

Spring 2021

Middle School Parent Opinions of Social Emotional Learning Competencies

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MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENT OPINIONS OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING
COMPETENCIES

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Education

Major: Educational Administration

Under the Supervision of Dr. Kay A. Keiser

Omaha, Nebraska

February, 2021

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ABSTRACT

MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENT OPINIONS OF SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING COMPETENCIES

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University of Nebraska, 2021

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The purpose of this study was to explore parent opinions of the teaching of social-emotional learning (SEL) competencies in middle school. Three over-arching questions were examined. First, do parents believe that it is important for SEL competencies to be taught? Next, do sixth grade parents have a different opinion of the teaching of SEL than eighth grade parents? And finally, do parents believe that the specific SEL program being utilized at the school is helpful for their children?

Quantitative data from the survey indicated that parents were supportive of the teaching of SEL in middle school. Sixth grade parents viewed the competencies of Self-Management, Relationship Skills and Responsible Decision-Making Skills to be more important than eighth grade parents did. Parents believed the program was helpful for their student(s).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was the culmination of many hours writing and also reflecting upon education and my role as an educator. Thank you to my dissertation committee including Dr. Kay Keiser, Dr. Tami Williams, Dr. C. Ostler, Dr. Jennifer Lemke, and Dr. Jeanne Surface for providing feedback and ideas during the writing process. A special thanks to my chair, Dr. Kay Keiser for spending time with me and helping to guide me toward a finished product. When you were with me, you gave me your total attention and honest feedback and I appreciate you for all you have done to help me along the way.

I wouldn't be where I am today without the help and support of my family. Thank you to my mom, Linda Sutton, and my dad, Terry Sutton for providing a loving and supportive home, for always being there, and for helping me to develop a few SEL skills ;) In addition, my sisters Abby and Ivy have always been supportive and loving and I know they are always there for me. My daughters Addy and Maya inspire me daily and remind me of the importance of being a good role model.

My wife Sarah has "nudged" me along during the writing process. But more importantly, through her loving words and actions, she has helped me to become a better person. Sarah – you are smart, patient, thoughtful, kind, loving and beautiful. You will always be the best thing that ever happened in my life. You are the best, and I am the luckiest.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, public schools have noticed an increase in mental, social, and emotional distress and are prioritizing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) by implementing programs to address social and emotional well-being (Wigelsworth, Humphrey, & Lendrum, 2013) and SEL has become one of the most popular topics in education (Lahey, 2014). Schools are looking to create a well-rounded educational experience that addresses the whole child - mentally, socially, and emotionally. It has become imperative that schools provide more than the traditional academic instruction in order to prepare students for life and work (National Research Council, 2013). Today's society requires individuals to be flexible, adaptive, and able to respond to various situations as they interact with their communities (Frey, Fisher, & Smith, 2019; Waters & Sroufe, 1983).

SEL has been defined in a variety of ways (Humphrey et al., 2011). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as: “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (p. 4).

SEL Components

Effective SEL is systematic, integrated schoolwide programming that takes place in schools and classrooms and through partnerships with families. When done well, SEL encompasses all students with additional support for students at risk with social, emotional, and/or behavioral hardships (Wiley & Siperstein, 2011; Adelman & Taylor,

2006). There are a variety of SEL frameworks to describe what the programming should entail. Durlak (figure 1.1) presents a framework containing the following:

1. Five interconnected domains of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies to provide a foundation for school and life.
2. Short and long-term mindset and behavioral outcomes resulting from effective SEL programming.
3. Synchronized school, classroom, family, and community strategies designed to enhance students' social, emotional, and academic performance.
4. Federal, state, and local policies to support quality SEL programming and improved student outcomes.

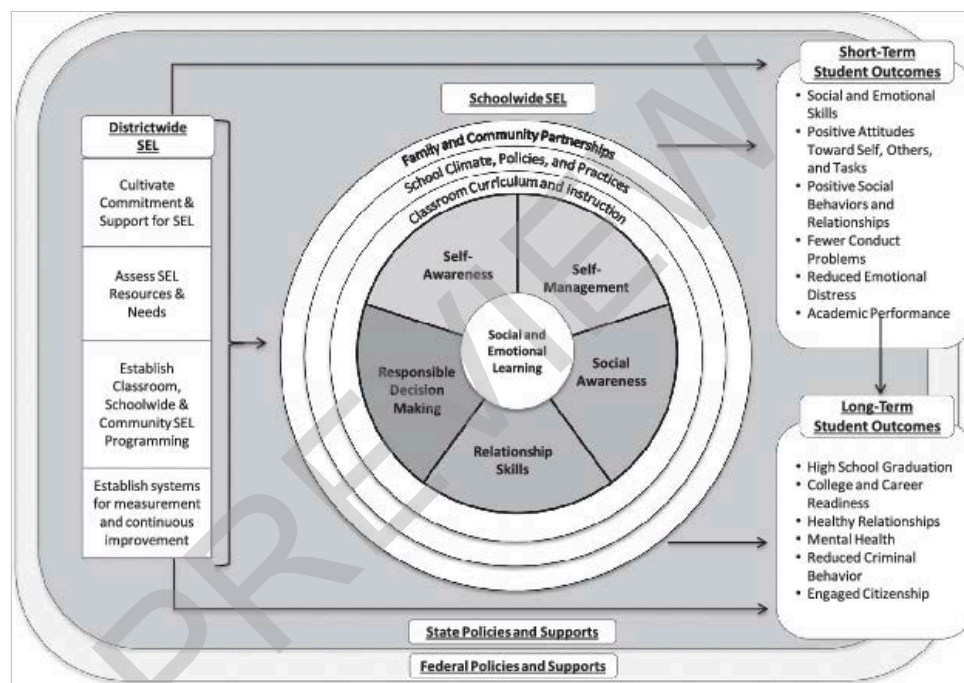


FIGURE 1.1 Conceptual model of systematic SEL in educational settings (Durlak, 2015).

As shared by Fisher, Frey, and Smith (2019) the question of whether or not to provide SEL programming has been answered and it definitely should be. The issue has become how can schools best implement SEL within their existing educational framework. SEL programming has been shown to be most successful if schools and teachers build SEL competencies into daily practice and real-life opportunities (SEL

Implementation Guide, 2018). Based upon their broad experiences working in elementary, middle and high schools along with their extensive review of the research, Fisher, Frey and Smith (2019) conclude teachers influence students' social and emotional development, so they have a responsibility to do so in a positive and deliberate way.

Middle School SEL

Schools have embraced SEL programming as early as pre-school and extending throughout their education into high school. Middle level is a particularly challenging time period due to the unique characteristics and developmental needs of adolescent learners and the upcoming transition to high school (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). "Perhaps nowhere in the life span, other than infancy, is the interplay of individual and collective factors in the composition of a human life more pronounced than in the early adolescent period" (Roeser et al., 2000, p. 443).

Armstrong (2006) has suggested that middle schools should provide students an environment to help them "negotiate the impact of puberty on their intellectual, social, and emotional lives" (p.113) and "the biggest need for young adolescents in education is not getting higher test scores but rather learning how to direct those surging emotional impulses into productive channels" (p. 116). SEL programs are also a key component of the Association for Middle Level Education's keys to educating young adolescents as these students learn best in environments that are "inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all" and where "human relationships are paramount" (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 33).

Parent Perspectives of SEL

Middle level educators are generally supportive of the implementation of core SEL competencies (Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2009) but how do parents feel about the implementation of SEL programming in schools? Do middle level parents believe that certain SEL skills are more important to be taught than others? Do middle level parents believe that the Second Step program has been helpful for their middle school student(s)? How do middle level parents teach SEL objectives at home? What other opinions do parents have in regard to SEL?

There seems to be a lack of research as to the opinions of parents regarding SEL in schools. Education is a shared responsibility of parents and schools and there are a number of positive academic outcomes associated with parental involvement in education. Fan & Chen's (2001) meta-analysis demonstrated moderate effect sizes due to the effect of parental involvement on academic achievement. Improved behavioral outcomes have also been linked to parental involvement including increased ability to self-regulate their behavior (Brody, Flor & Gibson, 1999) and also improved social skills (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzzo, Cohen, & Sekino, 2004). When parents and schools work together coherently, students are better able to retain what they have learned. Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory quantitative study was to investigate parents' opinions of SEL in schools.

Research Question

The central focus of this research is: What are parents' perspectives of the need and the effectiveness of intentional, direct instruction of social and emotional learning objectives at a Midwestern middle school?

Definitions

Terms used in studying social emotional learning have many nuances and shades of meaning. The following express the viewpoint utilized in the current study. Research (Goleman, 1998) related to the SEL competencies that lead to superior workplace performance suggests that competencies related to emotional intelligence (EQ) mattered more than twice as much as intelligence quotient (IQ).

Relationship Skills

Relationship skills is the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. It also includes the ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed (CASEL, 2003).

Responsible Decision Making

Responsible decision making is the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. It includes the realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and a consideration of the well-being of oneself and others (CASEL, 2003).

Self-awareness

As part of being emotionally intelligent, self-awareness is the ability to accurately recognize one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior. Self-awareness includes the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of confidence, optimism, and a "growth mindset" (CASEL, 2003).

Self-management

Self-management is the ability to successfully regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations — effectively managing stress, controlling impulses, and motivating oneself. It includes the ability to set and work toward personal and academic goals (CASEL, 2003).

Social awareness

Social awareness is the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Social awareness also encompasses the ability to understand the social and ethical norms for behavior and to recognize family, school and community resources and supports (CASEL, 2003).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

While there are many random and unintentional lessons learned daily by middle school students that impact their social and emotional development, SEL is "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2003).

Significance of the Study

SEL is an integral component of educational programming and schools continue to seek effective ways of implementing SEL. As schools continue to infuse SEL, reflect upon the implementation, and revise programming, educational leaders will investigate information and resources to develop the best possible implementation plans. This study helped provide a crucial piece of the implementation puzzle: What do parents think about SEL? This study will help educational leaders as they identify specific areas of SEL to target.

This study will also help support education policy by providing the parental perspective of SEL in schools. Parental support for SEL programming will help influence law and policy makers as they review current and enact new SEL related policy. Parents make up a large segment of the population and their voices matter.

College and career readiness encompasses a wide range of both academic and social emotional skills that schools can no longer ignore. As schools work to improve the quality of education, including SEL, it is crucial that research is conducted to determine the specific SEL skills to focus upon. This study will provide the critical parental perspective of what SEL competencies are most important to teach in schools and how to teach them.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academics have always been a driving force behind education and a primary focus of schools. In addition to academics, society also wants students to graduate from school with the ability to interact with each other respectfully, practice healthy and safe behaviors, and apply work habits and skills necessary for college, career and life (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013). Accountability measures, many of which accompanied the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 led to increased pressure and scrutiny on schools and students to perform academically. The increased attention and focus on academics coupled with societal changes such as social media and technology and the already challenging social and emotional development students face during schooling has increased students' risk for mental health problems (Doll & Lyon, 1998). Studies have shown that as many as 15 to 22 % of students experience mental, social, and emotional problems that require treatment (Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001). Many of these problems lead to drug use and abuse, academic difficulty, and school dropout (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Benefits of SEL

Although the responsibility to provide a “whole child” education for students that adequately prepares them for living, learning, and earning is a shared responsibility of families and schools, schools remain the primary setting in which students learn to effectively manage complex social relationships with others along with the other key SEL skills necessary to be productive and contributing members of society.

The improved behavior and SEL skills of students also leads to a better learning environment including reduced interruptions, more time on task, improved instruction, and increased academic achievement. Additional benefits are witnessed including reductions in juvenile delinquency, dropout, antisocial behavior, and mental illness. SEL skills help to promote mental health and in turn reduce the susceptibility to future health problems and adult outcomes (Greenberg et al., 2001; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003).

Despite the clear benefits, SEL is sometimes marginalized by educators and policy makers. High quality evaluation and analysis of the economic benefits of SEL are priorities in order to enact significant SEL programming in the future. There are a number of school-based interventions available to assist with classroom management and school behavior (Greenberg, 2010) but the long term benefits of such programming along with other universal SEL programs is generally unexplored. Durlak (2015) suggests substantial economic benefits to the implementation of SEL as there are hundreds of billions of dollars in public money used to address societal problems such as crime, substance abuse, and poor overall mental and physical health (Insel, 2008; McCollister, French, & Fang, 2010; Rehm et al., 2009).

Correlational and longitudinal research shows that improved SEL competencies are positively linked to adjustment outcomes and negatively associated with a variety of problems (Durlak, 2015; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Moffitt et al., 2011). One of the first publications to bring SEL to the forefront of education was *Safe and Sound; An Educational Leader's Guide to Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning*

Programs (CASEL, 2003). This comprehensive survey analyzed existing SEL programs and helped explain (1) how SEL can be accommodated into the academic mission of schools, (2) efforts that promote healthy behaviors and prevent high-risk behaviors, (3) comprehensive school reform, and (4) the creation of family and school partnerships (Durlak, 2015). This guide provided easy to understand and apply information regarding the various SEL programs and how to best implement this programming in schools. It was downloaded more than 150,000 times and lead to an updated publishing in 2013 titled: *2013 Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs - Preschool and Elementary School Edition*. The updated guide provides information about 7 preschool programs and 18 elementary level programs.

Detailed research regarding the academic benefits of SEL was provided by Zins and his colleagues (Zins, 2004) and their book was particularly important because it was released at a time in which national attention was focused on subpar academic performance of many United States students.

In recent years, a meta-analysis of over 200 studies and involving more than 270,000 students confirmed the significant positive effects of SEL in six primary aspects of development (Durlak et al., 2011). This research identified improvements in academic performance, SEL skills, prosocial behavior, and attitudes toward self and others in addition to reductions in behavior problems and emotional stress. The magnitude of the effect sizes (.22 to .57) was comparable to and sometimes higher than the effect size of those reported in other well established psychosocial interventions for children. The work of Durlak and colleagues (2011) also provided evidence that the SEL programs were equally effective for students in urban, suburban, or rural settings and also effective

no matter the ethnic composition of the school. Programs were more successful when taught by teachers within the school as opposed to staff members from outside the school. When implemented well, SEL programming helps students to perform better academically (Caemmerer & Keith, 2015) while also providing the necessary skills for individuals to lead happy, healthy, active and engaged lives (Bar-On, 2005; Cohen, 2001; Cohen, 2006; Elias, Zins, & Weissberg, 1997). A meta-analysis of research of SEL programs that are both well-designed and well-implemented in schools has shown “improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011, p. 405).

Through explicit instruction and other student-centered learning, SEL helps students engage in learning activities and develop important collaboration and communication skills (Darling-Hammond, et al. 2014) while also teaching and modeling social and emotional skills necessary for life. SEL programming can also provide benefits for students by helping schools and classrooms to establish positive, safe, caring, cooperative, well managed, and participatory learning environments (Zins, 2004).

SEL competence can also increase the probability of students to graduate high school, go to college, have success in their chosen career, experience positive work and family relationships and maintain better health while also decreasing the likelihood of criminal behavior (Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, 2008).

Additionally, research has also shown long term benefits later in life as these skills help students build relationships, resolve conflicts, feel more confident, persist when faced with challenges, cope with anger and frustration, manage emotions and develop socially responsible behavior (Weissberg, et al., 2003). SEL has also been shown

to be a cost-effective investment to assist with mental health promotion (Knapp, McDaid, & Parsonage, 2011) and to create an improved workforce due to the workers' improved motivation, perseverance and self-control (Heckman, 2000).

As suggested by Daniel Goleman (1995), “much evidence testifies that people who are emotionally adept – who know and manage their own feelings well, and how read and deal effectively with other people’s feelings – are at an advantage in any domain of life.” (p.36)

Impact of Trauma and Poverty on Students

Child development research from the last two decades has demonstrated the effect of developmental environments on children’s physical and mental health (Biglan, Flay, Embry, & Sandler, 2012). This research has clearly indicated that the interactions of children with their environment has an effect on their immune, cardiovascular, and endocrine system and also their brain (Blair et al., 2011; Hertzman & Boyce, 2010; Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009; Shonkoff, 2012). Advancements in the field of epigenetics have demonstrated that environmental exposure can impact whether and how genes are expressed (Meaney et al., 1996). Environments saturated with stressful situations can lead to detrimental physiological effects to the long-term physical, mental, and emotional health of children. “Early childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect have been associated with health issues in adulthood such as chronic cardiovascular disease, alcoholism, decreased immune function, and mental health issues” (Durlak, 2015, p. 81).

In addition to early childhood trauma, poverty can have a detrimental effect on the health and well-being of children because it inhibits the ability of the caregiver. Positive nurturing environments that are generally stress-free help to promote SEL well being