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Connecting Arts Integration to Social-Emotional Learning among Special Education Students

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Abstract

Little is known about the connection between arts-integrated education and social-emotional learning, particularly for students with disabilities. This paper draws on data from a case study of a federally-funded arts integration program called Everyday Arts for Special Education (EASE) to identify the mechanisms by which arts-integrated teaching promotes engagement, self-control, interpersonal skills, and leadership among special education students. We draw on observational and interview data to present a conceptual model for understanding the impact of arts-integrated education on student social-emotional outcomes. The data suggest that arts integration impacts students' social-emotional outcomes in two ways: by providing teachers with simple, easy-to-implement activities that explicitly encourage growth on one or more social-emotional competencies; and by providing teachers with a methodology that encourages student engagement, which in turn encourages social-emotional growth. We conclude with a discussion of some of the factors required in order for arts integration to be adopted and implemented effectively within classrooms.

Keywords: arts integration, social-emotional learning, special education

Scholarship on the value of both arts-integrated education and social-emotional learning (SEL) has grown steadily over the last decade, though we are still learning about the intersection between these two fields, as well as the specific pathways by which an arts-integrated education may promote SEL, particularly for students with special needs. Given the paucity of knowledge and evidence-based practices in these areas, practitioners and scholars agree that researchers should ask questions related to the impact of arts integration on outcomes among special education students, as well as the activities that yield a positive impact (Anderson et al., 2017). Arts-integrated instruction may hold great potential for students with special needs, particularly given its use of engaging activities and multisensory teaching, but its impact among this student population has not been widely studied.

This paper draws on data from a federally funded arts integration program that targets teachers serving special education students. The program, Everyday Arts for Special Education (EASE), uses simple, arts-integrated activities to engage students in their learning and help them develop core social-emotional skills. We draw on observational and interview data to identify the specific pathways connecting arts-integrated education to SEL among special education students. We provide a review of the literature, followed by a description of EASE. We then offer an analysis of the data supporting the observed pathways connecting arts integration to SEL, in addition to a conceptual model that visualizes these pathways. We conclude with a discussion about some of the conditions required for the program to be a success, as well as areas for additional research.

Literature Review

Defining Terms

Arts-integrated education aims to connect the arts and at least one other subject area in a way that meets both artistic standards and subject-specific standards (Silverstein & Layne, 2010). It differs from arts education insofar that the goal of arts education is primarily to teach students artistic ideas and methods. Arts integration practitioners typically see and advocate for the inherent value of arts education, i.e., the "arts for arts' sake" argument (Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013), but also attempt to harness this value to achieve other learning goals. These learning goals may be academic, behavioral, or social-emotional.

Given the proliferation of research on SEL over the last decade, we offer definitions and descriptions of the particular outcomes of interest in this paper. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), a leading entity in SEL research and practice, defined SEL as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others,

establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.). Their framework identified five broad factors -- self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making -- that provide a foundation for student learning and well-being (Durlak et al., 2011). In theory, these factors are no different for students with special learning needs, even those who require the most significant classroom modifications; moreover, given that special education students are at risk for academic and behavioral problems, SEL may be of heightened importance (Espelage, Rose, & Polanin, 2016; Kam, Greenburg, & Kusche, 2004).

The present study focuses on four SEL competencies: engagement, self-control, interpersonal skills, and leadership. Engagement and self-control were competencies that EASE staff members had identified as areas for exploration at the outset of the study; they suspected, based on prior experience, that EASE had an impact on these competencies, but wanted to know more about why. The other two competencies -- interpersonal skills and leadership -- emerged inductively during the research, as teachers shared with the research team the program's value in building these skills. Using CASEL's framework, engagement, i.e., interest in and motivation for participating in an activity, and self-control, i.e., willingness and ability to follow directions and regulate emotions and behaviors, can be classified as competencies related to self-management, whereas interpersonal skills, i.e., willingness and ability to interact positively and productively with peers and teachers, and leadership, i.e., willingness and ability to lead one or more peers in a group activity, are related to relationship skills.

Since the beginning of this study, other researchers have published findings on EASE's impact on SEL, based on data collected as part of a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) project. Using quasi-experimental methods, Horowitz (2018) found that the i3-funded version of EASE had a modest, but significant, impact on SEL among special needs students. Horowitz presented evidence of student growth in communication, socialization, following directions, time on task, and engagement. These skills align closely with the four competencies explored in this paper.

Arts Integration and SEL

Much of the literature on arts-integrated learning focuses on the relationship between arts-integrated activities and students' cognitive or academic outcomes (e.g., Gullat, 2008; Hardiman, Rinne, & Yarmolinskaya, 2014; Rinne, Gregory, Yarmolinskaya, & Hardiman, 2011; Walker, Tabone, & Weltsek, 2011). While there are many anecdotal and correlative examples of the arts' positive impact on student learning (Winner, Goldstein & Vincent-Lancrin, 2013), the metadata suggest that the evidence for an empirical link is less clear, and more quasi-experimental and experimental studies are needed (Hardiman, 2016; Hetland & Winner, 2001). This lack of clarity may

be attributed to ambiguity around the types of outcomes that can reasonably be affected by the arts, the ways in which the arts are integrated into instruction, and how skills acquired through the arts are expected to transfer to different areas of students' lives and school experiences (Deasy, 2002; Goff & Ludwig, 2013; Hetland, Winner, Veenema & Sheridan, 2013).

For a variety of reasons, SEL may be a more appropriate area of exploration for researchers seeking to understand and explain the impact of arts-integrated learning (Holochwost, et al., 2018). Specifically, SEL may be more proximate to arts-based learning than academic outcomes, and therefore more likely to be affected. In the creation or utilization of art, students perform tasks that promote SEL. Drama students communicate verbally and non-verbally with each other and with the audience; dance students follow directions to learn choreography; music students develop the habit of practicing to improve. Whether these competencies would, without prompting, transfer outside of students' participation in the arts is unclear (Catterall, 2002), but the direct connection between arts participation and SEL is compelling.

While the literature on SEL is vast, we found few studies connecting arts integration and social-emotional development, though our understanding is growing. Here, we examine the available literature that connects arts integration with our four SEL outcomes of interest: engagement, self-control, interpersonal skills, and leadership. Simpson Steele (2016) studied a unique instance of a school-wide arts integration in an elementary school and found evidence of the development of a range of social-emotional competencies, including communication, connection with others, and confidence to present in public. In a review of the literature that spans multiple art forms, Menzer (2015) found evidence that experiencing the arts in early childhood positively affects children's prosocial behaviors, emotional regulation, and emotional expression. Most effective arts activities studied by Menzer (2015) included a social component and/or an element of collaboration. It is thus unclear whether the benefits arise from socialization, the arts, or their combination. Winner, Goldstein, and Vincent-Lancrin (2013) offered quasi-experimental evidence that theater education positively affects self-regulation, perspective taking, and empathy and found inconclusive evidence from other art forms.

Goff and Ludwig (2013) cited studies that traced the link between arts-integrated instruction and improved self-management, communication skills, teamwork, leadership, agency, and relationship skills, among other prosocial outcomes (pp. 29-30). Brown and Sax (2013) found greater emotional regulation and positive emotional expression among students of an arts-integrated Head Start program in comparison with students at a comparable preschool. In a quasi-experimental evaluation study of multiple arts education programs, Holochwost, et al. (2018) also found a positive effect on engagement among a subset of students: treatment students who were engaged in school before the programs began maintained engagement,

while previously engaged comparison students became less engaged in school.

Notably, arts education may also yield many of the same benefits as arts integration for social emotional learning. This study only examines the ways in which arts integration may produce social emotional learning, though this is certainly an area ripe for study.

Connecting Arts Integration to Outcomes among Special Needs Students

The literature on arts integration and student outcomes overwhelmingly focuses on neurotypical, general education populations. Researchers have identified a critical need for studies on the relationship between arts instruction and student outcomes for special needs populations (Malley & Silverstein, 2014). The Department of VSA and Accessibility at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts recently published a white paper that encourages research that examines arts-integrated instruction instead of the traditional arts education model; measures the processes and outcomes behind arts learning for students with disabilities; and addresses the role arts instruction plays in promoting cognitive, social, and emotional growth for this population (Anderson et al., 2017).

Our review of the literature identified a handful of studies examining the connection between arts integration and SEL for students with special needs. A review of sixteen studies on the role of arts integration for "disadvantaged students," including English language learners, students with disabilities, and students classified in either group, found that participating students demonstrated gains in self-efficacy, self-regulation, and application of learning strategies (Robinson, 2013). Mason, Steedly, and Thormann's (2008) study of arts-integrated instruction in elementary, middle, and high school special needs classrooms identified three emergent gains: voice, choice, and access. Teachers observed that arts-integrated instruction fosters opportunities for students to explore their voice, communicate and share ideas, express themselves, make decisions, and create new methods for solving problems. Teachers also felt that arts-integrated learning enabled all students to feel comfortable and motivated to participate. Other research has shown that students with disabilities receiving arts-integrated instruction are more likely to feel valued and recognized by their peers (Robinson, 2013; Koch & Thompson, 2017).

Arts-integrated instruction demands an inclusive and differentiated learning environment so that students have multiple entry points for engagement based on their needs and can participate based on their preferences (Mason, Steedly and Thormann, 2008). This is consistent with what experts recommend for all classrooms (see, e.g., Rock, Gregg and Gable, 2008; Tomlinson et al., 2003), but the reality is that many special education teachers feel unprepared to differentiate learning for students with special needs (see, e.g., Leblanc, Richardson and Burns, 2009). Thus,

understanding the types of programs that can improve teachers' confidence working with special needs students is imperative.

Exploring the Pathways Connecting Arts-Based Learning to SEL

Though our understanding of the connection between arts-integrated learning and student outcomes is evolving, less research focuses on elucidating the *mechanisms* linking one to the other, particularly in special education settings. These mechanisms, or causal pathways, tell us how arts-integrated activities prompt changes in skills, attitudes, or behaviors, and how these changes in turn prompt student learning. Identifying these mechanisms is not simply an academic exercise, but is crucial if the field is going to identify best practices in arts integration and attempt to implement these practices at scale (Holochwost, et al., 2018).

The literature gives some insights into the mechanisms by which arts-integrated activities may encourage student learning, though, again, most work in this area focuses on cognitive and academic outcomes rather than SEL. Scheinfeld (2004) pointed to four reasons that arts integration may support student learning: it is fun and motivating; it involves multisensory learning; it encourages student reflection; and it strengthens students' understanding and retention of texts by improving their inner sensory imaging and their emotional engagement (p. 4). DeMoss and Morris (2002) similarly identified four pathways connecting arts integration to student learning: they find arts-integrated units enjoyable, enjoy the inherent challenge of arts-integrated activities, experience less competition, and are more connected to what they were learning in class. These four aspects of arts integration promote intrinsic learning motivation, analytical skills, self-paced problem solving, and continued learning outside of class, respectively. Furthermore, cognitive psychological research supports the contention that arts integration improves retention of content. Rinne et al. (2011) elucidated how arts-integrated activities give rise to eight factors associated with long-term memory.

Though few articles explicitly document pathways to SEL, in linking arts-integrated learning to cognitive and academic outcomes, some authors either explicitly or implicitly point to the role that SEL plays as a mediator in this process. Two commonly cited mediators are student engagement and motivation. As described above, DeMoss and Morris suggested that student engagement, rooted in enjoyment of arts-integrated activities, is a key mediator linking the activities to students' cognitive growth. Brouillette's (2012) analysis also concluded that student engagement was a key mechanism linking participation in an arts-integrated program to language development among English language learners. Biag, Raab, and Hofstedt (2015) reported that students found joy in their art making, which helped promote overall engagement. Others have noted the role of motivation in explaining the connection between arts-integrated activities and student learning (Kosky & Curtis, 2008).

The aforementioned are all cases in which the relationship between arts-based activities and student outcomes is mediated by student engagement. In other cases, the relationship may be more direct, such as when arts-integrated activities are designed to impact SEL. For example, a teacher may teach a song that helps students learn to keep their hands to themselves or may teach a student to make eye contact by playing a theater game that encourages eye contact.
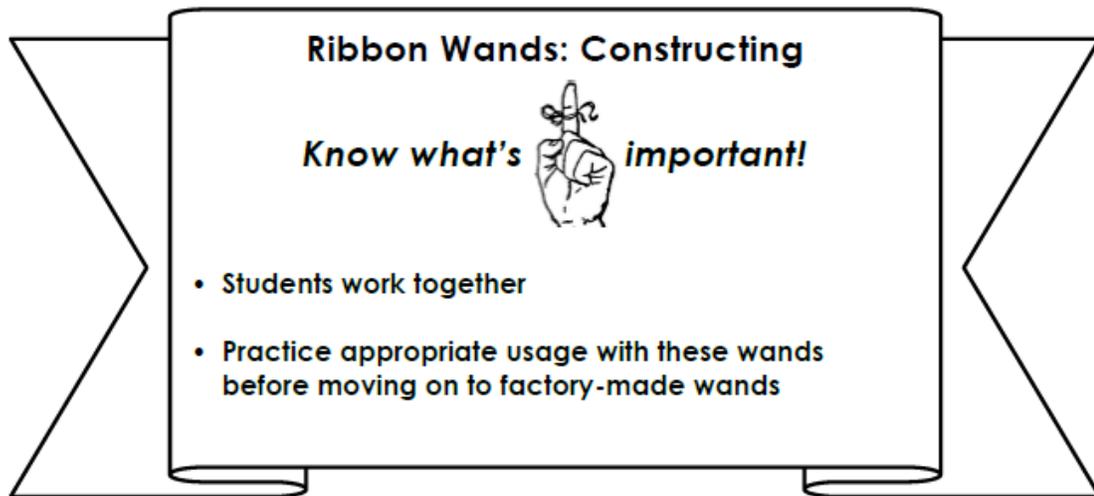
The EASE Program

EASE is an arts integration program that provides sustained and intensive PD services to elementary school teachers working in classrooms with special education students. This article is based on data collected in academic year (AY) 2014-2015 and AY 2015-2016, the first and second years of a four-year Professional Development for Arts Educators (PDAE) grant, funded by the United States Department of Education. The program, implemented by the Urban Arts Partnership (UAP) in a joint initiative with District 75 in the New York City (NYC) Department of Education and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), served 59 teachers across 17 schools between January 2015 and June 2016. District 75 is a non-geographic district that exclusively serves students with severe emotional, behavioral, developmental, and cognitive learning needs in self-contained classrooms. In NYC, EASE worked primarily in District 75 elementary school classrooms with an average student ratio of approximately two-to-one. In LAUSD schools, EASE served a mix of special and general education elementary school classrooms, where the student-teacher ratio was typically higher (closer to eight-to-one). Participating teachers include both general and special education teachers, as well as aides, paraprofessionals, and related service providers.

EASE instructional staff, who include program managers, curriculum designers, and teaching artists (TAs), provide three types of PD services to teachers over the course of three years. First, teachers attend workshops, where they learn the program model and practice the activities. Second, TAs offer teachers individualized assistance with lesson planning to help them find ways to integrate EASE into their lessons. Third, TAs visit teachers' classrooms between eight and 16 times per school year to model the activities and provide support.

EASE does not offer a curriculum, but rather a methodology and activities that teachers can integrate into their lesson plans. The activities are simple, clearly explained, and scaffolded for students of varying abilities. The activities feature elements from all of the arts (music, movement, visual arts, and theater). Unlike many traditional arts-based programs, the objective for EASE activities is their process, not artistic product. Each activity is designed, scaffolded, and modeled to foster SEL for students with moderate to severe disabilities and learning needs.

Participating EASE teachers are trained on the specific activities and the ways in which they can be integrated into their lesson plans. EASE program designers use a framework that explains how each activity can be differentiated for students with different abilities or experiences with the activity. Additionally, the cover sheet for each activity articulates the specific developmental, cognitive, and behavioral skills that the activity will support, such as fine and gross motor skills, eye contact, communication and socialization, and self-regulation. (A sample cover sheet is shown in Exhibit 1.) The activities require either no materials or simple, "everyday" materials, such as tape, water, and paintbrushes. Teachers are encouraged to sample the activities to see how their students respond, and modify the activities to meet the needs of their students.

Exhibit 1. Sample EASE cover sheet for "Ribbon Wands" activity.

Ribbon Wands: Constructing

Know what's important!

- Students work together

- Practice appropriate usage with these wands before moving on to factory-made wands

Communication Skills	Socialization Skills	Other Academic and Personal Behaviors

• Vocalization
• Appropriate manners
• Communicating needs and preferences
• Choice-making
	• Turn taking
	• Following directions
	• Self-Regulation:
	  o Approaching challenges
	  o Self-control when dealing with others
	  o Conducting oneself appropriately
		• Persistence: persist through task completion
		• Engagement: form connections with peers
		• Work Habits: able to work independently
		• Collaboration Skills: able to work collaboratively

Fine Motor Skills

TAs model the activities for teachers during the PD workshops and during their classroom visits. During classroom visits, they follow a protocol for introducing new activities: first the TA models the activity, followed by the teacher, then a paraprofessional, then a student who is capable of performing the activity with little support. By the time the other students in the class, which can range anywhere from two to 12 students, are expected to try the activity, they have seen it modeled several times.

Teachers are also trained on the "EASE essentials," a set of principles that teachers can remember using the acronym K.N.O.W.: K (Know what's important; let the rest go); N (Notice, use and create learning opportunities); O (One thing at a time); W (Wait...see what happens). K.N.O.W. encourages teachers to identify clear goals for each activity and allow students to experiment as long as students are safe and the goals of the activity are being met. Teachers are advised to look for, and take advantage of, learning

and leadership opportunities that may arise during the lesson. K.N.O.W. encourages teachers to minimize distractions and approach lesson execution in simple, incremental steps. Teachers are encouraged to give students time to engage in the lesson and play with the materials. As teachers practice K.N.OW. through the activities, they are encouraged to transfer the methodology into other aspects of their practice. They do this through either adapting existing EASE activities or "EASEfying" other activities or curricular areas with the help of a lesson plan template. This template is designed to prompt teachers to address how the EASE essentials will be incorporated in the classroom environment, lesson plan, and learning outcomes at the student and classroom levels.

Other core components of the EASE methodology encourage teachers to create engaging learning opportunities and classroom culture through games and by shifting the classroom's physical environment to the least restrictive possible, while remaining safe, e.g. completing the activity while seated versus getting out of their chairs, standing up, and moving elsewhere in the classroom to form a standing circle with their peers. EASE provides teachers with a formula for student engagement: Rules + Play = Game. This principle reminds teachers that all learners are able to learn and abide by classroom and social rules and norms so long as they provide an opportunity for fun and play to learn and practice those rules.

Methodology

This article presents a conceptual model for understanding EASE's impact on student SEL. The model, shown in Figure 1, was created inductively, meaning that the assumptions undergirding the model and the hypotheses of how different parts of the model are connected are rooted in data collected during our fieldwork. This is not to suggest that we began our fieldwork with no assumptions about how the program works, but rather that we made an effort to rely on teachers' and staff members' narratives and our own observations to construct a theory for how the program impacts student outcomes.

As described earlier, we decided at the outset of the study to focus on student self-control and engagement. We also used an inductive approach to identify the outcomes that teachers felt EASE was most effective in impacting. During end-of-year interviews, we asked teachers to describe the skills and behaviors they felt the program was impacting. We then analyzed the data, looking for patterns in the types of responses provided by teachers. We compared the interview findings with our in-class observations with respect to students' behaviors and engagement.

To build the model, we drew on data from 44 classroom observations, nine observations of PD workshops, 26 in-depth interviews with teachers, and several informal interviews with program staff. We received permission for this research from an independent IRB, as well as the NYC Department of Education's IRB. All observations and interviews were conducted by a team

of research assistants (RAs) using a protocol designed by the Principal Investigator (PI). The PI analyzed the observation and interview data in order to create a theory for how the program activities shape student outcomes. In some instances, we directly asked teachers to explain the utility of EASE and methods for their practice and for student outcomes. (Appendix A includes questions from our end-of-year teacher interview protocol.) In other cases, we drew on our direct observations of students' reactions to, and participation in, EASE to inform the conceptual model.

The data presented here is a valid representation of teachers' accounts and our own observations. We do not exclude data that might suggest an alternative narrative. In fact, our analysis prompts us to conclude that there is a high degree of consistency in how teachers describe the pathways linking the EASE activities to student outcomes, as well as consistency between our own observations and teachers' accounts.

Figure 1. Conceptual model illustrating causal pathway linking EASE activities and methods to students' social-emotional outcomes.
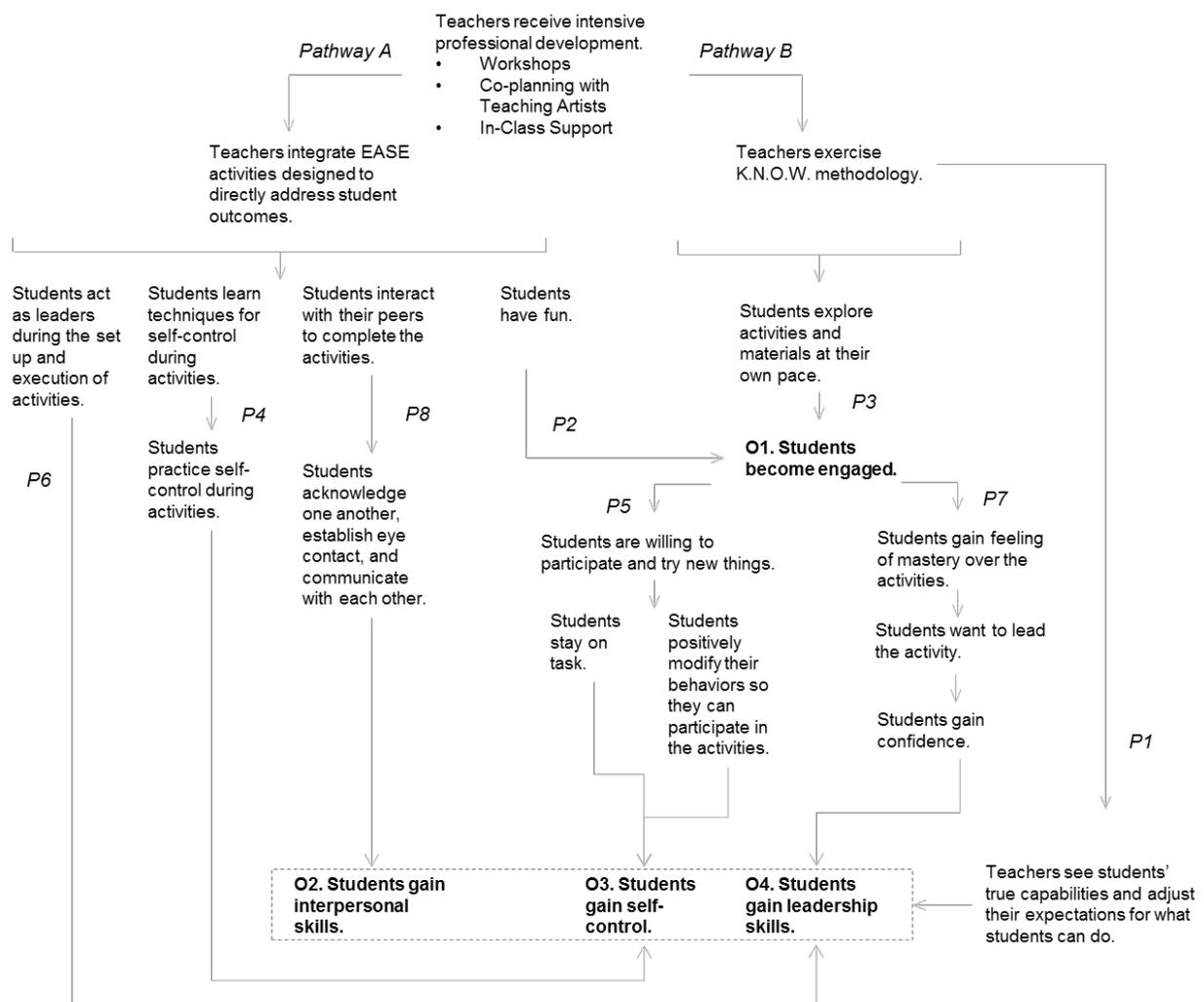
Findings

Using EASE in the classroom

The conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. The data suggest that EASE impacts students' SEL in two ways: 1) by providing teachers with simple activities that explicitly encourage growth on one or more social-emotional competency; and 2) by providing teachers with a methodology that encourages student engagement, which in turn encourages social-emotional growth. Figure 1 shows the first pathway (Pathway A) on the left-side of the model and the second pathway (Pathway B) on the right side of the model. The activities and methodology work independently and interactively to support social-emotional growth among students. To facilitate our discussion, we assign each of the outcomes in Figure 1 a label: engagement (O1), interpersonal skills (O2), self-control (O3), and leadership skills (O4). We also label the pathways: the first figure of each pathway label is the letter P and the second figure is a number indicating the order in which the pathway is discussed. (P1, for example, indicates it is the first pathway discussed in the text).

The value of simple, adaptable activities (Pathway A). Teachers cited two specific benefits of the EASE activities: they were simple, utilizing "everyday" materials, and they could be integrated into teachers' lessons in many different ways. First, teachers appreciated that the activities used easy-to-find materials. One teacher explained, "I think the simplicity of the activities and using things like nylon stockings and tape, I didn't realize those things could have such an impact like they do in the classroom. The simplest things...to me are very helpful." Another teacher similarly added,

There are things that they teach you how to do, where you never even knew [something] could be an instrument or could be a piece of art. So it just kind of shows you how to take everyday items that we kind of pass over and incorporate them into your lesson.

A teacher in NYC explained that he had previously struggled with creating a dynamic classroom environment and that the simplicity of EASE enabled him to comfortably try new things in the classroom. "I think, honestly, one of the reasons why my principal picked me [for the program] was because maybe I don't appear to be as fun as other teachers," he said. "So this helped me open up that avenue without having to be cheesy about it...It gave me and the students the 'real world' connections and how we can use objects that are simple to build skills and habits we need."

Teachers further appreciated that EASE could be adapted for any number of purposes. All teachers we interviewed said they use EASE on their

own, albeit to different degrees and with varying levels of mastery. "We use the activities practically every day," an LA teacher explained.

> Like just now, I was walking to the office and I saw another teacher and she had a blow up beach ball. It was clear and it had a shell inside and I thought, "Oh my gosh, how cool!" I have a student who really likes the ocean and so she offered to let me borrow it. So, when the kids come back, I'm going to do Pass the Object [an EASE game] with the beach ball. So it's been great because it's a nice way to introduce this ball. I initially thought, "Oh, I shouldn't borrow it, because it could pop or get lost." But learning Pass the Object has really empowered the kids to explore and get to know the materials that we're going to use in the classroom before they actually get to use it.

The value of the K.N.O.W. methodology (Pathway B). Teachers found the K.N.O.W. methodology valuable and, in some cases, transformative, insofar as it shifted their approach to student learning in the classroom. This was a common theme during interviews with teachers. One LA teacher admitted to being both "uncertain" and "skeptical" when she started working with the EASE TA. "We were just passing an object. I didn't understand," she said. However, when she implemented the activities with her students and applied the K.N.O.W. methodology, she saw the benefits.

> I started to understand the importance of just stepping back. We're always hands-on, because my students are not easily engaged and half of them may need hand-over-hand assistance to do things like toileting, feeding themselves, and their self-help needs. So it has allowed for me to see and understand the importance of just letting go and waiting to see what happens, instead of like, "Oh no, that's not how we use a rain stick. We use it this way," or "You've had it for too long. Pass it along." It's just rush, rush, rush, telling the kids what to do all day and not really letting them take in the information. I felt like [EASE] really helped me open my eyes and see things in a different perspective.

When asked to describe the biggest benefit of working with EASE, other teachers similarly pointed to its value in teaching them to "let go," "wait," and let students explore. "The biggest benefit for me was learning to wait," a teacher explained. "Because often, I would prompt my students and help them along. But just giving them that second, just waiting and seeing what they do. And also knowing which areas I should correct and focus on rather than trying to control all aspects of everything." Another teacher added:

> The biggest benefit for me was letting go and letting the students explore. My biggest thing is appropriate behavior. For me, it was hard

for me to be in this program, I'm not going to lie to you. [The students] were allowed to rip the paper and they were allowed to kind of just put everything wherever they wanted. For me it was huge to just let them explore what they're going to explore and then, after they have those moments, have them come back…And if the lesson took 40 minutes instead of 20 minutes, it was okay. The biggest thing with my group is trying to manage their behaviors and trying to have them act as appropriately as possible. Sometimes I lost sight of the fact that they should have the opportunity to explore. Things that we take for granted, they haven't even been exposed to yet. The students could just be who they are, which is awesome. I don't want to sound like I stopped them from that, because I didn't. But it's nice for them to have the opportunity to dive into something, be who they are, and kind of have no rules. Because everything in their lives and their days is so structured. It's really nice to see them be free, even if it's just for a period. Whatever they do, it's right. If they want to put water on the table, they could do it. If they want to put the instrument on their heads, it's cool.

Other teachers also described how stepping back gave the students freedom to explore and be themselves in the classroom. "EASE taught us that art is a way of getting students engaged and following through with the lesson or activities," a teacher told us.

But it also helped us to remember what is and is not important, as well as what comes out of just sitting back and watching. That was the big thing, because sometimes we get stuck in the habit of correcting the students. The biggest benefit is the freedom students got from EASE; the freedom of not being told, "Don't do this, don't do that."

During interviews, some teachers also explained that EASE had enabled them to see students' capabilities (P1). These teachers credited the K.N.O.W. methodology with allowing them to watch their students and fight the urge to intervene. Because of teachers' "hands off" approach, students were given more time to try things on their own. Moreover, the simplicity of the activities, coupled with the fact that the students were being exposed to the activities fairly frequently, meant that students were more willing to take risks. One teacher summarized,

It opened our eyes to see what the kids are really able to do, because I feel like a lot of times, before you try it, you don't know if your kids are even able to grasp concepts. There were some kids that [during freeze dance] would freeze when the music stopped or run into a designated area that they're supposed to be in. It was kind of cool to see. And I feel like if I wasn't exposed to EASE, maybe they would've never had that opportunity.

The very fact that teachers were encouraged to "let go" (as they described it) and let their students learn at their own pace opened teachers' eyes to the fact that their students could do more than they initially thought.

In short, the teachers found both the EASE activities and methods to be valuable classroom tools. In the next section we describe how the activities and methods may in turn affect student outcomes.

Linking the EASE Activities to Students' Social-Emotional Outcomes

Engagement (O1). Student engagement is perhaps the most important social-emotional competency impacted by EASE. It is important by itself, because it promotes academic learning by engaging the students in the activity at hand. Furthermore, it also promotes growth on other social-emotional outcomes, like self-control and leadership, that in turn bolster student learning. EASE is also a departure from conventional in-class motivation strategies for special education students in that it fosters intrinsic motivation and rejects extrinsic motivators, such as prizes, pizza parties, iPad time, etc., for participating in the classroom (Witzel & Mercer, 2003).

EASE encourages student engagement in two ways: by making the programs fun (P2) and by letting students explore the activities and materials at their own pace (P3), which in turn encourages them to grow more engrossed in the activity. First, EASE staff members very explicitly describe the EASE activities as being "fun" and as intending to promote fun in the classroom. This was a common theme in both the interviews and the observation data. During interviews, teachers described the activities as fun and pointed out that the students found it engaging to use everyday objects as arts materials in the classroom. "They're not used to those kinds of things," a teacher explained. "Using tape or making their own instruments out of tin cans or other simple items. I think that itself impacted them." During classroom observations, the research team observed students laughing uncontrollably as they completed the activities.

Teachers suggested that the K.N.O.W. methodology further increased student engagement. Specifically, giving students time to explore the materials and engage with the activity and the materials in their own way made students more interested in the activities. Many of the activities very intentionally gave students time to interact with the materials before using them. In some cases, we observed that the simple act of feeling an object like a paintbrush or a cup of water engaged students in the activity even before it began. The following observation notes were taken in a classroom of very high need students in NYC:

> The teacher told the class, "Today we are going to do some painting with soap and water." The TA passed around a pan of water and let every student dip their hands in it. Each of the students seemed to enjoy the sensation of getting their fingers wet. The teacher followed

behind the TA with a spray bottle and sprayed a little water in the students' faces so they could get the sensation of having their faces wet. The teacher then asked a student to pass around the paint brushes. She chose a student to join her in asking which color paint brush they would like. The teacher helped the student pass around the paintbrushes to the students, who then explored the water for roughly four minutes. "We're going to explore with brushes," the teacher said. The teacher took the brush and rubbed it on her forehead and on her wrist, then up and down her arm, then painted her back and neck. The students, with assistance from the paraprofessionals, mimicked the teacher. "Brush your head and then your shoulders," she said. Once students had water and soap at their desks, they were allowed to play with water for roughly nine minutes.

As this example illustrates, giving students time to explore the materials piques their interest in
the activity and prepares them for learning.

Self-control. Several EASE activities explicitly teach students specific techniques of self-control and encourage them to practice those techniques in the classroom (P4). For example, an activity called "Self-Control Ritual" teaches students how to wait patiently to handle materials. The activity requires the teacher and students to give a short chant about self-control, with accompanying choreography that concludes with students putting their hands at their hips (and, hence, not on the materials). This activity can be integrated into nearly any activity that involves materials. Below is an example from our field notes of its use in a general education class in LA:

The teacher passed out the ribbon wands and then asked the students to sit in three rows across the carpet. The TA asked the students to stand up with their hands at their sides, and to spread out. She then told the students that their teacher was going to place ribbon wands at their feet, but that the students should not touch them. She said that the students have self-control and then, with some attitude, chanted, "I have self-control, I'm cool, I can wait." Both her arms were folded across her chest, and she was leaning backwards. Next, the TA told the students to bend down, but not touch the ribbon wands. Most students followed her. She told the students to say "Hi" to the ribbon wands as she waved her hand. Most students followed her without touching the wands. The TA then repeated the self-control chant, picked up her wand, waved it up high, and put it back down. Most students followed her. She again repeated the self-control chant.

Several teachers discussed how they use this activity to focus students. One teacher explained,

The TA did the Self-Control Ritual during PD and was like, "I have self-control!" The other teachers and I were looking at each other like, "Mmm, okay?" But we did it with the kids and it was great because it provided a fun way to redirect. It provides them with something that will redirect or stop a tantrum from happening. Standing in front of them and saying, "Hey, do what I do!" and then the movements, the voice, and the tone really snap them out of it and they go right back to what we were doing.

Another teacher discussed specifically how she used this activity to help focus students in her classroom. "I think the program has really helped a couple of my students, especially the higher functioning ones that actually understand it now," she said.

When we hand out materials, we give them one piece at a time. They actually explore and they get that energy out of them. Then we do the "I've got self-control!" game and they know, okay, I can't touch it until she says okay. But they've already had a chance to touch it, compared to just saying "Don't touch it anymore."

Other teachers mentioned that the activities explicitly encouraged students to make and indicate choices, follow directions, and communicate their wants, all indicators of self-control. One teacher described how the painting activities encourage self-control among her students:

We modify the painting activities so that they have to ask for more of whatever they want, and that's increased their vocabulary and communication, which is a huge issue for our students. They're able to communicate a little better on what they want and what's appropriate, how to wait, and that you can't just grab from someone else.

These examples all illustrate the activities' direct effect on self-control. EASE may also have an
indirect effect on self-control. Because EASE is fun and engaging, students want to participate and therefore are willing to modify their behaviors in order to do so (P5). "Our students look forward to the EASE activities so much that they're generally more willing to complete an activity. It ties into our rewards," one teacher explained. Another teacher added that her students were more likely to "share" and "mind their Ps and Qs" on days when they were doing EASE activities.

Leadership. EASE encourages students to assume leadership roles in the classroom. This objective is built into the design of many EASE activities (P6). For example, a teacher may ask a student for assistance in setting up an activity or in passing out the necessary materials. One teacher described how this helped her students assume more active roles within the classroom.

"I have seen them take responsibilities for jobs like picking up the paint brushes and handing out construction paper and things like that," she said. "It was always easier for me to just hand out the materials and say, 'Let's do it.' But [EASE] has really helped the kids take ownership and responsibility for materials in the classroom and have an important role in our class."

In other cases, the activity requires that students actually assume a clear leadership role. This would often, but not always, occur during the opening ritual. Below is an example of this from our observations of a special education classroom:

> The warm up activity was follow the leader, which started with the TA modeling certain physical movements that everyone in the class was then supposed to mimic. Eventually student leaders were chosen (and some volunteered). In this class, the volunteer chose the next person who would lead the exercise. One student volunteered immediately to lead and he made the students do a downward facing dog before selecting the next student to be a leader. The students were creative in coming up with new moves to model, like a swim move, rolling hands, scoop, clap and wiggle, dribbling a basketball, and slithering like a snake. Almost every student in the class was able to have a turn as leader.

Sometimes students assume leadership roles, because they are built into the activity (as described above), and sometimes students simply become so engaged that they volunteer to lead (P6). Below is an example of the latter, observed in a special education classroom in NYC:

> The Opening Ritual conducted by the TA and teacher was the simple "Hello song" where the teacher played pre-recorded music from her computer. Both she and the TA greeted each student by taking their hands, swinging them side to side and looking them in the eye while singing "Hello" with the student's name. The students were all willing to be greeted without refusal and were attentive to both the teacher and the TA. After the teacher and the TA greeted each student, a student volunteered without being prompted to lead the exercise herself. The teacher said, "G, do you want to say hello to your friends?" She shook her head yes and then grabbed the hands of the first student and moved down the line, singing "Hello" to each student with the help of the teacher.

One teacher hypothesized that the reason students are willing to take on leadership roles in the classroom is because the activities are done frequently and are conducted in such a way that students have time to engage with the activity in their own way, at a slow pace, and with nobody telling them they are doing it "wrong" (P7). This promotes a feeling of mastery over the activity, which, in turn, boosts students' confidence and

willingness to lead. "Students become more confident within themselves," the teacher explained. "Because with EASE, they really can't do anything wrong. It's not like academics where they have to know the exact number. If they're painting with water, it's free. They can do whatever they want. So they become more confident with who they are. And then they want to lead because they feel excited over it." Other teachers offered anecdotes of students who were typically withdrawn, but would volunteer to lead EASE activities in the classroom because of the feeling they had mastered the activity.

Interpersonal skills. Several EASE activities explicitly encourage students to interact with, or acknowledge, each other to complete an exercise (P8). Interaction encourages awareness of peers, eye contact, and communication, all indicators of growth in interpersonal skills. These activities were very salient in the observation data. We provide examples from our notes here:

- Los Angeles general education classroom: The students worked in two groups. In one group, the students worked in pairs to stuff stockings with balled-up newspaper pages. The teacher had the students take turns stuffing the stockings with their partners, with each pair of students alternating between who stuffed the stocking and who tied it off. During this time, the students talked with one another about the stockings and how to stuff them. As the students worked, the teacher reminded them to make eye contact and commended them for working as a team. In the other group, the TA had the students share their ideas for pretend play using the stuffed stockings. Then she had the students create words out of the stockings. The students worked collaboratively, huddling together, to come up with words.
- Special education class in NYC: The students worked in pairs to roll out the masking tape and color on the canvas. Students helped each other rip and place the tape down on the canvas. They communicated with each other, made choices about tape color and length, and (once the coloring started) shared the crayons. When the activity was over, the students also worked together to lift up their canvas and complete different tasks, such as looking at each other under the canvas and rolling up the canvas to use as a bullhorn.
- Special education class in NYC: The students stood in a circle, and the teacher explained that they were going to "Pass the Greeting." She reminded them, "We are going to make eye contact with the person next to us and say good morning. And then the next person will go, and so on. I'm going to start with my buddy here." The teacher bent down to the student next to her and said "Good morning." The student next to her smiled and said "Good morning." The students passed the greeting along to one another. For the second round, each student could choose what kind of movement greeting she wanted to pass

around the group. Students chose high fives, low fives, elbow bumps, foot taps, and fist bumps. For the third round, the teacher asked a student in the middle how he would like to start, and he said "As a monkey." So he created a monkey dance that he passed along to the student next to him, and so on. The students laughed every time it was passed to the next student. The students needed reminders to make eye contact, and some of the students even reminded one another to make eye contact.

Nearly every teacher noted the impact EASE has on students' interpersonal skills. Some pointed to specific activities. "I think the camera activity was great," one teacher explained.

> We had kids passing the camera and they were exploring it and some students were really engaged. And they even turned the camera around and said, "We're taking selfies." And we were like, "Find me!" And they were looking for their friends. You know, "Where's Jonathan?" They would turn and then go to them. We didn't see that awareness of their peers before. This activity showed us that they have awareness and they do understand.

According to teachers, this is particularly important in special education classrooms where some students struggle to interact with their peers. "There is a stereotype that autistic students are very exclusionist, that they are in their own world and just keep to themselves," a teacher working with autistic students told us.

> EASE really gets them out of their comfort zone, out of their skin, and just able to be with other people and be cognizant of their peers. Usually they don't even know who's next to them or whose turn it is. But because of EASE, they've had to acknowledge the person next to them. They'll say, "okay, it's your turn" or "who's going to go next?" Or "who wants to do this?" They have to do a lot of communicating when they are putting the tape on the floor. It's not one person. They have to be with another student, put it down together, and learn to collaborate. It increased their awareness of other people besides themselves. Even if they are non-verbal or non-moving, as human beings we need to have social interaction. Even a little contact can make a difference.

Many teachers emphasized how effective the EASE activities are at encouraging eye contact between students. "I started to really see my students do an activity like Pass the Object and actually interact with another student," a teacher explained. "They turn and make eye contact for a second, requesting things like sharing the tape or asking for water and things like that. They are able to look in the direction of the person with the water. Even though they're not asking for it, we can see them making

connections throughout the activities." Another teacher emphasized that the eye contact continued even when the students were not doing EASE-specific activities.

Teachers also pointed to other ways in which the activities promoted interpersonal skills among their students, mentioning that their students were better at sharing and working together more consistently, as well as simply being more aware of those around them.

Discussion

The above analysis outlines the ways in which EASE promotes SEL among special education students. There are two pathways of change: one by which teachers implement simple, arts-based activities with students; and the other by which teachers learn to allow students to explore activities and materials at their own pace. Students have fun and are engaged in the activities, which in turn builds interpersonal skills, self-control, and leadership skills. In other cases, EASE activities are designed to explicitly build skills, like self-control and leadership.

Implications for Practice

Though we highlight the role that EASE activities and methods can play in shaping student outcomes, our research indicates that there were at least three prerequisites to effective implementation. First, EASE teachers participate in extensive PD and training, in workshops, in their classrooms, and planning with a TA. This training is scaffolded over the course of three years, so that each year teachers receive different types of support and eventually less support as they learn to implement on their own. Given the demands on teachers, it is unrealistic to assume they will adopt EASE-like practices on their own without significant training. Any movement to integrate EASE or similar programs into classrooms should be accompanied by sustained and intensive teacher PD.

Second, teachers were able to adapt EASE activities to meet students' needs. Rather than provide teachers with a rigid curriculum, EASE provides teachers with a set of activities that are supposed to be modified and also provides training and modeling on how to differentiate them based on each student's abilities and learning needs according to their individualized education plans. For example, each activity's scaffolded instructions feature three different versions of the activity, differentiated by the level of cognitive and motor skills required: 1) mastering the basics; 2) gaining skills; and 3) training for expert students only. Because they are not rigidly prescribed, teachers quickly see the program's relevance. Moreover, the fact that they receive training in how to modify the activities means they are under less pressure to figure out these modifications on their own time. Teachers also

need not have any arts training or knowledge to implement EASE, which further promotes buy-in and adoption.

Finally, teachers are given adequate time and space to practice the activities. They practice them with their peers during the PD workshops and in the classroom as a TA looks on and provides feedback. The expectation that they are supposed to practice the activities and share their successes and challenges removes the pressure to implement perfectly right away.

Implications for Research

We see several areas for additional research. Future research can focus on identifying the mechanisms linking other arts-based programming to SEL among special education students. Qualitative research, similar to the research undergirding this paper, can help uncover additional mechanisms, offer nuance to the mechanisms presented here, and identify new outcomes affected by arts integration. Advances in path analysis can help researchers measure the relative importance of these causal pathways, i.e., which pathways have the greatest explanatory power.

Future research can also explore the mechanisms linking arts-integrated programming to SEL among different subsets of students, identifying best practices that account for individual and group differences. Additionally, given the paucity of current research in this area, it is difficult to compare studies of similar arts-integrated programs. As the research base grows, more attention to how programs like EASE are designed and implemented will inform practice.

Exploring the link between arts-based programming and academic outcomes, including the attainment of IEP goals, is beyond the scope of this research. However, the data reported here suggest that certain arts activities have a strong capacity for helping special education students master course concepts by helping them stay on task. Additional research should explore this mechanism and others as a means of identifying the types of activities that promote academic success. This work should continue to investigate the extent to which these mechanisms can be generalized across special education versus general education classrooms, as well as across grades, since the classrooms included in this study were all early elementary school.

Appendix A: Select questions from EASE interview protocol

1. Can you recall the first time that you heard about the EASE program?
   a. Tell me a little about how you heard about the program. Through a colleague? Through your supervisor?
   b. When you were introduced to the program, do you remember what this person said to you?
2. Did you want to work with EASE, or was it something you were told you had to do?
3. How would you describe the EASE program to potential colleagues?
4. Can you tell me a little bit about your classroom? Are you working in a class that has primarily special education students, or do you have an inclusion class?
5. The goal of EASE is to give teachers professional development in the area of arts integration. There are four types of EASE professional development for teachers: workshops, planning time with teaching artists, in-class professional development, and online professional development.
   a. Which of these forms of PD did you find most valuable? Why?
   b. Do you wish you had more opportunities for professional development?
   c. In what areas do you feel that you would want more training or PD?
6. EASE aims to give teachers enough training so that they will eventually feel comfortable using arts-based methods in their classrooms <u>without</u> the support of teaching artists.
   a. Do you feel that you currently have the knowledge and experience to successfully implement the EASE activities without the assistance of a teaching artist?
      i. [IF NO]: What types of supports would you need to help you implement the activities on your own?
7. How often do you currently use the EASE activities on days that the teaching artist is not in the classroom?
8. What are the biggest barriers to using the EASE activities on your own in your classroom?
9. Over the past year, we asked you to track student behaviors related to their self-control and engagement in the classroom. This was based on some previous research with the EASE program that suggested that the program helped students in these areas. We would love to get your feedback on this.
   a. In what ways did you observe the program help boost student self-control and engagement?
      i. Which EASE activities were most powerful in driving student growth in these areas?
   b. We are really interested in learning, from your perspective, about other skills and behaviors the program may be impacting. Did

you observe *other* competencies or behaviors that the program may have affected?

    i. Could you describe those competencies and behaviors and the ways in which the program impacted them?

10. The EASE model can be beneficial for both teachers and students. Take a minute to reflect on your time working with the program.
    a. What was the biggest benefit for you personally?
    b. What was the biggest benefit for the students?
11. Do you have any other comments or suggestions you would like to make about the program?

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