Serving ALL Students: Social and Emotional Learning in a "Press Pause" World

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Abstract

This paper shares the findings of a non-experimental quantitative case study done in a rural central Illinois K-8 school district. The study focused on the delivery of student social and emotional learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and how educators were able to still design equitable learning opportunities for students through their social and emotional learning program even though the delivery model had to be changed overnight from in-person to remote learning. All staff were asked to complete an online survey asking about their growth in the use of 28 best practice instructional strategies that could be used for the remote delivery of student social and emotional learning. These strategies were also aligned to the five core student social and emotional competency areas as outlined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's competency-based conceptual framework. While the staff survey also asked them to self-report their current feelings, their current self-care strategies, and their current perceived level of certain social and emotional learning competencies, the findings reported in this paper focus only on the self-reported staff growth in the use of each of the 28 instructional strategies. The data shows that staff self-reported growth in 21 of the 28 strategies. The results of this study are important because they offer an understanding as to how educators are able to continue to provide equitable learning opportunities for success for all students through the remote delivery of social and emotional learning.

Keywords: *equity, marginalized, social and emotional learning, instructional strategies*

> *At some point or another, everyone has felt unseen and unheard and marginalized.*
> *--Ayanna Pressley*

It is true indeed that each one of has felt marginalized at some point or another; however, to truly be marginalized is to be put in or kept in a powerless or unimportant position within a society or a group (Merriam-Webster, 2021) and in the education segment of society there are some groups who have been and continue to be marginalized. These groups include minorities, second language learners, special education students and those who experience poverty. While education has made some progress through research and evidence-based best practices in instructional strategies and curriculum programs that demonstrate that they provide a more equitable educational experience for all students, it remains a daunting task due to an ever-changing society, increasing student needs, and decreasing available resources.

One research-supported and evidence-based curriculum program that promotes a more equitable educational experience for all students is that of social and emotional learning (SEL). With systemic implementation, SEL fosters an equitable learning environment where all students feel respected, valued, and affirmed (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.-a), no matter their ethnicity, language, learning ability or income (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Dunham, n.d.; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Shellinger, 2011). This programming is essential as our population demographics continue to shift as "An increasing number of school-aged children and youth reside in poor or low-income families and communities" (Jagers, Rivas-Drake, & Borowski, 2018, p. 2).

The Benefits of Social-Emotional Learning

Practitioners and researchers alike have long emphasized that all students can benefit from opportunities for social and emotional learning (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Durlak et al., 2011). Research shows that SEL promotes the academic growth of all students (Niemi, 2020) and it enhances student college and career readiness (Osher, Kidron, Brackett, Dymnicki, Jones, & Weissberg, 2016).

There is now a strong body of evidence confirming that social and emotional learning drives increases in grades as well as scores on standardized tests (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Durlak, 2017). A 2011 meta-analysis of 213 SEL programs demonstrated they immediately improved the academic achievement of students (Durlak et al, 2011). In 2017 follow-up assessments were done with students an average of 3.5 years after their last SEL intervention. The results of those assessments indicated students who had received SEL programming averaged 13 percentile points higher in academic performance (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017).

An added benefit of student social and emotional learning is that it improves their competencies in establishing and maintaining positive attitudes and relationships (Sailors, 2017). There is a high return on investment with every invested dollar returning $11.00 by preparing them to be caring, responsible, and productive citizens (Belfield, Brooks, Klapp, Levin, Shand, & Zander, 2015).

Review of the Related Literature

A Brief History of Social Emotional Learning

Some claim that student SEL programs began in ancient Greece when Plato proposed a holistic student curriculum that required a balance of the arts, math, science, physical education, character, and moral judgment (Edutopia, 2012). Concerns about equity have motivated the SEL movement from the start when scholars found that when educators lacked a basic understanding of child development, children from marginalized communities suffer the most (Comer, 2009). Many attribute the beginning of successful modern student SEL programs as having started with the work of James Comer and his colleagues with their piloting of *The Comer School Development Program* from the 1960's through the 1980's. Their results demonstrated a sustained improvement of student social skills and achievement and then in the late 1980's, a five year project funded by the W. T. Grant Consortium, provided the first list of social and emotional skill areas for students (Edutopia, 2012).

With this increasing interest in student SEL came additional research studies and new organizations. One prominent and lasting organization founded is 1994 is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, commonly known as "CASEL" (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.-e). CASEL has done and continues to do cutting edge research on student SEL and they have developed a competency-based conceptual framework that many school districts in the United States are using for program delivery. The Collaborating States Initiative (CSI) was established by CASEL in 2016 with the purpose of working with state agencies to create equity-focused, evidence-based SEL programs and as of March of 2020, they reported that 18 states had developed statewide CASEL-based frameworks for K-12 students (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.-b).

CASEL's Competency-Based Conceptual Framework

CASEL's conceptual framework was derived from child development theory and research on student success (Brackett, Elbertson, & Rivers, 2017). It concentrates on students acquiring and applying skills in recognizing and managing emotions, making responsible decisions and positive relationships (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). CASEL has identified five interrelated sets of cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies that comprise social and emotional learning and that are integral to the development of justice-oriented, global citizens, who have a growth mindset and who place an emphasis on commonalities rather than differences (Jagers et al, 2018). The five CASEL competency areas include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making, with all of these areas being able to be taught in many ways and across many settings (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.-c).

The first two competency areas pertain to "self". One of these areas encompasses self-awareness which is having the ability to accurately recognize one's own feelings and thoughts and their influence on behaviors. It includes accurately assessing one's strengths and limitations, and possessing a growth mindset with a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism (Melnick, Cook-Harvey, Darling-Hammond, 2017). The second "self" area is self-management which is being able to regulate one's emotions and behaviors in order to set and achieve personal and educational goals. It encompasses delaying gratification, managing stress, controlling impulses, self-motivation, and perseverance (Melnick et al., 2017).

The third CASEL defined competency area is that of responsible decision-making. This includes making constructive choices about personal behavior, social interactions, and school based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, social norms, realistic evaluation of consequences of various actions, and the well-being of self and others (Melnick et al., 2017).

Relationship skills make up the fourth competency area which includes having the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups. This involves communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking help when needed (Melnick et al., 2017).

The fifth and final competency area is that of social awareness. This is having the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse background and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school and community resources and supports (Melnick et al., 2017).

Student SEL Mandate in Illinois

As a result of the "Children's Mental Health Act of 2003", Illinois was one of the first states to implement a statewide student SEL framework based on CASEL's five core competency areas. Using their work, Illinois generated an umbrella of three goals that incorporated a total of ten SEL standards. Each of the standards outlines age-appropriate benchmarks and performance descriptors (Illinois State Board of Education, Social and Emotional Learning, n.d.-c).

The first Illinois goal concentrates on student development of self-awareness and the self-management skills needed to achieve school and life success. The three standards appropriated to this goal include identifying and managing one's own emotions and behaviors, recognizing personal qualities and external supports, and demonstrating skills related to achieving personal and academic goals.

Illinois Goal 2 incorporates the social awareness and interpersonal skills that students need to establish and maintain positive relationships. The four standards in this goal consist of recognizing the feelings and perspectives of others, recognizing individual and group similarities and differences, using communication and social skills to interact effectively with others, and demonstrating an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways.

The final Illinois goal encompasses student competencies in demonstrating decision- making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contacts. The three standards found in this goal include considering various factors (ethical, safety, and societal) when making decisions, applying decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations, and contributing to the well-being of one's school and community (Illinois State Board of Education, Social and Emotional Learning Standards, n.d.-d). While the integration of these SEL standards may be more obvious in some subject areas such as health and social science, it is possible to integrate them throughout all learning areas.

When Illinois issued their state mandate for student SEL programs, many school districts had to determine how they were going to deliver this program. Some districts chose to purchase an already made curriculum, some chose to offer a before or after school program, and some chose to design and implement their own integrated SEL curriculum program. While there are various program delivery modes, a common characteristic is that they are delivered in person. In the middle of March in 2020, many Illinois school districts suddenly found themselves needing to shift away from their in-person delivery mode due to "shelter-in-place" state orders (Mervosh, Lu, & Swales, 2020) that were the result of the declared world-wide COVID-19 pandemic.

As a result, districts knew that it would be essential for them to find other ways to deliver the SEL that students so badly needed during the pandemic and that delivery needed to center on: 1) creating a connectedness with them and their families across a physical distance; 2) providing them with developmentally appropriate strategies for understanding and regulating their emotions; and 3) making certain that they were practicing self-care (Schlund & Weissberg, 2020). But, how could a school district provide this critical student SEL when schools were closed, people were quarantined, and the district just did not have the resources that they needed?

Teaching Student SEL during a Pandemic

In 2019, the Federal Communications Commission reported that 6.5% of the American population, lacked access to broadband internet, including wired and fixed wireless connections (Federal Communications Commission, 2019). For that same year the national poverty rate for

children under the age of 18 was 14.4% (United States Census Bureau, 2020) and specifically in Illinois, during the 2019-2020 school year, it was 48.5 % (Illinois State Report Card, n.d.-b). The Illinois statistic of 48.5 % is of particular interest because the most recent Illinois State Report Card (2019-2020 school year) for the K-8 rural school district studied, noted that it had a low income student percentage of 66.3% (Illinois State Report Card, n.d.-a), which is higher than both the national and state averages during that time period. Considering this characteristic as well as the added stressors that students are facing from the pandemic, it is clear that SEL programs needed to continue to further not only their academic achievement, but also to help them understand and learn how to cope with their emotions and stressors. It was especially imperative for SEL programming to continue as students were learning to navigate this new age of social distancing and masking.

Research reveals that there are at least 28 best practice instructional strategies that educators can use to remotely support student SEL needs during COVID-19. These various strategies include: 1) establishing a predictable routine (Ellerbeck, n.d.; Sparks, 2020; Kaufman, n.d.), 2) keeping some school traditions and rituals (Prothero, 2020), 3) providing opportunities for reflection (Ellerbeck, n.d.; Alexander & Endo, 2020; Waterford.org, 2018; Kaufman, n.d.), 4) performing check-ins (Ellerbeck, n.d.; Prothero, 2020; Kaufman, n.d.), 5) integrating SEL activities into other learning (Ellerbeck, n.d.; Sparks, 2020; Prothero, 2020), 6) building community (Alexander & Endo, 2020; Prothero, 2020), 7) asking students about their feelings (Alexander & Endo, 2020), 8) helping students become aware of their emotions and accepting of how they feel (Alexander & Endo, 2020), 9) providing resources that students may need (Alexander & Endo, 2020), 10) journaling (Alexander & Endo, 2020; Bouffard, Parkinson, Jacob & Jones, 2009; Waterford.org, 2018; Prothero, 2020), 11) promoting stress management techniques (Alexander & Endo, 2020; Kaufman, n.d.), 12 and 13) practicing self-care and sharing healthy lifestyle tips (Alexander & Endo, 2020), 14) forming strong bonds with others (Alexander & Endo, 2020; Kaufman, n.d.), 15) considering multiple perspectives (Alexander & Endo, 2020), 16) listening to each other's thoughts and experiences (Alexander & Endo, 2020), 17) teaching decision-making skills (Alexander & Endo, 2020; Waterford.org, 2018); 18) teaching problem-solving skills (Alexander & Endo, 2020; Waterford.org, 2018); 19 and 20) creating a sense of belonging and connection to the teacher and others (Alexander & Endo, 2020), 21) using simulations (Bouffard, Parkinson, Jacob & Jones, 2009; Waterford.org, 2018), 22) incorporating role play (Bouffard, Parkinson, Jacob & Jones, 2009; Waterford.org, 2018), 23) drawing (Bouffard, Parkinson, Jacob & Jones, 2009), 24) practicing mindfulness (Waterford.org, 2018; Kaufman, n.d.), 25) meditating (Waterford.org, 2018; Kaufman, n.d.), 26) participating in service projects (Waterford.org, 2018; Kaufman, n.d.), 27) engaging families (Kaufman, n.d.), and 28) talking about current events and what is going on in the world (Prothero, 2020; Kaufman, n.d.).

This paper explores how staff in one Illinois rural K-8 school district changed their instructional delivery of student SEL from in-person delivery to remote delivery using each of the 28 instructional strategies. It investigates the type of SEL opportunities all students were provided via these strategies as well as how much staff perceived themselves to have grown in their use of each strategy from March of 2020 to October of 2020.

The outcomes of this study are important to share because there is limited research about remote SEL program delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic. The reporting of this study also begins to fill the gap in the literature regarding how district staff can work together to provide pertinent and appropriate equity-based SEL learning for all students even when they are not able to be physically present with them.

The K-8 Illinois School District Case Study

Purpose of the Study and Study Questions

The purpose of this non-experimental case study was to examine how staff in one rural Illinois K-8 school district were able to craft equitable opportunities for students as they changed their SEL program delivery mode from in-person to remote learning due to state mandated school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020.

The questions that this study sought to answer were:

1) How did staff continue to deliver student SEL learning in a pandemic during the time that no one could be physically present in the district buildings?
2) What were staff perceptions of their own individual SEL skills so as to be able to role model those needed skills to students during the time that no one could be physically present in the district buildings?
3) What did staff do to practice self-care so they could be "at their best" and share those practices with students as part of their SEL curriculum during the time that no one could be physically present in the district buildings?

This paper reports only the findings pertaining to question one which explored how staff was able to continue to deliver student SEL learning and thus, provide equitable opportunities during the pandemic.

Frameworks Used for the Study

Theoretical Framework

Over the past 100 years there has been relatively little discussion about the theory or theories that underlie social-emotional education. Recent research, however, has indicated there are three overlapping forces that have created the foundation for current social emotional educational theory and practice that include cognitive behavioral theory, systems theory, and facets of psychoanalytic theory (Cohen & Sandy, 2003).

Cognitive behavioral theory shares that an individual's thoughts lead to certain feelings which then lead to certain behavioral responses. It underscores the concept that by changing thoughts feelings, ultimately, behaviors will change (Parvez, 2019). Systems theory is based on the principle that a complex system is made up of multiple smaller systems, and it is the interactions between these smaller systems that create that complex system (Wilkinson, 2011). Psychoanalytic theory explains that conscious, as well as unconscious emotions and thoughts shape who a person becomes, what he or she learns and how that affects his or her actions (Cohen & Sandy, 2003).

Conceptual Framework

Utilizing the three overlapping forces of cognitive behavioral theory, systems theory, and facets of psychoanalytic theory, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning

developed a conceptual framework for student social and emotional learning. This competency-based conceptual framework was used for this study and it was appropriate for use as CASEL states:

> SEL can be a powerful lever for creating caring, just, inclusive, and healthy communities that support all individuals in reaching their fullest potential. Systemic implementation of SEL both fosters and depends upon an equitable learning environment, where all students and adults feel respected, valued, and affirmed in their individual interests, talents, social identities, cultural values and backgrounds (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.-d).

Study Methodology

District Characteristics

The rural K-8 school district in this non-experimental quantitative case study is a two building district in central Illinois. Its most recent student population characteristics include 66.3% low income, 14% special education, 20.6% diversity, and a 24% mobility rate (Illinois State Report Card, n.d.-a).

Study Population and Sampling

This study used a total population purposive sampling technique with all 56 staff members in the district being invited to complete an online Google survey. Purposive sampling is often referred to as judgmental or expert sampling and this sampling method was appropriate for this study as all staff in the district share the common characteristic of working with the students who attend school there and one of the district's beliefs is based on the concept that all students have value.

Survey Instrument

Via an online Google survey all potential respondents were asked to respond to four demographic questions (gender, role, work location, and number of years of district experience), 40 categorical response self-perception questions (pertaining to feelings and level of adult SEL competencies), one checklist question that asked about self-care strategies, and two checklist questions asking which of the 28 best practice student SEL instructional strategies they implemented when schools closed in March of 2020 as well as when students returned to in-person learning in the fall.

Survey Validity

Before each of the 28 instructional strategies was included in the survey, it was affirmed that each addressed one of CASEL's research-based five core student SEL competency areas as well as one of the three research based competency areas as noted in the three Illinois student SEL goal areas. Nine of the instructional strategies addressed Illinois Goal 1 (self-awareness and self-management which are included in the CASEL competency areas), 13 strategies addressed Illinois Goal 2 (social awareness and relationships which are included in the CASEL competency areas)

and five strategies addressed Illinois Goal 3 (decision-making and responsible behaviors which are included in the CASEL competency areas).

The prototype of the survey was pilot tested with a small group of educators from another district and feedback was obtained as to the clarity of the directions, question simplicity, and the amount of time it took to complete the survey. Appropriate adjustments were then made to the survey before it was administered to staff in the school district of study.

Implementing the above described process is one way to ensure face validity. Face validity is also influenced by a respondent's view as to if the survey appears to really measure what it is supposed to measure. Respondents are more inclined to respond to a survey if they believe that the questions are meaningful and relevant (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorenson, 2010). The instructional strategies used in the study survey are all means by which student social and emotional competencies can be taught and strengthened. These competencies are research-based and delineated by CASEL and they are aligned in the three state-mandated Illinois goal areas for student social and emotional learning. Thus, face validity of the study survey was strengthened.

Survey Reliability

The Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20) is a special case of Cronbach's alpha that is used to measure reliability for a test with dichotomous variables. For the three part survey that was used in this study, the reliability of the section that contained the checklist questions (the focus of this study paper) was determined through the use of the KR-20. The checklist question section asked for "no" or "yes" responses with regards to if a staff member had chosen to implement each of the 28 instructional strategies when delivering remote student social and emotional learning during the study time period which occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The reliability statistic obtained from the KR-20 was .812. The criterion of 0.8 is often cited as a minimum alpha (Nunnally, 1994). Therefore, for this quantitative study, the reliability was appropriate.

Statistical Procedures Used

Descriptive data was reviewed for this study and it was disaggregated by role, gender, work location, and number of years of experience in the district. A gap analysis procedure was also used with the data relating to which best practice instructional strategies were used to deliver student SEL. The gap analysis examined if there was any staff growth in the use of each of the instructional strategies from March of 2020 to the fall of 2020.

Because the researcher was also interested in knowing if there were any nonrandom associations between the variables of the respondents' years of district experience and self-reported feelings of being overwhelmed or anxious, the Fisher Exact Test (an inferential statistical test) was used. This test was also used to determine if there were any nonrandom associations between the variables of work location and self-reported feelings of being overwhelmed or anxious. This test was selected as opposed to Chi Square due to the small number of respondents to the survey.

While the variables of gender and role were also considered, initial review of the data indicated that there was not much difference in the statistics for gender and role as an overwhelming number of respondents were female (80.8 %) and certified staff (80.8 %). Therefore, the Fisher Exact Test was not performed regarding the variables of gender and role.

Study Results

Respondents

With the potential respondent pool of 56 staff members, 32 chose to participate in the survey. However of those 32 surveys, there were nine that were incomplete thus leaving a total of 23 usable surveys which resulted in a 41.07% completion rate. The majority of survey completers were female (80.8%), certified staff (80.8 %), and worked at "Work Location 2" (57.7%). The majority of respondents had one to ten years of district experience (57.7%), with 38.5% of that group having one to five years of district experience, which included the 2020-2021 school year.

Question One Study Results:

The first question in this study (which is the focus of this paper) was related to how educators were able to continue to deliver student SEL learning during the time that no one could be physically present in the district buildings. This question specifically asked staff to self-report which of the 28 best practice SEL instructional strategies that they used starting March 14, 2020 through October 21, 2020. (At this point, it is also important to note that while district students returned to in-person learning on August 20, 2020, the district experienced a two-week quarantine shutdown in between August 20, 2020 and October 21, 2020.)

A gap analysis approach was used to determine if there was any growth in the use of each of the 28 best practice SEL instructional strategies. The overall range of results was –9% [helping students feel connected to the teacher (using technology, by phone, or in-person)] to a +26.8% [strengthening the sense of class community (technologically, by phone, or in-person)].

The overall gap analysis results revealed that there was perceived staff growth in the use of 21 of the 28 instructional strategies with the growth results ranging from +.20% to +26.8%. Table 1 shares data indicating that staff believed they had grown in their use of eight out of nine strategies that correlated to Illinois SEL Goal Area 1: "Developing self-awareness and management skills".

Table 1
Growth in the use of SEL Strategies Related to Illinois SEL Goal #1 (noted in percent)

Strategy	March use	October use	Growth
Talked to about feelings	40.0	54.2	14.2
Helped students with accept emotions	24.0	37.5	13.5
Asked students to journal	16.0	16.7	0.7
Point person for daily family checks	8.0	8.3	0.3
Kept certain school rituals	56.0	62.5	6.5
Taught strategies to cope with anxiety	20.0	20.8	0.8
Shared mindfulness techniques	24.0	25.0	1.0
Engaged students in the arts	20.0	25.0	5.0
Shared healthy lifestyle tips	28.0	20.8	-7.2

With regards to Illinois SEL Goal Area 2: "Using social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships", staff self-reported that they felt they had grown in the use of eight out of thirteen instructional strategies. (See Table 2.)

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Table 2
Growth in the use of SEL Strategies Related to Illinois SEL Goal #2 (noted in percent)

Strategy	March use	October use	Growth
Reassured students about the situation	40.0	62.5	22.5
Developed SEL lessons	4.0	4.2	0.2
Regular in-person student/family contact	12.0	29.2	17.2
Regular phone student/family contact	20.0	29.2	9.2
Regular technological family contact	68.0	75.0	7.0
Strengthened class community	44.0	70.8	26.8
Regular small group meetings	24.0	45.8	21.8
Regular whole class meetings	36.0	58.3	22.3
PD on trauma-informed practices	16.0	12.5	-3.5
Students felt connected to each other	48.0	41.7	-6.3
Students felt connected to teacher	84.0	75.0	-9.0
SEL resource web page for parents	16.0	8.3	-7.7
Developed podcasts	0.0	0.0	0.0

The data found in Table 3 which relates to Illinois SEL Goal 3—"Demonstrating decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts" presents those instructional strategies in which staff believed that they had exhibited growth.

Table 3
Growth in the use of SEL Strategies Related to Illinois SEL Goal #3 (noted in percent)

Strategy	March use	October use	Growth
Provided structure and routine	56.0	75.0	19.0
Engaged students in simulations	8.0	8.3	0.3
Taught problem-solving	12.0	25.0	13.0
Taught decision-making	16.0	20.8	4.8
Educated students about pandemic	28.0	37.5	9.5
Involved students in service project	12.0	4.2	-7.8

Specifically, the data in Table 3 delineates the five out of six instructional strategies for which there was perceived growth.

Contingency Matrices and Fisher Exact Test Results

There is no question that the COVID-19 pandemic and its offshoots (illnesses, isolation, deaths, financial struggles, etc.) continue to impact the health and well-being of all families across the United States. Numerous mental health experts believe that many people will experience and continue to experience increased stress, anxiety, depression, and trauma (Ellin, 2020). In May, The Washington Post declared that the pandemic was pushing us into a mental health crisis (Wan, 2020), with others stating that many teachers are experiencing burnout (Laskowski, 2020; Ali, 2020).

Considering this, the researcher was prompted to review the self-reported staff responses for the questions asking if they agreed or disagreed that they felt overwhelmed and had anxiety. The overall data showed that 88.4% of all respondents agreed that they were overwhelmed and 65.4% reported that they had anxiety.

The pertinent 2 x 2 contingency matrices were then examined, specifically the matrices with the percentages showing the levels of district experience (1-10 years and 11 to 16+ years) to respondent agreement or disagreement as to if they felt overwhelmed or had anxiety. The matrices with the percentages showing the work location to respondent agreement or disagreement as to if they felt overwhelmed or had anxiety were also reviewed.

When looking at the matrix data concerning district experience and feeling overwhelmed, 54% of the educators with 1 to 10 years of district experience agreed that they were overwhelmed while 4% of the educators in this same experience bracket disagreed. For those who had 11 to 16+ years of district experience, 34% agreed that they were overwhelmed with 8% disagreeing.

When looking at the matrix data about district experience and having anxiety, 46% of the educators with 1 to 10 years of district experience agreed they had feelings of anxiety while 12% of the educators in this same experience bracket disagreed. For those who had 11 to 16+ or years of district experience, 19% agreed that they had feelings of anxiety with 23% disagreeing.

When reviewing the matrix data about the work location and feeling overwhelmed, 38% of the educators at "Work Location 1" agreed that they were overwhelmed while 4% of the educators in this same building disagreed. For those who worked at "Work Location 2", 50% agreed that they were overwhelmed with 8% disagreeing.

Finally, when examining the matrix data about the work location and having anxiety, 31% of the educators at "Work Location 1" agreed that they had feelings of anxiety while 12% of the educators in this same building disagreed. For those who worked at "Work Location 2", 34% agreed that they had feelings of anxiety with 23% disagreeing.

Next, the Fisher Exact Test was performed at an alpha of .05 to find out if there were any nonrandom associations between feelings of being overwhelmed to district experience, feelings of anxiety to district experience, feelings of being overwhelmed to the work location, or feelings of anxiety to the work location. None of the Fisher Test results were statistically significant which indicated no associations between the variables. The results were as follows: 1) District experience by feeling overwhelmed was not significant with the Fisher Exact Test statistic value being 0.5558; 2) district experience by having anxiety was not significant with the Fisher Exact Test statistic value being 0.1034; 3) work location by feeling overwhelmed was not significant with the Fisher Exact Test statistic value being 1; and 4) work location by having anxiety was not significant with the Fisher Exact Test statistic value being 0.6828.

Discussion

Perceived Growth in Strategy Usage

The purpose of this case study was to determine how staff in one rural K-8 Illinois school district was able to provide equitable opportunities for student SEL remotely from March, 2020 through the beginning months of the 2020-2021 school year. The study also explored their perceived growth in the use of 28 best practice SEL remote instructional strategies during that time with that being of particular interest as the pandemic endured and delivery of education was ever-

evolving in the form of mandates requiring school closures, quarantines, masking, and social distancing for all education students and personnel.

Each of the SEL instructional strategies that staff used was aligned to one of the three student social and emotional learning goals as defined by the State of Illinois. Illinois SEL Goal 1 focuses on the positive enactment of self-awareness and self-management and nine of the instructional strategies used were aligned to this goal. Thirteen of the instructional strategies supported Illinois SEL Goal 2 which stresses both social awareness and self-management. Finally, Illinois SEL Goal 3 emphasizes decision-making and responsible behaviors and five of the instructional strategies reinforced this goal.

The overall gap analysis of the data gathered during the study time period demonstrates that staff feel they grew in 21 out of the 28 strategies with their growth results ranging from +.20% to 26.8%. They self-reported growth in their use of eight out of nine strategies in Illinois SEL Goal Area 1, eight out of thirteen strategies in Illinois Goal Area 2, and five out of six strategies in Illinois Goal Area 3. Their perceptions of growth are reasonable because from the initial pandemic shut-down in March of 2020 through October of 2020, educators continued to do what they have always done, care for our nation's children, by mentoring, supporting, and educating them, day in and day out, navigating the many uncertainties of the pandemic.

Perceived Stagnation or Regression in Strategy Usage

There were seven remaining instructional strategies out of the 28 for which staff perceived that their growth was either stagnant or they regressed. The lack of growth range for these seven strategies was –9% [helping students feel connected to the teacher (using technology, phone, or in person)] to 0% (developing podcasts on stress reduction/maintaining relationship strategies).

Research provides some likely answers as to this lack of perceived growth. Pre-pandemic, it shows that the teaching profession is already one of the most stressful professions (Busby, 2019). A recent report from the RAND Corporation suggests that teacher stress has increased during the 2020-2021 school year as a result of the pandemic indicating that one in four is considering leaving the profession, with the highest-ranked stressors being the mode of instruction and health concerns (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

While there were indeed pandemic-related health concerns as school districts closed in March of 2020, staff was at least sheltered at home while maintaining responsibility for their students' education, teaching remotely, whether they were using technology (with its own plethora of problems) or paper and pencil packets. Many found themselves simultaneously juggling their remote work with students, teaching and parenting their own children, caring for other loved ones (including those who may have fallen ill with COVID-19), and dealing with other tangential stresses brought on by the pandemic, such as financial problems.

When students returned for in-person learning in the fall of 2020, staff in the school district studied found themselves face-to-face on the frontline of the pandemic battle because no remote delivery options for student education were offered. While face-to-face interactions are central to providing any education, it is very risky during a pandemic (Jones & Kessler, 2020). As the pandemic continued and continues to persist and local, state, and national policies remain in flux, creating uncertainty and instability, educators are "playing academic catch-up" with their students while working longer hours (Ferren, 2021; Luthra, 2021). They now also have additional responsibilities such as contact tracing, keeping track of those who have had to quarantine (and when

those who were quarantined can come back), student desk sanitizing, and enforcing new rules such as social distancing and mask wearing (Cardoza, 2021).

Educators have seen their roles change significantly. In August of 2020, NBC News conducted an anonymous "Coronavirus Confessions" poll in which they received hundreds of responses with one stating "I thought I was a teacher. Oh no, a social worker. Wait, a police officer. Now a front-line health care worker. Just stop!!!" (Brand, 2020). Many poll responders also shared their anxiety and fear. Considering all of this, the regression of –9% growth in the strategy of helping students feel connected to the teacher by the use of in-person tactics or the use of telephone or technology, could be due to either educators or students fearing for their safety as a result of their in-person return to learning in the fall of 2020. The same is true for the lack of growth in the instructional strategy of helping students feel connected to each other through the use of technology, phone, or in person (--6.3% growth). Certainly, there were both staff and students who did not want to be present at school in-person as they were afraid, anxious, and may have had health concerns, thus hampering their abilities to renew and/or build upon any current or former feelings of connectedness.

Two of the seven instructional strategies for which no growth was perceived were technology-based and they included developing podcasts on stress reduction/maintaining relationship strategies (0% growth) and creating a parent webpage or Facebook page with resources (--7.7% growth). The lack of growth in creating a parent webpage, Facebook page, or podcast development could well be due to a lack of resources, training, and/or desire to learn the needed skills as a result of educator fatigue, having to work a longer work day, and/or everything else with which they were having to cope, both personally and professionally, that was pandemic-related.

The remaining three instructional strategies for which no growth was perceived include: 1) participating in professional learning on trauma-informed practices (--3.5% growth), 2) sharing healthy lifestyle tips (--7.2% growth), and 3) involving students in some type of project that helped others (--7.8% growth). Potential reasons for staff perceived lack of growth in these three strategies include: 1) high levels of feeling overwhelmed, 2) high levels of anxiety, 3) mandated mask wearing and social distancing with the in-person return to learning, 4) difficulty role modeling a healthy lifestyle and self-care at this time (due to an individual's circumstances), 5) limited or no opportunities to attend in-person professional development or to lead student service learning projects, and 6) sheer exhaustion.

From the study findings, it is also important to highlight that during a time when educator morale across the United States has been severely impacted by a pandemic that has dealt cruel blows to families, schools, and communities, the inferential statistical from the Fisher Exact Test results indicated that neither the educator's work location nor their level of district experience had any statistical significance in terms of contributing to their feelings of high anxiety or of being overwhelmed. Thus, it is entirely plausible that these feelings are the result of each individual's unique experiences during the pandemic.

Conclusion

The school district used in this study has a great percentage of students who fall into some type of marginalized category with a 14% special education student population and a 66.3% low income student population, equating a total of 80.3% marginalized students (Illinois State Report Card, 2019-2020, n.d.-a). Certainly, the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are intensified for marginalized students which include those from this school district (Woolf, 2020).

It makes no difference as to a student's "lot in life", each and every one of them deserves an education in which they are provided equitable opportunities for daily success. Social and emotional learning programs provide an essential foundation upon which to build those equitable opportunities. When these programs are implemented with the explicit goal of promoting educational equity and they are implemented with fidelity, they can establish a more inclusive and equity-based school community that promotes high-quality educational opportunities for all students, irrespective of their differences. These programs can "call out" bias and practices that close opportunity gaps for students.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, its unique challenges, and the changing societal and economic environments, providing support for student SEL has never been more critical whether students are learning in person or remotely. SEL can serve as a protective factor and decrease emotional distress (Taylor et al, 2017). Ensuring that students continue to be provided equitable opportunities for success through the continuation and reinforcement of social and emotional learning in a socially distanced world will require administrators and educators to think differently. The findings from this study provide some insights for educators as to how they are able to provide these much needed equitable opportunities and stability for students during these turbulent times through their continued delivery of a remote and low cost SEL program.

The results from this study are important because: 1) They begin to fill the gap in the literature regarding how district staff can work together to provide pertinent and appropriate equity-based social and emotional learning for all students even when they are not physically present; 2) they provide an understanding of the potential for low cost remote delivery of student social and emotional learning programs when schools are closed; 3) they provide an awareness regarding potential professional development needs for educators as to how they can successfully deliver student SEL instruction remotely through the use of specific instructional strategies; and 4) the study is one that can be easily replicated by any school district or any state, using the 28 best practice instructional strategies that were used in this study.

Student SEL programs must be implemented systemically, continuously, and with commitment, no matter what the conditions or the adversities that a school district is facing. These programs provide equitable opportunities for success for all students, even those who are the most marginalized. We must do this for all of our students because just as we are the keepers of their dreams now, they will be the keepers of ours in the future (Bullard & Taylor, 1993).

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