

Courage in the Classroom:
The Impact of Social Emotional Learning on Student Perceptions of Courage

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Abstract

This study was designed to examine the impact of involvement in social emotional learning (SEL) programming with a focus on student perceptions of courage. The results of a 2x2 ANOVA indicated that there was no significant difference between scores on SEL competencies for students not involved in a lesson driven SEL program compared to students who were. Female students ($M = 3.451$) had significantly higher scores than male students ($M = 3.283$), ($F(1,155) = 13.301, p = .000$, partial eta squared = .079). Four themes emerged regarding students' perceptions of courage: (a) characteristics of integrity, (b) persistence, (c) what it takes to be courageous, and (d) cultivating courage at school.

Purpose of Research

Courage is a foundational component of character that intersects with other virtues and strengths such as justice, humanity, and integrity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). If people are courageous, it is likely that they can draw upon this special strength across contexts and in various situations. Winston Churchill famously stated, “Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because, as has been said, it is the quality which guarantees all others” (Churchill, 1931, p. 11). Educators are privileged to carry out the monumental task of taking part in growing future generations as children spend well over 1,000 hours per year in school, an environment where courage can be nurtured.

Beginning in 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) required all public schools to improve school climate, and many schools have addressed this requirement in part through implementing social emotional learning programming and approaches. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2013) has been studying how to implement SEL competencies. A construct that has recently been incorporated in SEL programs is courage (Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, 2019; Starr Commonwealth, 2017). Despite research on the critical role that highly effective SEL programs play in schools, there is little information specifically about SEL programs and the construct of courage (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). This is perplexing when courage is a universally desirable value that is celebrated across cultures (Putman, 2010). There is an extensive body of research that characterizes courage as a construct, however there is limited research on courage and its implications for children in schools (Pury & Lopez, 2010). Currently, there is not enough information about students’ perceptions of courage, nor about strategies that promote the development of courage.

Theoretical Framework

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory can be used to explain how children develop social emotional (SE) competencies such as courage, and the importance of both perception and context in this developmental process. The environment in which a child develops is multifaceted and layered as a set of systems. The ways in which individuals interact with these systems explain their developmental path.

This study focused on the microsystem, the school, to understand how participation in an SEL program impacts SE development as well as to gather students’ perceptions on courage in this context. The mesosystem, which is made up more than one related microsystem in which the developing child is an active participant, was analyzed to explore the nature of such interactions regarding the development of courage in students. The exosystem, or “events . . . that affect the developing person” (p. 25), were explored in relation to courage at school. In this study, the American public school system on a governmental level has created a certain cultural landscape when it comes to school climate and school culture (ESSA, 2015). This macrosystem is largely applicable in the evolution of SEL initiatives and programming in the U.S. The final system, the chronosystem, encompasses developmental events that occur across a person’s lifespan, providing implications for future research.

Additionally, Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (1986, 1994) is relevant to students’ perceptions of courage and the developmental nature of courage. Self-efficacy refers to people’s beliefs about their capabilities and these beliefs determine how people think, feel, and behave. There are four main sources of influence for self-efficacy: (a) mastery experiences, (b) vicarious experiences provided by social models, (c) level of positive appraisal through social feedback, and (d) physiological and emotional state. In this study, students’ self-reports on an instrument

measuring SEL competencies as well as student interview responses were illustrative of their beliefs about their capabilities in the areas of SEL and courage.

Related Literature

Several large-scale metaanalytic studies have revealed that involvement in SEL programming yields improved SE outcomes and academic achievement as well as fewer behavioral or antisocial issues compared to students who are not involved in SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad, et al., 2012; Taylor, et al., 2017). These findings have been corroborated in studies focused on particular SEL programs and approaches, such as with the Responsive Classroom (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007), the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence's RULER approach (Brackett, et al., 2012; Rivers, et al., 2013), the Second Step curriculum (Holsen, et al., 2008), and Tribes Learning Community (Kiger, 2000). Though there is a paucity of research related to the intersections between courage and SEL programming, youths do have an understanding of courage. For example, Muris (2009) investigated the characteristics of courage in children, revealing that being courageous is not necessarily related to being fearful. While Sonnentag and Barnett (2016) identified that moral courage during adolescence can predict the tendency to be a moral rebel amongst one's peers, or to stand up for what they know is right even if it is the unpopular thing to do. Some gender differences exist when it comes to the nature of courage, with females demonstrating more courageous acts than males (Bronstein, et al., 2007).

Methodology

In order to conduct an investigation of courage in the classroom, the following research questions guided this study:

1. Is there a statistically significant difference in total mean scores for student perceptions of courage, gratitude, forgiveness and compassion between male and female students who have participated in an SEL lesson-driven program (SEL L-DP) and students who have participated in an SEL non lesson-driven program (SEL non L-DP)?
2. What are children's perceptions of courage in themselves and others and what does it take to enact courage?
3. What is the nature of courage in classrooms?

Research Design

An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was employed. A causal comparative model was used to address research question one and a multiple case study design provided guidance to address research questions two and three (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

Schools included in this study either implemented a specific, K-5 multiyear, sequenced, lesson-driven SEL program (SEL L-DP) or did not implement a specific, K-5 multiyear, sequenced, lesson-driven SEL program (SEL non-L-DP). Table 1 provides an overview of the criteria for each condition.

Table 1
Explanation of Criteria for Each Condition

Criterion	Condition 1 SEL non-L-DP	Condition 2 SEL L-DP
Multiyear program	A sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP was not in use.	The particular SEL L-DP was at least a K-5 sequenced program.
Repeated opportunities to practice	Students did not participate in weekly sessions, at least 15-30 minutes per week, for at least 12 weeks.	The sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP was at least a 12-week program, with at least one 15-30-minute session weekly.
Program continuity	Students had not consistently experienced a sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP one year prior to the school year and during the school year when the study took place.	The sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP was in use at least one year prior to the school year when the study took place.
Participant consistency	The students had not experienced a sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP for one year prior to the school year when the study took place.	The students had experienced the sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP for both the prior year and school year when the study took place.
Educator experience	The teacher had not implemented a sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP in at least one year prior to the school year when the study took place.	The teacher had used this sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP at least one year prior to the school year when the study took place.
Fidelity of implementation	Individuals were not implementing a specific sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP.	Individuals implementing the sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP needed formal training or if no formal training had been given to the teacher, the SEL L-DP needed to have contained scripted lessons to promote fidelity in implementation.
Availability of resources	The teacher did not utilize resources related to a particular sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP.	There were appropriate resources to fully support the implementation of the sequenced K-5 SEL L-DP.

Sample

Convenience and purposive sampling were used to recruit participants for this study (Merriam, 2009). Convenience sampling was used to gain access to research settings which were within a commutable distance, served the grade levels of interest, and were identified as public schools (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Gall, et al., 2003). This study was conducted in five public elementary schools from four school districts in one New England state. Fourth and fifth grade students and teachers from both urban and suburban settings were included in each condition of this study. Classroom teachers completed a demographic survey and aided in participant selection of students for interviews. A total of 215 students completed surveys and 25 were selected to be interviewed. The distribution of participants by condition, district, school, and classroom is shown in Table 2.

Instrumentation

Data were collected using four instruments: (a) the Choose Love (CL) survey (Author et al., 2017), (b) a student survey about courage, (c) semi-structured interviews, and (d) an educator survey. All student participants completed the CL survey, a 20-item, 4-point rating scale for those in grades 3-5, designed to measure student perceptions of SEL competencies related to the Choose Love Enrichment Program's (CLEP) core units of courage, gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion (Jesse Lewis Choose Love Enrichment Program, 2019). An overall mean is produced. Initial content validity was solicited from 12 educational experts and an internal consistency alpha of .91 was reported for the total instrument.

Data Analyses

To address research question one, groups were defined by condition which had two levels, (a) students who participated in an SEL non lesson-driven SEL program (SEL non L-DP), $n = 87$ and (b) those who participated in a lesson-driven SEL program (SEL L-DP), $n = 128$. The second independent variable was gender with two levels, male and female. The dependent variable in the two-way ANOVA was the overall mean on the CL survey. For the qualitative analysis, a multiple case-study was implemented in which cases were bound by condition, to understand student perceptions of courage and the nature of courage in classrooms (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Cyclical coding methods as described by Saldaña (2016) were applied to make meaning in order to address research questions two and three.

Results

Quantitative

Results indicated that there was no significant difference between conditions on the CL survey, ($F(1,155) = 1.901, p = .170$, partial $\eta^2 = .012$). There was a significant difference between mean scores for gender, ($F(1,155) = 13.301, p = .000$, partial $\eta^2 = .079$). There was no significant interaction. Descriptive information is located in Table 3.

Qualitative

The following four themes emerged from the interview data: (a) characteristics of integrity, (b) persistence, (c) what it takes to be courageous, and (d) cultivating courage at school.

Table 2
Program Participants by Condition, District, School and Classroom

Condition	Grade Level		Total
	4	5	
1. SEL non-L-DP			
District 1: Urban			
School 1			
Classroom 1	14		
Classroom 2		10	
Classroom 3		3	
District 2: Suburban			
School 2			
Classroom 4	11		
Classroom 5	12		
Classroom 6	12		
Classroom 7		11	
Classroom 8		14	
Total	49	38	87
2. SEL L-DP			
District 3: Urban			
School 3			
Classroom 9	11		
Classroom 10	7		
Classroom 11		12	
Classroom 12		12	
District 4: Suburban			
School 4			
Classroom 13	20		
School 5			
Classroom 14	13		
Classroom 15	15		
Classroom 16		19	
Classroom 17		19	
Total	66	62	128
Grand Total	115	100	215

Table 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges by Condition and Gender

Condition	Gender	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.	Range	<i>n</i>
SEL non-L-DP	Male	3.327	.346				44
	Female	3.467	.263				39
	Total	3.393	.316	2.70	4.00	1.30	83
SEL L-DP	Male	3.227	.296				35
	Female	3.435	.280				41
	Total	3.340	.304	2.75	3.90	1.15	76
Total	Male	3.283	.327	2.70	4.00	1.30	79
	Female	3.451	.271	2.80	4.00	1.20	80
	Total	3.367	.310	2.70	4.00	1.30	159

Theme One: Characteristics of Integrity. Students’ believed in the interconnectedness of various, specific characteristics of integrity when thinking about courage. These characteristics were: (a) honesty, (b) altruism, (c) compassion in action, (d) forgiveness, and (e) authenticity. Students’ definitions of courage, recounting of courageous acts they have witnessed or carried out themselves, and their beliefs about growing courage were described through these characteristics. By sharing perspectives about how people who are courageous have exhibited these characteristics, students were able to describe how they understood courage, primarily in the school context.

Theme Two: Persistence. This theme emphasizes the presence of persistence, or the act of sticking with something, someone, a goal, or a challenge. The following categories were collapsed to create this theme: (a) bravery, (b) the unknown, (c) pain, and (d) perseverance.

Theme Three: What it Takes to be Courageous. All students believed a person can grow courage. They also believed that there are certain prerequisites to be considered courageous, which are the focus of this theme. The following categories comprised this theme: (a) optimism, (b) examples and experiences, and (c) social support.

Theme Four: Cultivating Courage at School. A discussion of ways in which courage may be cultivated at school took place at the end of each interview. The analysis of the data revealed that students had recommendations and advice for educators and for peers when it comes to developing courage at school.

Scholarly Significance

Yong Zhao (2020) recently asked if SEL is creating “Another education war” (p. 1). Part of the issue explained by Zhao is that a large collection of programs, strategies, and resources are labeled as meeting affective needs, when there is in fact no consensus about what makes a sound SEL initiative. In this study, we tried to identify criteria that could be used to categorize soundly constructed programs that were implemented with fidelity. Unfortunately, we found that some teachers pulled their classroom activities from a variety of resources instead of following a sequenced program based on established SEL standards. Given our results of no significant difference between conditions, we have three potential conclusions: the type of program may not make a difference, the instrument may not have been appropriate for use across so many different curricular options, and the amount of time spent on SEL activities may be as important

as the type of activities. The fact that we found that mean scores of females were significantly higher than males is an area meriting future research.

Students from both conditions were interviewed and all had insightful stories about how they understood courage, but only students from programs that explicitly incorporated courage in the curriculum could provide advice for how to extend the concept of courage in the school environment. We conclude that the inclusion of an explicit focus on courage in classrooms could support student SEL competencies.

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