

From the Field: Practical Applications of Research

The Impact of Intentional Social and Emotional Learning Instruction While Engaged in a Semester-Long Project Based Activity for Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

This hypothesis-generating research study detailed the impact that intentionally integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) into a semester-long group project had on the overall success of the project and practice of SEL competencies. Researchers noticed a shift in students' mental well-being after returning to campus for face-to-face instruction following the COVID-19 shutdown. Many students appeared to be anxious, overwhelmed, and concerned about interactions with others. For these reasons, using the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework, they intentionally implemented SEL into a project-based learning (PBL) activity. Data were collected in two required undergraduate teacher preparatory classes with two instructors and 32-student participants. Data included researcher field notes, five SEL awareness check-in surveys, and a final reflective paper. The PBL activity was revised for that semester to include an intentional use of SEL awareness and activities. Findings pertaining to reflective practice, self-management, and relationship skills emerged and yielded important implications for classroom instruction for pre-service teachers.

Introduction

Following approximately 18 months of working and studying remotely due to the COVID pandemic, many instructors noticed a heightened sense of anxiety in students upon their return to campus, and college students reported experiences of moderate to severe stress and anxiety during the lockdown (Husky, Kovess-Masfety, & Swendsen, 2020). We, the researchers and instructors of this study, heard repeated comments from students that they were overwhelmed by the amount of course work, were nervous to speak in front of peers, and they expressed concern and anxiety about overall interactions with others. The amount of peer-to-peer discourse often present in our classes prior to the pandemic seemed to drastically decrease as did students'

overall enthusiasm and engagement. Ryan and Deci (2000) posited that making connections with others is often a powerful motivator for student learning (as cited in Hira & Anderson, 2021). It became apparent that many of our students were lacking connections with both peers and instructors.

The aforementioned sentiments are what we noticed as prevalent patterns upon our return to face-to-face instruction and what prompted us to intentionally incorporate social and emotional learning (SEL) into our classes. We were compelled to act and felt it would be a disservice to our students if we chose otherwise. For these reasons, this study sought to examine the impact of purposefully integrating SEL into project-based learning (PBL) in a teacher preparatory course. The way in which we, the instructors, infused explicit SEL instruction was by building SEL awareness and knowledge through the revision of the semester long Design-A-School (DAS) project, a PBL activity.

Review of Related Literature

Fall 2021 was the first semester students returned to campus for in-person instruction after the shift to a fully remote platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Aslanian and Roth (2021) reported that counseling facilities at colleges were overwhelmed at this time, and research conducted about the delivery mode of course instruction in higher education indicated students required strategies to help support and address the mental health needs of students (Bashir et al., 2021). Additionally, Lipson et al. (2022) studied more than 350,000 students during 2020-2021. They looked at a total of 373 college campuses and determined that more than 60% of students were experiencing issues related to mental health. In response to the evident mental health trajectory of our own college students, coupled with current research, we selected the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional

Learning (CASEL) framework to structure our study and chose to integrate SEL into the PBL activity due to the collaborative nature of the project.

The definition of SEL as posed by CASEL was used to ground our focus and intentionality throughout this study. "SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL's SEL Framework, 2020, para 1). Self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills constitute the five competencies within the CASEL framework. A multi-year case study of CASEL's framework at six elementary schools and out-of-school-time programs demonstrated that SEL can be effectively implemented with both school commitment and the use of certain strategies. "No matter the specific goal of SEL at each site, it was essential that each took concrete steps to achieve its vision: building SEL into the schedule, formally documenting in writing the approach to SEL, dedicating time for staff professional development and learning, and adopting short SEL rituals that could be used throughout the students' day" (Tosh, Schwartz, & Augustine, 2022, p. 21).

We have been using PBL successfully in our teacher preparatory courses since 2017. Project-based learning is an instructional strategy, "in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for an extended period of time to investigate and respond to an authentic, engaging, and complex question, problem, or challenge" (PBL Works, 2019, para. 3). Further, Vasiliene-Vasiliauskiene et al. (2020) posited that PBL has the ability to connect students through "learning communities" (p. 142). The Design-A-School activity seemed to be the perfect entry point for SEL instruction, as such communities work to improve time management, share increased responsibility, and most importantly can lessen emotions related to seclusion and isolation (Vasiliene-Vasiliauskiene et al., 2020).

Design-A-School (DAS) Project Background

The DAS activity utilizes the pedagogical approach of project-based learning. The project asks students to answer the essential question: How can we improve schools to better meet the needs of a diverse population of 21st century learners? While answering this question, students design a website intended to share their hypothetical school with peers and professors. The school design includes units of study covered in class addressing technology, finance and governance, the purpose of education, current reform, philosophy, history, and meeting the needs of diverse learners. Additional requirements of this project include an interview-a-teacher paper, completion of a mid-project evaluation, a final reflective paper, and a group presentation.

Methodology

Hypothesis generating research was the design for this mixed methods study which examined the impact of intentionally incorporating SEL into project-based learning in two sections of a teacher education course. The goal was for pre-service teachers to experience PBL as an instructional strategy in hopes they see, and experience, its value when incorporating the strategy into their own future classrooms. At the same time, this study sought to increase the teacher candidates' understanding of the use of SEL as part of content delivery and classroom strategies. Students were informed of the study and given the option to participate following IRB approval. The overall goal of this research was to better inform instructors about the use of SEL while engaged in a PBL activity.

Research Question

The following question served as the catalyst for research: How might the intentional use of the CASEL framework while participating in a PBL activity impact teacher candidates' knowledge, personal understanding, and usage of SEL?

Data Collection and Intentional Intervention

Collected throughout the duration of the spring 2022 semester, data included researcher field notes, five SEL awareness check-in surveys, and a final reflective paper. Participants included two instructors and 32-teacher candidates who were enrolled in two sections of the Foundations of Education course. This is a mandatory course for pre-service teachers pursuing degrees in either adolescent or childhood education. Participation was voluntary.

Each week, for five weeks of the semester, students watched a short video in class followed by an in-class discussion about each of the five CASEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. These videos were created by ThinkTVPBS (2019) and are available on YouTube and the CASEL website (Social and Emotional Video Library, n.d.). Our in-class discussion varied each week depending on the competency, but students were initially asked to reflect upon and discuss the questions: what did you see?, what do you think about that?, and what does it make you wonder? (Project Zero Thinking Routine, n.d.).

To further support learning and understanding, instructors asked follow-up questions based on students' responses and wrapped up the discussions by asking students how they are using and implementing the competency in their project-based DAS activity. The same week after our in-class discussion, students were requested to complete a Google Form which asked three closed-ended questions with one open-ended option. The survey questions prompted students to rate the extent to which they

understand what the SEL competency means, how effectively they use it, and how they will need or are using it this semester in their DAS group work. The results of these five surveys were reviewed using the auto-generated Google Form graphics and charts. Ultimately, additional statistical analyses were not conducted due to feedback from students that the surveys were distributed too soon after fully understanding the definition of each of the five SEL competencies.

Researcher field notes were taken after each video discussion and throughout the semester as students worked on their DAS projects in class. These field notes captured the researcher's experience with project-based learning and their observations of students' use of social emotional learning. The final reflective paper completed at the end of the semester asked students to consider the CASEL framework and the five core competencies of SEL. Students were asked to decide which one of the five competencies they relied on most to successfully complete this project and to explain which one of the competencies they felt they had improved the most while working with group members. These two qualitative sources of data were analyzed for emerging themes to be used to generate hypotheses of this research study.

Results

Initially, researchers analyzed both quantitative survey results and qualitative data from the final reflective papers and researcher's field notes. However, it became evident that the qualitative data provided a more thorough synopsis of the impact explicit SEL instruction had on teacher candidates while participating in the DAS project. Student final reflective papers demonstrated areas of strengths and weakness pertaining to how students applied the SEL competencies. Although data generated from the check-in survey results were extensive, the researchers decided to focus more heavily on the end-of-semester final reflective papers because they realized surveys were given during the same week that the SEL competency was initially addressed. The five check-in surveys, in turn, did not necessarily provide students with enough time to practice and implement that specific competency. While quantitative data provided important information, researchers felt the end of semester student narratives, coupled with the professors' field notes, provided a more comprehensive overview of implementation and practice of the five competencies during the 14-week semester.

Researchers' Field Notes

We, the instructors, gathered field notes during the semester pertaining to students' use of SEL during class discussions and as observed in written assignments. Moreover, field notes from both professors also indicated a trend leaning toward self-management, responsible decision making, and the competency of relationship skills. During the beginning of the semester, one professor recorded, "... hardly any of them (students) participated in class. The ma-

... jority were quiet and seemed reserved ..." However, in April, the same instructor commented, "It seems the class has become more comfortable working with each other - and groups seem to be working nicely ... I wonder if discussions about building relationships and responsibility have really been making an impact."

Both researchers, independently, took note of the fact that the in-class discussions after viewing the videos related to each competency were fruitful and demonstrated an initial understanding of SEL and how these pre-service teachers might foster social emotional skills in their future students. One researcher noted in her field notes, "I had a discussion with three students after the class in which we discussed the last competency, responsible decision making, and the students felt that, although they completed the check-in surveys after each video and class discussion, they did not make the connection between the competency and how they could or would use it in their PBL activity." The second researcher noted a similar resistance by her students to accurately completing the Google Form after each video and discussion. The two researchers felt that the final reflective papers, which provided additional time for the groups to work together and reflect on the five competencies, would be a more accurate assessment of their understanding and use of SEL in PBL.

Final Reflective Paper

This paper asked students to reflect upon the SEL competency they relied upon the most while engaged in the DAS project and discuss the one in which they felt they most improved. Thirty-four percent of teacher candidates commented extensively about the importance of self-management when working on this project, and 28% addressed responsible decision making. Nineteen percent of students discussed personal experiences pertaining to the competency, relationship skills. Narratives from the culminating reflective student papers revealed two emerging themes.

Student responses in their papers revealed a focus on reflection, a necessary component for inspiring reflective practice and practitioners. One student commented that they believed self-management helped them to "... manage my stress and motivate myself to complete this project not for myself but also for my entire group." Another student commented that they often "get irritated with group members ... However, instead of letting my emotions get the best of me, I ... acknowledged my stress, and used my planning and organizational skills to help our group complete the project and reach our goals."

Addressing improvement in the competency relationship skills, a participant commented, "As a group, I'm not going to lie; we did not have the best communication with one another at the beginning of the semester, but we slowly started building it throughout the course." Echoing the importance of relationship skills and effective communication, an individual responded, "One competency I have always

struggled with is relationship skills." The teacher candidate continued, "Even though we had occasional creative differences in how we wanted to approach the project, my team was not only kind and considerate but helpful and aware. ... Communication is key and this project was full of it." Data analysis revealed themes pertaining to relationship skills, self-management, and an improvement in overall student perceptions, reflection, and growth.

When students were asked about the competency in which they believed they improved the most while engaged in this activity, relationship skills were addressed by 40% of the responses and 25% indicated self-management. Although the competency of responsible decision making was discussed by 28% of participants regarding the competency on which they relied the most during the project, only 5% of students noted improvement in this area. Since the purpose of this study was to teach students how they might use SEL competencies while engaged in problem solving, teaching, and everyday tasks, researchers decided to focus on areas in which pre-service teachers noted significant improvement. By the end of the semester, student narratives indicated that participants demonstrated the most improvement in the areas of relationship skills and self-management.

Discussion and Implications

Improvement in the areas of self-management and relationship skills are evidenced in teacher candidate reflective papers and researcher field notes. The following two hypotheses were generated:

1. Intentional instruction about relationship skills facilitated student reflective practice that heightened awareness and application of respectful communication skills necessary for offering and receiving constructive feedback while engaged in a PBL activity.
2. Intentional instruction about the use of self-management facilitated reflective practice that helped students self-regulate emotions by recognizing and releasing elements of control necessary for responsible and equal distribution of groupwork while engaged in a PBL activity. (Craig, Eckardt, & Kraemer, 2023, p. 198)

As instructors and reflective practitioners, we hope the hypotheses shed light on the value of incorporating intentional SEL instruction into classes for pre-service teachers in order to promote well-being inside and outside of the classroom. The integration of SEL instruction while engaged in a PBL activity provided students with opportunities to both learn about the importance of SEL related to everyday activities and opportunities for putting these into practice. When working in any group activity, it is important to incorporate aspects of SEL in the project's implementation. Time should be built into the project's design to model and discuss respectful communication

skills necessary for receiving constructive feedback and engaging in productive academic discourse. Building student's self-management, including delegation skills, can assist them in self-motivation and release of control when it comes to working collaboratively.

Ultimately, we found that the intentional use of the CASEL framework supported our students' social and emotional needs throughout the project which led to fewer group disagreements, better communication, and a more equitable distribution of the work. Going forward, SEL will now be intentionally incorporated into our coursework with a specific focus on helping pre-service teachers define and utilize SEL competencies in all aspects of their lives. We will continue to provide prospective teachers with SEL skills to promote social and emotional success, and we hope our students will see value in integrating such competencies into their own future classrooms. Instead of solely teaching students about SEL competencies, we now strive to have them practiced in class to further promote learning and understanding.

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