

Abstract

Children are coming to school with increasing rates of unaddressed social-emotional needs, along with challenges directly related to these needs. Essentially, these deficits make it necessary for schools to go beyond a sole focus on facilitating academic learning, and place a targeted focus on social-emotional learning (SEL). Research indicates a strong correlation between social-emotional learning, cognitive development and academic success, reinforcing the need for this intentional shift. The purpose of this project was to investigate how a teacher might integrate social-emotional learning and mindfulness strategies, and enhance children's emotional intelligence, to improve the learning environment and experience of elementary students. I created a website, SEL4ED, as a social-emotional learning repository that can be used by educators, parents, and students alike. The feedback received about SEL and the SEL4ED site, indicated that educators recognize the importance of SEL for students, and want resources, tools, strategies, and ideas, so that they may best address these needs in a timely and effective manner. Growing evidence demonstrates that to promote a significant shift in social-emotional outcomes and academic achievement, districts, schools, and educators all need to value SEL instruction, and commit to its integration within the daily curriculum. This targeted focus is a critical factor in how we teach to the "whole child". SEL4ED is designed to be a collaborative resource, and my hope is that educators will continue to contribute and share their ideas and experiences on the site. These contributions will help develop, grow, and enhance the repository, and support others in their endeavours to teach to both the hearts, and minds, of today's students.

[SEL4ED](#)

Keywords: social-emotional learning, emotional intelligence, social-emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences, SEL4ED, mindfulness, self-regulation

Acknowledgements

“If there is no struggle, there is no progress” ~Frederick Douglass

We do not always end up where we think we will, but we always end up where we are supposed to be, and we always end up learning something about ourselves along the way. Struggle begets strength. I hope I have imparted this sentiment on a deep level to my daughters.

The journey towards the final words typed in this paper is one I could not have made alone. I was loved, encouraged, and supported along the way by some very special people.

To my daughters, Maddy and Elly, who have been the constant inspiration for all that I do. You have endured so much change over the past few years, and I have asked so much of you. This has been another chapter in our journey together. Your love and support for me, and of me, has never wavered. Your loyalty is unmatched. You put up with my exhaustion, crankiness, and my saying, "Not right now, I have homework". You have sacrificed so much for me, and I cannot tell you how much I appreciate it, (and how guilty I have felt). You have helped out, shown so much patience, and done things that needed to be done, that I couldn't do, because of my workload. You have seen me through three Degrees now- I hope you can see that anything is possible. I cannot express my love and gratitude for you both enough.

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Chapter 1- Introduction

Purpose of the Major Project

The social and emotional well being of my students has consistently been important to me. I have always had a tendency towards empathy, and have been able to discern when someone is struggling. I have always wanted to be someone who would try to help. In addition to this, I have always placed great emphasis and priority on the building of relationships, connections, and positive communication in both my professional and personal lives. Teaching, from my perspective, is grounded in developing relationships with students, and attending to their social and emotional needs along with their academic ones. As such, I invest much time and energy to this pursuit. Teachers and students connect by communicating and by sharing who we are, and that builds trust. Trust and sharing lead to positive relationships, which, in my experience, have in turn often nurtured the seeds of willingness to engage with learning; this can be the tipping point of personal growth. This transformation cannot happen without relationship, connection, communication, and purposeful attention to the social and emotional needs of our students.

This was never more apparent to me than when I taught alternate education. The students with which I worked did not care at all about what I knew, until they knew that I cared about them. I showed them I cared by being genuine, by putting effort into connecting with them, and by understanding that we are all humans with emotions, different experiences, needs and wants, before we are academic learners. Being able to truly listen to them and to show empathy and understanding, to help them attempt to understand themselves and their own social and emotional needs, and then to articulate those needs, benefitted me as much as it benefitted them. This ignition of the deep sense of empathy within myself helped me better support my students. As stated in Meijer et al (2009), “Professional behavior becomes more effective and also more

fulfilling if connected with the deeper layers within a person” (p.299). With empathy, I was able to understand each student’s perspective about their education, what they needed and did not need at various times, and to understand my role in their education. I began to understand that some days a student’s life was not conducive to finding meaning and purpose in schoolwork, and that it was my job to honour that and to attend to their social-emotional needs. My perspective as a ‘teacher’ was altered, and the importance of social-emotional learning was highlighted, for I was attending to my students as people, before attending to them as students; “A teacher will never succeed in giving proper guidance to a child if he does not learn to understand the psychological world in which that child lives” (From Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 201, as cited in Cartwright, 1951: 62).

Current research tells us that many children are beginning their education without the social, emotional, and behavioural competencies that are important for success (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Raver & Knitzer, 2002; Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 200; as cited in Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Research also indicates that significant positive changes in social, emotional, and academic competencies, along with improved learning environments, are the result of direct and purposeful teaching of social-emotional learning strategies (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Since “children spend a significant portion of their time in schools, schools are a major context for social and emotional development, growing along with and connected to academics” (Jones & Bouffard, 2012, p. 3). Research is recognizing what educators feel and experience: that the importance of social-emotional learning in school helps provide children with necessary life skills for success, and is a foundation for rich and meaningful engagement with the learning experience and learning community.

The goal of this project is twofold: to ascertain how a teacher can integrate social-emotional learning and mindfulness strategies to enhance children's emotional intelligence, and to improve the learning environment and experience of elementary students; and to build a modular online repository of social-emotional information, strategies, activities, and experiences that can be easily integrated and utilized by elementary teachers. In my eight years as a teacher of various grade levels, and of diverse students with a variety of challenges, I have consistently observed a need to address the social-emotional competencies of children. Though it is time consuming and a great deal of work, I believe that it is a critical factor for student success. Therefore, I am driven to find and employ social-emotional learning strategies and programming that is effective and meaningful, which is often a daunting task. I want to share what I have learned with other educators with the hope that they can utilize the information I have discovered and consolidated to facilitate their access to, and implementation of, social-emotional learning in the classroom. My goal is to contribute to an increasing awareness of, understanding of, and attention to, the critical nature of social-emotional learning in education, by means of an informative, easily integrated and utilized, modular resource.

Justification of the Major Project

During my time as an alternate education teacher, I employed a variety of social-emotional strategies with my students (aged ten to sixteen years-old). The goals of the programs I taught were specifically social-emotional, and very little focus was placed on academics. I quickly understood the impact of a focus on social-emotional learning for these particular students. However, I also saw the value of social-emotional learning for *all* students, and began to profoundly understand the merit of the statement "all behaviour is communication". The value of this perspective became very apparent in October 2014 when I returned to mainstream

teaching from teaching alternative education for three years- I was now the teacher of a newly formed primary class. As with most classes, there were challenges, some minor and others not so minor. Armed with my experience in alternate education, and having a perspective that social-emotional learning was a key factor for student success, I knew that I could not effectively facilitate academic learning with my class without addressing the social-emotional needs of the students. However, I could not, as I had done in the alternate programs, push aside all academic learning and focus solely on social-emotional competencies. That was not the mandate here. I had to find a way to do both, to provide supportive and enriching social-emotional programming, while still addressing the academic needs in an engaging and meaningful way.

The research began. The plethora of information about social-emotional learning was a double-edged sword: so much to choose from, but too much to easily identify worthy material from. Also, I found limited stories of experience- what educators found worked or did not work- most of the information and programs that I found were provided by companies or agencies, not by teachers. Further, the information was so dispersed that it was difficult to weave it all together. Time was not on my side, I could not wait to find “the right thing”, so I had to implement strategies and ideas with a trial-and-error approach, and do a great deal of research and creating. In teaching one often hears, “Why reinvent the wheel?” I felt like I was reinventing the wheel, or perhaps attempting to create a new one. It felt like an uphill battle.

Within the existing spectrum of programs and information that address social-emotional learning, many focus on very specific components: empathy, bullying, mental health, suicide prevention, mindfulness, self-regulation, anxiety, safe schools, social responsibility, and character development. These programs solely address those areas in isolation of one another (Carthy Foundation, 2013). Challenges also exist because of the various programs and

frameworks available: “Educators do not know which ones to choose and it is hard to differentiate among them. Programs cost money and individual schools and school boards often make their decision based on the charisma of the person selling the program” (Carthy Foundation, 2013, p. 6). Thus, finding the right approach and program can be frustrating and time consuming. As such, I had not found a consolidated resource with a variety of strategies, ideas, and research, with documented experiences, that was modular, easily utilized, and easily integrated. Teachers do not have the time to filter through the copious amounts of research and information available about social-emotional learning, nor do they need another boxed curriculum to navigate through- yet the critical nature of addressing our students’ social-emotional competencies cannot be ignored. In fact, one of the primary obstacles to implementing social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies is time: “Teachers sometimes view SEL as one more burden, yet another factor to integrate and implement, especially in a climate of fiscal restraint and teacher overload” (Carthy Foundation, 2013, p. 5). Teachers need to be able to access relevant information and the experiences of others with regards to social-emotional learning in one place, and without having to invest a great deal of time- they need a resource and platform that can be easily utilized, and a place to collaborate and share their stories. It is my belief that if educators had access to an online, modular resource that contained useful, easily integrated, relevant and applicable information and strategies about social-emotional learning, and could read and share others’ experiences, social-emotional learning in schools would be become better understood and more widespread. This is what I intend to create with this project- an online platform and repository for social-emotional learning that can reach an infinite number of educators for the greatest impact.

Critical Challenge Question to be Addressed

The value I place on social-emotional learning, the need for the purposeful teaching and integration of it in our schools, and the difficulty I had finding a few consolidated resources that were easily integrated and covered the scope of students' needs, inspired this project. Thus, my Critical Challenge Question to be addressed was: how can a teacher integrate social-emotional learning and mindfulness strategies, and enhance children's emotional intelligence, to improve the learning environment and experience of elementary students? This project reflects my journey to discover answers to this question, and has become a tangible representation of the fruits of my labour.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this project, social-emotional learning, or SEL, refers to the definition articulated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

Social-emotional learning is the “process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others; making responsible decisions; establishing positive relationships; and handling changing situations capably” (Carthy Foundation, 2013, p. 1). Various terms have been used when referring to, and interchangeably with, social-emotional learning: emotional intelligence, emotional quotient, social intelligence, social-emotional competence, and social-emotional intelligence, and have been used in the creation of this project. For the purpose of this project, each refers to the definition posited by CASEL above.

Universal Design for Learning is an approach to teaching that uses brain research to design learning in such a way that it supports all students. This is accomplished through providing accessibility to those with the greatest challenges, and offering multiple means of

engagement, representation, and expression of learning (CAST, n.d. from <http://www.cast.org/our-work/about-udl.html#.VIPNpYSZ6fQ>).

Response to Intervention is “a multi-tier approach to the early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. The RTI process begins with high-quality instruction and universal screening of all children in the general education classroom. Struggling learners are provided with interventions at increasing levels of intensity to accelerate their rate of learning” (RTI, n.d. from <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>).

Overview of the Project

It is my belief and experience that teaching to, and facilitating the development of social-emotional competencies improves student outcomes. I also believe that teachers and schools have a unique opportunity to foster this growth. However, I also understand the time and access constraints that educators face, and that teachers do not need more boxed curriculum- we need modular resources that are easily utilized, integrated, and implemented. We also need the support and experience of other teachers- we need to share and hear stories of what worked and what did not. Ideally, this information would be housed in an easily accessible place- like a website. The purpose of this project was to create just that- a website focusing on social-emotional learning: information, tools/strategies, a variety of resources (to use, implement, and for further study), stories of experiences, and collaboration. The site does not only highlight the value of social-emotional learning, but also demonstrates how the strategies can be easily implemented, and shows the positive results I have had with students. The site could be used by educators and parents alike, adapted for Kindergarten through grade eight, and could be used in a face-to-face, blended, or online learning environment. This resource would ideally contribute to the increased importance, understanding, and implementation of social-emotional strategies and

learning in education, and improve the learning experience and learning environment for all learners.

I created the website using Weebly as the platform. My goal was to take all of the information, experiences, and documentation I accrued over the past few years working with students, as we navigated our way through the vast spectrum of social-emotional learning, and consolidate it into a viable resource. The site, entitled “SEL4ED: SEL Resources for Education” <http://sel4ed.weebly.com>, (Appendix A), consists of an overview of what social-emotional learning is, explanations as to why it is important, research regarding social-emotional learning, tools/strategies that can be easily utilized and implemented with what teachers are already doing, resources (and links to resources), a blog outlining my experiences with social-emotional learning, what has worked well and what did not, and a space for sharing and collaboration. It also reflects (generally, anonymously and anecdotally) feedback from students, parents, and colleagues about social-emotional learning. This offers insights into the perspectives of those involved and impacted by this: the students, parents, and teachers. Further, the site was shared with colleagues for feedback as to relevance, ease of use, quality of information and ideas, and any other input. My project is presented in a platform that can be readily updated with new information, new stories, new ideas, and new resources- it has the opportunity to evolve in a genuine and authentic way, as the need demands and the sharing grows.

Chapter 2- Literature Review

Introduction

Children today are coming to school with needs that are far more fundamental than academic learning. They come with their own unique social and emotional needs that silently scream to be addressed. These undercurrents of need are disguised behind behaviour issues: anxiety, ADD, ADHD, inattention, anger, and bullying. As educators, we need to examine our roles in the purposeful intervention around these struggles. Should we accept these challenges and conditions as “the way a child is” and push forward with the academic learning that we are responsible for as teachers? Is it possible for educators to attend to the social-emotional needs of these children in a very purposeful and meaningful way, in conjunction with their academic learning? My goal with this project is to ascertain how a teacher can integrate social-emotional learning and mindfulness strategies to enhance children’s emotional intelligence, and to improve the learning environment and the learning experience of elementary students. The literature I refer to throughout this chapter will examine what social-emotional learning is, why it is a critical issue to address in education, how educators can approach and implement social-emotional learning strategies, what is being done, and what the challenges are.

Social Emotional Learning and Emotional Intelligence

Social-emotional learning, or SEL, is a framework for the study and development of social emotional intelligence (Carthy Foundation, 2013). As described by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), social-emotional learning is the “process of acquiring and effectively applying the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to recognize and manage emotions; developing caring and concern for others; making responsible decisions;

establishing positive relationships; and handling changing situations capably” (Carthy Foundation, 2013, p. 1). Further, CASEL has articulated five specific social-emotional factors that together form our social-emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Carthy Foundation, 2013).

Social-emotional learning is known by many different terms: emotional intelligence, emotional quotient (EQ), social intelligence, and social-emotional competence (Coryn, Spybrook, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009). Each of these terms is grounded in the same premise: (according to cognitive theorists) a person’s emotions and social relationships are an integral part of an individual’s development and maturation (Coryn, Spybrook, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009). We are not one-dimensional creatures- we are complex human beings who possess a myriad of strengths, challenges, skills, and developmental processes we must navigate. Gardner calls this myriad of qualities our “multiple intelligences” (Katz, 2012). Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory states that people are gifted with a set of intelligences, comprised of differing types and levels of intelligence (Katz, 2012). He points to eight different intelligences, including intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences as part of this set. Intrapersonal intelligence refers to self-awareness, being able to understand and be objective about oneself, possessing metacognitive skills, having the capability to understand one’s relationship to others, one’s need for change, and one’s response to change (Katz, 2012). Interpersonal intelligence refers to how we perceive the feelings of others, our ability to relate and respond to others, how we interpret behaviours and communication, and the capability to understand how people and their circumstances are related (Katz, 2012). Intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligences are our social-emotional intelligences.

Gardner was not the only theorist to posit the importance of our social-emotional intelligence. In the early 1990s, Salovey and Mayer began to advocate for the inclusion of social-emotional knowing as an intelligence (Coryn, Spybrook, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009). They asserted that social-emotional aptitude could be measured through “specific performance-based abilities” and that social emotional orientation encompassed four factors: Identifying Emotions, Using Emotions, Understanding Emotions, and Managing Emotions (Coryn, Spybrook, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009). Salovey and Mayer’s work was reinforced further by the work of Daniel Goleman, who in 1995 wrote *“Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ”*, and posited five elements of Emotional Quotient, or EQ. Similar to Salovey’s and Mayer’s four, Goleman’s (1995) five elements of EQ included: knowing your emotions, managing your own emotions, motivating yourself, recognizing and understanding other people’s emotions, and managing relationships (Goleman, 1995). Goleman’s five EQ elements correlate closely with those of CASEL, Gardner, Salovey and Mayer- all speaking to the relevance of emotions, self-awareness, self-management, awareness of others’ feelings and sense of being, and relationship, in terms of optimal development of the whole child. Social-emotional learning must be implemented and applied in the education of our children.

Why Social-Emotional Learning is Important

Social-emotional learning is critical to education: “Developing social-emotional competence is a key to success in school and in life” (Zins & Elias, 2006). Research shows that social-emotional skills can be taught and learned, and that social-emotional development and skills are just as important as cognitive development and skills to success in school (Carthy Foundation, 2013). In fact, effective schools are finding that social-emotional intelligence and academic achievement are interrelated and integrated, and purposeful instruction in both facets

maximize students' potential to succeed in school and in life (Zins & Elias, 2006). Brackett and Rivers (2014) state that schools that report an improvement in academic success, improvement in teacher-student relationships, and a decline in behaviour issues, all have a purposeful, systematic approach that promotes students' social-emotional development as a core component of learning (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). In addition, CASEL states: "satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn, it actually increases their capacity for learning" (Protheroe, 2012). Elias, O'Brien, and Weissberg (2006) support this: "When it comes to the impact of mental health on academic outcomes...developing social-emotional competence is key to success in school and in life" (as cited in Protheroe, 2012). Social-emotional learning is key to educating the whole child, and research is showing that specifically teaching to develop social-emotional intelligence leads to substantial growth in the areas of social, emotional, and academic learning, as well as resulting in the improvement of the learning environment (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Nobel Laureate, James Heckman, has stated that "the greatest returns on education investments are from nurturing children's non-cognitive skills, giving them social, emotional, and behavioral benefits that lead to success later in life" (Heckman & Masterove, 2004, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). A growing number of researchers, educators, and parents are acknowledging the need for the recognition and purposeful teaching of social-emotional learning skills within the context of the education system (Zins & Elias, 2006).

Science is also providing evidence of the validity of social-emotional intelligence. Goleman (1995) states that neuroscience is demonstrating that academic learning and one's social-emotional state are linked, and that emotional centers in the brain are intimately intertwined with neurocortical areas which are involved in cognitive learning (Goleman, n.d.

from <http://www.danielgoleman.info/topics/social-emotional-learning/>). Neuroscience is revealing that the complex connection between emotions and executive functioning in the brain have a critical impact on learning (Carthy Foundation, 2013). Donahue-Keegan (2013) explain that cutting-edge research in the field of neuroscience indicates that “(a)ttention to the social and emotional dimensions of learning and teaching in schools is critical to academic achievement, and foundational to the development of crucial life skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability, and collaboration.” This confirms that when a person is not in an optimal social-emotional state, their ability to learn cognitively is impaired, highlighting the relationship and importance between social-emotional state and cognitive function.

Growing numbers of children are coming to school experiencing an array of social, emotional, and behavioural issues that impede their ability to focus, learn, experience academic success, engage in positive interpersonal relationships, and to develop into secure and productive adults (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). It is estimated that in British Columbia, 29 percent of kindergarten children arrive at school demonstrating at least one developmental vulnerability (Shore, 2014). Add to this the fact that child mental health issues are on the rise: statistics are revealing that 20 per cent of children are struggling to such a degree that they require mental health interventions- yet less than 15 percent of those identified receive the services they require- and rates of anxiety, aggression, peer relationship problems, stress, conduct disorders, violent behaviour, depression, attention deficit disorder, and school dropouts are increasing (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Maras, Thompson, Lewis, Thornburg, Hawks, 2015; Napoli, Krech & Holley, 2005). These statistics clearly indicate the critical need for direct and purposeful attention to the social-emotional needs of the children and youth we are educating. It has been determined that “schools are the primary locales to improve the SEL of children” (Foster et al.,

2005; Rones & Hoagwood, 2000; Satcher, 2004; Weisz, Sandler, Durlak, & Anton, 2005; as cited in Maras et al., 2014), and “School-based personnel are more effective at improving SEL outcomes than services provided by nonschool personnel” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Faced with these statistics and facts, there is little doubt that social-emotional learning is an essential component when it comes to educating our children and preparing them for life. Brackett et al (2012) assert that social-emotional learning provides students with improved adjustment and greater academic success as evidenced in their participation in positive social behaviour, decreased behavioural issues, decreased stress, anxiety, and depression, and improved academic standing. Further, a study on mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (a SEL strategy) resulted in evidence of an increase in attention, and a decrease in behaviour issues and anxiety in 9-12 year olds (Semple et al., 2009; as cited in Oberle et al., 2012). A study by Napoli (2004) found that students that participated in mindful breathing were more able to relax, focus, experience less anxiety, deal with conflict more productively, and re-focus after their attention had been disturbed (Oberle et al., 2012). It is evident that emotional state can improve or impede a person’s cognitive function and mental health- both important factors to success in school and in life. As educators we want to facilitate the development of happy, responsible, well-functioning people. Social-emotional learning is critical to achieving this end, and is an investment in our children and youth.

Approaches and Current Practices

Evidence shows that school-based interventions and classroom teaching can improve social-emotional development and skills and decrease problem behaviour (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor (2010) posit that educators are increasingly becoming aware of the critical nature of the school’s responsibility to actively provide interventions and

promote children's social-emotional competence as a critical factor in education. In fact, educators are recognizing the need for a preventative approach- to implement programs and strategies before any problem behaviours or mental health issues arise (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). That is, to take a proactive approach regarding social-emotional learning.

Schools are widely acknowledged as the major setting in which activities should be undertaken to promote students' competence and prevent the development of unhealthy behaviours. In contrast to other potential sites for intervention, schools provide access to all children on a regular and consistent basis over the majority of their formative years of personality development. (Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, 1994, as cited in Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010, p. 2)

This idea is furthered by Schaps and Battistich (1991, p. 129), who assert that elementary schools "are preferred institutions for *primary* prevention programs since very few children will manifest serious problem behaviours by the end of elementary school" (as cited in Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas (2004) and Ysseldyke et al. (2006) purport that social-emotional learning supports should be viewed as a leveled framework- social-emotional supports should be provided to all students within the context of their education, and more intensive supports given to those who need more (as cited in Maras et al., 2014). Thus a variety of evidence-based programs and other interventions have been developed to address these explicit needs (Maras et al., 2014). What is best for the neediest is best for all.

There are a variety of social-emotional programs being practiced and implemented in schools to help children and youth foster and develop social-emotional skills (Carthy Foundation, 2013). The goals of these programs are to develop the social-emotional competencies outlined by CASEL, Gardner, Salovey & Mayer, and Goleman (as described

earlier), to result in better academic and life outcomes. These evidence-based social-emotional programs (and other interventions) focus on creating safe, caring, well-managed, and participatory learning environments; and provide instruction in self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2003, as cited in Protheroe, 2012).

These elements of the social-emotional programs must work together. The creation of an environment conducive to learning, that can be a supportive and genuine forum to implement specific strategies, is a critical starting place (CASEL, 2003, as cited in Protheroe, 2012). Thus, programming must include creating a safe and positive learning environment grounded in relationship, caring, and connection, as these factors are critical to the successful implementation of social-emotional learning strategies. Brackett & Rivers (2014) outline four such programs:

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), The Responsive Classroom (RC) Approach, The Reading, Writing, Respect, and Resolution (4Rs) Program, and The RULER Approach to SEL. The PATHS model is targeted at preschool and elementary aged children; it is grounded in the affective-behavioural-cognitive dynamic (ABCD) model of development that posits that the concurrent workings of affect, behaviour and cognition result in improvements and development of social-emotional skills (Brackett & Rivers, nd). Educators with PATHS training teach students about self-control, social problem solving, awareness and understanding of emotions- including labeling feelings, drawing what different feelings look like (i.e. facial expressions), and discussing feelings and emotions (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). At both the preschool and elementary levels, PATHS training has demonstrated positive outcomes: “..PATHS has been shown to increase social competence and reduce social withdrawal” (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014); “to improve children’s feelings vocabulary, and increase their

understanding of their own feelings and those of others” (Greenberg et al, 1995, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014); “to increase children’s inhibitory control and their verbal fluency; and reduce behavioral problems” (Riggs, Greenberg, Kusche, & Pentz, 2006, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). The RC Approach targets the synthesis of children’s social, emotional, and academic needs, and involves “ten classroom practices designed for both optimal learning and creating a classroom where children feel safe, challenged, and joyful” (www.responsiveclassroom.org, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Some of these practices are: gathering in the morning to connect, to share the ‘Shape of the Day’, and to get ready for the day; teacher-modeled and led co-operative problem solving strategies carried out through scenarios and role play (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Rimm-Kaufman, Fan, Chiu, & You (2007) state that these practices are focused to enhance the importance of a balance between academic and social-emotional learning (as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Results of the implementation of the RC Approach offer evidence that RC is affecting the social-emotional environment of the classroom, as well as demonstrating academic gains:

Results from quasi-experimental studies have shown an increase in reading and math scores as well as closer relationships with teachers, more pro-social skills, more assertive behavior, and less fear among children in RC classrooms compared to those in comparison classrooms after multiple years of exposure to the RC approach.

(Rimm-Kaufman, Fan, Chiu, & You, 2007, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014, p.373)

The 4Rs Program uses literacy-based curriculum and is designed to integrate targeted methods of skill development with modeling of positive social behavioural norms (Brackett & Rivers, 2014).

The program, which targets children from pre-kindergarten to grade 8, includes books (specific topics) used for ‘read aloud’, interactive lessons to build social-emotional skills, a focus on the

development of an understanding of emotions and the capacity to deal with them, assertiveness training, peaceful conflict resolution instruction, a focus on the development of tolerance and respect for diversity, and a focus on the development of empathy (CASEL, 2015, from <http://www.casel.org/guide/programs/4rs-reading-writing-respect-and-resolution/>). Positive outcomes have been documented: “After two years in the program, children were rated as more socially competent, more attentive, and less aggressive than their peers in comparison classrooms” (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011). Finally, the RULER Approach is grounded in the achievement model of emotional literacy, which asserts that “acquiring and valuing the knowledge and skills of recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotion (i.e., the RULER skills) is critical to youth development, academic engagement and achievement, and life success” (Rivers & Brackett, 2011, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014).

RULER is an acronym for five specific and intertwined emotional literacy skills: **R**ecognizing emotion, **U**nderstanding emotion, **L**abeling emotion, **E**xpressing emotion, and **R**egulating emotion (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). The RULER Approach incorporates emotional literacy training and support for students, administrators, teachers, and families alike (Brackett et al., 2009; Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Maurer & Brackett, 2004; as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). In fact, “The integration into existing curriculum and training of both students and adults is the cornerstone of RULER” (Brackett & Rivers, nd). These skills work together and impact one another, each developing concurrently and building a child’s social-emotional skill set (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). Implementation of the RULER program has demonstrated positive outcomes: “In one study, students in middle school classrooms integrating RULER for one academic year had higher year-end grades and higher teacher ratings of social and emotional competence (e.g., leadership, social skills, and study skills) compared to students in the

comparison group” (Brackett et al., 2012, as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). All four of these programs demonstrate evidence of positive student outcomes- both social-emotionally and academically- subsequent to their implementation (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). This speaks volumes to the effectiveness and importance of social-emotional learning. Other approaches to social-emotional learning involve programs focused on being mindful. Mindfulness programs, such as MindUp (The Hawa Foundation, nd; Steffenhagen, 2009) and Master Mind (Parker, Kupersmidt, Mathis, Scull, & Sims, 2013) have emerged offering strategies applicable to the development of social-emotional competencies: mindfulness aids in directing attention and focus (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Research by Brown and Ryan (2003) has shown that mindfulness “was positively associated with several dimensions of well-being (e.g., optimism, positive affect, self-actualization) and negatively related to indices of psychological and emotional disturbance (e.g., negative affect, depression, anxiety, rumination)” (as cited in Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor (2010) suggest that mindfulness training can be implemented concurrently with other social-emotional skill development strategies and programs to complement and improve the outcomes. In fact, a variety of benefits resulting from mindfulness training have been identified: “increases in attention, behaviour and emotion regulation, effective stress responses, and social-emotional competence, as well as decreases in depression, anxiety, and externalizing behaviours (e.g., aggression)” (Biegel, Brown, Shapiro, & Schubert, 2009; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Mendelson et al., 2010; Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005; Saltzman & Goldin, 2008; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; as cited in Parker, Kupersmidt, Mathis, Scull, & Sims, 2013). Thus, the premise behind mindfulness and mindfulness strategies seem to fit well with the premise and goals that drive social-emotional learning, and as such, could be integrated as part of a social-emotional learning program.

Regardless of the program or approach taken, there are some important guidelines to consider.

The Carthy Foundation (2013) asserts: social-emotional programs should be planned and carried out carefully and with intentional thought; should not have any significant implementation issues; expressly target specific social-emotional skills; be taught sequentially and through scaffolding; involve experiential and practical lessons that allow students to practice their new skill; should involve the training of educators; should include parent involvement and be supportive of them. Further, Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) posit that social-emotional learning should be “embedded in curriculum and instruction, as well as in student supports and after-school programming” (p.11). Ongoing teacher training, strengthening relationships amongst (and between) all stakeholders (student-teacher, student-student, teacher-teacher), building a strong school culture and embedding social-emotional practices into the culture, integrating social-emotional learning daily in meaningful ways, and commitment to the processes and practices, are also critical factors (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

All of these factors are key to implementing a successful program. However, it is important to remember that the adoption of a specific social-emotional learning model or approach is not the key factor- the critical factor is that the purpose and intention are identified, and that educators become aware of the dire need for social-emotional learning in schools, and then take action.

“There is not a correct way to map out all of the social and emotional skills. Getting it all to fit in a tidy box is much less important than the dialogue that takes place in the process” (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2015). When we acknowledge and recognize the need for social-emotional learning in our schools, we can address it fully, and work toward making the learning environment and the entire learning experience better for our children.

The Challenges

The need for the teaching of social-emotional skills and competencies in schools has been established; positive outcomes have been demonstrated (Jones, Aber, & Brown, 2011; Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg & Schellinger, 2011; Brackett & Rivers, 2014). However, needs and challenges still exist that may impede the adoption and implementation of social-emotional programming and strategies in education. Some of these are: teacher attitude and beliefs about social-emotional learning, insufficient teacher training, lack of funding for comprehensive training in specific SEL programs (such as the PATHS, RC, 4Rs, and RULER programs), needed support from senior and middle level administration, policy and curriculum that are geared toward academic achievement, lack of time, the need for more data and research, and lack of common language. (Carthy Foundation, 2013; Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, Salovey, 2012; Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg & Schellinger, 2011; Cefai et al., 2013; Schonert-Reichl & Zakrzewski, 2014; Jones, Bailey, & Jacob, 2014). Further, Jones and Bouffard (2012) suggest the following specific challenges surrounding the implementation of successful social-emotional learning programs: lack of time spent on the lessons, social-emotional skills taught in isolation- time spent on practical application in daily life is lacking, skills targeted on classroom activity that do not extend to interactions and application outside of the classroom, and lack of teacher training in the promotion of social-emotional skills (p.7-8). Thus, there are undeniable challenges that surround the successful implementation of social-emotional learning in education. I have described these in more detail below.

Social-emotional programs are primarily delivered by teachers, therefore teacher attitudes and beliefs about social-emotional learning will invariably impact the implementation,

assessment, and results of these programs (Brackett et al, 2012). As such, an educator's approach and commitment to teaching students specific social-emotional skills will impact the success of what it being taught, and educators who parallel the social-emotional needs of their students with the academic needs are more likely to commit time and energy into the integration of social-emotional learning into the daily class routine (Brackett et al., 2012). Further, teacher confidence and demeanor while teaching and implementing principles of the program also affects the success of it: "In general, teachers are more likely to continue using a program when they feel comfortable with and enthusiastic about teaching it" (Rohrbach, Graham, & Hansen, 1993, as cited in Brackett et al., 2012). Unfortunately, without the appropriate training in the implementation of social-emotional learning skills, many teachers do not feel confident, which impacts students negatively (Schonert-Reichl & Zakrzewski, 2014). Schonert-Reichl and Zakrzewski (2014) state that 83 per cent of teachers want to receive training in social-emotional learning, but few actually get that training. This lack of training, buy-in, and commitment actually worsens students' social-emotional skills (Schonert-Reichl & Zakrzewski, 2014).

Moreover, the commitment to professional development- from not only teachers, but all stakeholders in education- around social-emotional learning also impacts its success (Brackett et al., 2012). That is, awareness and acknowledgement of the critical nature of social-emotional learning needs to be made at the whole school level, and a commitment to its implementation made by the entire school community (Cefai et al., 2013). Brackett et al. (2012) posit that this commitment creates and supports a school culture that truly values the importance of social-emotional learning: "Intervention effects are the strongest when principal support and implementation quality are high" (Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003; Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobsen, 2009, as cited in Brackett et al., 2012).

Many teachers want to apply and implement social-emotional learning in their classrooms, but feel that the lack of time and a robust academic curriculum pose great challenges (Cefai et al., 2013). This demonstrates the lack of importance the educational system places on social-emotional learning in comparison to academic learning: there is a “...concern that SEL will take precious time away from academic learning” (Cefai et al., 2013). As such, educators are hard pressed to raise academic standings, which places the focus of importance on academics and leaves little time for social-emotional learning to take place (Brackett & Rivers, 2014).

Brackett & Rivers (2014) state: “Major progress in SEL likely will not happen until legislation....is passed which holds schools accountable for the social and emotional development of students. Above all, educators, researchers, and parents must champion the SEL cause and the efforts toward enduring SEL programming in schools”.

Finally, the need for more data, research, and common language surrounding social-emotional learning poses challenges to its adoption and implementation: “More data across multiple outcome areas are needed” (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg & Schellinger, 2011; Carthy Foundation, 2013). Dirks, Treat, and Weersing (2007) posit that more theory based research is needed to assess and identify the relationship between different social-emotional skills, and that there is a need for a more standardized way to measure these skills (as cited in Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg & Schellinger, 2011). Many studies have shown positive correlations and positive outcomes as a result of the implementation of social-emotional skills training, but the lack of a standardized measure and common language about social-emotional learning may pose a challenge to its validity for some (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg & Schellinger, 2011; Carthy Foundation, 2013). Further, many programs have not been assessed, therefore cannot be considered “evidence-based” programs (Carthy Foundation, 2013). These

challenges may be enough for some to disregard the importance of social-emotional learning in our schools, despite the research and evidence that speak to its value and the critical nature of its implementation for our children. Overcoming these challenges and meeting the needs that exist are critical to ensuring that social-emotional learning is given the credibility it is warranted, and valued as much as academics are, for our students.

Summary

Social-emotional learning is a critical component of education, and of life in general, that I highly value and regard. This fact highlights the connection between who I am personally and professionally in my teaching; as Meijer et al. (2009) call it, “being-while-teaching” (p.306), which benefits both my students and me. I could not effectively execute my role as a teacher without being cognizant of my beliefs, relating this identity so closely with my professional identity. However, beyond my instincts and my beliefs, I have discovered an expansive body of research and information that confirms the critical nature of practicing and implementing social-emotional learning in education. My beliefs inform my practice, but this practice is also grounded in evidence-based research that confirms the correlation between adept social-emotional skills and improved self-regulation, increased inhibitory responses, improved behaviours, cognitive gains, academic success, and success in life in general (Zins & Elias, 2006; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Carthy Foundation, 2013). Brackett and Rivers (2014) assert: “EI theory proposes that the ability to reason about and leverage emotion enhances thinking, problem solving, relationships, and personal growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Indeed, individuals with higher EI tend to perform better in school (Gil-Olarte Marquez, Palomera Martin, & Brackett, 2006; Rivers, Brackett, & Salovey, 2008), have better quality relationships (Brackett, Warner, &

Bosco, 2005; Lopes et al., 2004), resolve conflict in more constructive ways (Brackett, Rivers, Shiffman, Lerner, & Salovey, 2006), solve social reasoning problems more effectively (Reis et al., 2007), and engage less frequently in unhealthy behaviors (Brackett, Mayer, & Warner, 2004; Trinidad & Johnson, 2002)” (as cited in Brackett & Rivers, 2014). The positive impact of social-emotional learning and the development of social-emotional competencies cannot be denied, in spite of some of the challenges to its implementation. I believe the challenges (as outlined above) are not sufficient to merit doubt that purposeful attention to the development of our students’ social-emotional needs can improve their outcomes- research is clear in this regard.

Children are coming to school in need of more than academics, and it is our responsibility as educators to help meet this need. I assert that it is possible for educators to successfully attend to these social-emotional needs, and effectively teach to develop children’s emotional intelligence, along with teaching to their academic needs. Not only is it critical, it is possible.

Chapter 3 – Procedures and Methods

Major Project Design

In the Online Learning and Teaching Diploma (OLTD) 501 course, we were asked to identify a key topic of interest, formulate a central inquiry question, and design an action plan for our inquiry question (Learning Activity 4). I did not realize it then, but my inquiry question was rooted in my educational philosophy, would frame the perspective of my entire OLTD experience and deeply inform my intentional practice as an educator. My key topic of interest and context was: “How to build connection, relationships, and community in an online learning environment”; my central inquiry question was, “What are some of the most effective strategies for building connection, relationships, and community with students who are learning purely online?” Connection, relationships, and community were always important to me in a face-to-face learning environment, and this perspective was not altered in the new experiences I had been exposed to with online learning. When I prepared for my ePortfolio presentation, I recognized how much I wove this perspective into each OLTD course I took without even realizing it; I approached my assignments with a focus on building connections, relationships, and a sense of community. I learned that social-emotional learning was the foundation of my educational philosophy, and the foundation of who I am and what I value as a person.

With this mindset, it was no surprise to me that the development of my critical challenge question to be addressed in my Major Project was founded in social-emotional learning: How can a teacher integrate social-emotional learning and mindfulness strategies, and enhance children’s emotional intelligence, to improve the learning environment and the learning experience of elementary students? I was determined to discover how I could do this, and if I could, to share it.

During my first year in the Online Learning and Teaching (OLTD) Program, I had no inclinations as to what my Major Project would encompass. I did not expect to be focusing it on social-emotional learning. At that time, I was teaching alternate education, so a targeted focus on social-emotional learning made sense. The students with which I worked were very resistant to any and all social-emotional strategies I employed. I did not feel very successful at all, and I wondered if I was failing them. The only consolation in this for me was that these students were now attending school, and had not been before this (not consistently). Though they rejected most of my attempts to arm them with some social-emotional learning strategies and tools, I had created an environment in which they felt safe, and they were making connections with me and with peers, which for them, was enough.

The following year I was teaching in a mainstream primary class. This was a chance to approach social-emotional learning from a proactive position. As with most classes, there were existing challenges of varying degrees, however I still felt that I had the opportunity to facilitate a proactive approach to addressing social-emotional learning. I was determined to make a difference.

The copious quantity of information available regarding social-emotional learning created a disadvantage for me; it was very difficult to determine what to try, use, and what would be effective. So I had to filter through a great deal of information. This demonstrated for me that educators would benefit from a resource that was modular, easily accessible, and integrated. I began to document and reflect on what I did, what I used, and the results. This became the foundation of my project- to design a focused resource for educators based on my research and experiences. I knew I wanted to create this resource in an online format, as I had learned the value and power of sharing online with colleagues in OLTD, and I recognized the ability that

online resources have to reach a much broader audience. Most of all, I wanted to create something useable; something that could seamlessly integrate with what teachers were already doing. The idea for my major project was born.

Major Project Development

I began my work with students in my grade two/three split class at the end of October; I had only started as the teacher of this class two weeks prior. Armed with my past SEL experiences, I knew it would be important to place a targeted focus on community and relationship building, direct teaching of friendship, kindness, respect, empathy strategies, and self-regulation skills. I believed that addressing the social-emotional learning for these children would not only benefit them socially-emotionally, but academically as well. It would allow me to be able to move beyond classroom management, to truly facilitate their learning.

To fully understand the purpose of my project, it is important to relate what I did with the students and why. Please note that I have not provided any information about the individual students in the class, nor any sense of general tendency of the class and their needs. I have only provided a description of the activities I implemented, and why I did so.

I included resources on SEL4ED, (on the “Materials I Used” page), to provide a means for teachers to assess the SEL competencies of their students. Using a Social-Responsibility Rubric as a starting point, I completed an assessment of the students to determine their SEL proficiencies; I used this same rubric at the end of the year to compare and determine growth. I also had the students complete a form answering questions about empathy and their reactions to specific situations; they completed the same form at the end of the year so I could compare their responses. I felt these resources provided a measurable way to determine a SEL baseline of the students before the implementation of the various SEL activities. These documents could also be

used subsequently to measure growth and development. I felt this was an important tool for teachers to have, or to reference for developing one of their own, as it provided some measurable anecdotal data that could be used for assessment.

Initially, I began to focus on how I could facilitate an increase in student behaviours that demonstrated kindness and compassion towards one another in this primary class. I decided to start with a story, as I believed that would engage them and be a good way to introduce the ideas I wanted to familiarize them with. So, I read the class the book, “Have You Filled a Bucket Today? A Guide to Daily Happiness for Kids” (McCloud, 2007), and we started on our path to “Bucket Filling”. After the story, we talked extensively about what “Bucket Filling” and what “Bucket Dipping” behaviours were, how we could fill someone’s (and our own) bucket, and shared personal experiences of both. Bucket filling behaviours are those that make others (and ourselves) feel good/happy; bucket dipping behaviours are those that make others (and ourselves) feel bad/sad. Then I showed the class some cards I had made: “You Filled My Bucket” and “Compliments”, and a bucket I had decorated to look like the one in the book. I explained to them that we would be using these cards daily and gave examples of how to use them, and how not to. The aim was to make a positive statement about the person they were writing the card for, and that sometimes we would have to think deeply, but we could find something positive about everyone. I also encouraged them to try to make statements about the qualities of the person, beyond something superficial, like what they were wearing that day. These cards were placed on a bookshelf in the class and were taken and written on anytime students had some free time. An exception to this was the “Compliments” cards: I wrote the name of each student in the class on these, handing them out randomly after lunch during silent reading, and the students would fill out the compliment card for the student whose name I had

written on it. The compliment cards were also available for use during free time, but I structured this part of it to ensure that each child got at least 5 compliments by the end of the week. At the end of the week (Fridays), I went through the bucket and read out what was written on the cards and the children would then take them home.

The students began using the language “so-and-so filled my bucket”, and “I am sad because my bucket got dipped”, and we continued discussing the feelings surrounding those experiences. We did a variety of bucket-filling activities. I dedicated one of the bulletin boards in the class to bucket filling: it was entitled “We are Bucket Fillers”, and had a big bucket drawn onto it. The board was covered with colouring pages the students had coloured of their own buckets, with a caption beneath stating what they felt was a good bucket filling action, and signed their name beside it. They also worked on a cut and paste, cutting and pasting behaviours into “Bucket Filling” and “Bucket Dipping” columns. For different journal activities, they wrote about: times they filled someone’s bucket and how it made them feel, times their bucket had been filled by someone, times their bucket had been dipped, and times they dipped into someone’s bucket and how it made both the other person and them feel. This evolved into discussions about friendship, how to be a good friend, what makes a good friend, and about the importance of being the kind of friend you would like to have. Students completed activities and role plays that reinforced what they were learning about how our words, actions, and behaviours affect how others feel, and how what we do impacts how we feel about ourselves as well.

The power of the bucket filling and compliments led me to include them on the website, within the category of “Tools and Strategies”. I created a page dedicated to the bucket filling and compliments activities. I felt discussing my experience using them with my class, and sharing the outcomes I observed, were important pieces to explaining why and how these

activities could work with any class. These activities set a tone for our classroom community; one that brought attention to looking for the best in everyone, the importance of self-awareness and awareness of others, and an understanding about how we all can impact the feelings of others (both positively and negatively), which also impacts how we feel about ourselves. These activities also introduced specific language (bucket filling, bucket dipping), tapped into the students reflections of their own bucket filling/dipping experiences, and brought an understanding to the statement I used frequently, “Treat others as you wish to be treated”. I included PDFs of the documents I used, names of books, and an explanation of the activities that teachers could use and easily integrate into the activities they do with their classes on the SEL website. Bucket filling and compliments activities would be especially powerful at the beginning of the year, to set the tone for the learning community the teacher would like to create with the class. These activities could be adapted to use with other grades as the teacher sees fit. For example, for intermediate grades, “Bucket Filling” could be called “Pay it Forward” or “Random Acts of Kindness”, and the activities that follow could be based on those themes. These activities were all about empathy and creating awareness of how our behaviours and choices impact others as well as ourselves- a worthwhile theme that is easily integrated into the classroom environment and learning.

The bucket filling and compliments gradually petered out a few months in, as I believed they had run their course, and if I had persisted with them, they would have become less genuine. The bulletin board remained up, and the language was still used, but the daily writing of bucket filling and compliment cards was not happening, and in a sense may not have needed to anymore. “Kind Words” became the platform for our compliments.

Piggybacking on the bucket filling idea, I incorporated “Kind Words” into our daily Calendar time. This activity was a daily occurrence until the very last day of the school year- it was very effective. “Kind Words” was the last activity we did during our Calendar time. The special helper stood at the front and chose peers with their hands up to share a kind thought about the special helper; I recorded them on a piece of paper (five comments), read them aloud at the end, and the special helper took it home at the end of the day. These positive affirmations were successful in igniting a sense of happiness and pride. Of course, this activity came after a discussion of what the comments should focus on- the person, not what they looked like or wore, a discussion about finding the positives in everyone, and that there needed to be a lot of input, many hands should be raised to contribute. This activity was a favourite, and students could not allow a day to pass without it being done. I am sure it meant more to some of the students than others, but I did know that it was a powerful activity. Gradually over time, I passed over the recording of “Kind Words” to the students, and had each of them record for the special helper and read the statements aloud. I believe this made the activity more powerful, as the students were in charge of it and became an even more active part in it. Some of the kids even asked to read aloud their own “Kind Words”, and were able to say (with pride), “I am (and read what a peer had said)”.

Kind Words was grounded in positive affirmations and recognizing the best in each person. This was an important skill to focus on and learn, and the power of it to shift perspective led me to share it as part of the “Tools & Strategies” page on the site. I felt that the fact that this activity could be seamlessly integrated into the school day, took very little time, but reaped significant rewards, and allowed students to recognize the positive qualities in themselves and

others, warranted its inclusion. This was an easy SEL activity that bolstered students' self-perception and perceptions of others.

Having used calm breathing with the alternate education students with which I had worked, I decided to try it with these primary students, to encourage a calm energy and address self-awareness. I explained the benefits of calm breathing, both physiologically and mentally, and asked for input. I believed explaining what happens in our bodies when we focus and breathe calmly was very important, so the students could relate to the purpose. Asking students how they felt when they focused on calm breathing was important as well, so they could reflect and articulate on their experiences, and hopefully connect with the benefits.

Initially, I used a chime that I had bought along with a book about Mind-Up (The Hawk Foundation, 2011) a few years before. However, a couple of the students found the pitch of the chime too hard on their ears, the sensory input was too much. I had also used an app, "Pranayama Breathing" (Saagara, 2014), so I downloaded it onto my personal iPad and brought it to work with me to try. After the first day, it came with me to work every day after. The Pranayama Breathing worked. Perhaps the visual representation of the breathing along with the audio tones for "inhale" and "exhale" was helpful. Use of this app had the added benefit of targeting both visual and auditory learners, and demonstrated an example of what the breathing looked and sounded like. Though it began with challenges, as most of us need to practice an activity before the benefits present themselves, we stuck with it and the growth demonstrated was amazing.

As mentioned, we began with one minute; the lights were turned off, students sat at their desks, eyes closed or looking down into their laps, and were asked to focus on their breathing. I soon realized that while some seemed comfortable at their desks, others did not, so I changed

this and had students find any comfortable spot/position to be in while doing the breathing. This was much better. Some stayed at their desks, but most sat or laid on the floor, and went under tables and desks. They got comfortable in their own ways to be able to do this activity. As students became better able to do the calm breathing quietly and focused, I started to add time in fifteen-second intervals. We discussed factors that made focusing more difficult some days (ie. being hungry, noise in the hallway, a stuffed up nose, etc.), and what helped focus (ie. thinking of one word, thinking of their breathing sounds, imagining lying in the sunshine). After each session I would comment on the growth I noticed and verbally recognize those who were well focused. This morphed into a self-reflection: I started to ask them to self-assess their focus each day after breathing. I gave an explanation to four numbers (one, two, three, four) and would ask them, without speaking, to hold up their fingers in a one, two, three, or four to express how they felt their individual focus was. Interestingly, most of them were very accurate in their self-assessments, and most strived to maintain or improve. Over the course of the year, we worked our way up to seven minutes of calm breathing every morning, and every student developed the capacity to do it well. The growth I observed was substantial. For these reasons, I felt including calm breathing on the SEL site was important. It was an activity that could be easily integrated, and helped many students become more self-aware about how their physical state could affect their focus and learning, and helped to develop their independence with self-calming strategies for both in and out of school. This was an activity that could be transferred across environments and used lifelong, an important skill for all teachers and students to learn.

A colleague of mine had been trying a Body Scan activity with his class. Essentially, this was a form of progressive muscle relaxation, where the students would lay on the floor, eyes closed, and follow the instructions given by a pre-recorded voice (female and male versions) to

bring attention to different parts of the body, breathe into any tension, then relax it, eventually working on each part of the body. Knowing the success we were having with our breathing activity, I decided to try this as well. It worked fairly well, but I didn't think it was as successful as the breathing, and the class voted that most preferred the breathing over body scan. Due to time constraints, I knew I couldn't do both every day, so I let go of the body scan and persisted with our breathing activity. I believe this was the right choice for this group of students. Though I did not continue to use it with my class, I included it on the site as I felt it could work for other teachers with other classes. Having various options and ideas available to educators allows them to have another similar SEL activity ready to try, if the first one does not work well with their class.

Taking the perspective of proactive classroom management and relationship building, I decided I would give students their chance to talk at the beginning of the day, to "get out" what they wanted and needed to say. This became our "Check-in". After Pranayama Breathing, the students would come together at the carpet area and sit in a circle. We used a beanbag as the "talking beanbag" (you couldn't talk unless you had the beanbag), and the "Special Helper" would start check-in. Each student would state how they felt on a scale from one to ten, one being the worst you could feel, and ten being the best, connect that with why they were feeling that way, and then make a gratitude statement. This gave each child the opportunity to 'have their say' at the beginning of every day, to say how they felt and why, and provided a safe forum for sharing and connecting. It allowed me the opportunity to learn how each child was doing that day, so that I could be more aware of the individual needs. This allowed me the chance to approach the students and their needs with a more informed perspective. It also allowed their peers to better understand and connect with them. Further, finishing what they had to say with a

gratitude statement helped to frame whatever they had said with “a positive”, allowing them to identify something good about their life. This activity turned out to be one of the most powerful ones that we did, and I believe it would be beneficial for all students; because of that, an activity that I felt needed to be shared on the SEL site.

Check-in took a fair bit of time every morning, about twenty-five to thirty minutes. I often felt pressure to speed it up or to stop doing it because of the academic work that we needed to attend to, but I realized that this thirty minutes every morning probably saved me a fair bit of time dealing with behavioural issues throughout the day. Check-in set the tone for a more positive day for everyone. In my research, I found a video from Edutopia (n.d.), that illustrated a similar activity that spoke to the importance and power of this platform for connecting teachers with students, and students with each other. This practice was definitely one that contributed significantly to developing community, connections, relationships, and empathy; thus its inclusion on the site. I believe that this targeted attention to SEL can benefit all students, and for some, the only place they can have these needs met is at school. This activity was a necessity for the SEL site.

I also incorporated a variety of mindfulness activities into different parts of the curriculum. Much research has been done about mindfulness in education and the ‘brain science’ related to it. In fact, The Hawn Foundation (2011) has created an entire educational resource around it. As it was such a current topic in education, and because I observed the value of the mindfulness activities we did, I believed it was a useful resource for teachers and important to include mindfulness activities, resources, and my experience using them with my class, as part of the “Tools & Strategies” section of the site. Mindfulness also connected purpose to practice through the various activities, which included learning about, and better

understanding how the brain works and responds. This allowed students to relate to the science behind our mindfulness activities, and they began to understand that mindfulness is not just “for today”, but rather a skill for life.

I felt it was important to create a frame or context for all of this work that I did with my class, so I included various sections on the SEL website to address this. Explaining what SEL was, why SEL was important, and the research behind it (both evidence-based and anecdotal) were critical pieces to have on the site. There had to be credible reasons that teachers would consider using any of the materials and resources I discussed. I felt that understanding what SEL encompassed, why it was critical in education, connecting its educational applications with the respected works of Abraham Maslow (Hierarchy of Needs), and Howard Gardner (Multiple Intelligences), and providing research to support my perspective, made what I proposed more credible, and connected it to long-standing evidence-based research.

It was also important to consider how I delivered this information. I included videos, info graphs, and images, as I had to look at the site from the viewpoint of prospective users, and I recognized that having different modes of representing the information for various users’ learning styles and preferences made the information more accessible and digestible.

As a teacher, I knew that accessibility to resources was important, and often a stumbling block. The time and energy it took to find, sift through, and develop resources was overwhelming. I wanted this site to provide easy accessibility to resources for teachers, so housing them directly on the website on a “Resources” page was important. These resources were in the form of videos, websites, books, and other materials (such as the actual ones I used). I tried to provide many options so that everyone could find something useful, and because it was all housed in one spot, accessibility was easy.

Over the course of the year, as we engaged with all of these activities, I consistently requested feedback from the students, and we discussed their perspectives about what we were doing, what value they got from it, what they liked, and what they did not. This open dialogue was an important piece of what we did, as it provided a forum for their reflection, and mine. It guided our next steps, how things were framed, and what we could improve upon. At the end of the year, I also requested feedback from parents and colleagues regarding their perspectives of the social-emotional learning that I facilitated with my class over the year. These were important pieces of information, as this would help inform my practice, and validated the value of what I was trying to do. As such, having a place on the SEL site for feedback from students, parents, and teachers was important to me, so while I explained the feedback on these pages that I had already received, I asked for more from the website visitors via a form on the page that could be completed and submitted to me.

Beyond the feedback I requested on these pages, I wanted contributions. I felt that the SEL site and the information on it could only grow and remain useful if it was built upon by the contributions of those who are doing SEL work. I believe that we learn by sharing, and that many educators are implementing meaningful and useful SEL strategies and programming into their practice. However, if these practices and ideas are not widely shared, we cannot build upon each other's strengths and successes, to best support our students. I wanted this site to be relevant and of value, so I needed other educators, parents, and students to contribute. These contributions were submitted via an easily accessible form linked directly to the site.

Finally, I included a blog on my site: a personal account of how I felt about SEL, and why. I believed that I needed to provide a context for my strong beliefs in, and commitment to, SEL for education, so that site visitors could understand how my interest and perspective

developed. This was also a place for me to reflect upon, document, and chronicle my continued experiences and learning with regard to SEL, an important journey for personal and professional growth.

Major Project Delivery/Implementation

After gathering all of the information and observations collected from the eight and a half months of implementing the various strategies geared at building community, connections, relationships, empathy, and mindfulness, I was armed with the substance that would inform my project. Now I could share what I had intended to do, why, what I did, the resources I filtered through, and what results I observed.

I decided to use a website as my platform: a website was widely accessible on a large scale, housed a variety of resources in varying formats (text, videos, links, documents) in one space, allowed for users to provide instant feedback and contribute, and reached various stakeholders (educators, parents, students). This was the major vehicle for the delivery and implementation of all of my research and efforts. This is where my SEL work could be used and developed collaboratively. As such, there were specific factors I had to consider in terms of the structure of the site. The navigation, usability, and ease of use were important. If it was not easy to locate what was being looked for, it would not get used. Further to this was the appearance: I wanted the site to be attractive and engaging. Searching for images that connected with the content that were free for use in the public domain was a factor that required a great deal of time, but was an important part of the website build. The website was the right choice as a platform for my project, but I had to be very purposeful and methodical about how I built it; the information on the site would be useless if it was not structured and presented well. I learned that as important as the content was, the platform was a critical piece as well.

I shared my website with colleagues (classroom teachers, learning support teachers, curriculum support teachers, and administrators) via email, with a request for feedback. This led to the SEL site being included on the school site of an elementary school in my district; to being housed and aligned with a SD71 site providing resiliency resources (Learn71); to me being asked to join a district 'Resiliency Committee', that I did not know existed before I created my site,; and it led to many positive conversations with colleagues. Then, I branched outside of my own district: I sent the site's link to a school in the Saanich school district (SD63), as I had heard they were doing some interesting work in SEL. The vice-principal of Sidney Elementary asked if he could share the site with his staff, as he felt they would find it useful. I also sent my site to the Senior Editor of Heart-Mind Online, a resource developed by the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education, who shared it with her colleagues and contacts involved with promoting SEL. My site was ready to be used and interacted with by educators, parents, and students.

Chapter Four- Field/Beta Testing and Findings

Beta Testing Methods and Process

I wanted to create a site that allowed me to share what I have learned with other educators. My hope was that teachers could utilize the information I discovered and consolidated through my research, to facilitate their access to, and implementation of, social-emotional learning in the classroom. My goal was to contribute dynamically to the increased attention being placed on the critical importance of social-emotional learning in education. The site was designed to be a repository of information for educators supporting the implementation of SEL in schools. As such, the site contained a great deal of information regarding the importance of the direct teaching of SEL skills, tools and strategies, a variety of resources, and a blog where I shared my personal perspectives about SEL. However, I knew this would not be enough. It was necessary that I structure the site so that it could grow and develop dynamically, rather than being a static resource, proverbially collecting dust on a shelf. To encourage participation with the site, and the collaboration of others doing this work, I created a page on the site where contributions could be made, and acknowledged, through the completion of a Google form. These contributions would be the avenue with which educators, parents, and students could share their SEL experiences, ideas, and stories regarding SEL. By designing the site to be participatory, it also made it more powerful and useful.

The site, SEL4Ed, was shared out to several colleagues at the beginning of October, 2015. I had approached social-emotional learning (SEL) and the development of SEL4Ed from the perspective of a classroom teacher with experiences in alternate education. I did not want this perspective to be the only one that I considered, or sought out, when requesting feedback about my project. Therefore, I intentionally shared the site with elementary colleagues who had

different roles: administrators, classroom teachers, learning support teachers, and school counselors. The goal of this approach was to get the perspectives of educators, whose views would be framed by their distinct roles and experiences with students. I felt this would provide more broad and authentic perspectives, rather than just targeting educators with experiences in a singular role.

Beta testing the SEL4Ed site was a process of sharing information and gathering feedback. This would shape how I approached the continuous development and restructuring of the site. In using the feedback for this purpose, SEL4Ed would reflect what my colleagues valued, how they envisioned using this site, what mattered to them, and how I could facilitate those needs via the site. These contributions would be key in the growth and development of SEL4Ed.

The educators who viewed the site submitted very positive feedback. The general consensus was that SEL was a very relevant topic for educators, the information provided on the SEL4ED site was very useful, and the website platform was a good choice. All of the feedback responses indicated a strong need for SEL integration in school for students, a range of SEL options that educators could try, and SEL options that could be used “right now”. My colleagues saw value in SEL, and in the SEL4Ed site.

Unintended Consequences

The principal of my school viewed the site and connected with me the next day. She was thrilled with the content and platform, and requested to put a link to SEL4ED on our school’s website, so that it was available to educators and parents beyond those I had sent it to. She also shared SEL4Ed at a staff meeting, which prompted conversations with colleagues regarding my experiences with SEL. These were conversations that would not have occurred otherwise. The

increased awareness surrounding the SEL work I had done, also propelled me to become included in a Professional Learning Community (PLC), where my knowledge and experiences with SEL were viewed as an asset. Colleagues were very interested in what I had been doing, and conversations became an avenue for discussing, sharing, and expanding upon ideas presented on the SEL4ED site. This verbal collaboration became a powerful tool in our PLC discussions. A link to SEL4ED was put on the School District's site "Learn71". Here, it would be aligned with a site created by my colleagues about resilience. This prompted my inclusion in a District Resilience Committee, and I was asked to moderate a book club with a theme of resilience. SEL4Ed launched more direct involvement for me with SEL-like-minded educators in my district, something I did not expect to happen. I decided to take SEL4ED beyond my own school district, and sent an email and the SEL4ED link to the vice-principal of Sidney Elementary School in The Saanich School District (SD63). I had been told that this school was implementing some targeted SEL work with their students, with positive results. The vice-principal was receptive, and very interested in the site. He asked to share SEL4ED with his staff, indicating that he felt they would find it very useful. This feedback demonstrated that SEL4ED was viewed positively outside of my district, and led me to share it beyond the school setting.

Since I had used the "Heart-Mind Online" site extensively in my research, and many resources from that site were included on SEL4ED, I decided to send the SEL4ED link to the Senior Editor of Heart-Mind Online, at the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education. The Senior Editor replied with very positive feedback, and said she would share SEL4ED with her colleagues and contacts who were doing work with SEL. SEL4ED was being shared on a broader scale. I hoped this would improve the chances for collaboration and sharing on a larger scale, allowing for the site to become more dynamic and useful.

Findings of Beta Testing

I was very excited about the feedback SEL4ED was receiving. Not only was the feedback positive and encouraging, SEL4ED was getting exposure beyond my own school district. In my mind, the findings of the beta testing demonstrated a validation for the importance of SEL, and the extent of the need for a resource like SEL4ED. In spite of the positive feedback I had received, only two people had contributed their own stories and ideas to the site. This was a challenge for me. While I could share SEL4ED, get positive feedback, and revise the site accordingly, I could not force collaboration and sharing. Therefore, I could not ensure the authentic, long-term growth and development of the site. I wanted contributions, but I could not force that. I knew from the feedback I had received, that SEL4ED was considered relevant, useful, easy to use, and offered important learning for students. However, these positive qualities alone were not going to make the site grow in a dynamic way. Rather, this was dependent on whether or not people were willing to collaborate and share their thoughts and experiences to the site. I realized I could not continually send out emails and ask people to contribute. However, I did not know how else to consistently engage people with SEL4ED. From my perspective, this was a significant challenge.

I began to consider why my colleagues and other educators were not contributing to SEL4ED. I discerned that there were likely a variety of contextual factors that were limiting feedback and contributions to the site. SEL4ED was sent out for feedback in October, which is a very busy time of year for educators. The constraints posed by limited teacher time, with regards to SEL work, is reflected in the research by Cefai et al (2013), which states that while many teachers value SEL and would like to apply and implement SEL in their classrooms, lack of time and a vigorous academic curriculum pose great challenges for them. As such, while my colleagues may have been interested in SEL and the SEL4ED site, this may not have been the

ideal time to ask for feedback, due to the time constraints that they felt at this point in the school year. Compounding the timing of my request for this feedback, was the fact that a new student information system, MyEdBC, was concurrently being implemented in B.C. schools, and had just been released that September in my district. This brought many challenges for teachers and schools in general. Teachers and administrators were struggling with the learning curve that comes with implementing a new Student Information System, and many were feeling highly frustrated by the amount of time they were spending on learning the software. Added to this was the expectation of the simultaneous implementation of the new Kindergarten to grade nine curriculum in the province, along with a new system of reporting student progress. These factors imposed another complex layer of responsibility onto teachers, in addition to the new Student Information System. Many teachers were feeling completely overwhelmed. These were the same teachers from whom I was asking for their time and feedback. It began to make sense to me why the ratio of feedback to contributions was so imbalanced. There is also the comfort level issue with trying something new, like SEL, when so few have had experience with it. SEL is not widely recognized as mission “critical”, so there is still a tendency to see it as a peripheral add on. Teachers may be reluctant to engage in the issue for fear of ignorance and revealing their lack of readiness to incorporate SEL strategies; this would limit the feedback and contributions as well. Beyond these thoughts and speculations were factors I knew nothing about. I had to reconcile with myself that the lack of contributions were not a reflection of the importance of my SEL work, but of a variety of unrelated factors that inevitably exist.

I articulated the purpose of this project in Chapter One: my goal was to take all of the SEL information, experiences, and documentation I have accrued, and consolidate it into a viable resource. I outlined the following specific intentions:

- to create a website platform focusing on SEL information, tools/strategies, a variety of SEL resources;
- to demonstrate how the strategies can be easily implemented, and the positive results of implementation;
- to share my experiences, what I have done, what has worked well for me, what has been useful, and the results I have observed;
- to offer a collaborative platform for educators and parents to share their stories, ideas, and experiences;
- to offer a space for feedback and insight from students, parents, and colleagues regarding their thoughts and experiences with SEL; and
- to demonstrate how a teacher can integrate social-emotional learning and mindfulness strategies to improve the learning environment and the learning experience of elementary students.

This journey has allowed me to fulfill my intention: I created SEL4ED as a platform that was easily and readily accessed, and provided users with information, various tools and strategies, and many SEL resources. I shared my experiences, and demonstrated a variety of means for SEL implementation in the classroom, explaining how it improved the learning environment for students. I included a page on the site dedicated specifically to sharing and collaboration, hoping it would become actively used, allowing SEL4ED to be dynamic. Finally, I asked for feedback and contributions to the site. The feedback I received validated the purpose of my project: SEL4ED was relevant, needed, and useful. I also experienced unintended consequences: SEL4ED opened a door for me to connect with like-minded educators, I became part of a District Resilience Committee, I became the moderator of a Book Club with a focus on Resilience, and I

was participating in authentic conversations with colleagues about SEL, conversations that I would otherwise not be involved in.

SEL4ED, as a website, is new and has limited exposure. It is my belief that over time it will grow and develop through the sharing and contributions of others. I am hopeful that the permanent SEL4ED link on the Learn71 site, will allow it to be used by educators as they find it, or are made aware of it by others. Further, because I have shared SEL4ED beyond my own district, I believe there is an increased opportunity for its use, and for sharing and contributions to be made. SEL4ED may be slow to grow, but the potential for it to become more dynamic over time definitely exists. Regardless of its use or implementation on a broad scope, or of the challenges I face with trying to continually engage others with it, I am confident that I will continue to promote, develop, use, and share this site; and perhaps this is the primary factor with which I will be able to engage others. I believe in the value of SEL and the SEL4ED site, and as such, will continue to promote the principles that drove me to create it.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary

Social-emotional learning, and all it encompasses, is the foundation of my educational philosophy. The following quote by Aristotle speaks to this: “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all” (Aristotle quote, n.d.). As an educator, I am driven to build relationships and connections with students. During my work in the Online Learning and Teaching Diploma Program (OLTD), I unconsciously gravitated towards the themes of connection, community, and relationships. These elements were the foundation of my pedagogy, and remain so. I have continually examined how I could best serve my students, and how I could help shape their learning environment and learning experiences positively. Regardless of the age-group, grade, or context I was teaching in, I knew that creating connection and relationship would consistently be important to me, and would continue to strongly influence my practice. I have spent the past few years incorporating various social-emotional learning tools with my students. I observed how my attention to SEL improved the learning environment and experiences for them. I deeply believe in the value of SEL. As a result, I concluded that researching SEL further, and creating an utilizable SEL repository, was what I was compelled to do. This was why I developed SEL4ED.

Experience made me acutely aware that many students came to school with substantial social-emotional needs, that unaddressed, significantly impeded their learning. Research has demonstrated that when SEL strategies were directly and purposefully taught to students, there was a significant positive improvement in social, emotional, and academic competencies. What is more, SEL also improved the learning environment for all students (Brackett & Rivers, 2014).

According to CASEL: “Satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn. It actually increases their capacity for learning.” (Protheroe, 2012). It was unquestionably evident to me that targeted attention to these needs was paramount for students’ success in school and in life; and as such, these skills needed to be developed in the school environment. Zins and Elias (2006) posit that effective schools have found that social-emotional intelligence was significantly correlated with academic achievement, and that purposeful attention to the teaching of SEL increased students’ potential to succeed in school and in life.

More than just my personal belief in SEL was propelling me; research confirmed the importance, validity, and value of teaching SEL strategies. Schools needed to directly and purposefully address SEL. I wondered if this could be done effectively in a school setting, where curriculum and assessment seem to be the prevalent driving forces. I believed this was possible, and set out to test my beliefs. My Critical Challenge Question to be addressed was: How can a teacher integrate social-emotional learning and mindfulness strategies, and enhance children’s emotional intelligence, to improve the learning environment and the learning experience of elementary students? The journey I took, the research with-which I engaged, and the learning activities I implemented, were the foundation of my major project: SEL4ED.

The Literature

Increasing numbers of children are coming to school struggling with an array of social, emotional, and behavioural issues that compromise their ability to learn, focus, engage successfully in academics, engage in positive interpersonal relationships, and to develop into secure and contributory members of society (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). If we expect children to be ready to learn, we must respond to the issues they bring with them. We must tend to the needs of the whole child. In education, we have begun to look beyond cognitive

development and place value on the needs of the whole child. When addressing the needs of the whole child, researchers and educators are recognizing that social-emotional learning is an integral facet of education. In fact, educators are becoming increasingly aware of the education system's responsibility in actively providing SEL tools and strategies, and to promote children's social-emotional competencies (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). There has been substantive growth in the recognition (by researchers, educators, and parents) of the value of the targeted teaching of social-emotional learning skills within the context of our schools (Zins & Elias, 2006). Research indicates that social-emotional development is equally important as cognitive development to success in school. More importantly, it is critical for teachers to know that social-emotional skills can be taught and learned (Carthy Foundation, 2013). Further, the direct teaching of SEL skills and strategies leads to significant growth in social, emotional, and academic learning, as well as resulting in the improvement of the learning environment (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). The SEL tools and strategies that I have implemented with students over the years supports the validity of this research. Experience has demonstrated to me that integrating SEL activities into the classroom routine on a daily basis, was a critical facet of addressing social-emotional learning needs. Over time, I have seen that attending to these needs, and building these skills improved the sense of connection and community and supported a decrease in problems between peers. Teaching SEL directly supported the improvement in the ability to focus and self-regulate, so that learning could take place. Neuroscience has established a clear link between academic learning and one's social-emotional state; that emotional centers in the brain are closely associated with neurocortical areas which are involved in cognitive learning (Goleman, n.d., from <http://www.danielgoleman.info/topics/social-emotional-learning/>). This connection between emotions and executive functioning in the brain has a vital impact on

learning (Carthy Foundation, 2013). Thus, social-emotional state has a direct impact on cognitive function. When students are struggling socially-emotionally, their capacity to learn will be compromised

SEL also helps reduce the incidence of externalized problem behaviour. Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor (2010) posit that while school-based interventions and the direct teaching of SEL skills can improve social-emotional development and SEL skills, they can also decrease problematic behaviour. Experience has demonstrated this to be an accurate postulation with regard to the effects I have observed in students: increased empathy and compassion towards one another, decreased negative peer-to-peer issues, and improvements in friendships. SEL reaps benefits for everyone, both socially-emotionally and cognitively.

Our goals as educators go far beyond cognitive learning; we want to facilitate the development of happy, responsible people, who function well in society. Social-emotional learning is a pivotal factor of our success in achieving our goals.

Perceived Successes

I believe that the development of SEL4ED, the journey and the end product, demonstrate significant successes. I distributed a digital feedback form (via email) to colleagues: administrators, classroom teachers, learning support teachers, and school counselors. The form (Appendix B) requested feedback about various aspects of SEL4ED, including relevance, usefulness of the content, usefulness of the platform, the site navigation, and other comments.

The feedback I received indicated that SEL was a very relevant topic for educators and schools, that the information provided on the SEL4ED site was pertinent and practical, and that the platform was appropriate and widely accessible (Appendix B). The feedback expressed a definite desire and need to address SEL in schools, a need for a variety of SEL options that

educators can implement, and use immediately. My colleagues expressed an appreciation for SEL, and for the SEL4ED site. Aside from the positive feedback, SEL4ED sparked an interest in the SEL work I was doing. It also stimulated a great deal of collegial conversations about the importance of SEL, the need for it, and ideas of how it could be developed and implemented. It was clear to me that I had touched upon something that was of interest to many educators, some of whom may not have known how SEL could be implemented easily in classrooms. These conversations became a springboard for discussion, sharing, brainstorming, and further development of ideas suggested on the SEL4ED site. I did not expect the breadth and depth of these conversations, nor the collaboration that took place. Our District Principal of Innovation and Technology heard about the SEL work I was doing, and requested to meet with me. He asked if SEL4ED could be aligned with a Resilience site he was involved with creating, and he placed SEL4ED on “Learn71” (Appendix C), the School District’s sharing site. I was invited to join the District Resilience Committee, and asked to moderate a book club with a theme of resilience. As a result of my SEL work and SEL4ED, I was becoming more directly involved with educators in my district who were wishing to develop their own interests in SEL. Thus, a platform for collaboration began. This unintended bubbling of interest and collaboration was, in itself, aligned quite nicely with the goals of my project.

I shared SEL4ED outside of my own School District, to a school in Sydney, and to the Dalai Lama Center for Peace and Education. I received very positive feedback from both. This affirmed that my goal to attract increased awareness about the critical nature of SEL, through SEL4ED, was met with success in many ways. The fact that SEL4ED was being shared and received positively on a broader scale opened the door for it to grow, develop, and have increased successes.

However, these are not the only successes. My experiences have shown me that SEL improved the learning experience and environment for students by increasing awareness of self and others, improving focus, improving self-regulation, increasing a sense of empathy and consideration for the feelings of others, developing kindness and kind behaviours, building of relationships and a solid sense of community. The growth I have observed with a variety of students, both socially-emotionally and cognitively, were the greatest rewards of all to come out of my commitment to SEL over the years.

It is my belief that SEL4ED was received so positively because the people who reviewed it are those on the front lines, those who know how dire the student need for SEL truly is. These are the professionals who work with these students, along with their diverse and ever-changing needs, on a daily basis. Students spend a minimum of six hours a day in the care of educators and schools. Schools provide connection, relationship, caring, and pseudo-parenting for these children, reflecting the old saying, “It takes a village to raise a child”. Schools and educators are a part of this village. Educators know this. We also know that we have not been professionally trained to deal with the diverse social-emotional needs that confront us daily through our students. Nor do educators have a plethora of time to research and train themselves, or to develop SEL curriculum. Thus, having a resource like SEL4ED allows educators to accelerate their learning about SEL by providing tools and strategies that can be easily implemented and applied in the classroom. Educators need easy-to-use SEL resources like those found on SEL4ED.

Perceived Limitations

While SEL4ED was met with great interest and reviewed very positively, there were limits and questions regarding its potential impact, and to whether or not it would grow and

develop. I was also unable to control if the site would be viewed beyond my original request for feedback, and unable to know whether or not anyone (besides myself) would even use it.

Further, I had no control over one of the primary functions of the site: to be a repository for information based on collaboration and sharing. I had no idea if anyone would contribute to the site to help it grow and develop; in essence to keep it dynamic and alive. Thus, I had no idea if SEL4ED would endure.

There were also limitations in terms of potential implementation by different educators. Without a common language, without an obligation to implement it, and with no continuity in the delivering of SEL from year-to-year (some teachers will do it, some will not), there could not be consistent growth and development of these skills for children. What they develop one year may not be encouraged or developed the next. This sporadic implementation of SEL limits its effectiveness.

Recommendations

I believe that the direct teaching of SEL, and integrating it into each school day, is a proactive measure we should take when educating our students. According to Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor (2010), there is a definite recognition for the need of a proactive approach; that programs and strategies should be implemented *before* problematic behaviours or mental health issues develop. Teaching and implementing SEL at the classroom level, for all students is required. Social-emotional learning supports should be approached as a leveled framework: SEL supports should be provided to all students within the context of their education, and more intensive supports given to those who need more (Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas (2004) and Ysseldyke et al. (2006); as cited in Maras et al., 2014). The integration of SEL supports is also reflective of both the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Response to Intervention (RTI)

frameworks. It supports the premise in both of these frameworks, that what is best for the neediest, is best for all; and when educators can address SEL with the entire class, and then provide more intensive intervention where needed, everyone gets what they need.

One of my blog posts addressed another recommendation I feel would be an effective approach to implementing SEL in schools:

I have always wondered why SEL is not approached from a whole school perspective. Schools have growth plans for academic areas (such as literacy and numeracy), but I have never worked at, or had friends who worked at, schools that had growth plans for SEL and school culture/connection. I don't understand why this would be the case. If a whole school approach was taken with SEL, then children would be receiving common learning and language, and it could be built upon year-to-year, rather than having SEL addressed inconsistently throughout the school years. Teachers in similar grades could collaborate and develop common approaches, programming, and goals for the students in those grades; this could extend from kindergarten through grade 12. Older students could also take a leadership role and work with younger students to teach and role model SEL skills and strategies. A side effect of this approach could be a school with a solid sense of student connection, and of collegial community- which would only benefit and reinforce a sense of community for the students. Further, I believe that both students and teachers should belong to the whole school. By this I mean that all teachers in a school should be responsible to connect with all students, not just the ones they teach. I know this would likely be easiest in an elementary setting, but efforts could still be made in high school- even a "Hi" and a smile is connecting. This connects teachers and students to each other and the school as a whole. That would create a

foundation of school connection, which the SEL skills could then be built upon. School connection + direct and purposeful teaching and attention to SEL = more resilient students. And that is exactly what we are striving for (Gilmore, 2015).

I was pleasantly surprised when a Principal responded very positively to this post, indicating that this could be done, and exemplifies lifelong learning. A common goal would require a common language, and I believe that having SEL as part of a School Growth Plan would also take care of the limit of not having a common language around SEL. A common goal, with common language, tools, and strategies being implemented school wide could provide a platform for a very successful implementation of SEL with our students.

If the importance placed on SEL, and implementation of SEL are to grow, there are critical factors that need to be in place. Schools (and teachers) require support at the district and administrative levels: the promotion of SEL by the Ministry of Education, district senior management, principals and teachers is essential, and educators must be provided with SEL training and be given full support for its implementation. A need exists for SEL to be valued and promoted on the same plane, and with the same regard, as other curriculum. Further, a common SEL language should be developed in schools in a collaborative way, so that the learning can be generalized and built upon from year to year. I also believe that it is important to conduct focused longitudinal research, following a cohort of students who have been provided with direct teaching of SEL skills, tools, and strategies, from their kindergarten and/or primary years into their high school years. Having concrete data to reflect upon could help with providing an increased awareness about the impact of SEL, and improve the support for and implementation of SEL on a larger scale.

Finally, in British Columbia, we are currently adopting a new set of Core Competencies to guide teaching and assessment. One of these sets, Personal and Social Competencies, targets Positive Personal and Cultural Identity, Personal Awareness and Responsibility, and Social Responsibility (from <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies>). These competencies can be addressed through the direct teaching of social-emotional learning strategies, tools, and ideals. SEL is an excellent way to target these new competencies, while attending to a critical part of every student's social-emotional and cognitive development; allowing us to facilitate the development of the whole child.

I will continue my work with SEL, and will continue to share what I have learned with others. I feel SEL is critical for educators: we need to develop our understanding of it, and our ability to teach it to our students. Authentic and meaningful learning cannot take place when students are unable to self-regulate, do not feel connected to school, do not feel valued or understood, do not participate in healthy relationships with their teachers and peers, and when they do not share or experience empathy and compassion. As a plant will not grow, flourish, and be healthy in unprepared soil, a child will not learn and grow to be the best they can be if the foundation for that growth is not stable or secure. SEL helps establish the stable and secure foundation for social-emotional and cognitive growth.

Conclusion

When I began this project, I did so with the staunch belief that SEL was the foundation upon which learning, self-regulation, and relationships were built. I felt this way because of the experiences I had teaching diverse children, in varied settings, over a number of years, and because *relationship* was the foundation of my educational philosophy. Research reflects what experience has shown: SEL is critical for education, and must be addressed. I have learned that

SEL can be implemented in every classroom, every day, and doing so reaps significant benefits for students, regardless of what level of need students have for SEL. Some need it more than others, but they all benefit. When I hear educators speaking about classroom management issues, unregulated students, bullying, students who struggle with focus, and students who are not engaged and are not learning, I automatically think, “They need SEL”. But how do we get there? That is where I get stuck. I am unsure how SEL can become far more accepted and implemented on a broad scale; how and when all educators can come to a realization that not only is SEL important to teach in schools, but it can be done. This project was an effort to begin focusing a spotlight on SEL, to spread the awareness, to invite collaboration, and to demonstrate some tools, strategies, and ideas that could be easily implemented on a daily basis. I feel I have achieved what I set out to do. But the work has only begun. Moving forward, the way to ensure that SEL awareness continues to grow and to develop, is to keep researching SEL, implementing it, talking about it, sharing it, and promoting it through conversations, contributing to and continually developing SEL4ED, and in any other way we can. I believe that is our responsibility as educators; to teach both the heart, and the mind.

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Appendix A: SEL4ED Website

SEL4ED: SEL Resources for Education

Home Why SEL? Tools & Strategies Resources Feedback Your Ideas & Stories Blog



"Educating the mind without educating the heart, is no education at all"
-Aristotle

[USE SEL TODAY!](#) [CONTRIBUTE YOUR STORIES & IDEAS](#) [SITE FEEDBACK FORM](#)

Everything SEL

 <p>Why SEL?</p>	 <p>What is SEL & The Research</p>	 <p>Tools & Strategies</p>
 <p>SEL Resources</p>	 <p>EMOTION Feedback</p>	 <p>Blog</p>

*All images on this site are from Pixabay - public domain free use

Appendix B: SEL Feedback Form

SEL4ED Feedback Form

Thank you for taking the time to contribute your much valued thoughts and feedback.

Your anonymous feedback and comments may be used to improve the platform or content of the SEL4ED website.

Relevance*

Please rate the relevance of the information on the site SEL4ED for elementary school use. Is this relevant to what elementary students need implemented in their classes?

- Very relevant
 Somewhat relevant
 Not relevant

OPTIONAL: If you would like to provide more detailed feedback, please do so here:

Usefulness of the Content*

Is the content on the SEL4ED website useful in providing ideas and resources for elementary school teachers?

- Very useful
 Somewhat useful
 Not useful

OPTIONAL: If you would like to provide more detailed feedback, please do so here:

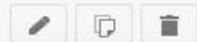


Usefulness of the Platform

Is this website a good platform for teachers to house and share ideas and stories regarding their experiences with social-emotional learning (SEL)?

- Very good
 Satisfactory
 Unsatisfactory

OPTIONAL: If you would like to provide more detailed feedback, please do so here:



Site Navigation

How would you rate the ease of navigation through the site?

- Very Easy
 Easy
 Slightly difficult
 Very difficult

OPTIONAL: If you would like to provide more detailed feedback, please do so here:

OPTIONAL: More to Add?

If you have any other comments, questions, or feedback about SEL4ED, please share it here:

Appendix C: Learn71 Website

LEARN71 

HOME SD#71 WEBSITE STAFF WEBMAIL STUDENT WEBMAIL

Resiliency

 Search