

The Effects of Implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Program on Teachers and Staff

Presented by:

Kristi Perryman, Ph.D., LPC-S, RPT-S


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Erin Popejoy, Ph.D., LPC-S and
Julia Conroy, M.S., L.A.C submitted to the *Journal of
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Social Emotional Learning Programs

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is defined as “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and establish positive relationships with others” (Zins & Elias, 2007, p. 234)

Numerous benefits have been cited in the literature for students participating in SEL programs, including improved behaviors, attitudes, academic performance, enhanced executive functioning, increased diversity in friendships and decrease in bullying, etc. (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).




Since teacher attitudes are vital to implementing any program with students, our study sought to evaluate the impact of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Program on the teachers and staff who were teaching the skills in the classrooms at a therapeutic day treatment program. The literature regarding implementation of other SEL programs states the following:

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1. One of the most crucial determining factors of program success according to the literature is the manner of implementation. It is necessary to conduct a thorough assessment to ensure the identified school and teachers have the capacity to effectively implement it (Wanless & Domitrovich, 2015; Bumbarger, 2015).
 2. It is important for curriculum facilitators to be familiar with the needs of students to ensure its success (Hunter, DiPerna, Hart, & Crowley, 2018; Durlak & DuPre, 2008).
 3. Adjustments should be made according to race and ethnicity, SES, gender, disability status, parenting involvement, and school level factors (Garner, Mahatmya, Brown, & Vesely, 2014). SEL programs are most successful with careful consideration to their implementation.
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Aim of the study

Research evaluating the impact of SEL programs on teachers at alternative schools has been limited, and none has been done specifically on the implementation of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Program. This is a population with high needs, and there are an estimated 500,000 students enrolled in alternative schools in the U.S. (NCES, 2014).



The therapeutic day treatment program in this study serves students ages 5-18 who are not succeeding in a traditional school setting due to emotional and behavioral issues. Because their goal is to improve behaviors, strengthen relationships, and enhance emotional well-being, it aligns well with the goals of Choose Love.


This research study evaluated the effectiveness of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement through the lens of teacher and staff experience at a therapeutic day treatment school and provides direction for potential implementation strategies for other SEL programs with similar goals.






Current Study

This transcendental phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experience of faculty and staff implementing the Jesse Lewis Choose Love curriculum daily over the course of 10 weeks at two therapeutic day treatment (TDT) school campuses in the southern United States.



Transcendental phenomenology was selected as the qualitative method of inquiry for this study because it takes the total lived experiences of one phenomenon and reduces that to a single essence.


The objective was to gain a deep understanding of the teachers and mental health paraprofessionals (MHPPs) who were trained in and implemented the curriculum and draw potential conclusions for future SEL implementation.






Method


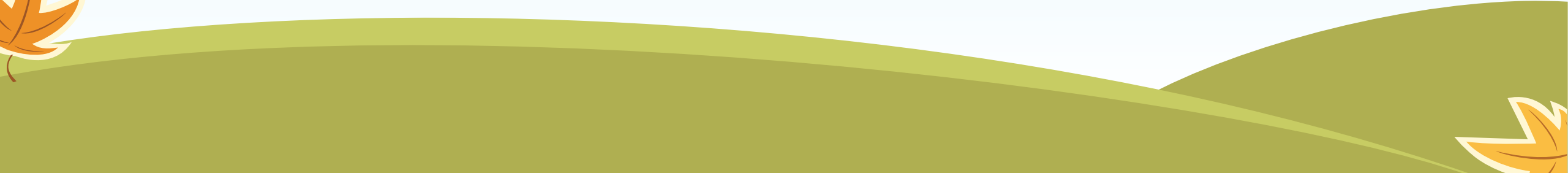

Prior to beginning this study, the Choose Love curriculum was extensively reviewed to choose and create the needed lessons. The elementary curriculum included 17 lessons per grade. In order to implement the lessons daily for 10 weeks, a total of 50 lessons were needed.



Additional age appropriate mindfulness lessons were selected by the primary researcher, who is a former elementary counselor, to align with the topics of courage, gratitude, forgiveness, and compassion, which are the foundation of the Choose Love curriculum. These mindfulness lessons were integrated with the established curriculum by implementing them on alternating days.



The original Choose Love secondary curriculum contained more lessons than the 50 needed for junior high and high school. To address this excess, specific lessons were selected by a former high school counselor for the purposes of this study.





Training





TDT faculty and staff received a two-hour training from Scarlett Lewis, founder of the Jesse Lewis Choose Love Movement, approximately one month prior to this study being initiated. Upon IRB approval, the two counselor educators from a local state university who had prepared the Choose Love curriculum, provided an additional one-hour training at each site to review the curriculum, disperse the lessons, discuss the research and gain informed consent one week prior to beginning the study.

Both TDT teaching faculty and MHPPs, along with site directors, were trained together to promote cohesion in understanding. MHPPs provided the lessons directly to the students, and the classroom teachers were encouraged to utilize the language in their daily classroom activities to facilitate integration of the language and concepts into daily interactions. After completing the training, teachers and MHPPs were given a jump drive with the lesson for each day and a list of needed materials (markers, paper, etc.) according to their grade level.





Participants

- 21 MHPPs
 - Eight teachers
 - All participants were using some combination of conscious discipline, level systems, point systems, or a token economy within their classrooms prior to the implementation of the Choose Lose curriculum.
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Data Collection


Qualitative response survey:

Questions were designed to be open-ended to encourage rich and detailed descriptions from participants. The seven items focused on current classroom dynamics, such as “How would you describe your classroom climate?”, and gauged receptivity to the new curriculum by asking questions like, “What challenges may arise incorporating the Choose Love curriculum in your classroom, if any?”





Focus Group 1: Mid way through the study (week 5)

Open-ended questions were designed to evaluate teacher and MHPP perceptions of the program and offer needed supports. These six items highlighted classroom impact by asking questions, such as “Are you noticing changes in the classroom? If so, what are they?” as well as personal emphasis through questions, like “How do you see yourselves changing as a result of this experience?”



Focus Group 2: Upon completion of the study (week 11)



Questions during the final focus group incorporated data from the previous data collection by asking for updates in identified areas for desired change within the classroom, reported changes in classroom dynamic and management styles, and fulfillment of expected benefits and challenges in curriculum implementation.





Results

Qualitative research is inductive and allows for patterns and themes to emerge as the data is collected. Final themes from this research included:

- Student and staff changes in social emotional learning
 - Staff cohesion
 - Awareness of student social emotional learning needs
 - The significance of established stability and teacher investment.
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Change in Students

Participants observed changes in their students, especially with regard to **displayed compassion, application of coping skills, and increased vulnerability.**

Tanya observed, “My kids have been using the Choose Love language outside of the lessons.” Arti noted, “I saw kids showing more compassion, and they labeled it as that.”

Emil described his class’s reaction to a student who is behaviorally disruptive: “A lot of our kids have been showing compassion toward him, but he has no empathy and no remorse for what he does. The other kids are like, ‘I feel bad for you.’”






Change in Students




Teachers and MHPPs also detected a difference in **utilization of coping skills** in getting their **social and emotional needs met**.



Chantel observed, “Some of the kids are better now at expressing what they need, especially those who have been with us longer.”



Carolina identified the application of Choose Love skills by noticing, “I’ve been hearing a lot of kids taking breaths.” Merlin echoed the application of the curriculum by saying, “They’re definitely using the verbiage and identifying coping skills more.”



Caterina noted, “I have felt like our kids have felt more safe with us... We had two of them fall asleep during our guided meditation. In our job, for a kid to feel that safe... for a kid to fall asleep shows a level of trust.”





Change in Staff

Both teachers and MHPPs reported **more warm and compassionate feelings** towards their students after implementing curriculum.







Emil said, “Yeah, it felt good when they said that I was what they were grateful for that day. It made me feel closer to them.”

Merlin noticed, “I see the students using the lesson time to become more vulnerable with me and each other.”

After ten weeks of programming, Leila claimed, “I feel like I have been a little bit more empathic and composed with my kids.”

Tanya shared, “One of them, as we were walking down the hallway, he never touches me but he kind of touched my hand and said, ‘You know, if you’re feeling sad about your mom, you could get a stuffed animal and name it your mom’s name and that way when you miss her you can just hug it.’”

There were changes reported in internal processing as well. Caterina shared, “I find after applying the curriculum I find myself saying, ‘What do I need to do to be calm and collected in this time?’” Carolina said, “I’m feeling different about this place than I ever have before.”







Group Cohesion




Before the curriculum was being applied, participants reported a **lack of unity** among teachers and MHPPS. One teacher claimed, “There is not as much teamwork between the staff as I would like.” According to one MHPP,




“Consistency among certain staff members is also an issue, causing more anxiety among the children as they don't know what to expect. Favoritism is also something that occurs in my classroom among the teacher and other MHPPs. The kids have picked up on who is liked by whom and this can trigger rejection responses quickly.”



Participants expressed confidence in the curriculum's ability to **foster a sense of cohesion** among the staff. One teacher stated, “I'm excited for the staff to utilize the Choose Love curriculum because I believe it will not only be a strong program to teach social skills but will connect the staff and students due to a common focus.” This sentiment was echoed by an MHPP, saying,



“I am very excited for the Choose Love program, and parents I have talked to about it are very excited as well. I think it has a lot to offer, but I also recognize it requires a lot of buy-in from all parties involved. I am very eager to see where this program takes our classroom, kiddos, and families.”








Group Cohesion

As we returned to the campuses to collect data, **we noticed a developing cohesion** among teachers and MHPPs who were increasingly more comfortable with one another during the focus groups.

During the first focus group, Leila reported, “They’ve been using the language more with each other, and I guess we have as well. It’s a movement kind of.”

During the second focus group, Judith shared, “I think what builds the most empathy with each other is going through things together... like recognizing hardships together and talking about what it’s like here.”

Tanya added, “Our sense of empathy and compassion has increased as a team because we all know what the day is going to be like.”







Awareness of Student Needs



One teacher expressed a **lack of social and emotional competence** of their students. One MHPP said, “A few of our kiddos have been having problems with bullying one another as well as with how to resolve conflict when having difficulties getting along.”

Another MHPP claimed, “I would like to see more classrooms practicing more patience and empathizing and less demanding and impatient and unempathetic.”


This awareness with the social and emotional skill deficiencies of participants was also paired with a **hopefulness for students’ abilities to change**. One MHPP stated, “A couple kids in our class resist physical touch, talk of feelings - anything seemingly uncomfortable for them relating to expressing themselves effectively or accepting support from others. It may get worse before it gets better for them, but I have high hopes that this will be helpful for them.”






Awareness of Student Needs

Another MHPP echoed this hopefulness saying, “I think a consistent ten week course, which heavily focuses on love will be beneficial to how they see themselves and their own interactions with the world.”



After implementing the curriculum, Chantel reported, “As a team, when we decompress at the end of the day, we talk more about what this kid needs.” This **awareness of student needs** was also apparent in a suggestion made by Judith, who said, “The lessons need to offer more opportunities for students to actually interact with one another to practice what they are learning.”







Existing Stability

One participant called for the need of a “more consistent and assertive approach to the classroom structure” to effectively engage students.

A teacher expressed uncertainty about curriculum implementation by saying, “The team feels overwhelmed due to the high level of needs in this classroom. I believe they see this as just something else they have to try to do when they already feel overworked and understaffed.”





Existing Stability

Additionally, one MHPP expressed concern about their own familiarity with the material due to a lack of preparation time,

“I am not sure we feel like we have been given enough time to prepare for this. We have been given very limited training and are just now seeing the material and have very little prep time before we start incorporating it. There is not a lot of time for planning built into the work day, especially due to the high level of needs in our classroom, so all of this prep work will have to be done in our personal time at home.”

This stability was also significant at an institutional level. Participants emphasized the desire for stability from their students. Caterina said, “The more structure and consistency [the students] had with [the programming], the more they bought into it.”






Participant Suggestions

Participants made several suggestions to the execution of the Choose Love curriculum during both focus groups.

They shared that sometimes the day-to-day lessons felt disjointed and that it may be more useful to introduce one concept at a time, tying these concepts together at the end of the week. This was likely due to the added mindfulness lessons, which were conducted every other day in order to extend the Choose Love curriculum.

Participants also recommended new methods of incorporating social emotional learning skills, such as mindfulness and more creative or active hands on interventions, to promote student engagement in the process. We observed participants exhibited excitement when making these contributions.





Summary




Overall, the participants viewed the implementation of the Choose Love curriculum **positively for both themselves and their students** in many ways.

As literature indicated, participants perceived changes in their students' displayed compassion, coping strategies, and vulnerability (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017).


The observed change in social and emotional well-being also supports existing SEL research on the increase in facilitator capacities (Zinsser, Denman, Curby, & Shewark, 2015).

Our results indicate this change occurs at a teacher and MHPP level. It is important for facilitators of school programming change to notice results in order for them to continue with the new programming (Tyre, Feuerborn, & Woods, 2018).







Participants displayed **more cohesive behavior** with one another. Both MHPPs and teachers shared unity in their concerns with the existing culture for their students and appreciated the unity that the new curriculum developed among them.




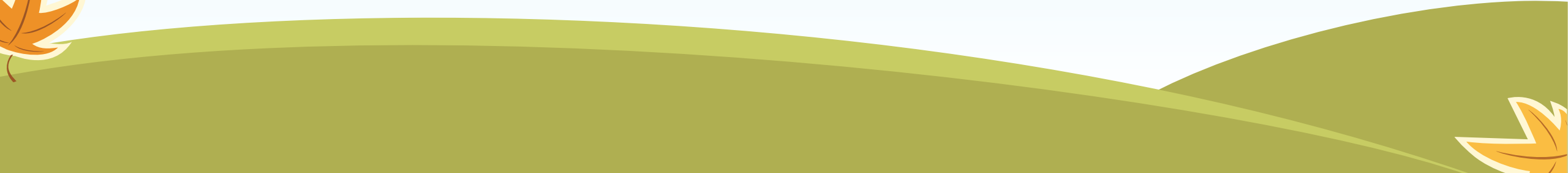
Facilitation of SEL programming opens up more opportunities to apply social and emotional skills (Zinsser, Denham, Curby, & Shewark, 2015). Additionally, these shared experiences surrounding a new and unfamiliar events were correlated with increased group cohesion (Wyatt, 2013).



Participants in the study exhibited the **high familiarity with the needs of their students**, already emphasized in the literature (Hunter, DiPerna, Hart, & Crowley, 2018).




Facilitators must adjust SEL programming according to the diverse needs of students to optimize its effectiveness (Garner, Mahatmya, Brown, & Vesely, 2014). The teachers and staff who are implementing the programming must be aware of student needs to make appropriate accommodations.







New Findings


Our results reveal an aspect of **participant investment** that had not been previously explored in the research. Participant investment was seen in their creative approach to tailoring the Choose Love curriculum to the interests and learning styles of their students (Arifani & Suryanti, 2019). These creative approaches included utilization of more hands-on activities, using mindfulness exercises, incorporating collage or physical movements rather than journaling, and promoting collaboration through role play activities.



In their suggestions, participants revealed that they were critically thinking about the curriculum, which indicates their investment. It is important to incorporate staff input in social emotional learning programs to promote teacher investment.





According to the literature, facilitator value of social and emotional learning yields most effective programming results (Collie, Shapka, Perry, & Martin, 2015). Additionally, our results also indicate a strong support of similar responses to SEL programming from mental health paraprofessionals and teachers. This understanding from a MHPP perspective provides a more comprehensive understanding of SEL program application.





Implications

From the results, there are considerations to be made in future SEL and Choose Love implementation to maximize effectiveness.

- Ensure the teachers of the programming demonstrate their own social and emotional competencies through an awareness of the needs of their students in these areas and be receptive to these values.
 - Provide flexibility within the program with consideration of teacher/facilitator input into programming, valuing the expertise of the teachers as those most familiar with the unique needs of their students. This would be more easily done if the training was provided from someone within the school who is present on a daily or weekly basis, such as the principal or professional school counselor.
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Future Research




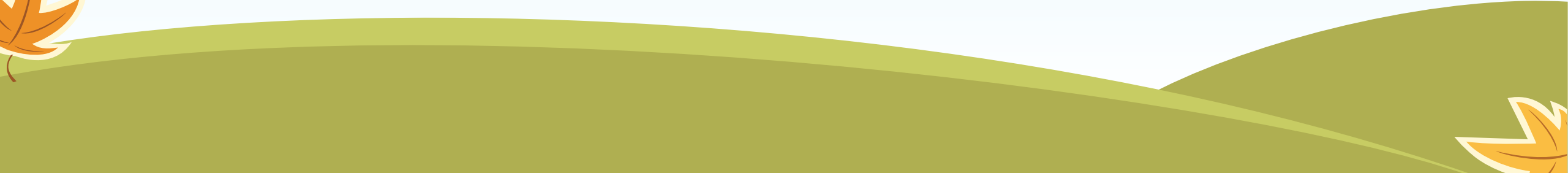

Future research with regard to the Choose Love curriculum should take the suggestions list by participants, either explicitly or through interpretation, into consideration.

The Jesse Lewis Choose Love curriculum may benefit from including more activities, which utilize creativity, mindfulness, and physical movement. Exploring the effectiveness of alternatives to writing, such as drawing or writing music, may be beneficial for all ages.

Results also called for the inclusion of opportunities for the students to practice the skills being taught with one another through role plays. All of these methods could be included in SEL programming as creative methods to instill social and emotional learning.











With regard to general SEL implementation strategies, there needs to be more exploration into the effects SEL programs have on school cultures and dynamics. If administrators are able to see the changes these programs make in their staff and students, they can be treated with the gravity deserved to develop them holistically.



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