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Social Emotional Learning and School Climate: A Case Study of Elementary Teachers

Abstract

Schools are turning to social emotional learning (SEL) to improve educational outcomes for K-12 students and provide them with the skills to think, relate to others, and lead responsible lives. The current research surrounding SEL and school climate indicates how the two areas have a symbiotic relationship, drawing benefits from the other. This case study helps school leaders connect the benefits associated with SEL with current measures of school climate across elementary grade levels. The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does the instruction of social and emotional learning impact school climate?
 - a. How do teachers perceive the relationship of social and emotional learning to the quality and character of school life?
 - b. How do teachers explain the value of SEL?

Aim

The purpose of this research was to help educational leaders better understand the impact of SEL programming on the school climate of elementary schools by exploring the perspectives of teachers.

Problem

Research supporting SEL has garnered the attention of educational leaders in charge of elementary schools across the country. To strengthen the learning environments of their schools, these leaders promote the teaching of social emotional competencies through various programs and curricula. Research connecting school climate with the implementation of SEL programming in elementary schools is limited, thus educational leaders may not understand the direct impact of SEL programs on their school climate or, if they do, they lack robust sources of evidence to justify attention to both arenas. Research in this area is necessary to bolster educational leaders' capacity to drive school improvement efforts that combine SEL programs with efforts to develop positive school climate in order to address the ever-changing needs of student populations.

Research Findings

The study gathered and documented the voices of 11 elementary teachers who are trained in SEL programming and who currently provide SEL instruction to students in kindergarten through the sixth grade. The researcher arrived at four conclusions related to how school life is experienced by teachers implementing SEL and its relationship with school climate, including:

1. Coherent implementation approach establishes teacher ownership, understanding, and support for SEL. This highlights the importance of undertaking a coherent approach to enacting SEL interventions in schools (Stillman et al., 2018) and developing SEL programs that are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit (Durlak et al., 2011).
2. Allowing SEL to grow organically and based on student need maximizes its influence on student outcomes and establishes it within the fabric of school life. The approaches utilized by teachers in this study support the idea that evidence-based programs have a higher likelihood of being effective when they are embedded into traditional academic areas to improve the generalization and maintenance of SEL skills (The Pennsylvania State University, 2017) and intentionally built into the curriculum, daily work, and everyday interactions of the school (Mahoney et al., 2020).

3. SEL improves school climate by promoting supportive interactions and student ownership within the school environment. SEL promotes the interpersonal skills necessary for effective interactions and increased student ownership of the learning environment. Grounding a school in SEL helps mold these social exchanges due to its focus on instructing and encouraging appropriate student interactions, while also emphasizing constructive teacher-to-student interactions.
4. School leaders must consider all factors influencing school climate and how these factors change over time. Similar to research indicating that student perceptions of school climate are shaped by their individual characteristics and experiences (Griffith, 1999; Koth et al., 2008), teacher perceptions of school climate are shaped by their own characteristics and life experiences. This study contributed to this idea by showing the internal and external factors that can influence the climate of a school and how fluctuations can be experienced by staff.

Conclusion/Discussion

As shown in this study, SEL helps teach the relationship skills that strengthen student-to-student and teacher-to-student interactions and how it establishes optimal conditions for learning through positive relationships with adults while also promoting student ownership of the learning environment. Teacher prioritization of SEL is vital, hinging on a coherent implementation process grounded in meaningful training opportunities and support from school administration. This study showed how, when guided and prioritized in this fashion, SEL can become engrained in the daily life of a school, leading to a sense of defined autonomy for teachers to meet the social and emotional needs of their students.

This study also explained how to sustain SEL growth within a school, teachers must feel connected to their school environment. Similar to the social and emotional connections teachers seek to provide for students, teachers must feel supported, recognized, and have positive relationships with administrators and colleagues (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011). The participants' lived experiences captured in this study highlight the significance SEL can have in elementary schools. The participant teachers' words and descriptions routinely placed SEL alongside important aspects of school life, including students' academic progress, social relationships, emotional safety, and students having a predictable school experience.

Research Implications

The findings, results, interpretations, and conclusions from this research study have brought forth additional considerations regarding future research tied to SEL in the following areas:

1. *Structures Used to Deliver SEL Programming*: Educational researchers could study which SEL structures have the greatest impact on the social and emotional development of students and overall SEL program effectiveness.
2. *Adult SEL*: Researching how to authentically promote adult SEL in systems through regular adult SEL opportunities can serve to increase staff wellness, raise teacher resilience, and serve as a valuable connection to determining SEL's impact on school climate.
3. *SEL and Self-Efficacy*: Another area for educational researchers to consider is the potential tie between SEL and improved student self-efficacy.

4. *SEL Measurement Tools in K-12 Educational Settings*: SEL measurement is an important area of potential research since there are additional schoolwide instruments emerging in the field that can assist leaders in their efforts.

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Author Information and Biography

Robert Van Vorst received his Ed.D. in Educational Leadership and Management from Drexel University. He is currently an elementary school administrator with a wide range of experience implementing SEL programming on both the school level and district level. He was a contributor to *Rethinking Disability: A Disabilities Studies Approach to Inclusive Practices* by Jan W. Valle and David J. Connor (2010). The full study tied to this research brief can be found using this link: <https://doi.org/10.17918/00001337>