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Adam McKee  
amckee426@gmail.com

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**Social Emotional Learning in Early Elementary Education and the Impact on Academic  
and Behavioral Outcomes**

Adam McKee

School of Education, University of Washington – Tacoma

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Dr. José Rios

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## **Abstract**

This project explored the impact of direct instruction in social-emotional learning (SEL) at the elementary grade levels on academic and behavioral outcomes. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to analyze existing research in this area. The findings demonstrate a strong correlation between explicit SEL instruction in primary grades and positive improvements in both academic achievement and behavioral outcomes. This paper concludes that providing explicit instruction in essential SEL skills, including self-regulation, flexibility, and inhibition, is vital for promoting positive student outcomes in both academic achievement and behavior.

*Keywords:* Social emotional learning, academic outcomes, student behavior, curriculum, explicit instruction, executive functioning

## **Social Emotional Learning in Early Elementary Education and the Impact on Academic and Behavioral Outcomes**

Throughout my time working in education, I have observed a trend expressed by teachers and other school faculty regarding students lacking fundamental social skills, emotional regulation skills, and positive self-image. Anecdotally, these skills are deficient in numbers not seen previously. In the past eighteen months, I have witnessed numerous students facing challenges when interacting with other students, teachers, or school faculty due to behavior issues. A significant portion of these students struggle to remain in the classroom environment and do not meet the academic standards for their respective grade levels.

Various factors have been suggested as contributing to the increase of this student profile, including COVID-19 and the subsequent disruption of in-person instruction, shifts in parenting culture, and changes in school discipline policy (Vogelbacher & Attig, 2022). Consequently, SEL has emerged as a buzzword in conversations with school administration, education literature, and parents. Simultaneously there continues to be a pointed emphasis on academic rigor, an increase in instructional time devoted to academic subjects, and preparing students for standardized assessments. This causes me to consider how fostering a robust SEL curriculum can balance academic rigor and whether each domain can mutually reinforce the other.

My research seeks to address the challenges students lacking social-emotional skills face in schools where SEL instruction is lacking. Specifically, my aim is to explore whether allocating a greater proportion of students' daily schedules to evidence-based SEL instruction can yield improved academic outcomes. By investigating the potential link between increased exposure to SEL instruction and academic performance, I hope to understand the value of integrating SEL instruction into the academic framework. This project intends to discover

effective practices that balance academic rigor and social-emotional well-being, helping to facilitate a more holistic and comprehensive approach to student development.

### **Local Connection**

The school district I work for places a strong emphasis on maximizing academic instructional time. The district achieves this through what they call a guaranteed and viable curriculum. This means standardized and comprehensive curriculum that is consistent district wide. For example, a second-grade student will learn the exact same content regardless of which class or which school they are in within the district. On any given day students in respective grade bands receive identical content in both math and English language arts (ELA). The district prides itself on maintaining rigorous academic instruction, with math and ELA blocks taking up the majority of instructional minutes in the schedule.

While the district acknowledges the importance of SEL instruction in presentations to parents and teachers, the reality is minimal time is allocated for SEL instruction in the schedule. In contrast to the math and ELA curriculum, there exists no universally implemented SEL curriculum within the district or guidance on how to teach SEL. In practice, teachers are on their own to provide SEL instruction as they see fit, as long as it does not interfere with the academic instructional minutes guaranteed by the schedule.

In addition to the lack of SEL instructional opportunities, my school is currently grappling with a significant number of students with behavior challenges, which poses a challenge in effectively managing classroom and school-wide expectations. These student behaviors affect not only teachers' ability to adhere to the pacing guide, but also hinders other students' abilities to learn effectively with disruptions ongoing in the classroom. Currently,

teachers use various strategies such as relocating disruptive students into the hall to work independently or frequently calling for administrative support with student de-escalation. Consequently, students with disruptive behaviors frequently find themselves removed from the classroom environment thus impeding their access to essential academic content. As a result, students are falling behind academically due, in part, to their behavior related difficulties.

### **Regional Connection**

Regionally there are districts and individual schools with similar dynamics. My student teaching experience took place in a lower-income school district with a diverse student body encompassing various socioeconomic, cultural, and racial backgrounds. However, the issues and concerns expressed by the staff in my student teaching experience mirrored those observed in my current school setting. While the school did not employ a guaranteed and viable curriculum, the priorities of the school district also emphasized ELA and math with limited time for SEL instruction. The prevailing sentiment expressed by experienced teachers and administration was that increasing numbers of students were struggling socially and emotionally, resulting in academic difficulties for all students. Unfortunately, no clear plan or direction was in place for effectively addressing these challenges to support students.

### **National Connection**

COVID-19 affected public schools nationwide. The absence of in-person instruction resulted in students missing out on two years of crucial educational experiences, disrupted their lives and provided significant challenges to social-emotional development (Vogelbacher & Attig, 2022). Further, the collective trauma of having a deadly and novel virus emerge during a vulnerable time in students' lives, left a lasting impact on students' sense of security and

emotional coping skills. As schools continue to recalibrate to meet students at their current level, it is critical to find the appropriate balance of instruction to support student development academically, socially, and emotionally.

### **Importance**

As a special education teacher, I play a critical role in supporting students with significant behavior challenges and advocating for effective behavior and academic interventions. Growing caseload numbers and a tendency to default to special education referrals for students with behavioral challenges, highlight the need for proactive intervention strategies to address behavior in the general education setting. Many students on my caseload have minutes on their IEP to receive specially designed instruction in emotional self-regulation, social awareness, or self-management. It is important to help students and fellow teachers understand and implement effective interventions before special education referrals are considered.

### **Importance to Students**

Students learn best when they feel safe, secure, and welcome. Unfortunately, many students do not feel this way at school, as evidenced by their behavioral challenges. This creates a ripple effect where these students' actions contribute to an atmosphere of insecurity. Consequently, these students cause others to feel unsafe and unwelcome. This type of environment is detrimental to students' well-being and hampers their potential for success. However, increasing SEL instruction with intentionality can foster environments that aid students' social awareness and improve their ability to regulate and manage themselves. As a result, these efforts contribute to improved social and academic classroom environments.

## **Importance to Community**

I am a big believer in the importance of public education as a mechanism to benefit communities. The purpose of public education is to prepare students to become responsible and effective citizens (Cohen, 2006). When members of the community are educated and well-adjusted, all individuals within that community benefit. Therefore, I want the school I teach at to be a positive agent of change in the community, fostering the development of educated and well-adjusted individuals who possess the ability to think critically, problem solve, and socially integrate within their community.

## **Purpose and Focal Questions**

The purpose of this project is to explore how SEL relates to students' academic success in the classroom and their overall social and behavioral development. More importantly, I want to investigate if SEL interventions are in fact directly helpful to students academically and determine when and how to implement them for maximum effectiveness. Given this purpose, the focal questions for this project are as follows:

- How does increasing SEL minutes affect overall student development?
- What is the relationship between social emotional learning and academic outcomes?
- How does social emotional learning affect long term benefits for student outcomes?

## **Literature Review**

Social-emotional learning in schools, commonly referred to as SEL, is a process in which students develop social awareness, relationship building, self-regulation, goal setting, and executive functioning skills (OPSI, 2023). It is a key piece of the whole child education



movement, which focuses on developing students beyond just reading, writing, and math, but also competency in social skills, emotional regulation, and ethical behavior (Burroughs & Barkauskas, 2017). Washington State requires school districts to utilize one of their state-funded professional learning days to train staff on SEL and SEL-related topics (OPSI, 2023).

Additionally, Washington State has SEL standards, benchmarks, and indicators to ensure effective SEL implementation across school districts statewide. The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction recognizes SEL as an essential and integral part of a student's educational experience.

While state standards exist, there is considerable variance in how SEL is implemented from district to district and, in many cases, from school to school. Research has indicated that SEL is important for overall student outcomes, but how much it supports students' academic achievement and behavior is still a question researchers are studying (Schonfield et al., 2015). Questions that continue to be asked are what type of SEL instruction should be implemented, how much, and when SEL instruction should occur.

For teachers and administrators in the field, understanding what SEL instruction should look like, how teachers should be trained, and what the most impactful times to deliver the instruction are questions that are important to consider (Mahoney et al., 2021). Schools have a mission to help their students achieve their best possible outcomes. Understanding how SEL plays a role in this goal can help school administrators best determine how much time and what kind of SEL instruction should be implemented.

Teachers and other school faculty have conveyed that students lack fundamental social skills, emotional regulation skills, and positive self-image at a rate that, anecdotally, has not been seen prior to COVID-19. Teachers describe students as having difficulty socializing with other

students and cooperating with teachers and school faculty due to conduct and other behavior issues and struggled to return to a school community environment since COVID-19 (Cetin, 2022). Many of these students are not at grade level academically and struggle to stay in the classroom throughout the day. This project explores why students are struggling and how teachers and school administration can help these students access and function in their educational environments. By examining SEL interventions in primary and early elementary grade levels and students' short and long-term academic outcomes, this project aims to see how SEL impacts students' academic and behavioral success in both the short and long term.

There have been several ideas about why students struggle in the current education climate. COVID-19 and missed in-person instruction, increased student and teacher stress, changes in parenting styles, and school discipline policies are some of the speculated reasons (Cetin, 2022). SEL has become a catchword in educational literature and conversations with school administration and parents. Simultaneously, many school districts continue to focus on academic rigor, increasing and maximizing academic instructional time for students to recoup for lost in-person instruction and preparing students for standardized achievement tests. A pressing question is how to intentionally implement an effective SEL curriculum to balance the demand for academic rigor in many districts and with many families (Mahoney et al., 2021). Further, can SEL instruction benefit the educational outcomes districts and families want?

Research has identified a few ways SEL interventions benefit students' behavioral and academic outcomes. First, designated SEL minutes are essential to behavioral effects in early elementary education, and a decrease in some academic minutes to facilitate SEL instruction does not adversely impact academic outcomes (Hart et al., 2020). Second, executive functioning skills increase with direct SEL instruction and interventions, and improved executive functioning

contributes to academic success through the ability to self-manage, prioritize, and persevere through adverse situations (Kats Gold et al., 2021) Third, behaviors and attitudes affect academic and social success. Students with SEL instruction in early childhood have more well-adjusted behaviors, better peer relationships, and less aggression and hostility (Jones et al., 2010). Also, classrooms with fewer adverse behaviors have better outcomes for all students, not just those with behaviors (Powers & Bierman, 2013). Fourth, early SEL intervention shows positive distal or related outcomes, such as lower special education referrals for intermediate-grade students (McCormick et al., 2019). This review of the literature will look at each of these themes and the discussion taking place in the research. It will also look at questions still being asked and what the next steps in research might be.

### **SEL Academic Minutes for Students**

When looking at SEL implementation in schools, one pressing question is how much time should be devoted to SEL instruction. Schools want to produce students who produce high test scores and achieve academically, so a natural response is to emphasize academic instruction more. This outlook can result in high academic instructional minutes, or minutes during the scheduled school day spent on reading, writing, and math instruction. Schools must also provide specific amounts of time in the day for recess, lunch, and specialists like library, music, and physical education. Considering the importance of academic instruction and required minutes for non-academic times, SEL instruction can be deemphasized and fit into the schedule at ineffective times or for an ineffective duration.

While it may seem counterintuitive that decreasing academic minutes to add more SEL instructional time would benefit academic outcomes, research indicates that explicitly taught SEL programs improved students' social skills, attitudes toward school, and student approaches

to learning (Kats Gold et al., 2021). The better the student was able to regulate their own emotions, the better productivity the student had in class. The subsequent result was an increase in students' actual benefit from their academic instruction in the classroom (Graziano et al., 2007).

Specific SEL curriculums have evidence to support their effectiveness and success in improving students' abilities to function in a classroom setting. For example, implementing SEL programs like "Second Step" proved beneficial in reducing problem behaviors in the classroom and increasing students' social competence when implemented (Low et al., 2019). The Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) also showed noticeable improvement for first and second graders in areas of self-control, cooperation, responsibility, and empathy when scripted lessons were implemented for 20-30 minutes per day (Hart et al., 2020). Other programs also demonstrated effectiveness in improving students' social skills and decreasing depression and aggression, such as the 4R's program (Jones et al., 2010).

Studies have also shown that replacing a portion of academic instructional time with SEL instruction does not adversely impact student achievement in that academic area (Hart et al., 2020). For example, students who received explicit universal SEL instruction beginning in second grade for 20-30 minutes a day experienced no appreciable statistical difference in test scores for reading and math through 5<sup>th</sup> grade despite lost academic instructional time compared to the group of students who received no SEL intervention (Hart et al., 2020). This suggests that implementation of SEL instruction up to 30 minutes does not adversely affect academic achievement. Hart in response asks the question if SEL programs are worth the financial and time investment considering the lack of change in test scores.

Other studies looked at specific SEL curriculums, such as Brown et al. (2010), to determine their impact on short-term academic outcomes. Brown found that explicitly taught SEL curriculums had positive effects on lowering student levels of depression, hostility, and aggression, but did not have any significant change in student academics. However, there is evidence to support that implementing some SEL curriculums actually improve academic outcomes as evidenced by students receiving the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum. In a 3-year longitudinal study, students demonstrated an increased proficiency in academic areas or reading, writing and math. (Schonfield et al., 2015). While short-term academic gains are not always visible, evidence shows that decreasing adverse student behaviors sets the stage for increased student focus and engagement during academic instructional time.

Despite the research indicating that lost instructional time does not adversely affect state test scores, there still seems to be some debate about how much SEL instruction improves academic achievement. These discussions raise the question, does it matter if academic outcomes increase if behavioral outcomes improve? Part of educating the whole child is educating children to function within a society by learning to function as part of a community. The evidence shows that increased SEL minutes positively affect children behaviorally, by reducing feelings of anxiety, depression, and student hostility, with no adverse impact on academics (Jones et al., 2010).

### **Executive Functioning**

Students' self-management and executive functioning skills, or abilities to prioritize, plan, monitor, and achieve goals, are critical to academic success. Key executive functions include inhibition, working memory, and cognitive shifting. (Kats-Gold et al., 2021). Inhibition is the

ability to control and modify one's emotional responses to situations. Working memory refers to the ability to manage and recall specific information in the short term. Cognitive shifting is the ability to be flexible in responses, actions, and behaviors in various situations. Additionally, classroom participation, assignment completion, and communication with adults and peers contribute to success in school and require executive functioning skills to be competent. Without these skills, it is difficult for students to function within a school environment and access instruction.

The importance of developing these skills is critical to academic success. To participate and be successful in even the early stages of school, students need to develop their foundational executive functioning skills, such as emotional regulation, flexibility, and self-management. Students in preschool and kindergarten are required to demonstrate skills such as sitting quietly, following directions, taking turns talking, working as part of a group, and getting along with peers to be successful. These tasks require students to utilize inhibition, cognitive shifting skills, and flexibility at an early age. From this point, students entering the primary elementary grades must build upon these skills of functioning in a classroom community and apply them to more complex social interactions and progressively challenging academic tasks. Bettancourt found that students who were not socially and behaviorally ready for kindergarten were at higher risk of needing additional academic supports, grade retention, and suspension by fourth grade (Bettancourt et al., 2017). The need for this skill development is especially prominent for boys. DiPrete (2012) found that girls are generally more developed socially and behaviorally than boys and carry an advantage over boys in their approach to learning over the first six years of their educational experience.

Denham and Brown (2010) found that kindergarteners with poor self-management and learning skills fell behind those with stronger skills and formed a substantial gap in self-regulation, self-awareness, and self-perceived academic confidence by just second grade. Bernard (2006) found that students with disabilities and academic achievement delays, had low levels of work persistence and poor organizational skills. Strength in these traits is critical to a student's ability to seek out additional resources when needed and be successful in a typical school environment. As students' progress to intermediate and secondary grades and the social and academic demands become more challenging and complex, the resulting gap will widen exponentially without the appropriate intervention. These data suggest that early SEL intervention at the primary level is critical to prevent noticeable social and academic achievement gaps for students.

The discussed evidence demonstrates that SEL interventions are critical at a young age. Executive function development and SEL instruction appear from the research to perhaps be more critical at these early stages than academic instruction. DiMaggio et al., (2016) found that emotional knowledge, expression, and regulation were vitally important to students learning. Kats Gold et al. (2021) found universally taught SEL curriculum "I can succeed for Preschool" was successful at increasing preschoolers' executive functioning skills and receptive emotional knowledge and showed a reduction in students' internalizing problems. Among the areas of executive functioning that showed significant improvement were self-control and flexibility, both skills necessary for successful functioning within a classroom environment. Internalized behaviors like anxiety, loneliness, and poor self-esteem, linked to learning difficulty (Verboom et al., 2014), were also reduced.

Emotional regulation is one of young children's most critical executive functioning skills. Graziano et al. (2007) found that emotional regulation abilities in kindergartners were a key indicator of early academic success in math and literacy. Increased emotional regulation not only improved standardized test scores but also improved teacher rated classroom performance. In a study of kindergarteners in Michigan, it was found that emotional regulation was positively correlated with math skills and phonological awareness (Matthews et al., 2009). Emotional regulation is crucial for early learners as they continually encounter new and novel concepts and information. Encountering new information and being challenged consistently to learn new things can bring up emotions of anxiety and frustration. Being able to regulate these emotions and utilize coping skills effectively predicts how well a student can respond to completing academic work with accuracy.

While the research indicates the benefits of early SEL intervention and curriculum implementation on students' executive functioning and academic skills, there continues to be a disconnect between the research and the actual implementation of research-based SEL programs by school policymakers (Dehnam & Brown, 2010). Assessments exist to measure the skills of students in decoding and fluency for reading, grammar, spelling in writing, and computation and application of math concepts. These assessments help to show where a student is succeeding and areas in which they may require additional support. Given that research has demonstrated that social-emotional skills are also essential to student success, it would seem that having a reliable means to assess students' social emotional skills would be necessary. However, despite researchers having assessments to evaluate social emotional skills, there is not a widely used or standardized way for educators to measure their students' skills in this domain. A question remains of how to bridge the gap between research and evidence showing the importance of



social emotional skills on academic success, and policymakers for education on training for teachers in SEL instruction and implementation of universal SEL instruction and assessment.

### **Behaviors and Attitudes**

Behaviors and attitudes can substantially affect student academic achievement, not just for students who exhibit behavioral challenges but also for students who inhabit the same classroom or learning environment (Abry et al., 2017). For example, classrooms with high levels of adverse behaviors have been shown to produce a collective group of students with high levels of externalized and internalized feelings of aggression, depression, and anxiety that can be displayed through peer conflict, withdrawal, and physical and verbal aggression. Conversely, classrooms with low levels of student misconduct result in better behavioral and academic outcomes for all students, even those who do not display externalized aggression or depression. Based on this research, understanding how SEL instruction relates to student behaviors and attitudes is critical to creating a more conducive learning environment and benefiting all students' academic outcomes.

Studies have indicated that aggressive and disruptive behaviors can be related to peer relations (Powers & Bierman, 2013). This means that students who externalize aggression and engage in disruptive behavior are more likely to develop friendships with students who exhibit aggressive and disruptive behavior. Understanding that aggressive behaviors group together, decreasing aggressive behaviors in a classroom setting would seem imperative to improving academic outcomes for a given class. Campbell et al. (2006) found that aggression trajectories rather than aggression levels were better indicators of later struggles academically. That is to say, children with moderate levels of aggression who show a decreasing frequency are more likely to experience positive academic and social outcomes in schools than children who show low, but

stable levels of aggression. Campbell found it is not necessarily the level of aggression output by the child that is indicative of their future success, but rather the direction those aggressive tendencies are trending. As such, classroom and school environments with many aggressive-disruptive behaviors will likely experience increased numbers of aggressive students through peer relationships without implementing SEL interventions to alter and reduce aggressive students' aggressive tendencies regardless of their aggression levels.

When research based SEL curriculums or interventions were implemented, student hostility, aggression, and depression were all positively impacted. Students with the highest reported disruptive behavior levels experienced the most significant positive behavior change during these interventions (Jones et al., 2010). In one study, a simple check-in, check-out SEL intervention reduced disruptive behaviors for the study group by 17.5 % over the course of the study (Todd et al., 2008). As mentioned earlier, SEL curriculums such as Second Step have also been shown to decrease levels of aggression in students who had previously exhibited aggressive tendencies (Low et al., 2019). These studies provide evidence that schoolwide implemented SEL curriculum and targeted SEL interventions positively affect student behaviors and attitudes and adverse classroom environments.

### **Special Education Referrals and Distal Outcomes**

Considering the effects of SEL interventions, it is important to consider the immediate and short-term impacts and the long-term and distal effects. One area of interest is how early SEL intervention affects special education referrals. Many students are referred for special education for academic specially designed instruction (SDI) in conjunction with social emotional instruction, and often many special education students have only areas of SDI for social emotional behavior. Understanding that early SEL intervention positively impacts young

students' social-emotional skills, it is worth investigating how early SEL intervention affects special education referrals for students later when they enter the intermediate grade levels.

Several studies examined how early SEL interventions affected later grade-level student outcomes, including special education referrals. Darney et al. (2013) looked at students with various academic and behavioral challenges entering first grade. The study found that students who experienced academic and behavioral difficulties in first grade were at an increased risk for adverse long-term outcomes by sixth grade, such as increased likelihood for special education referrals, academic failure, school suspensions, and deviant behavior. In fact, a study found that students who lacked school readiness skills in kindergarten were retained at their highest rate before third grade primarily for academic reasons (Davoudzadeh et al., 2015).

Another study found that students who received SEL instruction of the “INSIGHTS” SEL curriculum beginning in kindergarten were 5% less likely to receive a special education referral by fifth grade than those who did not receive the intervention (McCormick et al., 2019). Jones et al. (2015), looked at kindergarten SEL skills but then looked at outcomes beyond intermediate grades up to two decades later in adulthood. The results indicate that SEL competency in kindergarten is critically linked to overall outcomes, not just academic achievement, but employment, substance abuse, and mental well-being. Prosocial skills at early ages prove to be an accurate predictor for later academic outcomes. This information points to the idea that students with challenging behaviors can achieve more positive outcomes through specific SEL interventions and by creating a socially inclusive environment for students of all behavior types. (McGuire & Meadan, 2020).

These studies support the idea that children who present persistent challenging behaviors are at greater risk for special education referrals, grade level retention, and societal

consequences. Hibel et al. (2010) found that while early school success accurately predicted later academic achievement, social economic status (SES) also played a significant factor. Hibel found that students in special education were disproportionately represented by students who were identified as low SES or from ethnic minority heritage. This raises the question of how we measure social emotional skills. Are social emotional skills judged differently depending on culture? Or are students of minority heritage behind in social emotional development because of their SES status? This raises questions outside of the educational realm about ethnicity and SES relationships. In any case, the research indicates that SEL interventions are impactful in reducing special education referrals for individual students and school communities. It also supports the idea that fostering and developing positive student behaviors is critical to their success in school and beyond.

## **Conclusion**

The growing body of research on SEL and its role in education indicates that it is pivotal in providing positive academic and social outcomes for individual students, schools, and the greater community. In all four of the areas discussed, research indicates that increasing SEL instruction quality and time is beneficial for the student, particularly at the early stages of development. The research is clear that SEL deficits as early as kindergarten can have long lasting and impactful effects on students and their trajectory in social and academic outcomes. Questions such as what specific types of SEL interventions are most effective, how to accurately and uniformly assess social emotional skills in students, and how much time in a school schedule should be devoted specifically to SEL instruction remain. However, the broader question of whether SEL instruction benefits academic and social outcomes appears clear. Early SEL intervention is a net positive for students, schools, and communities.

## **Action Plan**

This paper explores the importance of SEL instruction on short- and long-term student outcomes, including academic and behavioral. The focal question is what is the relationship between explicitly taught SEL curriculum and those mentioned areas of student development. Related questions are how does increasing SEL instructional minutes affect overall student development? What is the relationship between SEL and academic outcomes? Finally, how does SEL affect long-term outcomes for students? The action plan below categorizes into four themes based on my research. Those themes are minutes spent on SEL instruction in the classroom, SEL and executive functioning skill development, SEL effects on student behaviors and attitudes, and SEL and its relationship to long-term student outcomes. The tables below are broken into these four themes, with three categories in each table. The categories summarize what the research says, what the school I currently work at has in place, and my recommendations moving forward based on my research.

### **Minutes Spent on SEL Instruction in the Classroom**

Table 1 summarizes the research regarding time spent in the classroom explicitly teaching an SEL curriculum versus teaching academic subjects such as English language arts (ELA) and math. The research indicated that an increase in SEL instructional time and a decrease in rigorous academic instruction do not adversely affect student outcomes in academic subjects (Hart et al., 2020). Additionally, the research indicates that explicitly taught SEL instruction improves student attitudes toward school, social skills, and development and improves student learning approaches (Kats Gold et al., 2021).

**Table 1***Minutes Spent on SEL Instruction in the Classroom*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Reduction in academic minutes does not adversely affect academic achievement (Hart et al., 2020).	My district prioritizes academic learning. The district schedules Math and ELA to take up the vast majority of instructional minutes during the day with 90 minute uninterrupted math and ELA blocks.	Create shorter lesson blocks and add a 30–45-minute SEL block.
Explicitly taught SEL programs improve students' social skills, attitudes toward school, and student approaches to learning (Kats Gold, 2021).	School offers SEL time (5 – 10 minutes daily) but no explicit curriculum.	Introduce explicit curriculum for teachers to teach such as Second Step.

**SEL and executive functioning skill development**

Table 2 summarizes how SEL instruction impacts the development of executive functioning skills. The research shows that direct and explicit SEL instruction improves students' executive functioning skills (Kats Gold, 2021). The research also indicates that students with social/emotional/behavioral skill deficits at ages as young as kindergarten are at significantly higher risk for grade retention, need for additional academic supports, and suspension by intermediate grades. The research indicates that early SEL intervention is at least as important, if not more important, than academic interventions in early primary education. Further, despite the detailed research on the importance of early SEL instruction, there is a disconnect between researchers and school policymakers, with policymakers continuing to focus more heavily on rigorous academics and state test scores (Denham and Brown, 2010).

**Table 2***SEL and executive functioning skill development*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Emotional regulation is one of a young child's most critical executive functioning skills (Graziano et al. 2007).	My school does offer more unstructured socialization time for Kindergartners than other grades offering a 45-minute free choice block at end of the day.	Keep the current time allotted for socialization but implement explicitly taught SEL lessons at the beginning of the block (20 min.) remaining time can stay free choice and provide an opportunity for students to work on learned SEL skills.
Research indicates the benefits of early SEL intervention and curriculum implementation on students' executive functioning and academic skills (Kats Gold et al. 2021).	Some SEL time is provided for kindergarten classes throughout the day (15 min.) No uniform curriculum is provided to teachers.	Provide teachers with specific evidence based SEL curriculum to teach.
There continues to be a disconnect between the research and the actual implementation of research-based SEL programs by school policymakers (Dehnam & Brown, 2010).	The district provides slideshows for teachers to review intermittently during the year and hallway posters for student reminders.	Implement evidence based SEL curriculum, or update district created slides to be more robust with daily lessons.

**SEL Effects on Student Behaviors and Attitudes**

Table 3 summarizes how direct and explicit SEL instruction affects student behaviors and attitudes in school. The research discusses how classroom environments with high levels of high behaviors have been shown to produce a collective of individuals with both internalized and externalized expressions of aggression, depression and anxiety. This can manifest as aggression toward other students, teachers, and staff, self-harm, and negative self-perceptions. The research also indicates that the trajectory of aggression is more indicative of potential struggles than the level of aggression. Meaning a student with high levels of aggression who is able to lower the

frequency of aggression is lower risk for academic struggles than a student with low, but consistent levels of aggressive behavior.

**Table 3**

*SEL Effects on Student Behaviors and Attitudes*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Classrooms with high levels of adverse behaviors have been shown to produce a collective group of students with high levels of externalized and internalized feelings of aggression, depression, and anxiety (Abry et al., 2017).	My school works to balance classes so that there is a wide range of academic levels, socioeconomic backgrounds, and documented behaviors in each classroom.	Continue working to make sure kids with previous displays of behavior are not grouped together. Provide high structure environments to ensure students mitigate adverse classroom behaviors.
Students who externalize aggression and engage in disruptive behavior are more likely to develop friendships with students who exhibit aggressive and disruptive behavior (Powers & Bierman, 2013).	The school provides extra supports for students who exhibit aggression and disruptive behaviors, such as jobs helping with kitchen and recess staff, and helping kindergarten teachers with small tasks to earn positive attention and provide students with sense of accomplishment and self-worth.	I recommend providing more social groups in the context of lunch bunches or other social groups facilitated by the school counselor that can provide students with aggressive behaviors an opportunity to interact with other students outside of a classroom environment to develop diverse peer relationships.
Aggression trajectories rather than aggression levels were better indicators of later struggles academically (Campbell et al., 2006).	Students with frequent aggressive tendencies receive more support from administrators and have individualized behavior reinforcement plans established for them.	Track Kindergarten behaviors to identify which students may be struggling with aggression or behind in social skills. Ensure those students receive intensive behavior supports and individualized plans as soon as consistency is established to work on lowering trajectory.



## SEL and Its Relationship to Long Term Student Outcomes

Table 4 summarizes how SEL instruction in primary grades relates to long term students outcomes, academically, behaviorally, and related outcomes. The research indicates that students who enter first grade with academic and behavioral deficits at are increased risk for special education referrals, suspensions, and deviant behavior by sixth grade (Darney et al., 2013). However early SEL interventions at the primary level result in lower special education referrals at the intermediate grade levels. Additionally, students' social skills in primary grades appeared to be a predictor of student outcomes beyond intermediate grade levels, predicting individual success at the secondary and post-secondary levels (Jones et al., 2015)

**Table 4**

### *SEL and Its Relationship to Long Term Student Outcomes*

Research	Practice	Recommendation
Early SEL intervention positively impacts young students' social-emotional skills (McCormick et al., 2019).	Primary grade levels receive short amounts of SEL time on daily basis (5-15 min.) No specific intervention or curriculum used across staff	Implement a school wide evidence based SEL curriculum for 30 min. daily.
Students who experienced academic and behavioral difficulties in first grade were at an increased risk for adverse long-term outcomes by sixth grade (Darney et al., 2013).	Students who have academic or behavioral difficulties can be referred to Child Study Team (CST) which trials interventions in the general education setting.	Ensure that increased SEL instruction is part of a CST intervention plan for students referred whether academic or behavioral.
Students who receive specific and targeted SEL instruction in kindergarten are less likely	Some SEL time is provided for kindergarten classes throughout the day (15 min.)	Provide teachers with specific evidence based SEL curriculum to teach.

to be referred for special education in middle school (McCormick et al., 2019)	No uniform curriculum provided to teachers.	
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## Conclusion

Tables 1-4 discuss different aspects of social emotional learning in schools and how schools implement SEL. However, all four themes have two common threads. The first is to increase the amount of time SEL instruction is taking place. Schools are currently not devoting significant instructional time to SEL, despite the research touting its importance in student development.

Secondly, schools would benefit from investing in specific SEL curriculums to be explicitly taught to their students during SEL instructional times. Many teachers find themselves on their own when it comes to teaching SEL with little to no guidance. Several evidence based SEL curriculums are available to schools and are proven to increase prosocial skills in students who receive consistent instruction in SEL.

## Discussion of Findings

Social emotional and behavioral skills are foundational to functioning effectively in a school environment. Strong social skills and emotional regulation abilities allow students to navigate social interactions with their peers, respond appropriately to social conflict, and engage in positive behaviors that contribute to an effective learning environment. These skills contribute to positive student outcomes by helping students form positive relationships with peers and adults, manage their behavior, and learn effectively. Without these skills, students may struggle to follow school expectations, feel socially isolated, and experience academic difficulties, which can negatively contribute to their personal and academic growth.

Working in schools, I have observed many students lacking these skills. Additionally, experienced teachers and other school faculty have expressed to me that students lack fundamental social skills, emotional regulation skills, and positive self-image at a level they have not seen previously. In my observation, many of the students who lack these social, emotional, and behavioral skills struggle to stay in the classroom during the day and are significantly behind their same age peers academically. Simultaneously, schools focus on improving student test scores, maintaining academic rigor, and maximizing academic instructional time. This combination of events and policies contributes to an environment where students lacking fundamental social skills and emotional regulation fall behind their peers, making it difficult for them to catch up academically.

This paper aims to examine the role social emotional behavior skills play in student outcomes academically and holistically in student success. More specifically, what is the relationship between early intervention in social emotional behavioral skills and overall student outcomes? The focal questions of this project are: How does teaching explicit social, emotional, and behavioral curriculum at an early age affect students' overall development? How does explicit SEL learning affect student outcomes academically and behaviorally? Finally, what relationship does explicit SEL instruction have to long term student outcomes?

In my research, I identified four themes related to my questions. Those are 1) SEL instructional minutes for students, 2) Student executive functioning, 3) Student behaviors and attitudes, and 4) Special Education Referrals and distal outcomes. These four areas of research provide insight into the benefits of early SEL instruction and provide evidence that can help us answer the focal questions of this project.

## **SEL Academic Minutes**

The first area I investigated was how increasing SEL instructional time might affect student academic outcomes. The district I currently teach in highly values reading, writing, and math instructional time. The district has a guaranteed and viable curriculum throughout the district. You could walk into two separate second grade classrooms anywhere in the district on any given day, and the students would be learning the same lesson and completing the same work.

The academic minutes served are also uniform throughout the district in these areas, taking up most of the student's day. For example, in a 360 minute, or six-hour day, a first-grade class in my district spends 130 minutes a day on reading instruction, and 120 minutes a day on Math instruction. That is 70% of a student's day spent in core math or reading instruction. The remaining minutes of the day are split up into 40 minutes of recess, 30 minutes for specialist, 25 minutes for lunch and only 15 minutes left over for SEL instruction.

Interestingly the school district administrators tout the importance of SEL during district teacher training and in district literature put out to the public. However, the district's guaranteed and viable curriculum excludes SEL. In this area, teachers are given between 5-15 minutes a day, depending on grade level, and are provided with no uniform curriculum to teach. The result is that most teachers do not have a plan for SEL instruction, and it is either skipped or taught inconsistently, with varying degrees of success among different classes. For example, SEL time for grades K-4 is the 15 minutes directly after the reading block and before recess. During these 15 minutes students need to transition out of reading by putting away supplies and clearing desks, and also need to line up for recess in an orderly fashion. Often, cleaning up after reading and lining up a group of students takes the entire 15-minute SEL window, meaning there is not

explicit SEL instruction taking place. Some teachers take the transition as an opportunity to weave social skills instruction into cleaning and lining up, while others do not. Given this inconsistency, I wanted to investigate how increasing SEL instructional time at the expense of other academic instructional time might affect student academic performance in reading, writing, and math.

In the research I found, the evidence suggested that increasing SEL time at the expense of academic minutes, up to 30 minutes a day, resulted in no difference in academic performance (Hart et al., 2020). Some studies found that academic scores increased in all three core academic subject areas: reading, writing, and math (Schonfield et al., 2015). These findings confirmed that SEL is integral to developing the whole child. To succeed academically, students need to be part of a classroom environment and know how to learn in a classroom. Often students I see as a special education teacher struggle to feel like they are part of their general education class. They feel like other students don't like them, that they are not smart, and that they are inferior to their typically developing peers. The research showed that increased SEL instructional time benefits student attitudes and improves learning approaches (Kats Gold 2021). SEL curriculums taught explicitly are also beneficial in decreasing student behaviors (Low et al., 2019). Students develop skills such as self-regulation and self-advocacy. Having these skills allows students to experience better self-regulation and contributes to academic success (Graziano, 2007).

### **Executive Functioning**

The findings from my first theme tie in with the second theme of student executive functioning skills. As mentioned, student self-regulation is a contributing factor to academic success. Thus, it is essential to students' academic outcomes that they develop executive functioning skills, such as self-regulation ability to prioritize, plan, and monitor their academic

performance. In addition, students require executive functioning to be successful in school environments as early as kindergarten, when students are expected to follow directions, take turns, sit quietly, work as part of a group, and get along with peers. These skills require students to utilize executive functioning abilities such as inhibition, flexibility, and cognitive shifting (Kats Gold et al., 2021).

Developing these skills at the primary grade levels is critical for overall student development. Students who fall behind in these skills as early as kindergarten are at higher risk for adverse academic and behavioral outcomes by the time they reach intermediate grade levels (Bettancourt et al., 2017). Students who are behind in social skills and have difficulty displaying appropriate behavior in kindergarten were found to be behind their peers in academic and behavior skills by a substantial margin by second grade (Denham and Brown, 2010). This is evident in several second-grade students I work with who are significantly behind academically. These students all struggled with following typical school expectations of sitting quietly, being flexible in their routines and taking turns as part of a group. As a result, these students were often not able to learn the core curriculum in the way it was presented. Additionally, these students were often separated from the whole class either to take a break or go to the administrator's office. These students' inability to behave in an expected manner resulted in them missing losing out on valuable class wide instruction and impacted their academic trajectory at an early stage in their learning.

This research illustrates the urgency and importance of early SEL intervention at the primary level. I would argue using this data, that devoting instructional time to SEL development is equally, if not more important for student outcomes than academic instruction at this early stage. Without effective executive functioning skills, students cannot access academic instruction

and thus fall exponentially further behind as the years progress, widening the gap between them and their peers. This scenario can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and anxiety, contributing to learning difficulties (Verboom et al., 2014), as I have witnessed with several of my students.

### **Behaviors and Attitudes**

The third theme of my research focused on how SEL instruction affects student behaviors and attitudes. As mentioned in the first two themes, student attitudes toward learning and their ability to self-regulate are essential factors in their academic success. An example of this is, I have a student who is very reactive and impulsive. He does not like to engage in academic work unless he already knows how to do it, and will react, often violently, to any form of correction. In some cases, teachers have expressed fear and anxiety about teaching him. If asked if he would like to learn something new, he will often state that he does not care. This student is an example of how an inability to self-regulate and a negative attitude toward learning have impacted his academic success. Focused SEL instruction to build his self-regulation skills and change his attitude about learning would have been very beneficial for him at the kindergarten level.

The research also indicates that while the development of positive behaviors and attitudes in a classroom setting is beneficial for the individual, it is just as crucial for the collective classroom. Behaviors and attitudes can affect the academic outcomes for not only the individual exhibiting these behaviors, but also for the other students in the classroom environment (Abry et al., 2017). One student's struggles with disruptive or aggressive behavior can spread to the others in the class and create an environment of anxiety amongst all students in that particular environment. One student's verbal or physical aggression can manifest in other

students as internalized anxiety, depression, and withdrawal, often manifesting in increased peer conflict within the classroom and social and academic withdrawal.

In my school this effect is evident in several classrooms. Throughout school, there are a few classrooms that have a reputation of being more disruptive than the typical class. These classes have several different students that have individual behavior plans in place. However, students that have struggled with disruptive behavior in previous years have exhibited a reduction in disruptive behaviors in more stable classroom environments.

These anecdotal observations and the research contribute to the theory that creating a classroom environment with low student misconduct benefits all students' academic and social development. Lowering the frequency or trajectory of a disruptive or aggressive student's behavior is critical to their academic success and that of the rest of the class. Studies found that aggression level trajectories were more indicative of academic success than aggression levels (Campbell et al. 2006). This means that a student having low but consistent levels of aggression are more detrimental to the classroom environment than a student who may display significant levels of aggression but in a steadily decreasing frequency.

Implementing evidence based and explicit SEL curriculums has significantly improved student behaviors across several studies. It has also been demonstrated that when these curriculums are implemented with fidelity, the students with the most disruptive or aggressive behaviors benefit the most (Jones et al., 2010). Further studies have demonstrated that SEL curriculums markedly decrease disruptive and aggressive behavior in students (Todd et al., 2008). Thus, it would seem to the students' and schools' educational benefit to ensure evidence based SEL curriculums are in place and being taught with fidelity.



In my school there has been a lot of attention focused on addressing disruptive behaviors for students that already have weak self-regulation skills and are frequently disruptive. This looks like administrators frequently being called to classrooms to pull a disruptive student from class and engage in some type of restorative action. However, there has been very little preemptive action toward preventing these types of behaviors. The school has not implemented a uniform SEL curriculum and has not made time in the schedule for one to be effectively taught.

### **Special Education Referrals and Distal Outcomes**

The fourth theme of the research looks at the longer-term outcomes for students as they reach intermediate grades and beyond. The research clearly shows a benefit to implementing SEL curriculum for students in the short term, but what is the relationship between implementing SEL curriculum and long-term outcomes? The research reinforces that primary school students with social and behavioral skill deficits fall behind their peers and have difficulty closing the gap.

Students who have behavior and academic struggles after kindergarten and entering first grade are more likely to be held back academically or receive a referral for special education by the time they reach sixth grade (Darney et al., 2013). The same can be said for behavioral outcomes, as these students are at increased risk for deviant behavior, school suspension, and expulsion by intermediate grades. In both my student teaching experience and my current role as a special education teacher, I have seen a correlation between students with low academic performance and increased disruptive behaviors. Additionally, I have noticed in my practice, that families begin to have conversations with school administration about grade retention around third grade. This aligns with research indicating students are most likely to be retained prior to third grade (Davoudzadeh et al., 2015).

Success in kindergarten in behavior and academics has also been linked with many later outcomes in life. SEL skill development at the primary grade level has been associated with post-educational outcomes more than twenty years after kindergarten. Some research suggests that students with SEL deficiencies in primary school are at higher risk for substance abuse, mental health struggles and are more likely to struggle with post-secondary education employment (McCormick et al., 2015). It should be noted that there is some disagreement in the research field about the correlation of SEL skills to post-educational outcomes. Questions about a student's class, socio-economic status, and minority status are thought to play a role in distal outcomes.

Despite questions about distal outcomes, the evidence has consistently shown that implementing SEL curriculum is only of benefit to students and can have benefits that reach adulthood. It is also clear from the research that early implementation of SEL programs in preschool and kindergarten has the most impact on students by bridging the gap early, while it is still small. The numbers show that students who receive this intervention are less likely to receive special education referrals, struggle academically, or have consistent adverse behaviors that prevent them from accessing academic instruction.

### **Implications for Future Teachers, Students, and/or Schools**

The themes of my research have implications for various stakeholders in education. Students, teachers, and schools could all benefit from more focus on developing and implementing evidence based SEL curriculums. In addition, an increase in curriculum funding, training, and implementation would greatly benefit the lack of basic SEL skills in schools.

Some students lack the fundamental social, emotional, and behavioral skills to function effectively in a school environment. As a result, these students struggle to remain in the

classroom, have peer relationships, and access the academic content in their classrooms. As they are pushed up through primary and intermediate grade levels, they fall further behind, increasing their frustration, anxiety, and isolation from their peers. An increase in evidence based SEL instruction at early ages would give these students the skills needed to function in a school environment, so they can access their academic curriculums at earlier ages and close the gap with their peers. This would benefit not only the students behind these skills but also their classmates and the greater school community.

Teachers continually hear about the importance of SEL instruction, but many lack training on what it is or how to deliver it effectively to students. Often SEL instruction might look like reading a book to the class or playing a game before quickly rushing on to the next block on the schedule. While there may be benefits to some of these activities, there seems to be a lack of consistency and uniformity in SEL instruction that is not found in other instructional areas. Teachers need more training from their district administrators on how to be culturally responsive to their students of diverse backgrounds, teaching self-regulation and self-awareness. Providing teachers with specific SEL instruction in pre-service teaching programs and having increased professional development, training, and materials to provide SEL instruction that has been researched and proven effective, will provide teachers the confidence to deliver effective SEL instruction to benefit their students.

School districts value academic test scores and emphasize supporting instruction in reading, writing, and math through professional development courses for their staff, curriculum selection, and teacher evaluation. However, while most school districts acknowledge the importance of SEL in schools, there seems to continue to be a disconnect between the educational research indicating SEL skills are critical for academic success and school policy

makers decision making. For example, it seems to be widely recognized in research that social and emotional development at a young age have a direct effect on academic outcomes, however in my district there are very little resources provided to address school readiness. Students who enter with lower social skills do not receive designated instructional time or have a direct curriculum to help them build these skills. Schools can benefit their students, teachers, and communities by investing funding in more evidence based SEL curriculums, placing greater emphasis on teacher training of SEL curriculums, and making more time in school schedules to teach students the necessary SEL skills to be successful within a school environment.

### **Implications for Future Research**

A considerable amount of research indicates that investing in SEL benefits students, schools, and communities. However, SEL is still a relatively new field in education, and there are gaps to be filled and questions to be answered. Students are in their second year back in classrooms after being disrupted by a global pandemic. There are still questions about what exactly students need to re-acclimate to school environments and how schools have changed since the pandemic.

Questions also exist about how socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds affect SEL skill development. An interesting question is whether students from lower socio-economic backgrounds struggle with SEL skills more than students from higher socio-economic backgrounds or if their SEL skills look different due to their environment. More research into how students from different backgrounds respond to SEL interventions would be beneficial as to how their needs differ. This would be helpful in informing schools how they may alter their teaching practices and curriculum selection to be more inclusive of a more diverse set of learners.

Similarly, questions about equity in schools and how it relates to SEL instruction are essential areas to continue exploring. An argument could be made that our schools are designed to cater to a specific type of student who comes from a higher socio-economic background and follows a narrow scope of behavioral norms. The question should be asked if schools need to adjust and increase their supports to help students meet the current expectations of what appropriate social-emotional and behavioral skills look like and what schools are doing to effectively facilitate meeting students' needs.

Many SEL curriculums exist, and research is being done on the effectiveness of specific curriculums. It would be valuable to see how effective curriculums are across various populations, such as rural, suburban, urban, and racial and economic populations. Understanding the effective core mechanisms in each curriculum and how they positively affect the students to whom they are being taught would be beneficial in continuing to refine curriculums, target specific skill development, and utilize appropriately across a varied and diverse population of students throughout districts and the country.

### **Limitations of the Project**

This paper addressed how social, emotional, and behavioral skills impacted student outcomes. More specifically, this paper looked at the importance of these skills at a primary grade level and how they affected short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes of student success both behaviorally and academically. While I found ample research regarding social-emotional behavior skills in early elementary-age children, there were limitations.

It is evident from the body of research cited in this paper that explicitly taught SEL curriculums are effective, but further research into the effectiveness of each program with a

variety of populations would help determine which type of SEL curriculum would be appropriate for a given school population. There was also a lack of research on the optimal instructional time for SEL instruction. While the research was clear that SEL instruction did not affect academic results up to 30 minutes, there was little additional research on what effect more time spent on SEL would have on academic performance or if there was a point of diminishing returns with SEL instruction. Finally, while the research indicates that increased SEL instruction benefits student outcomes, there is little research on which specific school policy changes affect student outcomes. This lack of research could be attributed to the fact that schools continue to focus on standardized student test scores, and school policymakers continue to place the highest value on academic instructional time.

## **Conclusion**

This paper examined the importance of social-emotional skills in early elementary-age students. In doing so, I found that early development of social-emotional skills like self-regulation, self-awareness, flexibility, cognitive shifting, and basic social skills are hugely important to a student's academic and behavioral outcomes in school and beyond. Furthermore, explicitly taught SEL curriculums taught in the primary grades are demonstrated to improve students' executive functioning, behavior, and long-term academic and behavioral outcomes without adversely affecting academic scores. The overarching implication of this research is that schools and school districts should prioritize SEL curriculum implementation for students at the primary grade levels.

The value of this project is that it confirms that SEL is a critical component to educating the whole child and essential to both academic and overall outcomes in life. Schools have an understandable focus on maximizing academic benefit and achievement, and school policy

reflects this ambition through academic rigor and preparing students for standardized tests. However, the evidence shows that integrating social and emotional instruction into schools in coordination with more traditional academic disciplines maximizes students' chances for optimal outcomes in life (Zins and Elias, 2007).

Through my research, I came away with a few main takeaways. The first is increasing SEL instructional time at the expense of some academic instructional time is not detrimental to academic achievement. The studies are clear that, at worst, SEL instruction did not produce any change in academic achievement or standardized test scores. However, many studies indicated that the skills developed through SEL instruction directly contributed to students' learning approaches and academic success.

My second takeaway is that executive functioning and positive behavior skills are critical to students accessing academic instruction effectively. Students that enter schools lacking essential skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and flexibility are quickly left behind, as they cannot function within a school community effectively. These skills are foundational for students to be able to access the academic instruction taking place in our schools.

My third takeaway was that direct SEL instruction is best when taught at early primary grade levels. Students lacking social-emotional skills and school readiness are at greater risk of falling behind their same-age peers. As mentioned, students must learn executive functioning skills to participate effectively in a classroom environment and community. Ensuring our youngest learners gain these skills and can keep pace with their same-age peers is crucial for their success.

Schools that value educating the whole child should follow the research available and invest in their student's social-emotional learning and primary grade levels. The evidence is clear, an early investment in students' social development can pay dividends in their academic performance in the long run. By implementing explicitly taught SEL curriculum at primary grade levels, schools can offer their students the best chance at positive academic achievement, social well-being, and post-educational outcomes.



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