Leading a Multi-Tiered Approach to Bringing Social-Emotional and Character Development to General and Special Education Students

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In 2000, the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that 94,000 students with autism were receiving special education services in public schools. By 2008, that number increased to 336,000 students (NCES, 2010). Currently, over 6.6 million students, or 13% of all public-school students, are receiving special education services. Over the last decade, the increase in the number of students receiving special education services has resulted in a need for school principals that have the leadership knowledge and skills to effectively lead programs that will result in the successful achievement for these students (Lynn, 2015). Further, this rise implies that school principals are navigating educational environments in which they are having to be more directly involved with special education teachers, students, and parents (Lynn, 2015). Research suggests that while the responsibility for leadership in special education is being increasingly delegated to school principals, it is still unclear what specific practices are contributing to effective special education leadership and programming.

Several studies using qualitative research methods have focused on investigating principals' perceived effective leadership strategies in special education (Lynn, 2015; Simon, 2014). One study found several themes important to effective leadership, including current professional development, classroom support, visible involvement, parent relationships, and goals of student success (Lynn, 2015). Another study found that principals' leadership approaches for supporting special education programs are aligned with a social justice mindset. Further, they concluded that a majority of the participants see themselves as social justice leaders who create opportunities for inclusion and support cultural and diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Additionally, this study found several themes about leadership qualities that include creating a culture of acceptance, having strong interpersonal/communication skills, valuing feedback in collaboration, understanding the experiences and perceptions of special education teachers and supporting their professional growth (Simon, 2014).

At the same time, there has been increasing discussion about the importance of building students' social-emotional competencies for their academic and behavioral success (Jones, Brush, Bailey, Brion-Meisels, McIntyre, Kahn, Nelson, & Stickle, 2017). However, the majority of these discussions focus on SEL as a universal intervention, i.e., at Tier 1 within a multi-tiered system of support (Samuels, 2016). As noted above, the context for multi-tiered interventions is changing, with students who might traditionally be defined as needing Tier 2 services—so-called at-risk students, or students with early signs of behavior or emotional difficulties—being served primarily in the Tier 1, the universal environment of the mainstreamed classroom. Yet, it is clear that learning SEL skills requires more than SEL instruction—it requires an environment in which the skills are prompted, cued, reminded, and reinforced consistently and over multiple years. If that is true for universal, Tier 1 learners, then it will be even more important for students learning in a Tier 2 context (Elias et al., 2015).

This article discusses a case example of SEL applied in a coordinated, multi-tiered context with a particular focus on students at Tier 2 and Tier 3, i.e., students with identified difficulties in social-emotional competencies. It is worth noting that in this new, integrative multi-tiered context, SEL 2.0—a combination of social-emotional and character development (SECD)—is the preferred strategy to employ, and this will be illustrated through the case discussion (Elias, 2009).

MOSAIC: Tier 1 Intervention Supporting Special Education Leadership

Among the key elements needed in Tier 1 support systems to engage special education students, as well as students from high-risk, underprivileged areas, are (a) a focus on building positive relationships (b) emotion awareness and regulation, (c) problem solving and conflict resolution, (d) communication, (e)

positive purpose, (f) leadership opportunities within school and community, and (g) promotion of youth voice and empowerment (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011; Johnson & Weiner, 2017). MOSAIC, which stands for Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character, is a curriculum-based intervention that promotes student voice, engagement, and social-emotional and character development skills. Each month in the curriculum is centered on a main theme that is supported by a selected virtue and two skills. The activities include pedagogical methods such as debates, conversation series, service projects, problem-based learning, and teacher-led discussions.

In addition to teacher-facilitated activities, MOSAIC incorporates a component that gives students the opportunity to apply the skills they are learning on relevant issues in their classrooms, school, community, and wider world. Two students from each MOSAIC classroom are elected as Ambassadors to serve as classroom leaders. They are expected to maintain the responsibility of facilitating monthly discussions within their classroom through a format called Students Taking Action Together (STAT). The Ambassadors lead discussions about school- or community-related issues as well as engage students to give feedback and suggestions that are directed to the appropriate area of the school depending on the concern. The opportunity to become student Ambassadors aims to inspire students to develop a sense of purpose by encouraging them to apply and practice the MOSAIC virtues and skills in leadership roles (Vaid, DeMarchena, Hatchimonji, Linsky, Elias, 2015).

In the STAT component, Ambassadors are leaders within their MOSAIC classrooms and in the school. They help facilitate the suggestions and efforts provided by their peers in order to communicate solutions and create action plans that address school and/or community issues. Ambassadors are given the opportunity to identify concerns, get feedback from their peers, brainstorm solutions with their peers, practice effectively communicating their ideas to stakeholders, and putting together a plan of action. This Tier 1 intervention was created to address the need to address students' positive motivation, character, and sense of purpose as a vehicle to learn SEL skills, thereby providing principals with powerful tools to support their special education population. (Note that in the current example, focusing on a high-risk urban population, the approach would be equally advisable even if there were no special education students within the Tier 1 context.) As with all curriculum structures, the role of the principal in implementing it determines how effective this approach is in practice. We present an example of how principal leadership can lead to effective multi-tiered SECD implementation in a challenging educational context.

Case Study: Ezra L. Nolan Middle School #40

For one principal in Northern New Jersey, inclusion and positive relationships between peers and adults in the middle school is a high priority. Despite the variability in perspectives of leadership in special education, Ezra L. Nolan Middle School #40 prides itself in promoting a culture of inclusion; a place where there is no delineation between general education and special education. At MS #40, there is a strong focus on promoting strong, positive relationships and providing a safe and comfortable learning environment. Research supports the view that educational settings at the K-12 level should encourage student expression and be the spaces where students feel listened to and understood. In fact, one of the main factors associated with dropout rates is students' perceptions that they don't feel cared for enough and don't have positive relationships with their teachers (Elias, 2010).

Ezra L. Nolan has a total enrollment of 262 students with 90 6th graders, 84 7th graders, and 88 8th graders. In 6th grade, there are 44 males and 48 females enrolled, in 7th grade, there are 44 males and 32 females enrolled, and in 8th grade, there are 46 males and 41 females enrolled. Fifty-four percent of students are African American, 29% are Hispanic/Latino, 7% are Asian, and 6% are White. Seventy percent (N=183) of the student population is in general education and 30% (N=79) is in special education. Within special education, 48% of students are in self-contained classrooms, and 52% are in inclusion classrooms. Eighty-three percent of the student population are classified as economically disadvantaged.

When MOSAIC was introduced to the district, the principal at MS #40 was eager to make the necessary adjustments in the school structure and assign leadership positions in order to effectively implement the program. Several other adjustments were made to make sure that the program would adapt well to the culture and system of the school. There was a clear message from the school administration that MOSAIC could positively benefit their students and there was intentional collaboration within the school to make implementation and dissemination productive and effective.

Leadership for special education in a school in which special education students constitute a multiple minority numerical, learning and/or mental health status, sometimes race/ethnicity—brings special challenges. While the average percentage of students with special education classifications has been estimated at 13% nationally, that number is higher in urban minority school districts, and there is strong consensus that many students who would benefit from services are not getting them because of concerns about sanctions for higher classification rates (Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, undated). One of these challenges in urban schools is how to create a cohesive, inclusive, positive learning environment in which all students can master essential social-emotional competencies and positive dispositions that will promote a trajectory toward college and careers. Those who might be effective leaders in more advantaged, less heterogeneous, lower stress contexts will not necessarily be able to do so in a highly inclusive urban setting (HIUS). Fortunately, some guidance is emerging. We will discuss each principle and then present how the case example exemplifies it

Start with a Positive Guiding Vision and Prioritize Student Voice

Because urban schools can have strong failure histories and staff and students may feel correspondingly demoralized, the first step is to activate aspirations toward a sense of positive purpose. For staff, this often means re-acquainting them with why they chose to be educators, and particularly special educators. For students, it means spending time on showing them examples of success despite challenge. In the service of positive purpose, individuals will undertake greater effort and be more likely to withstand setbacks. This also means that time is spent working from strengths and not focusing only on remediation. For many urban schools, the path to success does not travel through the greatest challenges and difficulties first, no matter how pressing these may be. A school cannot be "turned around" instantly and cannot pivot based on its weakest spots. A lesson learned and an operating principle from work done consonant with this case study is to start with a guiding vision of some aspect of the school linked with positive purpose. One useful jumping off point for a guiding vision is a focus on the positive value of student voice and agency.

A corollary of a failure history can be a combination of learned helplessness on the part of students (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978) and lower expectations on the part of staff (Jussim & Eccles, 1992; Jussim, Madon, Chatman, 1994). In many schools, this sets up a vicious, self-fulfilling downward spiral. A leader focusing on special education students must make explicit efforts to bring student voice and empowerment into everyday routines, as well as specialized programming. Consider roles of special education students on committees, in leadership or co-leadership roles, as greeters, doing morning announcements, and in other ways serving the school visibly, responsibly, and meaningfully.

MS #40's school vision is to be an inclusive environment and foster positive relationships among peers and staff in the building. When thinking about some of the ways the schools fosters student voice and leadership, one particular example comes to mind: The MS 40 community hosts a Martin Luther King speech contest every year. All students are afforded the same opportunities and support to present their speeches under the direction of the Language Arts Specialist. The students who prepare their speeches present them to the administration and in front of a group of peers. Ultimately, two students from each school in the community participate in a local contest with the rest of the district. One year, a student who was in a self-contained classroom for students classified as having learning disabilities was motivated to compete and reached out to the principal for more information. The student worked with the Language Arts Specialist, who supported the student in memorizing a few lines from one of Dr. Martin Luther King's speeches. Administration, teachers, and students supported the student in achieving this goal and the student felt validated. This example speaks to the intentions of MS #40's principal in fostering an inclusive and supportive schooling environment that provides students with opportunities to express their voice despite handicapping learning and/or mental health status, and to have that expression be heard in supportive and positive ways.

With MOSAIC's Ambassador component, students are given an intentional role to be active participants in their learning through the use of their voice. They learned to identify their concerns, work with their peers to come up with solutions, and present their ideas to leaders in their school. Ambassadors are as likely to be selected from among special education students as any other, because of the environment of positive expectation and acceptance created. MS #40's mission aligned well with the purpose of MOSAIC and therefore, the implementation of the program made sense and felt necessary to key stakeholders. However, establishing a system for realizing MOSAIC required

the active, coordinated, sustained involvement of several individuals in the school.

Build the Team

School leaders have so many demands on their time, including many that they cannot control, that they must delegate a team to carry forward any social-emotional and character development efforts in the school. The leader must be involved, but cannot manage day to day decisions and actions in each educational area and cannot be a source of backlog because he or she must make all decisions, large or small. Much is known about how to develop leadership teams (Marzano et al., 2005; Novick et al., 2002; Patti, Senge, Madrazo, & Stern, 2015). The team has to learn together how to work as a team; they must experience success together, develop trust, and build confidence. There is no shortcut for this, and it cannot be rushed. Teams must work on small projects and/or less persistent problems first, despite the pressures in the environment to do otherwise. A strong, effective leader understands this and will resist internal and, sometimes, community and central office pressure to tackle the most pressing issues immediately. These teams are best set up as peer learning networks that support one-another and spur their members on to learn more deeply.

Ezra L. Nolan's immediate team members include one MOSAIC and Ambassador point person, the principal, and one English teacher. Prior to taking a principal position at a special education alternative school, the Special Education Supervisor played a major role in the immediate team until the Spring of 2017. Several individuals are involved in other components of the project such as the Purpose Essay Project, which is headed by two Social Studies teachers. The MOSAIC point person manages all aspects of the program in the school. The point person creates the MOSAIC class rosters, provides all teachers with copies of the curriculum, helps facilitate professional development, answers questions about the curriculum, and overall, serves as a support system to the teachers that implement the lessons. With the support of the administration, the MOSAIC point person keeps the program running. Additionally, the MOSAIC point person also serves as the Ambassador point person, which manages the annual ambassadors' positive purpose project. The Ambassador point person schedules bi-weekly meetings with the Ambassadors to plan, propose, and develop a project to showcase at the end of the year. Ideally, different individuals would fulfill these roles and responsibilities, but MS #40 is a fairly small school, thus, having a small team seems to work best for this school.

Another part of the team—and, indeed part of the infrastructure of the vast majority of enduring SECD efforts—is role of outside expertise (Kress & Elias, 2013). "Expertise" can be operationally defined as a resource with greater implementation experience than the school that is implementing. It reflects the evidence that working with someone or a group that has been farther down the road one is travelling and can provide ongoing guidance is an essential element of sustainability. A corollary of this is that such a resource is always relevant; it cannot be "outgrown." Indeed, many schools involved in the implementation process become resources to other schools even while they themselves are being supported by other experts. In MS #40, the partner was the Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab, which had developed and piloted the MOSAIC approach, and other SECD-related approaches, in other similar settings (Elias & Leverett, 2011). The SECD Lab provided a designated consultant to MS #40 to provide implementation and evaluation assistance and to serve as a liaison to the team, and the director of the SECD Lab—who had experience with SECD implementation with special education populations—held regular and as-needed administrative meetings with the school principal. Noteworthy is that momentum was maintained despite a change in the liaison from the SECD Lab and some changes in the leadership team in the school.

Implement Universal SECD and Show Links to Core Improvement Areas and Build Ongoing Feedback Systems

Adubato (2016) points out the paradox that schools with a history of failure often are reluctant to try different pathways to success. Academic difficulties are best overcome by adding more academic time and drilling on math and language arts; behavior difficulties are best overcome with strict discipline systems, often restricting privileges as rewards for good behavior. Social-emotional and character development (SECD) interventions seem risky because they take an ecological, developmental, and systems approach to reaching academic and behavioral improvement. They are based on the concept that academic difficulties are addressed by helping students be emotionally ready to learn and have the skills needed for effective classroom and

school interaction; that students often respond best to special opportunities as an incentive for them to improve their SECD and academic abilities, rather than as a reward; and that educational motivation is enhanced in the service of positive purpose, rather than being seen as a goal in itself. The focus is on strengthening, rather than remediating.

When schools employ the kinds of tactics that Adubato (2016) decries, they also reduce students' opportunities to learn essential SECD competencies that they will need for success in careers or higher education. Thus, leaders in HIUS have an ethical obligation to implement SECD interventions in their schools in the interest of both equity and effectiveness (Elias, 2009; Elias & Leverett, 2011). Correspondingly, leaders need to have conversations that make it clear that doing things the same way is more dangerous than trying something sensible and different. Along with that is the understanding that interventions are not implemented based on faith. All interventions should be subject to getting feedback from staff and students, and monitoring against key criteria- behavior, attendance, school climate, and academic achievement. Miracles cannot be expected. Benchmarks should be established and a developmental pathway to progress should be explicated.

In an effort to refine MOSAIC and make it more appropriate for the school, the teachers and students at MS #40 participated in ongoing feedback about the intervention. The integration of a curriculum feedback process was designed and used to create greater student and teacher participation and ownership in MOSAIC (Hatchimonji, Linsky, DeMarchena, Nayman, Kim, & Elias, 2017). Teachers and students submitted monthly feedback about the lessons. More specifically, they were asked to identify successes, obstacles, and suggestions. Feedback was compiled by Rutgers SECD Lab consultation team and reports were produced for the schools. The feedback reports included a summary of the feedback, and responses from the Rutgers team about changes made and changes to come. Beyond the opportunities that the feedback process allows for teachers and students to be more engaged in the learning process, it also allows for flexibility in the curriculum to meet the local goals and needs of educators and students (Hatchimonji, et al., 2017).

In addition to curriculum feedback, the school received feedback on teacher perceptions of students' social-emotional skills (SEL) and student perceptions of school climate. Teachers reported on perceptions of students SEL skills using the *Devereux Student Strengths Assessment-mini* (DESSA-mini). Students reported their perceptions of different aspects of the school environment, including respect, friendship and belonging, engagement with and ability to shape the school environment, and support from teachers. *Reports that summarized this information were created to provide actionable feedback to the schools. Data were disaggregated by gender, grade level, and ethnicity.*. For teacher reports of student SEL skills, there was a mean of 3.52 (SD= 1.02) in the Fall of 2015 and in the Fall of 2016, there was a mean of 3.67 (SD= of 0.92). For student perception of student climate, there was a mean of 3.06 (SD= 0.72) in the Fall of 2015, and a mean of 3.32 (SD= 0.74) in the Fall of 2016.

Align Interventions in Tier 1 and 2 At Least, and Tier 3 and Tier 1, Ideally

In multi-tiered interventions, schools implement a universal, skill-building intervention (Tier 1) and when students show signs of difficulty with the skills areas and/or with the intervention, they are referred to Tier 2 services. Rarely, however, are the Tier 2 services provided aligned with the universal Tier 1 program (Elias & Tobias, 2018). This is also true of students who are included into mainstream classes—the interventions they receive outside of Tier 1 typically are not the same as those being given at a universal level. The upshot of this is that special education students, as well as those who are potentially referable for special education if their difficulties are not remediated, are least likely to find their skill development supported. What they learn in their pull-out groups or individual skill-building sessions rarely is aligned with the universal-level intervention students are receiving. When they interact with the rest of the building, they are out of sync; when they are in Tier 1, there is little prompting of what they have learned in Tier 2. Therefore, they are less likely to exhibit the skills they have been learning. Logically, a *Tier 1 intervention is truly universal: all students receive it. When students have difficulty, they should not get a different intervention, they should get a variation of the universal intervention so that their skill set is shared with their other classmates and can be prompted by all school staff.* This is true at Tier 2 and Tier 3. Whatever SECD approach is used in Tier 2 or 3 should focus on the same skills. This provides special education students, as well as those who might be referred for those services, with true inclusion and an optimal chance to feel part of a community of skill and character development.

At the Tier 1 level, the MOSAIC curriculum intervention is provided to all students in the building at Ezra L. Nolan Middle School. Tier 2 services include counseling where the guidance counselor and Crisis Intervention Teachers have smaller MOSAIC groups during this designated period. Students were identified for these groups based on their behavioral and emotional concerns. They are a mix of general education and special education students and therefore, not grouped by any academic level. Another example of Tier 2 services includes male crisis intervention teachers working with a specific group of boys who need additional guidance. For Tier 3 interventions, four self-contained classes participate in MOSAIC. Initially, the school attempted to integrate all self-contained students into the general population, but this was not met with much success. After surveying the students, the administration found that these students reported concerns about being separated from their homeroom teachers. Each of the self-contained teachers implements the program with great success. The relationships between students and teachers at this level have flourished since they have been able to spend personal time together and discuss current issues provided by the lessons in MOSAIC. On occasions where these students are with their wider peer group, they share in the MOSAIC virtue and skill structure in an unstigmatized way.

Communicate and Share Successes Widely

In the eyes of many, students with specific learning disabilities—behavior, language, mathematics, physical challenges, communication, intellectual, etc.—are often given the label "special ed student." Along with that label comes doubt that they can achieve accomplishments in any area (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2002). Hence, it is especially important to widely and frequently communicate successes attained by these students (and all students, of course) as a result of participating in social-emotional and character development interventions. Indeed, these interventions should be designed in ways that allow public products to be conveyed to community audiences (Levy, 2008). Building leaders should ensure that communications take place with staff, parents, and central office, that the efforts of special education students are explicitly visible, and that every opportunity is taken to convey positive expectations about what all students can achieve, without exception (Adubato, 2016; Marzano et al., 2005).

As part of the MOSAIC program, the student Ambassadors participated in the showcasing of a Positive Purpose Project at Rutgers University, where all participating schools and Rutgers University staff and students attended. In the Spring of 2017, the MS #40 Ambassadors developed a Mentoring Program run by the 8th grade Ambassadors. They mentored 6th and 7th graders about what to expect once they get to 8th grade. They created poster boards, videos, and gave presentations detailing the rationale for their ideas and the process for achieving their goals for the project. The Assistant superintendent was available to go to the showcase and presented each group of Ambassadors with an award for their efforts and leadership. Additionally, in 2017, Ezra L. Nolan Middle School became the recipient of a Promising Practices Award for its work in MOSAIC. The award, given by Character.org, recognizes educators in the United States and internationally who have implemented unique, specific, and effective character education strategies. It is the school's first step toward becoming recognized as a State and National School of Character.

Beyond the leadership development in special education, MS #40 experienced a reduction in suspension rates since the implementation of MOSAIC. The total for the 2014-2015 academic year (pre-MOSAIC) was 6.4%, the total for the 2015-2016 academic year was a 3.4%, and in the 2016-2017 academic year, it dropped to a 1.4%. Of course, this clearly reflects a wider set of trends in the school co-occurring with implementation of MOSAIC. However, it at least suggests the importance of MOSAIC as a contributor to wider efforts at improving school culture and climate, building students' sense of positive purpose, giving them voice, and helping build their interpersonal competencies. Acknowledging that suspension as a discipline measure is often disproportionately used, it is important to note that interventions that focus on social-emotional learning and wellbeing are successful in enhancing students' behavioral adjustment in the form of increased prosocial behaviors and reduced conduct and internalizing problems (Durlack, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011) and should be used as an alternative. The principal in MS #40 attributes the reduction in suspension rates to the overall development of social-emotional awareness and emotion regulation in her students.

Additionally, the school has seen some academic gains for 6th and 7th graders with regards to Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) scores within the area of Language Arts Literacy (LAL) as well as Math.

Twenty-seven percent of 6th graders in general education received a score of 3 in LAL in the Spring of 2016, and 34% of 6th graders received a level 3. Between Spring 2016 and Spring 2017, the percentage of 6th graders that received a score of 4 or 5 increased by 1%; 15% in the Spring of 2016 and 16% in the Spring of 2017. Fifteen percent of seventh graders in general education received a score of 3 in Math in Spring 2016 and this percentage increased to 26% in Spring 2017. Nine percent of 6th graders in special education received a score of 3 in LAL in the Spring of 2016, and in the Spring of 2017, the percentage increased by 9% (18%). Similarly, 9% of seventh graders in special education received a score of 3 in the Spring of 2016, and this percentage increased to 21% in the Spring of 2017. Zero percent of 7th graders in special education received a score of 4 or 5 in Math in Spring 2016, and this percentage increased by 16% in Spring 2017.

Concluding Thoughts

In urban education, there is a severe need for educational institutions to embrace programs embedded within the school that address the social-emotional needs of all students. School leaders making the decision to implement a program like MOSAIC across Tiers 1, 2, and 3 can lead to meaningful benefits for students, particularly those most significantly at-risk. Leadership is required to establish a specific timeframe daily for relationship and skill building among students and staff members, to provide an opportunity for a deeper connection and sense of community within the school. The ability for all students in a school to address life's obstacles through a common set of skills and virtues provided by a program such as MOSAIC is an integral part of the school day and is particularly valuable among teachers and staff, given the time constraints during the day devoted to academic subjects and a rigid schedule. Over the past three years, it is evident that the students of MS #40 have greatly benefitted from their participation in the MOSAIC program and the overall climate of the school has improved. This happens when leaders are committed to making their school one community, across tiers. That this can happen in urban, economically disadvantaged schools such as MS #40 suggests that this is a viable strategy for similar, and less challenged, schools.

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