APPROVAL OF HONORS PROGRAM SENIOR PROJECT

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Inadequate Social-Emotional Learning Leads to Behavior Challenges in a K-5 Setting

This Senior Project is approved as acceptable

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Introduction

School personnel face many challenges that make implementing social-emotional learning difficult. The result of this lack of focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) causes major behavioral challenges in many public-school K-5 students for the classroom teacher and the school environment. Research makes clear that the best way to address the shortcomings of current SEL practices is to holistically examine the concept and implement evidence-based practices. As a result, this work argues that the best strategy to address this lack of focus on SEL is three-fold: Clearly define SEL and its intent; Make clear and explain the various challenges of implementing SEL in many K-5 settings; Detail the consequences resulting from those challenges. Finally, this work will provide research regarding the best evidence-based practices for implementing SEL in a K-5 setting.

What is Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)?

Definition of SEL

SEL is defined as the methodology to help students comprehend and manage their emotions (Contributors, 2022). Social-emotional learning is the process through which students develop essential skills to understand and process emotions effectively. There are five areas that SEL covers. These areas include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and making responsible decisions (Contributors, 2022). “The development of these skills provides an underpinning for productive citizenship” (Eklund K, 2018). Each area has its own set of skills, and the areas work together to create a person capable of handling difficult situations and making the right decisions. SEL was originally incorporated into North Carolina schools after June 2020, when North Carolina passed a Senate bill to require public schools to

incorporate a School Mental health plan. After this bill passed, more schools began to incorporate SEL (*Social Emotional Learning,* 2024).

The first area is self-awareness. Self-awareness is being able to recognize and name different emotions in various situations (Sprenger, 2021). For example, Sally's cat is missing when her teacher asks what is wrong. Sally answers, "I am sad and worried about my cat." Sally is demonstrating self-awareness by being able to recognize and name her feelings. The second area is self-management. The area of self-management is all about regulating their feelings and responses. There are about 6 aspects that go into this self-management, which include "impulse control, stress management, self-discipline, self-motivation, goal setting, and organization skills" (Sprenger, 2021). For example, can a teacher place candy in front of a student, away from the student, and that student not eat it? If the student does not eat it, they are demonstrating strong self-management; if not, they are demonstrating less developed self-management.

The third area of SEL is social awareness. The area of social awareness digs a bit deeper. It has students extend beyond just themselves. Social awareness is being able to consider the thoughts and perspectives of others and empathize with them (Sprenger, M.). For example, Steven is having a really rough day, Sam recognizes that Steven isn't his normal self and asks him if he wants to talk about it. Steven says no, Sam says I understand. Here's a piece of candy to help cheer you up. Sam is demonstrating social awareness by sensing that Steven is off and respecting his wishes not to talk about it.

The fourth area that SEL covers is relationship skills. Relationship skills are harder to fully teach. "According to CASEL, the necessary skills include the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups, to communicate clearly, to listen well, to cooperate with others, to resist inappropriate social

pressure, to negotiate conflict constructively, and to seek and offer help when needed" (Sprenger, 2021.). Understanding and being able to handle relationship skills are easier for students who are older and have an understanding of the three areas, self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness, already discussed. The fifth area of SEL is responsible decision-making, which can even be hard for adults. Everyone has to make decisions all the time. "Responsible decision making includes identifying problems, analyzing situations, solving problems, evaluating choices, and reflecting on the outcome" (Sprenger, 2021). Students need guidance to understand how to make the best decision possible when faced with all the different decisions they will have to make.

Schools must address all these areas, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making when it comes to implementing SEL in the school environment. "When SEL is implemented, it provides children with the understanding and knowledge of social and emotional components needed for self-regulation as lifelong learners" (DeLyon, 2025). Each area is important for building each student to be a productive member of society who understands and can process the world around them. In the post-COVID era, SEL is even more important. "According to Scott, et al (2021) the fallout of COVID-19 likely involves intensified hardship and burdens experienced by youth, families, educators, and school systems alike. Experiences of adversity during formative developmental periods may hinder students' academic, social, and emotional learning" (DeLyon, 2025). A local elementary school writes in their school improvement plan, "By the end of the 2025–2026 school year, Coopers Elementary will provide students with daily Social Emotional Learning (SEL) instruction, along with academic and restorative supports as needed, utilizing available district resources. As a result, the school aims to increase student growth and reduce office referrals by

10%, decreasing from 283 to 253 incidents in educator's handbook" (*CES 25-26 SIP Presentation.Pptx*, n.d.). Schools are hoping to use SEL to promote student learning and reduce the number of days students miss due to behavior. Now, what is causing the delay in implementing SEL?

Challenges Implementing

Challenge 1

The first challenge and "biggest barrier schools face in putting social-emotional learning curriculum in place is an age-old foe: time" (Prothero, 2024). Teachers face the issue of not having time when it comes to implementing SEL in their classrooms. Teachers have so many other responsibilities and subjects to teach, they often don't take/have the time to devote to SEL. "The time required to plan SEL lessons can create an additional burden for teachers in their timetable" (Lead). The time required to plan SEL lessons is a leading concern among teachers who already devote an extraordinary amount of time to lesson planning. Teachers may purposely choose to skip over SEL because they need to get the students caught up on the main classes, math, reading, science, and social studies. Teachers are already overwhelmed with grading papers and planning the next lesson, so they may feel SEL is not as important.

Challenge 2

The second challenge faced by educators and schools is a "lack of funding and support from teachers" (Prothero, 2024). Schools are struggling to implement SEL due to a lack of funding. Some schools are unable to allocate funds to promote SEL learning. Working in unison with the lack of funding is the lack of support from school personnel. The lack of support could be due to the fact that SEL "requires teachers to carry out extra research and preparation if they don't have

the necessary supports. This can leave them feeling demoralized and burnt out" (Lessonbee). Teachers already deal with burnout, anxiety, and frustration over the main subjects and may feel as though SEL is just one more thing to add to their list. Teachers may feel that SEL "is often beyond their specialisation and teaching areas" (Lead). They may not understand how to teach it, which can promote a disdain for the subject and increase resistance to implementing it into their classroom.

Challenge 3:

There is also the challenge of putting a formal curriculum in place and providing access to the materials needed to teach students SEL skills. This challenge relates to a lack of funding and figuring out what curriculum would be best. The director of CASEL notes the following as the reason a formal curriculum is difficult to put in place: ""Most often, these are barriers of time due to the limited number of minutes in each school day and the many areas teachers are asked to address"" (Banks, 2023). One issue related to finding a formal curriculum is time. When finding a curriculum for a school, the concept of time is factored in, and many SEL curricula may have lesson lengths that are too time-consuming. Within the issue of time is finding the right SEL curricula. There are many different models of SEL out there for schools to use, and it can be challenging to pick one. For example, "other popular SEL models include the Emotional Intelligence Model and 21st Century Skills" (Lessonbee). This is just one example of an SEL model. There are tons of curricula out there, such as Second Step or Instill. Schools also must consider diversity and inclusivity. That adds more difficulty when it comes find a curriculum to put in place.

Each school is unique and may face its own set of challenges when it comes to implementing SEL into the school. The challenges above, time, funding/support from educators, and

implementing a formal curriculum are the most common challenges schools face. These challenges are valid, absolutely, but is it causing more harm to the students? What happens when SEL is left out of the classroom and school?

Consequences

Consequence 1

The first consequence is a lack of self-awareness and self-management. When students are not involved in an SEL program, they can be out of control. “A lack of social emotional learning can hinder a child’s ability to learn academics” (DeLyon, 2025). When students are not exposed to SEL, they may be unable to appropriately name their emotions and know how to deal with those emotions. When they are unable to name and deal with said emotion, it can lead to meltdowns and cause distractions for all in the classroom. Second Step includes an example about a boy named Mateo trying to put stickers on his rocket. The stickers won’t go on there right and he gets frustrated. Mateo screams, yells, and throws his hands up (Second Step). Mateo is showing poor awareness and management. Mateo would exhibit better management if he had taken a few moments to take a couple of deep breaths or even counted to ten.

When a student has a reaction like Mateo’s in the classroom, it distracts all involved in the learning environment. It causes the teacher to stop what they are doing to help that student. Sometimes it is not as simple as taking some deep breaths, sometimes it can be a child throwing a desk or trying to hit the teacher. “Huguley et al, (2022) goes into detail to explain that due to the increase in behaviors, evidence has shown that exclusionary discipline is ineffective at preventing unwanted behavior but also contributes to negative student outcomes, such as academic failure, dropping out, increased antisocial behaviors, and increased juvenile justice

system contact" (DeLyon, 2025). The lack of self-awareness and management can follow them into adulthood, creating more chances for the person to have an emotional moment and, in the worst-case scenarios, cause the person to hurt someone and end up in jail.

Consequence 2

The second consequence is an inability to interact appropriately with others. "SEL also teaches children how to interact with others healthily" (Banks, 2023). Learning to interact with others is important in a classroom and as students prepare to enter the workforce. Students need to develop social awareness and relationship skills to help them manage their relationships as they get into higher grades and adulthood. Students will need to know there is a time and place for different situations and how to conduct themselves appropriately. For example, Greg is working with Sarah on a project. He disagrees with how she did a portion and calls her out by saying you're stupid, you should have done it this way. When Greg did that, Sarah probably felt sad, upset, or hurt. Greg could've gone about it a different way by saying hey Sarah, I like this part, but maybe we could change this part. That change would've come off a lot better, and Sarah would have been more receptive to his feedback.

Students must know how to interact with others. It is a life-long skill. "SEL skills can help students in the future when it is time for them to get a job. This is because most jobs want people who have fluent social-emotional skills" (Banks, 2023). If a student is not exposed to SEL or instruction on how to interact with others, they may be unable to get a job or mess with the wrong person and end up hurt. When issues arise in their personal relationships with a significant other, they will be able to talk it out, hopefully, instead of just leaving. If faced with a customer who is upset, they will be able to talk to the customer and fix the problem without losing a customer.

Consequence 3

The third consequence is an inability to make responsible decisions. Students who have been exposed to SEL know what goes into making a good, responsible decision. “Students need to evaluate the consequences of their decisions, including their effects on the well-being of not only themselves but also others” (Sprenger, 2021). Those who have not tend to make decisions haphazardly and based solely on how they feel. For example, two teens, Henry and Steven, are about to decide on where to go for college. Henry gets his acceptance letters in, only opens his first pick’s letter, realizes he is accepted, and without opening the rest of the letters, he immediately decides to go to his first pick, Blue College. What Henry is unaware of is that he will have to spend three times the money to attend Blue College and has received no scholarship from Blue College, whereas he had a full ride to Red College. Steven took extra time to open and read all his acceptance letters. His first pick was Purple College, but after looking through all the applications and talking with his parents, guidance advisor, and friends, he decided to go to a school closer to home that he has a full ride for. In this case, Steven made a more responsible decision.

If students do not learn to make responsible decisions, they will feel lost and overwhelmed every time they have to make a decision. If a student is ill-prepared and does not take into account all the factors, they can end up in a place they hate, a situation that is unsafe, or worse. Students need to be able to make informed and responsible decisions. They need to be able to make these decisions in case of a health problem.

If students lack SEL instruction, they will have trouble naming and regulating their emotions, interacting with others appropriately, and face difficulty making responsible decisions. Each of the areas covered by SEL is essential to helping students now and in their adult lives.

The world is not getting any easier; in fact, it's just getting harder. Students are having to deal with ten times more now than students did 30 years ago. What can educators and schools do?

Evidence-Based Best Practices

Practice 1

First, teachers need to build relationships with their students. Ask the students questions and greet them at the door. "A recent study suggests that greeting and welcoming students each morning increased achievement by 20 percent and lowered disruptive behaviors by 9 percent (Cook, Fiat, & Larson, 2018)" (Sprenger, 2021). There was a time when all teachers stood at the door and greeted students as they came in. Today in schools, it's becoming less. Teachers have to prepare for the day absolutely, but there are other ways to greet students. Teachers can greet students at the door, in a fun morning/class meeting way, or with a simple check-in. "To further support that a welcoming school climate can support students growth and progress, (Knowles et al., 2024) shares how students who experience emotional and behavioral problems may be at an increased risk of experiencing poor quality relationships with teachers. However, by establishing a positive student-teacher relationship students can learn the skills to manage emotions and feelings when hardships arise" (DeLyon, 2025). Students learn best when they are in an environment where they feel safe and trust the person in front of them.

""You can't take care of the Bloom stuff until you take care of the Maslow stuff!" says Alan Beck (1994), founder of Advantage Academy" (Sprenger, 2021). Students' basic needs must be met before any learning can take place; this is in reference to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and that includes food, water, and a sense of security. When students feel safe and understood, they open up and are more receptive to everything the teacher is saying. Simple,

quick check-ins mean the world to students. A local schoolteacher checks in with her students every so often; as a result, her students get a big smile, and their eyes light up a bit more afterwards. They know she cares about them, knows them, and some of their stories. This also includes implementing SEL, providing opportunities for those exceptional students who may have difficulty sharing out loud, with the opportunity to use different resources to express themselves.

Practice 2

Next, educators need to teach SEL skills explicitly and systematically. Educators start by introducing empathy. Then, they move to self-awareness. Next, educators can teach self-management. Then, teachers can teach social awareness. Next, students learn about relationship skills. Finally, students learn about responsible decision-making. Each area does overlap and should be connected to as the teacher teaches the other parts. “Before we can teach students how to handle relationships with their peers, we, as educators, need to model relationship building” (Sprenger, 2021). Educators have to model the relationship building, whether that is with their peers or their students, but there does need to be modeling happening. Also, during a lesson when getting overwhelmed, pause, take a deep breath, and ask students what just happened to get them thinking about SEL in an everyday context.

Teaching SEL can take “multiple forms, including being integrated into another curriculum (e.g., literacy or math). On the other hand, some programs required separate times of the day devoted to SEL, such as morning and closing circle times (Berman, 2018; Stearns, 2016). These lessons focused on the direct, explicit instruction of social-emotional skills” (Todd, C., Smothers, M., & Colson, T, 2022). Educators do not always have to have a designated time to teach SEL. They can integrate it into other curricula. Some schools do prefer to have SEL taught in its own

entity. A local elementary school has SEL as one of its enhancement periods; they have the guidance counselor come in and talk about the different areas associated with SEL. The students and teachers seem to love it and appreciate all the insight.

Practice 3

Third, schools are incorporating SEL at varying levels, not just at the classroom level. “In this way, schools should set their priority on supporting adults first before expecting them to teach SEL (Darling-Hammond, 2018)” (Todd, C., Smothers, M., & Colson, T, 2022). There needs to be proper training and guidance in place for teachers and staff. Teachers should have the opportunity for collaborative planning for SEL lessons. When SEL is incorporated throughout the school and district, there is a decrease in turnover rates and teacher burnout.

“When families, teachers, and administration can support the whole-child students can receive the assistance and supports they need to be successful life-long learner” (DeLyon, 2025). There needs to be communication with parents about the SEL curriculum and what they can do at home to help. There needs to be SEL values shown and posted around the school and talked about in the district. Students need to feel as though they are not the only one involved in the process of learning SEL. They need to feel as though their teachers and school personnel understand and like to teach SEL. They need to see those around them modeling it like it’s talked about in practice 1. Students learn from watching those around them. When SEL is incorporated throughout the school, district, and home, students learn from it and become students who are aware of their emotions, can identify and manage their emotions, understand different social cues, manage relationships, and make responsible decisions.

These practices can help make sure that students are getting and grasping different SEL skills.

Conclusion

Review

SEL is meant to help students develop essential skills that follow them into adulthood. The skills include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and making responsible decisions. Even though schools face many challenges implementing SEL into the school including, a lack of time, a lack of funding and support from school personnel, and the lack of a formal curriculum being in place. As a result of the lack of SEL, students can struggle to identify and manage their response to their emotions, they can struggle to interact with others appropriately, and struggle making responsible decisions. These consequences can be avoided if educators follow simple evidence-based practices.

Summary of Recommendations

To fully implement SEL into a school, the district and schools should make sure that the teachers and staff are met with professional development tools surrounding SEL. Then, making sure that teachers are building relationships with their students. Educators should then decide how teaching SEL explicitly and systematically looks in their classrooms. The district should make sure that the SEL extends beyond the classroom, into the school environment, in the community, and into the students' homes. The parents should be involved. Whether that is hosting a community talk about SEL or sending home weekly newsletters about SEL. To implement SEL there has to be collaboration between the district, school leadership team, the teachers/educators, students, parents, and the community. Learning SEL is a lifelong process, but the students today need it now more than ever.

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