

Perceptions of Educators and Students Towards a Program in Social and Emotional Learning

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**Abstract**

This study was designed to investigate the perceptions of educators towards their role with meeting the social and emotional needs of students, as well as how educators and students experience participation in a school-based social emotional learning (SEL) program, with particular focus on the experience of educators and students participating in the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Enrichment Program. Data were collected through a qualitative multiple case study design, resulting in the following themes: Perceived Role of SEL in Schools, Purpose of SEL Instruction, SEL Implementation Requirements, and Benefits of SEL. Educators and students were in agreement about program outcomes.

### **Purpose of Research**

The social and emotional learning (SEL) needs of students in grades K-12 are vast and directly impact student academic achievement (Durlak, et al., 2011). When students struggle with unmet SEL deficits, they encounter obstacles that impede their efforts and ability to successfully participate in the learning process (Rossen & Cowen, 2015). The role of school personnel in addressing the affective needs of students vary across educational settings (Brackett & Simmons, 2015) and educators' perceptions can influence the level of support provided to students (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Conley et al., 2014). Many schools are now implementing structured SEL programs into their daily routine (Brackett & Rivers, 2014), yet perceptions educators have towards these programs remains understudied (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Conley et al., 2014). The Jesse Lewis Choose Love Enrichment Program (CLEP; Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, 2019) is one initiative which provides students with instructional activities that are aimed at facilitating the growth of positive coping skills in children and adolescents. By understanding the perceptions of educators towards an SEL learning initiative, as well as exploring perceptions of educators and students who experience this program, information will be gathered to aid successful implementation of such programs in the future.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In light of the scope and complexity of SEL programming for school-aged children, it is necessary to consider multiple theories that support the development and implementation of these programs, as well as inform current SEL practices and future strategy development (Brackett, Elbertson, & Rivers, 2015). Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) and Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation (Maslow, 1943) are two theories which support the need for implementing SEL programs in schools. Bronfenbrenner posits that an individual's development is influenced by the interrelated environmental systems (including the microsystem, mesosystem, macrosystem, and ecosystem) in which one lives (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015). The school environment constitutes a microsystem, and the experiences students have within this environment affect their development (Ashiabi & O'Neal, 2015; Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Maslow (1943) suggests that individuals must first have their basic physiological and safety needs met in order for them to make progress towards reaching their potential and becoming self-actualized. He contends that an individual's ability to attend to various activities in life depends, at least in part, on the satisfaction of basic prerequisite needs.

### **Review of Related Literature**

Initiatives such as Responsive Classroom (Desrochers, 2015), Second Step (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009), and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Simonsen, et al., 2008) are implemented in schools to assist students with developing their social and emotional skills and improve student behavior in ways that are conducive to learning (Belfield et al. 2015; Child Mind Institute 2016; Desrochers, 2015). Although PBIS is not a social emotional learning program, school-wide supports such as PBIS and social and emotional learning (SEL) programs are receiving more attention and consideration as having a place in the school day alongside academic subjects (Vega, 2012). According to Durlak et al. (2011), SEL programs that address students' levels of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making increase student academic performance by 11 percentile points as compared to students who do not participate in such programs. According to Aarons (2004), a practitioner's attitude towards trying new practices, their sense of self-efficacy, and view towards how the practice may fit into the context of their daily work may influence their willingness to

adopt evidenced-based practices. Additionally, Durlak and Dupre (2008) argue that “those who recognize a need for an intervention or believe the implementation will result in positive outcomes are more likely to adopt and implement Evidence-Based Interventions (EBIs) with greater fidelity” (p. 336). This suggests that the perceptions an educator has toward EBIs, such as SEL programs, could influence whether or not they are likely to adopt such programs, and the success they experience in their implementation.

### **Methodology**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do educators (teachers, counselors, administrators) view their roles when participating in a structured SEL program (the Choose Love Enrichment Program)?
2. How do educators (teachers, counselors, administrators) and students experience a structured SEL program (Choose Love Enrichment Program)?

### **Sample**

This multiple-case study took place in Hamilton Elementary School (HES) and Parker School (PS). These pseudonyms will be used throughout the study. HES was a public elementary school serving students in Kindergarten through fourth grades, located in a city within the South-Central Region of the United States. Eleven educators agreed to participate from HES. In addition, 15 students were interviewed, of which 11 were female. At the time of the interview, student participants were 5 to 9 years old. PS is a private faith-based school located within a city in the Northeast which serves approximately 500 students from grades pre-K through 8. Three educators and seven students participated in interviews. Three male and four female students ranged in age from eight to 13 years.

### **Research Design**

This research study was conducted using a qualitative multiple-case design (Merriam, 2009) involving two schools which implemented the CLEP between the fall of 2015 to the fall of 2017. The researcher sought to gather information regarding how educators (teachers, counselors, administrators) perceived their role with participating in SEL programs, as well as how educators and students experienced a structured SEL program, specifically the CLEP. The two schools were identified as cases because of their participants’ willingness to be interviewed and observed, as well as their involvement with the CLEP over a period of two years utilizing a whole school approach.

### **Program Description**

The CLEP is a structured SEL curriculum available for students across grades preK-12 (Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, 2019). The CLEP is a comprehensive and evidence-based program which was “created by educators for educators and is aligned with Common Core State Standards and American School Counselor Association Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success, and CASEL’s five core competencies” (para. 3 - 4). The curriculum includes lessons that can be implemented on a flexible schedule to facilitate integration into school routines despite the challenges and time constraints that may arise within school schedules: program lessons at the elementary level are 20 to 30 minutes, middle-school lessons are 10 to 15 minutes, and high school lessons are 5 to 10 minutes in length. The program can be implemented by educators (i.e., teachers, school counselors) in a classroom and through a school-wide approach. The curriculum consists of four major units: Courage, Gratitude, Forgiveness, and Compassion in Action which equal the “Choose Love Formula.”

### **Data Collection Tools**

The researcher used seven tools to gather data: educator demographic survey, educator interview protocol, student demographic survey, student interview protocol, classroom observation guide, and program artifacts. The protocols were adapted according to age level of participants in order to facilitate their engagement and elicit information from their perspectives. A reflexive journal was used to monitor and record any particular emotions, thoughts, feelings of bias that arose throughout the data collection and analysis process (Creswell, 2013). All interviews were audio-recorded and then professionally transcribed.

### **Data Analyses**

An open coding process was utilized to identify common elements that emerged within the data (Merriam, 2009). The researcher identified codes and construct categories (Saldaña, 2016) that led to the development of themes (Merriam, 2009).

### **Results**

#### **Theme 1: Perceived Role of SEL in Schools**

This theme is explained in two categories, (a) educator participants' perspectives (observations of student participation, sense of responsibility for implementing SEL, sense of competency, school obligation, SEL as foundation, SEL as priority), and (b) educator and parent perspectives (enhancing resilience, home-school connection).

One teacher contributed that the program's lessons helped students to think through ways to handle a situation differently, as witnessed during unstructured times.

Educators shared that SEL programs are important to have in schools, while their views as to who should be responsible for leading SEL program implementation varied. At HES the school counselor is viewed as the lead facilitator for implementing the program. PS educators shared sense of responsibility for implementing the program throughout the school.

#### **Theme 2: Purpose of SEL Instruction**

This theme is defined as the perceived purpose of SEL instruction, particularly with respect to how SEL instruction (a) addresses SEL needs (basic needs, emotional safety, personal growth and development), (b) facilitates the development of coping strategies (calming strategies, reflection, self-empowerment), and (c) promotes the learning of values and skills (civic responsibility, empathy, responsible decision-making, and self-regulation).

Educators shared their perspectives towards the need for educators to help children learn about what emotions are, how to identify them, realize that emotions are OK to have, and help students develop the language needed to self-advocate.

Anna (fourth-grade student) stated that participating in the program has helped her to "find ways where if you're upset you can calm yourself down easily without making anybody else upset."

#### **Theme 3: Implementation Requirements**

Categories include: (a) the format and structural elements (CLEP facilitators, schedule, time, duration, frequency, and daily application), (b) implementation challenges to overcome (general obstacles and reasons why students would not participate), (c) instructional approach (preferred activities, new activity ideas, instructional strategies, common language, and whole-school approach), and (d) recommendations for implementation (ideas for improvement, professional development, trust in program facilitators).

Educators and students acknowledged that certain people at each school play key leadership roles with facilitating the implementation of the CLEP and that a sense of trust with

those who lead the implementation of the program is an essential component in gaining buy in and participation in the program.

Educators and students at both schools discussed the ways in which CLEP is factored into their respective school's schedule. One principal stated that they have built time into the school master schedule for CLEP lessons so that it does not fall by the wayside due to other demands. Despite this intention, educators concurred that finding time to dedicate to the implementation of SEL content can pose a challenge in light of other demands placed on teachers to meet requirements for core academics.

#### **Theme Four: The Benefits of SEL**

Participants shared views that some of the benefits of SEL include (a) positive effects on school climate (community building, equity, school/classroom management, improved relationships, benefits for educators, ripple effect), (b) SEL as a method of prevention and intervention supports, (c) SEL outcomes (courage, gratitude, forgiveness, compassion in action, Choose Love formula), and (d) student participant perspectives (differences between CLEP and non-CLEP schools and importance of SEL instruction).

At HES, the effect that the program has had on the overall school community were shared. A kindergarten teacher recounted her perspective that the presence of the CLEP and the use of the language it incorporates, referring to words such as courage, kindness, love, is, "a positive in itself which is turning the building into a more positive place and environment."

The responses provided by PS students demonstrated how reflecting on the lessons learned through the CLEP has influenced their thoughts and decision making in ways that help build relationships to enhance a sense of community.

Jennifer, an HES student, expressed, "you have to love something and you need to learn how to love or you're going to end up mean and grouchy, and you might be lonely when you get older. A lot of bad stuff can happen if you don't love."

#### **Scholarly Significance**

In an article about unintended consequences resulting from SEL programs, Souter (2019) reported differences based on interview results from nearly 1000 fourth and fifth grade students and their teachers. While teachers and administrators thought the program empowered students to be their best selves, students interpreted the programs as stressing compliance and rewarding good behavior, such as being quiet and following the teacher's directions. The current study revealed that there are implementation issues to consider regarding the CLEP, but teachers and students were in agreement about the positive impact of the program. Our conclusion is that this is due to an underlying precept that the purpose of the program is to understand how to react to any situation by being a positive force rather than a negative one.

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