help, and understanding their own behavior patterns. This coincides with some of CASEL's 5 core competencies for SEL such as self-awareness and self-management.

Martinez (2015) takes Freedman's second pursuit, to be more intentional, and tells teachers to "choose yourself" (How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). This means

“proactively responding to situations instead of reacting on autopilot” (Martinez, 2015, How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). When I was a first-year teacher I had a vice principal who always would say that we need to be proactive, not reactive. As a first-year teacher that didn’t make sense to me because I didn’t have the tools I needed to be proactive; however, as I have gained experience as an educator I now fully understand what she was saying and completely agree with her. Being proactive with students, or in this case ourselves, means that we need to be aware of how situations make us feel and react and plan accordingly to make the best decision for ourselves and those around us. Choosing oneself goes hand in hand with CASEL’s responsible decision-making competence area.

Finally, Martinez (2015) takes Freedman’s third pursuit to be more purposeful and directs teachers to “give yourself” (How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). Martinez (2015) states that “**give yourself** means putting your vision into action, knowing your purpose, and doing things for a reason” (How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). In order for most people to truly be fulfilled in life, they must be working towards something they want or believe in. Teachers who have a realistic vision for themselves and work towards fulfilling that vision will have a more positive feeling towards work and their work environment. Living in alignment with one’s values will make that person feel more comfortable and at peace with their situations.

Teachers are given a lot of good information but often, they are not taught how to implement it for themselves or in their classrooms. Martinez (2015) provides four guiding questions for teachers to ask themselves after an “emotionally charged” situation. First, ask yourself “how did you feel during this situation?” (Martinez, 2015, How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). This is exactly what teachers ask students to do after they experience a challenging situation as well. What emotion did you feel in that moment? Once the emotion is named it

holds less power over the person. From there, Martinez (2015) states to ask yourself, “what were your emotions telling you?” (How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). Because you have already named the emotion with the first question, now you need to find out what that specific emotion means. Martinez (2015) writes that “exploring the meaning of our emotions is an important step toward developing self-awareness” (How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). Once you name the emotion, recognize what said emotion was telling you, then Martinez (2015) says to ask “what did you do about these feelings?” (How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). Many of us try to avoid dealing with emotions and feelings that we do not feel comfortable facing but that does not allow us to grow and make better choices the next time. Finally, Martinez (2015) tells teachers to ask “based on these reflections, what would you do differently the next time you’re faced with a similar situation” (How Can Teachers Develop Their SEC?). Teachers who take the time to ask themselves these questions and be honest with themselves will grow their social and emotional skills and therefore will be able to model better SEL skills for their students.

While modeling strong SEL skills for students is an important part of a teachers’ job, understanding themselves is not just for the students. Teachers who follow the “know yourself,” “choose yourself,” and “give yourself” pursuits will lead happier, healthier lives outside the classroom as well. Often teachers feel the pressure to work past contract hours, be available at all times of the day, and night, for parents and co-workers, and to make their job their main focus. These pressures can lead to burnout and disgruntled teachers. By practicing Freedman’s EQ model, teachers can check in with themselves and become more aware of what boundaries they need to place in their personal and professional life so that in all areas of their life they are giving their best selves to everyone around them.

Creating a Safe Environment

Once a teacher has taken the steps to understanding themselves, they have taken the first step to creating a safe environment for their students. Students will not thrive in an unsafe classroom. In order for students to feel comfortable making mistakes, sharing stories, learn academics and many other wonderful things, they must first know their classroom is a safe environment. Students dealing with the effects of trauma will especially need confirmation that they are safe at school. A safe environment does not mean just physical safety but emotional safety as well.

On CASEL's webpage *Belong and Emotional Safety* (2017) it states "to feel emotionally safe, students need teachers who are responsive to their needs" (para. 2). To build a safe environment, teachers must first build trust with the students in their class. Building trust can be difficult and time consuming but the payout is well worth the work. Cox (2018) writes that "establishing trust should start the moment your students enter the classroom" (para. 2). I personally like to hold the first morning meeting of the school year discussing trust and what it means and looks like to the students and to me, which is one suggestion mentioned by Cox in her article. By inviting students to share what trust looks like to them the teacher is able to be aware of actions that may build trust with their students. Cox (2018) states that by doing this it "will set the tone for healthy classroom relationships throughout the year" (para. 2).

In addition to holding a morning meeting on trust, Cox (2018) writes that teachers can build trust by "give[ing] your students responsibilities and trust[ing] that they will complete the tasks you set for them" (para. 3). She goes on to say that if a student doesn't complete the job, giving them time to fix it will show that you trust them, rather than finishing the job for them. As a teacher I know how difficult it is to not just jump right in and fix the unfinished task but

some students will see that as you undermining them and not trusting them. Instead, asking the student if the task is complete and asking them to take a second look at it could help them find the mistake and fix it themselves.

An extremely important way to build trust, especially for students who have experienced trauma, is to “be tolerant” (Cox, 2018, para. 7). Cox (2018) writes that a teacher should “be considerate of the negative experiences that may have affected a student’s ability to trust you” (para. 7). As already discussed, trauma affects a child’s mind and body. Depending on the trauma the child has experienced, they may not have the ability to trust adults when they enter your classroom, or they may take longer to trust anyone around them. Teachers should understand that every child will build trust at a different speed, some may have trust for their teacher right away, while others may never be able to fully trust their teacher, no matter how much effort is put into the relationship. A teacher implementing strong SEL skills in their classroom will continue to model how to trust, provide a safe environment, and be understanding at where each student is in their SEL journey.

Finally, Cox (2018) writes that “your students will not trust you if you aren’t consistent” (para. 8). Consistency is a necessary tool to provide for students who have experience trauma, to build SEL skills, and to promote trust. A teacher who says one thing and then does the opposite of what was said is modeling that they don’t mean what they say and they are not to be trusted. To build trust, a teacher must stay true to what was said to the students. Cox (2018) writes “if you consistently follow through on your word, then your word will have value, and your students will trust you” (para. 9). Once trust is built, students and teachers can continue to work on additional SEL skills.

Not only will being consistent help with trust but it will also help with classroom management. Once students know what is said will be followed through by the teacher they start to understand that consequences for their choices will also be consistent. Good choices will result in positive consequences, while poor choices will result in negative consequences. Children crave stability and when they learn that the teacher is consistent, the results are almost always positive.

Trust is a large part of creating a safe environment; however, there are many other supports that must be put in place to help students feel as though they are in a safe environment. Teachers may implement a calm corner or a safe space in their classroom for students to utilize when they need to separate themselves from the class. Starr (2021) writes “when students are feeling overwhelmed by their emotions, they need space to be alone” (para. 7). When implementing SEL in the classroom, students are being taught self-management, or how to appropriately manage their emotions. Providing a safe space allows the student to make a positive choice and remove themselves if they are overwhelmed. There are many different types of safe spaces, or calm corners, that teachers can choose to use in their classroom. I have found in my experience that my students do really well if I have multiple places they are allowed to move to with permission. I have had a back table that students enjoyed moving to and either working at it, or even sometimes, under it. I have had students in the past who just want to work under their own desk. Other students find that coming back to work at the back table next to me is what they prefer.

Some teachers have designated safe areas with calming tools, books, and other items. In Harmon’s (2019) article “How to Create a Calm Down Corner in 5 Easy Steps,” she gives some specific examples of what could be included in the calm down corner. Besides for the location

and setting expectations about the area, Harmon (2019) also says to “add furniture,” “add meaningful signage,” and “add calm down tools.” In step 2, “add furniture” Harmon (2019) states that she likes “to provide a comfortable option, like a bean bag chair” (2. Add furniture). In step 3 “Add meaningful signage” Harmon (2019) writes “you’ll want to give your students resources to help them self-regulate and manage their emotions” (3. Add meaningful signage). Some examples of “meaningful signage” are “a sign with breathing techniques,” “a list of things students could do in the space,” or “a resource with strategies for handling problems” (3. Add meaningful signage). Harmon (2019) also says to “add calm down tools.” Some great examples of calm down tools are “glitter jar,” “puffer squeeze ball,” “kinetic sand,” and a “timer” (4. Add calm down tools). These tools added to a calm down corner will be useful in helping students feel comfortable and focus on deescalating their feelings.

Whatever the teacher chooses to do with the calm down space in your classroom it is important that they explicitly teach students the expectations of the area. At the beginning of the year go over the expectations for the safe space. Teachers cannot expect students to know how to handle the freedom of a safe space right away. Students need to be shown, practice, and reminded of acceptable expectations for the safe space. These expectations can be explained during a morning meeting and practiced throughout the day.

Another way to build a safe environment is to push back against old, archaic rules and regulations. Teachers who feel comfortable standing against rules that make students uncomfortable should do so. Such rules that could be seen as making a student feel uncomfortable are rules that infringe on students’ own bodies, such as no hoodies or hats allowed. Students who are hoping to come to a safe environment when they come to school do not want to feel attacked for what they are wearing or how they look; often they are choosing to

keep their hood or hat on because they do not feel safe. In fact, in the handbook titled, *“Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma”* Izard (2016) writes that “the behavior of wearing a hoodie pulled tight over their heads...is similar to what they may have had to do at home” to become invisible (p.9). Teachers can continue to make their classroom a safe environment by allowing students to wear items that make them feel safe and building relationships with students so that eventually the student feels comfortable enough to not need the comfort from the item.

Another way to create a safe environment for students is to allow student choice. Student choice can be implemented in different ways and at different times. Student choice can mean “giving students the control over how they show what they’ve learned” (Starr, 2021, para. 12). However, student choice can also be as simple as telling students they can use pencil or pen for an assignment. Student choice allows students to feel as though they have a voice and a say in the classroom. A part of SEL is responsible decision-making and by allowing student choice the teacher is providing opportunities for students to make choices and practice their decision-making. Another way that student choice can be seen when implementing SEL in the classroom is by allowing students to choose a positive or negative consequence. In a situation where a student is fighting for control of a tough situation, providing them with two options a negative and a positive allows them to choose one. In this case, students are really having to practice their decision-making SEL skills. Student choice is a huge part of SEL implementation in the classroom but it is also one of the most difficult for many teachers who struggle with giving up control. In this case, teachers must really rely on the Six Second EQ model discussed previously.

The student choice option for choosing a negative or positive consequence coincides nicely with the next part of creating a safe environment, “using logical consequences” (Starr, 2021, para. 17). Starr (2021) believes “the use of logical consequences is to help students understand that for every action there is a reaction, AND that reaction will be directly tied to the action” (para. 17). To properly implement SEL into a classroom and create a safe environment, students should have consequences that make sense. In many elementary schools teachers still use the consequence of making students walk at recess for behaviors. Walking at recess does not make sense for a student knocking over a desk or running around, in fact, it will create the complete opposite effect of what the teacher is hoping for. If a student has so much energy they are running around the classroom, they need to be allowed to run and play at recess. If a student was frustrated and knocked over the desk, having them walk at recess is not teaching them any skills they need to better handle whatever emotion caused them to knock the desk over. Self-awareness and self-management, along with social-awareness all come into play with logical consequences.

When a student behaves in a way that needs a consequence providing a logical one allows them to understand that what they did wasn't acceptable and that the logical consequence is how they should have behaved. Starr (2021) writes “A student runs through your classroom and knocks something over. Instead of taking away minutes from recess...the consequence is having the student recognize that running through the classroom is what caused the accident, have them clean it up, and debrief about how that can be avoided in the future” (para. 18). Another example is from my own experience, one year I had a class that made a huge mess in the cafeteria. Instead of taking time away from recess or lecturing them, which they would have tuned out, I made them clean not only the mess they made but the whole cafeteria. This allowed

them to see how much work the custodians have with just a normal lunch mess and how their actions were inconsiderate to them. Logical consequences help students be more socially-aware and self-aware. Often the student who exhibited the behavior behaved that way because of a lack of a social emotional skill; therefore, using that time to work through and teach SEL would be the most effective way of implementing SEL in the classroom.

Creating an Equitable Environment

Creating a safe environment goes beyond consequences, stability, student choice, and calming corners. One concern previously mentioned with implementing SEL in schools was equity and culture. According to Simmons et. al. (2019) “five barriers contribute to inequitable access to a high-quality SEL education, and in turn, opportunities for all children to have healthy SEAD [social, emotional, and academic development]” (Barriers). These barriers are “poverty,” “exclusionary discipline practices and policies,” “lack of trauma-informed school practices,” “implicit bias in school staff,” and “educators’ stress and burnout” (Simmons et. al., 2019, Key Findings). Poverty, lack of trauma-informed school practices, and educators’ stress and burnout have already been discussed in this thesis. So, for this section “exclusionary discipline practices and policies” and “implicit bias in school staff” will be the focus.

Simmons et. al. (2019) state that “exclusionary discipline, such as school discipline practices like suspension and expulsion, narrows life opportunities and compromises quality of life” (p.4). In addition, these practices are not used proportionately for all students, resulting in inequitable punishments (Simmons et. al., 2019, p. 5). Simmons et. al. (2019) write that “black students are suspended and expelled three and a half times more than their white peers and are punished more harshly than white students for the same infractions” (p.5).

Inequities in school discipline do not only effect black students, students of other minorities are also found to be victims of inequitable discipline (Simmons et. al., 2019, p. 5).

Teachers do not have the ability to change the “exclusionary discipline practices and policies” but they can adjust their classroom so that those policies are limited in their controlled environment. Teachers can do this by checking in on their own “implicit bias.” Randles (2019) article, *5 Ways educators can check their implicit bias*, gives five tangible ways from Michael Bonner to help check their own implicit bias. First, “recognize that implicit bias is real” (Randles, 2019, para. 10). Whether or not educators are aware of it “we’ve all developed attitudes or stereotypes that unconsciously affect our understanding, actions and decisions” (para. 10). Once a teacher recognizes their implicit bias the next step is to work on changing those bias. Second, “review credible sources of data” (Randles, 2019, para. 11). The data will show where “implicit bias can come into play” (Randles, 2019m, para. 11). Third, “look at your own data” (para. 12). Fourth, Randles writes to “build relationships with people who don’t look like you” (para. 13). As humans its normal to build relationships with people who are similar to ourselves; however, as educators we need to grow and work to understand all cultures and this is best done by building relationships with people of different cultures. Finally, “spend time with students outside of school” (para. 14). Educators who make connects with students and families outside of school will “discover their cultures and what makes them who they are” (para. 14). While teachers are busy with work and their own life, going to even one sporting event of a student can really make a difference in the classroom. These tips are just a starting point to unpacking implicit bias but educators who work on fixing their implicit bias will be rewarded with better classroom management, relationships, and reduce the need to send students to school administrators.

Additionally, teachers can make their classroom more equitable and inclusive by having all cultures represented in their classroom. There are some simple ways of making the classroom more inclusive. First, make sure the classroom library includes a good variety of diverse books. Students love to make connections with characters in books but often those of different cultures struggle to find books where they are represented. Second, any visuals that are placed around the room should include a variety of different skin tones and disabilities. Currently outside my own classroom I have social distance greeting options posted. Before coming to class my students choose a greeting to do with me at the door. These visuals include different skin tones and children with disabilities so that all students feel represented in my classroom. Additionally, the teacher next door to me has hand signal posters for specific requests (bathroom, question, water) and these are posted in different skin tones. The more a teacher makes their room inclusive and equitable the more comfortable students will feel. Students who feel welcome and comfortable in their classroom environment will be open to be challenged, learning more SEL skills, and grow academically.

Along with representing all cultures in the classroom, teachers need to make sure they are making all students feel comfortable including those with disabilities. Being aware of a student's individual needs and comfort levels can go a long way in making the classroom inclusive. Some disabilities are not able to be seen but by taking the time to read through IEPs and 504s, getting to know each student on a personal level, and being aware of what tools the student needs teachers can provide a welcoming, comfortable environment for all. SEL already has much of the information a teacher would need to be able to help a student with a disability feel safe, comfortable, and welcome in the classroom.

Building the SEL Foundation in the Classroom

Educators can implement SEL in the classroom easily by taking it step by step, and focusing on one task at a time until they are comfortable; implementation does not need to be all or nothing. After working on their own self-understanding, SEL skills, examining their own implicit bias, and creating a safe environment, teachers are set to continue building SEL skills with their students. Each different SEL program will give the teachers steps and curriculum to implement into their classroom and schools but most follow similar outlines. The implementation of SEL in the classroom will be easiest for teachers if they mold the outlines or guidelines to fit their personality, teaching, and comfort level. Not all teachers will feel comfortable implementing a whole new system; that is okay and can be done in pieces while they continue to practice the new system or routines.

To start the morning off right, teachers should greet their students prior to entering the classroom. This is a great time to check in with students, see who is having a rough day, and teach healthy relationship skills. Often students and teachers are so rushed that building relationship skills are overlooked, which can negatively hurt the classroom community. Additionally, Terada (2018) writes that in a study done on 203 students “when teachers started class by welcoming students at the door, academic engagement increased by 20 percentage points and disruptive behavior decreased by 9 percentage points” (para. 4). Terada goes on to state that you should “say the student’s name,” “make eye contact,” “use a friendly nonverbal greeting,” “give a few words of encouragement,” and “ask how their day is going” (para. 11). All of these together won’t take very long but can make a difference in the classroom and the students.

The morning greeting helps gets the classroom community off to a positive start each morning. Teachers don't know what happened prior to the students being at school or entering their classroom but the greeting can help put a positive deposit into that child's emotional bank account. Morning greetings also allow students the opportunity to share something quick with the teacher. I have had students tell me they were upset or didn't sleep because of an event that happened at home. I have also had students so excited to show me a new greeting they made up from a movie or Tik-Tok they recently saw. Morning greetings can help continue to build the teacher-student relationship in a quick, simple way.

Once a student enters the classroom, they should know what the procedures and expectations are for the morning. Some teachers choose to put up a slide with directions so students can refer back to it as needed. Other teachers set the expectations for the morning from the first day of school and have the students practice it so students remember what they are supposed to do when they enter the classroom.

While there is some flexibility in how teachers run their classrooms during arrival, it is important to keep the SEL skills and goals in mind when planning the expectations. Having structured activities for students to do in the morning while they wait for the bell to ring can often help prevent disruptive behavior. However, giving the students choices on what structured activity they will do in the morning allows them to feel in control, work on their self-management, and responsible decision-making.

As the day moves on from students' arrival the next important piece of SEL in the classroom is often rushed, even in schools where SEL is promoted and a goal, the morning meeting. The morning meeting in elementary schools is a valuable time to build a strong sense of community in the classroom. In the article "What is Morning Meeting?" the Responsive

Classroom defines the morning meeting as a time when “students and teachers gather together in a circle for twenty to thirty minutes and interact with one another during four purposeful components” (para. 1). These four components are “greetings,” “sharing,” “group activity,” and “morning message” (para. 2). Almost all programs will include a morning meeting part of their program and a most include the same four components that the Responsive Classroom mentioned. Anyone who has ever been in an elementary school knows that the morning can be one of the most hectic, busy times of the day, second to dismissal. With that being said, a teacher who is able to fit in a morning meeting will see that students will come to love that part of the day and will see positive outcomes in their classroom and students.

When transitioning to a SEL classroom teachers should always keep the CASEL five core competence areas in mind and ask themselves if what they are implementing strengthens these areas. Morning meetings are a great way to strengthen four of the five competences. Aperture Education’s article “4 Reasons to Start the School Day with Morning Meetings” states that morning meetings “strengthen connections and relationship skills,” “increase self-confidence,” “promote social awareness,” and “encourage positive behavior toward others” (4 Reasons, 2021, 4 Ways Morning Meetings Support SEL). Therefore, by holding a morning meeting, teachers set the focus on social emotional skills and can continue to build onto it the rest of the day. Additionally, a positive classroom environment has been proven to be an important part of academic learning, SEL, and engagement. Morning meetings allow for the whole class to build a strong positive classroom environment.

SEL and Growth Mindset in Academics

At this point the teacher has implemented SEL into their classroom environment with structures and expectations and built a strong foundation and safe environment to allow for

students to feel comfortable as they enter the academic portion of the school day. SEL can and should be taught, and fostered, while teaching all subject areas. In fact, SEL and academics should go hand in hand so that neither one is taught in isolation. A goal when implementing SEL in the classroom is to see same benefits that have been shown in the research that supports SEL. One benefit is that research has shown that SEL “leads to academic outcomes and improved behaviors” (Benefits of SEL, n.d., para. 2).

A great way to implement SEL during academic teaching is by teaching students about the growth mindset and using that mindset during instruction. Most students are aware of where their strengths and weaknesses are academically and are quick to say they are “stupid” or “this is easy” which opens the door for some great growth mindset and SEL conversations. According to Yeager and Dweck (2020) “a growth mindset is the belief that personal characteristics, such as intellectual abilities, can be developed, and a fixed mindset is the belief that these characteristics are fixed and unchangeable” (p. 1270). Having a growth mindset falls under CASEL’s SEL category of “self-awareness” (SEL: *What are the Core*, 2020, Self-awareness). When a person is self-aware they are able to “recognize one’s strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence and purpose” (SEL: *What are the Core*, 2020, Self-awareness). Building a growth mindset during academics will in turn, build self-awareness.

Teachers should work on building a growth mindset in their classroom during academics to help students continue to grow their social emotional skills. Teaching students how to change their way of thinking is not an easy task, most students do not have a growth mindset and lack the confidence to even believe they can change their mindset. American University’s article “How to Foster a Growth Mindset in Students” (2020) claims that “mindset techniques involve shifting emphasis away from outcomes and towards efforts and process” (How to Foster a

Growth Mindset in Students). Teachers should praise how hard a student worked on accomplishing the goal, rather than the goal itself. This helps students understand that the effort they put into something is more important than the outcome they receive. In this same article, examples of growth mindset statements are given to help teachers understand how to rephrase what they say to students. These phrases focus on telling students that learning a new skill or struggling to understand something is their brain growing and learning something new. However, American University's article also states "a growth mindset approach still demands optimal performance from a student – simply rewarding efforts isn't effective, and, in fact, it can be harmful if the student's efforts are ultimately fruitless" (How to Foster, 2020, How to Foster a Growth Mindset).

Additionally, students need to be taught that asking for help and using the tools they have access to is an important part of having a growth mindset. Being self-aware includes being aware of one's limitations and often students, and a lot of adults, feel embarrassed to ask for help. A teacher who is implementing SEL in their classroom will teach their students it is okay to ask for help when they need it. Teachers can model asking for help themselves when they need it, either from another staff member, or even from the students in their classroom. Another way a teacher can model having a growth mindset is by positively reacting to mistakes they make. Having a growth mindset means understanding mistakes are okay and often result in learning something new. Every year I personally make mistakes when teaching so that my students will point out I did something wrong. I then use it as a teachable moment. In that moment I talk about perfection and how no one is perfect, that mistakes help you grow and that it is okay to make mistakes. Students often argue that it is not okay to make mistakes and that you don't learn from them. I then ask some questions that help foster a discussion on perfection and mistakes. After

the discussion most students understand that mistakes are a positive thing. Modeling a growth mindset is a great way to teach students how to grow their own growth mindset.

While there are many strategies to fostering a growth mindset in the classroom, teachers need to be aware of how teaching students to have a growth mindset may be uncomfortable for them, especially those who have dealt with trauma. To properly implement growth mindset in the classroom, teachers need to make sure they approach each child with caution keeping in mind that pushing them out of their comfort zone may make them feel unsafe and in turn can cause them to react in a defensive manner. Having strong relationships built with students will help students feel more comfortable and safer in making mistakes. Additionally, having a strong classroom culture and safe classroom environment will help students feel more comfortable approaching new challenges in their learning.

SEL and Behavior or Disruptions

While the hope might be that with the implementation of SEL, either a school-wide program or just in one's own classroom, outbursts or big behaviors will cease to exist, that is not necessarily the case. The goal is that these behaviors will start to minimize but children are still children and will experience emotions that are too big for their current social emotional skills to handle. While it might seem counteractive to work on SEL skills during a big disruption it is actually the perfect time for a teacher to help reinforce the skills they have been teaching all year. Often big disruptions happen because of a lack of social emotional skills or because a student's trauma response was triggered. Before teachers can begin to even approach this situation two things need to happen: they need to check in with themselves and make sure they are regulated and they need to have built strong relationship skills with the student. Once those two things have occurred the teacher has a better chance of helping the student during this tough moment.

In these big moments using SEL and trauma-informed tools are going to provide the best results possible. Wall (2021) states “battles and words should be selected carefully in order to avoid power struggles” (p. 123). Additionally, teachers should keep their voices calm and be respectful, even when the student is not exhibiting either of those behaviors. Wall (2021) also states that “the key is for teachers to hold firmly to expectations but be flexible in offering coping options” when putting structures and stability in schools (p. 123). Keeping a calm voice and not having a big behavior turn into a power battle is not an easy task; however, teachers need to be aware of their own emotions, triggers, and use strategies to keep themselves regulated.

Additionally, during these big behaviors and disruptions teachers tend to tell the student to “calm down” or “it’s okay.” These terms do nothing to help deescalate the situation, and in some situations may make the situation more disruptive. When a child has an outburst they are not okay, something has bothered them. Even more so, the student may not have the tools to “calm down,” and so by telling them to do so only frustrated them more.

Vollrath (2020) gives six simple steps to help de-escalate the situation. First, Vollrath (2020) says to “give the student time to regain their calm” (A De-escalation Technique). The teacher can work with the student by talking them through a mindfulness tool that can help bring the student out of the emotional mind and into the logical mind or the teacher can allow them to have a few minutes to use any tool the student has in their tool box. Second, Vollrath (2020) says to “direct the student to be aware of their thoughts and feelings” (A De-escalation Technique). To do this the teacher can ask the student what they were feeling in their brain and body, ask the student to tell them how they feel, and check in to see if they are ready to move forward (Vollrath, 2020, A De-escalation Technique). Third, “have the student redirect their thoughts” (Vollrath, 2020, A De-escalation Technique). This step allows the student to think

about something that makes them happy and start to feel more relaxed instead of on edge. Fourth, Vollrath (2020) says to “give the student positive feedback on becoming clam” (A De-escalation Technique). At this point the teacher should ask how the student is feeling, if they need more time to relax, and commend them for the work they have done so far to get to this calmer state (Vollrath, 2020, A De-escalating Technique). Fifth, “give the student a little more time to refocus” (Vollrath, 2020, A De-escalating Technique). If this student has calmed down enough this is where I ask if they want to go to the restroom or sit in the hall for a few more minutes to further come back down to neutral mood. If I feel this student isn’t ready to be left alone to regroup at this point, I personally just sit with them and check in a few moments later asking them how they are feeling. Finally, Vollrath (2020) says to “have the student reflect for the future” (A De-escalating Technique). This is a conversation where the student can tell the teacher how they should react next time or steps they can take to prevent this incident from happening again. These steps from Vollrath are great tips for when a student has an outburst or moment of strong emotions; however, there will be times where this is not the route the teacher should take.

If a big behavior happens such as a fight, a complete meltdown, or something that is out of a classroom’s teacher skillset, the best thing to do is to ask for help from an administrator or counselor. Teachers should try to handle as many behaviors as they feel comfortable so they build the relationship with their students; however, there are times that teachers need help and the best thing to do at that point is to ask for the help you need. Schools with counselors, mental health specialist, and supportive administration will fare better in teaching students SEL skills in those big moments. Unfortunately, not all schools have full time counselors or mental health specialists or supportive administration and that leaves the teachers feeling overwhelmed and

frustrated. This is why all schools need to implement SEL and have staff members who are skilled in mental health services for situations that are out of the teachers' skillset.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Next Steps

The next steps for people involved in making decisions for our public-school systems is to continue the research into SEL as our society and culture continue to change. As children continue to experience trauma, our schools need to adjust their SEL programs to include trauma-informed practices. All schools need to transition to trauma-informed teaching and use SEL to help effectively educate the children coming through their doors. Not only do the schools need to be trauma-informed and use SEL, but teachers need to be on board with the plan their school has. In order to have teachers on board, schools need to rethink how teachers are treated and reevaluate how much unnecessary work is required of their teachers. Even teachers who truly believe in the SEL and trauma-informed movement cannot realistically be on board with the changes if they themselves are not allowed to place boundaries at work and practice self-care. Additionally, teachers need to support other teachers as they work to make their individual classrooms into safe, supportive classrooms.

There is still a lot of work to be done in the public-school system. While many places are jumping on the SEL train, some schools are choosing the wrong program, implementing it incorrectly, and/or adding unnecessary stress to their teachers with the programs they choose. Teachers can only do so much when it comes to implementing SEL in their own classrooms but that's definitely the area where the change can start without any changes in policies. SEL can look different, and be implemented differently in each teacher's classroom; however, the overall ideas, expectations, and skills taught must stay consistent. The most important thing for all educators to remember is that no one is perfect, don't expect to be the perfect example of SEL in the classroom at all times, but do need to show students how to fix mistakes when they are made.

Educators should model how to apologize and make amends when a mistake is made. It is important for students to see that even adults make mistakes, have bad days, and can show emotions; however, it is equally important for them to see the adults in their life handle those challenges in a positive and effective way.

Academics still need to be taught along with SEL skills; however, with the implementation of SEL, growth in academics is almost guaranteed. Students who learn how to be leaders, have healthy relationships, and handle their emotions in a healthy, effective way will lose less instructional time in the classroom than those who are struggling to focus, behave, and communicate with their peers. When students are taught skills to manage their emotions, be effective communicators, be leaders, and hold themselves accountable public schools will then be effectively preparing students for successful lives outside the school buildings.

Call to Action

SEL needs to become a focus of the public-school system for many reasons. As the studies discussed, the positive outcomes from implementing SEL in schools cannot be dismissed. SEL has been proven to benefit students in many ways. SEL and trauma-informed teaching can help minimize the effects of childhood trauma. SEL programs have been shown to improve academics, behavior, attitudes about school, and social emotional skills. All students, even those who have not experienced trauma, benefit from the implementation of SEL programs. While SEL programs have been shown to be beneficial to public-schools, incorporating trauma-informed applications along with SEL provides a better, well-rounded program.

All public-schools should implement SEL and trauma-informed teaching. When choosing and implementing a SEL program, the school should be mindful of their specific school's needs and spend time researching different programs before committing to a specific

one. When implementing a SEL program, schools need to keep in the mind the needs of their teachers, along with the needs of the students. Students will grow more if their teacher has bought into the program and isn't burnt out.

Teachers have the ability to implement SEL in their classrooms without the use of a school-wide program but when a school-wide program is implemented properly the effects of SEL are larger. Teachers who want to implement SEL in their classrooms should do research on the best, most up-to-date information in regards to trauma-informed teaching. In order to effectively implement SEL, teachers need to take time to understand themselves, their needs, and their own social emotional skills. Additionally, teachers need to create a safe, comfortable environment where all students regardless of their culture, disability, or anything else feel welcome. SEL should be implemented from the first moment the student enters the classroom until they go home, starting with greeting students at the classroom door. During academic teaching, SEL can be taught and used in conjunction with working towards a growth mindset. While teachers may hope that disruptions and big behaviors will disappear, SEL does not guarantee that; however, teaching students how to effectively deal with those big emotions that cause the big behavior will be easier in a SEL classroom. Finally, teachers need to support other teachers. Perfection is not the goal, growth and mindset change are; teachers need teachers who will help them through the tough moments and mistakes made.

Ultimately the goal is that one day soon the shift will be from SEL in the classrooms, to whole-school SEL, to SEL in all schools. Our students need policymakers to recognize that while academics are absolutely important, testing is not. Policymakers need to rethink state standards and pacing so that students have the time they need to grow, learn, and become better human beings. Test scores won't help minimize the traumatic events that many students have to

live with or through and students can't focus on tests when they are living in constant fear. Public schools need to recognize that while trauma is not always seen, most students have experienced, or will experience, at least one traumatic event in their childhood. The public-school system needs to start to make the change from academic focus to the whole child focus. Once students' minds are healthy and strong, academics will follow. Trauma-informed SEL programs need to be implemented in each school across the nation to protect the children and grow strong, healthy, successful leaders for the future.

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