

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN AN EARLY CHILDHOOD SETTING

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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Betsy Klinger

As I entered the world of teaching in 2018, I felt most prepared for teaching academic content, but quickly realized the importance of SEL. My third year of teaching was dramatically changed once Covid-19 hit and school closures became the new normalcy. While SEL was important long before Covid-19, it became even more important after the pandemic struck.

Students face challenges in life that far exceed what most teachers and adults are prepared for. Homelessness, poverty, abuse, domestic issues, substance abuse and more are at the center of these students' lives. Additionally, students face continual mental health issues. When we pair unchangeable homelife circumstances, mental health and childhood growth and development, it becomes vitally obvious that learning social and emotional skills is as important, if not more important, than regularly scheduled academics.

The purpose of the below research is to validate the concept of the importance of teaching an SEL program from early childhood and into adulthood. The research found indicates that nurturing children's social and emotional learning is vital to lifelong successes.

Keywords included in the research are: Social emotional learning (SEL), Early Childhood, Curriculum

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Chapter I Introduction

As we spend more time as educators ensuring that students are ready for state testing in the areas of math and reading, we are spending less time ensuring that students are emotionally and socially strong. During the Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19), it became increasingly obvious to parents and educators that the needs of some children in a social emotional context have not been met. According to research reports, “Children who were isolated or quarantined during pandemic diseases were more likely to develop acute stress disorder, adjustment disorder, and grief. 30% of the children who were isolated or quarantined met the clinical criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder” (Liu, J. J., Bao, Y., Huang, X., Shi, J., & Lu, L., 2020). However, this is not a new issue in education. Social emotional learning is often given the backseat in a classroom, when compared to reading and mathematics curriculums. It is often stated that we teach math, reading, science and social studies, yet little emphasis is placed on social emotional learning. In fact, many teachers in working with students never have the opportunity or support to help a student learn to behave and manage emotions. That being said, research shows that promoting and actively participating in a social emotional curriculum can not only increase student test scores, but also give them long term classroom success. “There’s a strong case for making social and emotional learning (SEL) skills and competencies a central feature of elementary school. Children who master SEL skills get along better with others, do better in school, and have more successful careers and better mental and physical health as adults” (Jones, S. M., Barnes, S. F., Bailey, R., & Doolittle, E. J., 2017). So, as educators we have come to a crossroads where we must decide, are we hoping our students will grow into their own social and emotional skills, or are we going to explicitly work with children on behavior and emotion?

What qualifies a good program? And above all, is social emotional intelligence really that important?

Hypothesis:

Working with students on a structured social emotional curriculum throughout childhood can result in better student mental health and school success.

Statement of the Problem:

What is the benefit of having a social emotional program implemented in an early childhood setting?

Purpose of the study:

As children develop over time, it seems that social and emotional learning needs to occur within a classroom to promote future student success. Literature and research were reviewed to identify if implementing a social emotional learning program in early childhood can impact student outcomes. The review of research and literature suggests that working with students with a structured social emotional learning curriculum throughout childhood can promote school success, better social abilities in school, and overall, better mental health.

Significance of Study:

The Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19), brought to light more than just the value of health care; it brought to light the value of caring for an individual's mental health. As businesses shut down and mask mandates became enforced, our students had a great loss too, their school closing. The students not only lost out on core classes and time with friends and teachers, but they also missed out on fundamental social and emotional supports.

“For children, school is not only an educational hub, but also a home outside the home with plentiful free space. Schools offer window of freedom, scope of interaction with

fellows and seniors, psychological solace besides providing pedagogy and scholastics. Schools play an edifying role in promoting importance of personal hygiene, physical activity, healthy food, and body habits. Even a short-term shutdown of educational institutions and home captivity for children is indeed troublesome and anticipated to have detrimental effects on children's physical and mental health and shatter the sense of normalcy that schools used to provide" (Ghosh, Dubey, R., Chatterjee, & Dubey, S., 2020).

However, this is not new information suddenly brought on by COVID-19; this has been an ongoing issue. "Adolescence is a period of tremendous learning, exploration, and opportunity. Yet it's also a time when behavioral and health problems can emerge or worsen, with negative consequences that last long into adulthood" (Yeager, D.S., 2017). Schools have been establishing SEL programs for years, but it is now long past due that educators have resources available to them to promote SEL in their own classrooms. They need viable framework or curriculum, professional development, and a refreshed understanding of student needs. COVID-19 brought into the spotlight what many already knew, SEL can be beneficial for a student's social skills, success in school, and overall mental health.

Definitions of Terms:

SEL: SEL is social emotional learning. It seeks to foster the development of five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making" (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, 2011).

Curriculum: "Explicit Skills Instruction" (Lawson, McKenzie, Becker, Selby & Hoover, 2019).

Delimitation of research:

The research for this literacy review was conducted June through August 2021. While searching for information about social emotional learning (SEL), this author primarily used the terms social and emotional learning, SEL, early childhood, and benefits, to search through educational databases to find appropriate sources.

Methodology:

The information provided in this research review paper included both primary and secondary sources, as well as peer-reviewed articles and professional journals that are well established educational publications. The sources that provided the information for review were located by searching University databases such as Elton B. Stephens Co. (EBSCOhost), Google Scholar, and Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). All literature was reviewed and is reported here.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Identifying the Purpose of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

As a new and unseasoned teacher progresses through their undergraduate courses, the importance of teaching seems to lie in the ability to teach in the following areas: mathematics, reading, sciences, and social studies. In fact, so much professional development and academic focus is placed in these areas of learning. As new teachers progress through schooling and develop into the early years of their careers the entire focus is on how to create and deliver high levels of academic content while also providing differentiation and inclusion. However, once placed into the workforce it is blatantly obvious that one major area of learning needs strengthening. This area happens to be social emotional learning. Most educators would attest that the best learning happens in a classroom where relationships are rich and strong. So much of this reflects back on the social and emotional competencies of students. So, while educators do everything they can each year to embrace the challenges presented to them and help shape their students to the best of their abilities, a new curveball was introduced into the classroom.

A completely unforeseen event stole the world's attention. The Covid-19 health pandemic swooped in and changed the future of education forever. As pandemic related quarantining lifted, educators and parents took notice of an already existing problem either highlighted or exacerbated by Covid-19: social emotional learning (SEL). When the pandemic first struck, School closures due to health risks created a significant number of issues. "These groups are being deprived of their 'normal social interactions' secondary to social distancing and at-home learning or hybrid models of academics" (McKegney, C.C., 2021). Food insecurity, increased rates of child abuse and neglect, lack of educational access and elevated learning gaps

are also issues to consider. While these issues are only a few of what came from the Covid-19 pandemic, they account for a large amount of a child's social and emotional well-being. "For children, school is not only an educational hub, but also a home outside the home with plentiful free space. Schools offer a window of freedom, scope of interaction with fellows and seniors, psychological solace besides providing pedagogy and scholastics" (Ghosh, R., Dubey, Chatterjee, Dubey S., 2020). Due to school closures educators saw an incredible growth in already present SEL needs, "It will no longer be possible to discuss educational processes, pedagogy, curriculum and instruction, prevention, academic achievement, and the culture and climate of schools without discussing social-emotional competencies" (Elias, M.J., 2019).

So herein lies the discussion of SEL and how to create change in education that helps create room for emphasis in this area. However, creating systemic change in educational practices is no easy feat. In fact, it takes incredible amounts of investment, time, resources, training, and willingness to see a change. "Our education system has not primarily been organized around the social and emotional aspects of learning" (Elias, 2019). However, this can be true no more, as we must step up to bat as educators to face the curveball that SEL brings to education. In fact, this is not a new idea, and many have already bought into the idea with great success. "In many schools around the nation, SEL is becoming (or has become) part of a comprehensive strategy to strengthen students' academic performance, improve school and classroom climate, and lessen conduct problems." (Herrenkohl, Lea, Jones, Malorni, 2019).

Schools nationwide need to turn to a new approach to learning. It is time to look at the social emotional aspects of education. In doing so, educators have found social emotional programs to be an effective measure to adopt that will create a systematic and positive change in emotional wellbeing of students everywhere. "The proximal goals of SEL programs are to foster

the development of five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, 2011) Questions arise as we move in this direction, why are these skills important? There are several reasons why SEL skills are important. To begin with, articles describe adolescence as a period of transition. In fact, David Yeager stated in his article:

“Adolescents may especially need social and emotional help. They’re learning how to handle new demands in school and social life while dealing with new, intense emotions (both positive and negative), and they’re increasingly feeling that they should do so without adult guidance” (Yeager, 2017).

This indicates we have students who are going through potentially hard times, and with very little guidance, as well as hard times brought on by circumstances well outside their control such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

In addition to children facing periods of change and uncontrollable circumstances, students struggle with academic expectations. SEL programs are proven to increase student learning and performance. “Efforts to educate the ‘whole child’ through social emotional learning have proven critical to improving students’ physical and mental health as well as their academic achievement” (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elberston & Salovey, 2016).

“Children who effectively manage their thinking, attention, and behavior are also more likely to have better grades and higher standardized test scores. Children with strong social skills are more likely to make and sustain friendships, initiate positive relationships with teachers, participate in classroom activities, and be positively engaged in learning” (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, Doolittle, 2017).

Children are facing circumstances in life most of us could have never predicted. They are facing adult problems in childhood. In knowing this, it is our job as educators and adults to take great care in ensuring children are getting what they need, both academically and emotionally.

Long Term Benefits of Social Emotional Learning Programs

As educators, the effect we have on students can be lifelong. The lessons we teach are fundamental in shaping students for future successes, which is true for not only our standard academics, but for our social emotional learning as well. “SEL is a process that may happen on its own, but over the last two decades, SEL has been recognized as a formal component of a young person’s educational experience in schools and in informal learning environments” (Newman, Moroney, 2019). Where has this evolution come from?

“The field of SEL has emerged from these new understandings of the nature of biology, emotions, and intelligence and their relation to success and happiness. Through social emotional learning, children’s emotional intelligence (EQ) is bolstered, giving them an enormous edge in their personal and professional futures” (Hoffman, 2009).

We are the individuals who help mold the future well-being and self-regulation of students. “In the long-term, children with greater social emotional competence are more likely to be ready for college, succeed in their careers, have positive relationships and better mental health, and become engaged citizens” (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). We, as teachers, need to be conscious of the effect our teaching can have on students. The control of student outcomes lies heavily in the hands of educators. “Three domains which have been linked to children’s positive social and academic outcomes: emotional support, classroom organization

and instructional support” (Arby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Curby, 2017). This quote brings to light the heavy impact teachers have on students, who also carry heavy burdens.

The demands placed on individuals greatly increase as they age. Students in a Kindergarten program are just starting out their journey of self-regulation and emotional competencies. As they age, the demand placed on them only gets larger, and for some, too heavy to bear without proper educational support from teachers. This is when we see student substance abuse, increased dropout rates and other risky behaviors.

“Both parents and educators want young people to succeed in their academic, personal, and social lives. They want young people to have the motivation and ability to achieve; to establish positive relationships with their peers and adults; to adapt to the complex demands of growth and development; to contribute to their peer group, family, school, and community; and to make responsible decisions that enhance their health and avoid risky behaviors” (Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, & Weissberg, 2000).

The burden students hold is heavy. As educators, what we do for children from a young age well into their adulthood can definitively shape their outcomes as adults. This makes a strong case for the need for a systematic, diverse and age appropriate SEL program. Educators need these programs to enhance a student’s capability to recognize their emotions, manage their emotions, problem solve, establish goals, utilize interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, appreciate outside perspectives, and appropriately handle developmentally relevant tasks. Without an appropriate SEL program, the burden on teachers can be overwhelming. The SEL program is a guide which allows educators to feel sure they are reaching students on all levels of need.

“SEL programs also establish environments that support, reinforce, and extend this instruction so that what children learn in the classroom is generalized to their lives outside the classroom. SEL programs aim to foster the development of students who are knowledgeable, responsible, and caring, thereby contributing to their academic success, healthy growth and development, ability to maintain positive relationships, and motivation to contribute to their communities” (Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, & Weissberg, 2000).

Knowing that these programs can work effectively is important. Understanding the skills worked on, the reasoning behind the work and having a clear end goal of programming is important. However, understanding the data supporting these positive SEL changes is important as well. The following data speaks for itself.

“Of 213 school-based, universal social and emotional learning (SEL) programs involving 270,034 Kindergarten through high school students. Compared to controls, SEL participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

While an 11-percentile point gain is an average level of improvement, it is important to keep in mind the study was completed in under two years, which means that with a program that spans K-12 would only increase greater growth in percentile point gains with continued emphasis on SEL supports.

The evidence is there. The data speaks for itself. The understanding of importance is clear. The next step to consider is the teacher, administration, and community attitudes regarding an SEL program and the actual implementation of an SEL program.

Outside Perspectives on Implementation

As we begin to introduce a SEL program to schools it is essential to have the staff and those teaching it backing up the program. It is impossible to properly administer a new curriculum without staff buy-in.

“Although some educators may see SEL as yet another burden in the already over-taxed academic and social climate of contemporary public schooling, SEL advocates point to a small but growing body of evaluation literature that shows links between SEL programs and improved outcomes in a variety of areas” (Hoffman, 2009).

As behavior improves, so does the rate of risk referrals, behavioral write ups and dropout rates, and most educators feel the benefits outweigh the costs. The importance is clear to those that spend their days educating youth. As teachers, it is common that we are inclined to put the needs of children above all else, especially with areas where positive results can evoke real change. That being said, “In a recent national survey of teachers, 95 percent of respondents said that SEL is teachable; 97 percent said that SEL can benefit students from all socioeconomic backgrounds” (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). Research even demonstrates that higher teacher buy in can result in higher student SEL success. “When teachers believe in the value of emotions and demonstrate an interest in children’s’ feelings, they construct classroom environments within which children can strengthen their own emotional competencies” (Zissner, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015).

However, teacher buy-in can be looked at from a broader lens. Children adopt the attitudes and beliefs of those around them. If a teacher has a negative outlook or poor SEL skills himself or herself, there is a possibility that children can over time develop a similar attitude or mindset. The term ‘modeling’ is used often in education, as educators understand that children

learn by watching interactions and actions of others. Adults' ability to properly express emotions, demonstrate acceptable behavior and express appropriate actions can relate to their students' abilities as well. This is seen most closely when examining a child's interactions with his or her parents, but it can also be seen inside of a classroom.

“Teachers bring their own emotional competence into this relationship by modeling emotions, responding either supportively or punitively to children's expressions of emotions, and engaging in direct instruction regarding emotional experience. The emotional climate of the preschool classroom, created in large part by the teacher, influences children's emotional understanding and behavior” (Morris, Denham, Bassett, & Curby, 2013).

This statement, again, places validity in the idea that teachers can believe fully in an SEL program, but they also need to educate themselves on appropriate ways to teach the program and model emotions. Therefore, a systematic approach to teaching SEL is essential; it takes out room for error based on a teacher's personal emotional competence. In fact, while reading through literature there were many examples of teachers using their own school's SEL program to learn themselves.

“Many examples of teachers who 'lose it' in front of their misbehaving classrooms or admit to not knowing how to deal with troubling emotions that, if expressed, would make them appear “unprofessional,” are then able to calm themselves (and their students) with their SEL programs; anger management techniques” (Hoffman, 2009).

An adult's ability to demonstrate appropriate and healthy SEL skills is essential to demonstrating to students their own capacity to do so.

While teacher attitudes and beliefs are important, there are other underlying and less visible things teachers can do inside their classroom to demonstrate healthy SEL skills and buy-in. “Classroom organization reflects teachers’ use of proactive techniques to establish routines, enhance productivity, and engage children, and children’s compliance with expectations” (Arby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Curby, 2017). According to Arby, Rimm-Kaufman and Curby, “Well-organized classrooms have been associated with self-regulatory skills, engagement, motivation, and literacy and language skills” (Arby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Curby, 2017). This strikes as incredibly logical: the less students must worry about classroom routines and functioning, the more consistent their days can be. When an environment is consistent and healthy, so too can their emotional well-being and overall academic performances.

Evidence points to the need for an SEL program and teachers have expressed understanding of importance and appropriate buy-in. Teacher buy-in can look multifaceted and can even be as simple as how a classroom is organized.

However, buy-in does not stop at a teacher’s doorway. At every school there is a decision-making body that represents the best interest of staff and students: administration. While buy-in is important when it comes to teaching staff, so too is it important for there to be buy-in by a school’s administration. A component to consider is that, “Quality implementation and program sustainability requires comprehensive and costly support,” (Arby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Curby, 2017). While teachers and principals are fundamental in researching, learning, selecting, and promoting an SEL program, the administration is key in funding the project. “As programs differ in effect and in required input in terms of money, facilities and manpower, an important consideration in selecting a program is cost-effectiveness” (Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, &

Gravesteijn, 2012). Administration is key in determining cost-effectiveness which is vital to program selection.

An adult who fully embodies and believes in an SEL program does not even have to be an adult that regularly teaches the program. “It is essentially a matter of showing, by our own acts and attitudes, that we care about what students are going through and that we are partners in the search for meaning” (Hoffman, 2009).

Not only is administration and staff buy-in essential, but so too is the general public's buy in. This includes the students' culture, homelife and life outside school walls. School takes a large portion of the typical students focus and time, but the majority of time still lies outside the classroom's control. “Parents who are themselves more emotionally competent are better able to socialize their children in those competencies” (Zissner, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015). Having parent and public buy-in is essential. “Development occurs within the context of family, community and culture” (Blewitt, O'Connor, Morris, Nolan, Mousa, Green, Ifanti, Jackson & Skouteris, 2021). If we are spending time educating students, we should, in turn, do the same with the student's families and cultural units. “SEL programming should reflect school and classroom culture, children's racial and ethnic background, and the culture of children's community” (Blewitt, O'Connor, Morris, Nolan, Mousa, Green, Ifanti, Jackson & Skouteris, 2021).

The knowledge that adults have a large measure of power over a student's SEL is clear, now it is essential to pick the right program and implement it properly.

Valid Framework of a Social Emotional Curriculum

To appropriately educate children in social emotional learning, we must have a viable curriculum taught to fidelity. When an educational institution has made the decision to support

students emotionally, the first step is to consider what program to select. It is important to keep our key terms in mind as we provide programming, so the end goals are always in sight. We want to provide students with the maximum opportunity to learn self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. Each of these concepts is defined below:

- “Self-awareness includes recognizing one’s emotions, strengths, limitations and values.
- Self-management includes regulating emotions and behaviors, perseverance, and the ability to set and work toward goals.
- Social awareness includes taking the perspective of and empathizing with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, appreciating and respecting differences, and recognizing the emotions of others.
- Relationship skills includes effective communication, active listening, collaborating, and establishing and maintaining healthy relationships.
- Responsible decision-making includes making constructive choices across varied situations” (Newman and Moroney, 2019).

There are several approaches to teaching SEL, so it is essential to keep a few things in mind when selecting: the age of students, dosage of the program, demographics of students and desired outcomes. When keeping those qualities in mind, educators can select an SEL program that follows one of four avenues of thought. Social learning theory models, pretend-play models, cognitive regulation models and coercion theory models are all valid frameworks that teach SEL. Each of these offers different goals, theories taught, perspectives, and methods of teaching. Once a theory model has been selected, there are three implementation aspects to consider:

“First, many effective SEL interventions include training or professional development for early childhood teachers; some also emphasize building teachers’ own SEL skills. Second, effective interventions embed direct instruction and practice of targeted skills into daily activities, giving children repeated opportunities to practice SEL skills in different contexts; it’s best if these activities grow more complex over time. Third, effective interventions engage children’s families, so that kids have a chance to work on their SEL skills both at school and at home” (McClelland, Tominey, Schmitt, Duncan, 2017).

Not only is program selection essential, but so is the ability to assess program validity on a continual basis. We must be able to regularly check in on student progress outside of formative data and observations. To best serve children, keeping a pulse on progress is a must.

“Without meaningful assessment data, decisions affecting children--from policy to instruction--are likely to be buffeted by the forces of fad and politics. For SEL policy and programs to be as effective as possible, we need to develop usable, scalable, and scientifically sound SEL assessment systems” (McKown, 2017).

McKown outlined further how assessments should be developed. As standards are developing for SEL, so are assessments. The following are the recommended components to consider, from

McKown:

1. SEL assessment development efforts should meet the highest ethical and scientific standards.
2. Developers should design and build SEL assessment systems specifically for educational use.

3. Developers should focus on measuring dimensions of SEL that span the three categories of thinking, behavioral, and self-control skills.
4. Assessment methods should be matched to what's being measured.
5. SEL assessments should be developmentally appropriate.
6. The intended use of any SEL assessment system should be clearly specified from the design stage through the large-scale rollout

Valid frameworks are child centered, taught to fidelity, assessed often, believed in by the public and staff, educate teachers, and are programs that follow children through their education. Another viewpoint to look at a program through is by the acronym SAFE. SAFE stands for: sequenced, active, focused, and explicit. A program that is sequenced has a, “Coordinated progression of activities or practices to build competencies” (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). This indicates that the program is following a trajectory that is explicit and clear. As any other academic curriculum follows a scope and sequence, so should an SEL curriculum. When a program is active it has elements that require student participation, “Role plays involved students in active learning of SEL competencies” (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Role play and active learning help students to apply learning to real life situations. When students can apply what they have learned to themselves, it becomes ingrained. A program that is focused has a, “Dedicated time or specific program element that was focused on” (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017). Not only is it essential to have sequence, but when you can actively apply focus to subsets of skills for the proper amount of time, learning is more conclusive. Finally, a program that is explicit is a program that, “Identified specific SEL competencies that it was trying to develop within the intervention” (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017).

As with any academic curriculum, the content, delivery, accuracy, and focus of an SEL program must be clear. To engage learners and promote appropriate social emotional learning, a program that is selected must be chosen through the previously outline criteria.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, SEL learning is essential in an early childhood setting. Children need to learn proper self-regulation skills, self-awareness, self-management skills, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making skills. As children grow and develop, the burden on them to perform to a certain standard increases, as does their emotional distress. Providing them tools to regulate early in their education, and following up with this throughout its entirety, is essential.

Teachers are crucial for this education. Their buy-in, modeling, personal beliefs and educational background play a role in the delivery of a program, as well as overall student success within a program. Included with teacher buy-in is the buy-in of families, communities, and administration. Without the complete support from all angles, children's emotional and social growth is only partially complete.

Knowing the essentialness of a program is key, however, there are several components that need to be considered before implementation. The first to consider is the style of the program and overall program validity. It is also important to consider the program's ability to promote and guide teacher education in SEL. Further assessments throughout programming that are standards aligned and goal based are essential.

Overall knowledge of SEL is just the tip of the iceberg. Advocating for children, selecting a program, and teacher professional development within the program are other components to consider. Children need these social emotional skills for current and future success. It is our goal and purpose as educators to provide this SEL programming to students, in order to provide for them and their futures.

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