Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Social and Emotional Learning and its Effects on School Climate, Student Behavior, and Academic Achievement

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Abstract

The researchers interviewed six participants from three schools identified as The Leader in Me Lighthouse Schools. Using a qualitative design, the researchers examined teachers' perceptions regarding the effects of social and emotional learning on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools across central Alabama. The interview responses provided insight into the participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of social and emotional learning. The findings indicated that teachers perceived a notable difference in a positive school culture, positive student self-regulation, and student led academic achievement after implementing TLIM. The teachers stated the greatest barrier was the cost of the program. The implications for practice and theory could involve employing and examining other social and emotional learning skills curriculums in school settings to improve school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement.

> *Keywords:* social and emotional learning, The Leader in Me, school climate, student behavior, academic achievement

Conversations among 21ˢᵗ century educators across the nation focus on strategies to incorporate personal growth skills into the academic core curriculum because of the socio-cultural diversity of their students (Care, Kim, & Vista, 2018). Educational leaders are reviewing and integrating SEL initiatives into their instructional programs that focus on developing character, learning social and emotional skills, building relationships, and improving school culture (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). Researchers recognize that as schools implement core curriculum and life skills, students' academic growth increases leading to successful life experiences (Haymovitz, Houseal-Allport, Scott, & Svistova, 2017). Zins and Elias (2006) contend that educational instruction which integrates life skills with academics optimizes students' potential for positive academic achievement and success in their future employment. Grant et al. (2017) state student success depends on learning a range of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills along with achievement in core academic areas.

In 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required states to measure academic performance on standardized tests and to measure non-academic skills (Klein, 2017). Therefore, educators must consider social and emotional instruction as a core component to the educational process rather than a supplementary activity (Haymovitz et al., 2017). To accomplish this mission, effective educational leaders must possess knowledge about best practices in education, model best practices and procedures for teachers, and implement programs that focus on personal and academic student growth (Ash & Hodge, 2016). By modeling appropriate social behaviors and providing ample classroom opportunities for students to practice these behaviors (Farmer, Farmer, & Brooks, 2010), teachers create classroom environments which increase positive relationships with the students and their peers (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Even though educators agree that social and emotional learning (SEL) instruction is vital to creating sustainable outcomes among students, instruction that supports SEL is often absent in school curriculum (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Greenberg, 2010). Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, and Salvoy (2012) propose that ineffective implementation results in the failure of school growth. With the help of social and emotional learning, students can master the nonacademic goals as well as achieve higher academic grades as required by ESSA (Grant et al., 2017)

Components of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2017) defined SEL learning as a K-12 school framework based on best practices for developing social and emotional learning interwoven with academic achievement. Zins, Bloodworth, Weisberg, and Walberg (2007) contend that SEL competencies develop the ability for individuals to perceive and oversee feelings, overcome and tackle complicated issues, and build positive relationships with others personally and professionally. This type of explicit instruction guides students to become active learners by collaborating with their peers (CASEL, 2012). During this explicit instruction, students learn by practicing diverse scenarios in a variety of ways to familiarize themselves with this type of learning, programming it as part of their everyday nature (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). According to CASEL (2017), SEL contains five competencies: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making, Relationship Skills, and Social Awareness. The continued implementation of these competencies develops–platforms to help improve overall sustainable student achievement (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013).

CASEL (2017) explains that self-awareness enables individuals to identify their own emotions, thoughts, and values accurately. In this competency, students learn to control their

personal behavior. By learning to develop self-awareness at a young age, students develop the ability to recognize their individual strengths and weaknesses, which enhance their self-confidence and self-efficacy. Durlak et al. (2015) concluded that students who demonstrate mastery of self-awareness can show the connection between thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Self-management assists in successfully self-regulating one's own emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in various situations (CASEL, 2017). In effect, how one manages stress, controls impulsive behavior, and motivates oneself are all forms of self-management. This competency also includes setting goals and working to achieve–academic and personal goals. Durlak et al. (2015) suggest that when individuals display self-management, they can control their self-gratification and impulses to remain focused on accomplishing their desired goals.

Responsible decision-making requires individuals to make constructive choices about their own personal behavior as well as social interactions with others as it relates to personal ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms (CASEL, 2017). Students mastering this competency can realistically evaluate the consequences of their own personal actions as well as demonstrate mindfulness in considering the health and well-being of others (Durlak et al., 2015).

Relationship skills portray how well students establish–and maintain–healthy, rewarding relationships within a group of people despite their diversity (CASEL, 2017).   Good communication skills include not only the way students communicate with others but also include how they listen to one another. Relationship skills also include the ability to cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict in a constructive manner, and seek and offer help appropriately when needed. Learning how to act in public is a vital social norm for students to learn in this competency (Durlak et al., 2015).

The last component, social awareness, focuses on the ability to empathize with others by not only understanding but also by displaying social and ethical norms for behavior (CASEL, 2017). This competency also involves learning to view the perspectives and opinions of others who have a different viewpoint or value system in terms of cultural and ethnic belief systems (Durlak et al., 2015). Schools will be more successful in helping students achieve academic goals when social and emotional learning is implemented (Elias et al., 1997)

The Leader in Me (TLIM)

The Leader in Me (Covey, 2008) is a comprehensive school-wide initiative that develops a positive school culture by using a common language to develop student leadership, to improve academic achievement, and to decrease negative student behavior. *TLIM* schools report a decline in student discipline referrals and an increase in student, teacher, and parent satisfaction and engagement after implementing age-appropriate social and emotional learning skills (Hatch, 2012).

The program, based on Covey's (2013) *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, assists educators in implementing strategies designed to improve school performance and student success in the 21st Century. The *TLIM* program focuses on *7 Habits* which are (Habit 1) Be Proactive; (Habit 2) Begin with the End in Mind; (Habit 3) Put First Things First; (Habit 4) Think Win-Win; (Habit 5) Seek First to Understand, then to be Understood; (Habit 6) Synergize; and (Habit 7) Sharpen the Saw. The *TLIM* program contains strategies for educators to implement the *7 Habits* into the core mission and vision of the school as well as SEL strategies to empower students to reach their full potential in positive behavior, academic achievement, and personal life skills (FranklinCovey, 2014). Social and emotional learning skills are woven within the Covey's Seven

Habits (See Appendix A). Patterson (2016) suggests when educators implement social-emotional learning interventions in their classrooms the effects have an impact on long-term outcomes. Patterson also states that *TLIM* is an effective social-emotional program which contains research statistics supporting its role in developing positive social and emotional learning, even in preschool students.

The Teacher's Role in Social and Emotional Instruction

As research of SEL instruction evolved, the program attained the level of best practices in educational and mental health circles (Adams, 2013). Many schools began integrating SEL programs into their school curriculum and found the programs helped reduce student behavior issues and positively affected the everyday school climate (DePaoli, Atwell, & Bridgeland, 2017). In effective SEL programs, teachers provide ample opportunities for students to interact with their peers, and if the need arises, teachers reteach and remodel appropriate behaviors to reinforce the skills (Farmer et al., 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Other proponents in educational circles recommend that teachers spend time each day on *soft skill* instruction that includes behavioral and emotional life issues and strategies to overcome them (Education Week, 2016; Potts & Potts, 2016).

Jones and Bouffard (2012) stress that the attitudes of the teachers are the driving force behind the maintenance of SEL programs. The teacher's mindset shapes the mindset of his or her students (Klusmann, Kunter, Trautwein, Lutke, & Baumert, 2008). Students can sense their teachers' perceptions of the classroom environment (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997). Teachers not only influence their students by what they teach but also by how they model the curriculum and manage the classroom environment (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). When teachers are motivated in the SEL program and willing to participate in professional development, the propensity of sustainability in the effectiveness of the SEL program increases (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Likewise, the degree of implementation of SEL programs outside the classroom influence the program effectiveness and sustainability (CASEL, 2012). The commitment of teachers to implement these strategies at lunch, recess, carpool, assemblies, and other school activities outside the classroom requires motivation on the part of each teacher in the school (CASEL, 2012; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act, states may select how to implement SEL in their schools and may use that data collected in implementation for research purposes. School climate and student engagement are the most widely used indicators by school systems that do not implement SEL in their accountability reports (Wallace, 2018; Batel, 2017). Currently, only eight states require the implementation of SEL instructional standards in grades K-12 in public school curriculum (Wallace, 2018; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000). Most states include SEL in kindergarten or in afterschool programs (Wallace, 2018). Afterschool programs can provide an excellent venue for implementing SEL because of the flexibility in creating their own programs (Jones et al., 2017). Wallace (2018) also states that children attending these programs on a regular basis benefit from best-practices such as topics on self-perception, positive social behaviors, and increasing achievement, which could lead to increased college and career readiness.

Local, state, and national media continue to release reports detailing the schools that failed to adequately prepare its youth for success in school and in the workplace (Gurney-Read, 2015). They also report varied accounts of school systems that used inappropriate procedures for testing as well as districts that only use methods to teach students how to pass state tests (American

Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education, 2014). According to Humphrey, Curran, Morris, Farrell, & Woods (2007), these reactions to policy may cause educators to reevaluate their educational structure. Opponents to SEL programs argue that the school's responsibility is to academically educate students. In response, proponents of SEL instruction state that *to educate* includes improving social skills as well as academic skills (Coryn, Spybrook, Evergreen, & Blinkiewicz, 2009; Humphrey et al., 2007).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine teachers' perceptions of the effects of SEL on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools across central Alabama.

Research Questions

The researchers developed research questions to help them understand the perceptions of teachers on how social and emotional learning improved school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement.

1. Which practices of SEL instruction are effective in improving school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools in *The Leader in Me* program?

2. Which practices of SEL instruction are least effective in improving school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools in *The Leader in Me* program?

3. What are the complications, challenges, and potential barriers for teachers to incorporate SEL instruction into the curriculum?

4. Excluding the support received from *The Leader in Me* program, identify external factors, resources, or partnerships that helped influence school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in elementary schools.

5. What changes, if any, have teachers experienced during their own teaching practice that have influenced their teaching as a result of teaching SEL instruction in their classrooms? The researchers utilized a qualitative design in addressing the research questions framing the study. The researchers employed a grounded theory design to analyze the qualitative findings and to develop a theory that emerged from the researchers' interviews with the teachers.

Participants

Participants of the study included teachers from three elementary schools in central Alabama awarded *Lighthouse School* status. The schools had 50% or greater free and reduced lunch. Teachers included in the study were staff members in the school before and after implementation of the social and emotional learning program.

Instrument

The primary instruments in this study included the two researchers. To ensure no bias interfered with the study, the researchers deliberately had no prior relationship with any of the participants. The review of literature and qualitative questioning techniques served as core resources to develop the interview questions. The researchers collaborated with other university professional educators in formulating the interview questions. The interview included one session and nine open-ended items.

The researchers included several factors when formulating the interview questions. Since the research focused on social and emotional learning, the researchers included all five SEL components outlined by CASEL in the interview protocol: self-acceptance, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness. The researchers also formulated the interview items around the research questions and the three areas of concentration from research: school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement.

Data Collection Procedure

The researchers obtained permission from the superintendents and principals of the participating schools. Researchers used purposeful sampling in selecting teachers for the research. The principals in each of the three schools assisted the researchers by selecting effective elementary teachers who taught at their schools before and during the implementation of *TLIM* Program and after the recognition of the *Lighthouse School* status. The researchers interviewed six participants (two teachers from each elementary school selected). Qualitative interview is one of the most common ways to gather data for a qualitative study (Creswell, 2012). Researchers recorded each interview session using personal password-protected smartphones to record the interviews. Each interview required approximately 90 minutes to administer over a period of three weeks, spending one day at each school. Then the audio recordings were uploaded to an internet service, Rev.com, for transcription.

Data Analysis

Researchers analyzed the qualitative data by examining the transcribed interview notes. The researchers conducted a preliminary exploratory analysis by reading the transcribed interview notes and writing memos with short ideas and concepts about the data. Four overarching themes emerged from the interview coding process related to teachers' perceptions of the effects of social and emotional learning on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement: a) positive school climate, b) student self-regulation, c) student driven achievement, and d) barriers of the program. Within the four themes, the researchers addressed the five competencies of social and emotional learning outlined by CASEL (self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, relationship skills, and social awareness) and their relationships within the four themes.

Findings

Qualitative findings from interviews with six teachers from *Lighthouse Schools* identified the following themes: (1) positive school culture, (2) self-regulation, (3) student driven achievement, and (4) barriers of the program. The most common practices that improved areas of

focus included: (1) changing the focus to a student led school was the most effective practice to improve school climate; (2) making the students aware of their behavior and how it affected others was the most effective practice to improve student behavior, and (3) helping the students realize they are responsible for their learning was the most effective practice to improve academic achievement. The least effective practices to help improve the focus areas included: (1) school climate was least affected by a teacher led environment (2) student behavior was least affected by old discipline methods such as write ups and in-school detention, and (3) academic achievement was least affected by teacher led instruction. The research showed the most common barrier faced by the schools was the cost. Teachers noted that the greatest influence on their teaching practice was moving from a student focused learning environment to a student led learning environment.

Findings supported research of Humphries, Cobia, and Ennis (2015) who stated positive, proactive interventions are effective in building relationships and trustworthiness in the school culture and reducing student discipline write-ups within the school. Circumstances outside the control of schools such as poverty, crime, and prior knowledge of incoming students influence the safety and culture of schools; therefore, whole school intervention programming is necessary to increase trust and collaboration within the community schools. Additionally, whole school intervention discipline programs with high teacher involvement are successful in reducing student discipline and increasing positive school climates. *TLIM* program is a whole school initiative whose focal points are on developing character, setting goals, solving problems and learning to lead. This study and other studies on *TLIM* and other social and emotional learning programs represent examination of creative positive school cultures, reducing student discipline, and increasing student academic achievement.

Discussion of Results

The study involved a nine-item interview divided into three categories addressing the effects of the social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program on school climate, student behavior, and academic achievement in their elementary schools. The findings from the data indicated that participants perceived that the social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program did support improvements in the categories.

School Climate

The interviewees reported that the social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program did show positive results in the school climate. The interview participants in this study stressed the importance of changing the school culture to one more conducive to learning and placing the responsibility for the learning on the students. Participants in the study perceived that as students became more aware of others, assumed ownership for their schools' climate, and adopted the new culture as second nature, learning naturally followed.

Student Behavior

Interview participants noted that *TLIM* program helped the students take more responsibility for their actions and taught them to understand how students can control their reactions to different situations. Interviewees noted specific practices: developing cool down zones for students, setting up goal notebooks, and teaching self-regulation methods with teaching

the self-regulation methods as the most important. The social and emotional learning component of *TLIM* program teaches the students' expected behaviors, the expectation of incorporating learning ideals into their everyday thinking, and using what they learned to make the changes. Participants in the study felt that *TLIM* program made a significant positive difference in the self-regulation of the students, which led to a better school climate and academic achievement.

Academic Achievement

The participants in the study reported that academic achievement improved after the implementation of *TLIM* program. However, one participant reported the academic improvement was not as significant as the school had hoped. The participants in this study mentioned that having the students take responsibility and ownership in their own learning led to greater understanding on the students' part as to the importance of self-motivation to learn and achieve.

Conclusions

The importance of social and emotional learning continues as a topic of discussion in current research. As school leaders look for effective ways to improve school culture, student behavior, and academic achievement, social and emotional learning programs may effectively foster these changes in all types of schools. As school leaders, teachers, and stakeholders understand social and emotional learning and the positive effects on school environments, new ways to initiate change can surface for implementation. These processes not only improve students' lives while in school but also their eventual outcome as productive members of society. SEL can affect students in environments outside of the school and bring about more positive changes to the communities in which these schools reside. By teaching students ways in which to manage themselves in varying situations, schools which implement the social and emotional learning programs can make a lifetime change that benefits students, schools, and communities across the state.

The researchers designed this study to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding the effect of SEL on school climate, academic achievement, and behavior in schools in central Alabama. The researchers found that teachers perceived a significant difference in these areas after their schools participated in a social and emotional learning program. The researchers' findings indicate that students began to appreciate their roles as a force for change concerning the school climate, which led them to understand that they are active participants in the process of their learning and behavior for improvement in their school. The use of effective strategies to train teachers and students was important to set the groundwork for the strong skill set that was needed to implement the components of the program. The strategies included instructing teachers to support their students as leaders in the school, responsible decision makers, and active learners. While teachers perceived these strategies as effective, other factors led to barriers for the implementation and sustainability of the program. The greatest barrier was cost. This study contributed to school improvement research by providing additional data into the effectiveness of social and emotional learning for students in the state of Alabama.

This research showed that teachers perceived that social and emotional learning helps to improve three vital parts of students' education: 1.) school climate improves, 2.) student behavior improves, and 3.) student academic achievement improves. Improvement continues to occur after the initial implementation phase of the program.

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