

Social Emotional Learning: A Multi-Tiered School Counseling Approach

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Abstract

The authors explore the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) at the elementary school level. A review of the literature on the short term and long term benefits of SEL in schools and a description of the competencies of SEL programming: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, is provided. The authors propose a three-tier comprehensive prevention and intervention model of SEL instruction, intervention, and progress monitoring that involves elementary school counselors, staff, parents, and community stakeholders to provide students with essential skills to be utilized throughout secondary and post-secondary education.

Keywords: Social and emotional learning, schools, elementary school counseling

Social and Emotional Learning Advocacy

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is essential for student success in school and life (McKown, 2017). Students must receive direct instruction in order to properly recognize and manage feelings across settings just as students receive direct instruction cognitively and academically (Swartz, 2017). Counselors, teachers, parents, administrators, staff, and community members join together in the instruction and support of students' social and emotional awareness and regulation. A school counseling program with emphasis SEL contributes to a positive school climate built upon mutual respect and empathy for others. Counselors deliver Tier I classroom guidance lessons to all students, Tier II interventions to groups of students requiring added recognition and practice of various social and emotional skills, and Tier III services to individual students in need of even greater support. An essential component of a comprehensive school counseling program with a social and emotional learning focus is to employ quality, core instruction through guidance lessons to all students and thereafter assess for areas of need.

The system of delivering counseling services through a multi-tiered approach was adapted from both Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Benner, Kutash, Nelson, & Fisher, 2013; Parisi, Ihlo, & Glover, 2014). Just as Benner et al. (2014) suggest implementation of multi-tiered academic supports contribute to improved academic performance, we suggest a multi-tiered framework for implementing social and emotional learning can contribute to social and emotional competence. Using the *Response to Intervention and the Pyramid Model* (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2009) as a guide, we envision a three-tier comprehensive prevention and intervention model of SEL instruction, intervention, and progress monitoring as reflected in Figure 1.

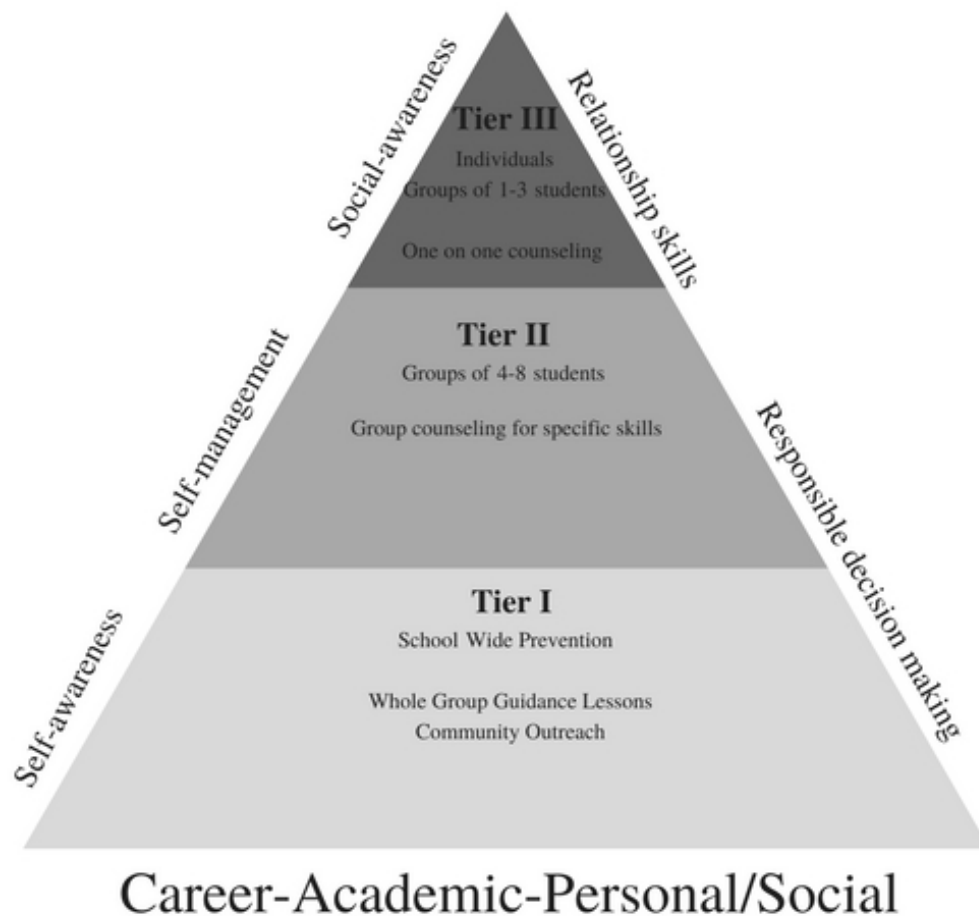


Figure 1

Review of Literature

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is very important in the development of a child. Children will use the skills taught in SEL to be successful throughout their school years, in their careers, and in interactions with others (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). There are five competencies that are taught in SEL and they include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). These competencies have an effect on a child's success and ability to learn and have an impact on the child even as early on as their preschool years (Kwon, Hanrahan, & Kupzyk, 2017). For

these reasons, every school should implement an SEL learning program to enhance children's relationships with others and their own emotional regulatory skills.

SEL is increasingly important for children to learn because of changes happening within our society, families, and communities. Economic changes have dramatically affected families and the poverty level in our country. For example, \$500 in 1990 would have the same buying power that \$977 would now (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). 35% of all children in the United States are living in a single parent household (Datacenter, 2016), which can put even more strain on a family's financial situation. Because of these types of familial changes, more and more parents are forced to work more hours to keep up financially. Addiction and mental health also play a huge role in changing family dynamics. Appendix A shows Indiana estimates of drug, alcohol, and mental health disorders in 2015, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Children who live with drug abusers may be forced to deal with parents who are inattentive, in jail/prison, have unstable living situations, and the list goes on and on. Another major issue is the ease of access to the internet and social media that "encourage health-damaging behavior" (Greensberg, Weissburg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003, p.468). Children can view a wide variety of violent, sexual, and other inappropriate material in the click of a button, without the maturity and guidance to know what to do with what they see. With the multitude of changes affecting our children, we need to provide them with some extra support and guidance so that they can make good decisions and have some control over the development of their character.

Our schools are also experiencing changes and problems that have an impact on children's learning and development. One serious issue is that resources for schools are diminishing (Greensberg et. al., 2003). Schools are enrolling students at higher rates than in the

past, increasing class size and teacher ratios, as well as decreasing a teacher's ability to give extra attention to students who may need it (Greensberg et. al., 2003). While some students excel, others "struggle academically and are disengaged" (Greensberg, et. al., 2003). More students are dealing with mental health problems and social-emotional issues as well. Without the appropriate teaching and guidance, a student can become a disruption to the entire class. A child's emotions can either help or hamper the learning environment Our schools need efficient and evidence-based SEL programming to combat all the challenges that we are currently facing.

There is a vast body of research that shows SEL can help children be more successful academically as well as socially (Kwon, et.al., 2017; Zins, 2004; Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017). Zins (2004) points out that schools sometimes use a fragmented approach to dealing with emotional or social issues instead of a holistic, person-centered approach. By using an SEL, the entire school (staff included) are learning ways to manage emotions and behaviors holistically that help create a "positive environment that is conducive to learning" (Zins, 2004). There are many benefits of using an evidence-based SEL including a stronger sense of community, higher aspirations and motivation, more prosocial behavior, fewer absences, reductions in conduct problems, better problem solving, higher testing and academic grades, and an improvement in nonverbal reasoning and higher-level reasoning as well (Zins, 2004). The research shows that implementing a comprehensive SEL program can reduce negative behaviors and improve behavior, attitude, and learning if a holistic, person-centered approach is used.

Tier I

The purpose of Tier 1 is to create a school wide prevention strategy to advocate for social emotional learning. The goal is to create a school where students are taught how to regulate their emotions. Self-regulation is the "ability to regulate our thoughts, feelings, and actions. It is at the

core of emotional wellbeing for academic and life success. It is the essential skill that allows us to put a pause between impulse and action” (Vohs & Baumeister, 2004). In order for this to be the most effective it is crucial to involve students, teachers, parents, and the community. Zins (2004) notes that social emotional learning (SEL) plays a critical role in influencing both nonacademic and academic outcomes. Learning is a social process. “Students do not learn alone but rather in collaboration with their teachers, in the company of their peers, and with the support of their families” (Zins, 2004).

The main goal of Tier I is to reach all students in SEL, educate parents on how to be involved within the school and with their child, create a stronger bridge between school and home, and to create a family within the school where students feel as though school is a safe and happy place for them to learn and grow. Tier 1 instructional practices include instruction to 100% of students across all settings. Tier 1 provides direction instruction to social and emotional skills which are crucial for students to be successful in school and beyond. In this Tier there will be two school wide assessments for parents and teachers and a student self-assessment . Tier 1 is a school wide prevention strategy that involves students, teachers, classrooms as a whole, and parents.

Parent Involvement

Improving student achievement calls for parent involvement (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). The key to increasing student achievement and ensuring more equitable practices in schools is to increase parent and community involvement (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). This means creating a team of people to support the school and creating a strong ‘school family’ of individuals. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) state: “Three primary roles of the school include: 1. Giving parents access to information and skills to support their children’s education, 2. Coordinating community

programming that meets the needs and issues that students and their families encounter, and 3. Recognize the rights of parents- and their fundamental competence- to share in decision making” (68). For the school wide initiative, a letter will be sent home to parents explaining bucket filling. According to Holcomb-McCoy (2007), policies that institute, embrace, and support programs and activities that engage families and communities; shared leadership that includes families and communities; clear communication between community, school, and families; and a school’s willingness to evaluate goals are all important considerations for enhancing parental involvement.

Teacher Involvement

Teacher involvement for Social Emotional Learning is crucial. When a child’s home life is chaotic, unsafe, and perhaps lacking in positive adult role models, it is imperative to find shelter and inspiration somewhere (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). That is where school can become a sanctuary. Teachers will be trained on Conscious Discipline. Conscious Discipline (CD) is a comprehensive classroom management program and social-emotional curriculum (Bailey, 2014). Overall results have shown that CD improves social and emotional skills, academic readiness, academic achievement, quality of student-teacher interactions, and school climate (Bailey, 2014). Additionally Conscious Discipline decreases aggression, impulsivity, and hyperactivity in “difficult” children (Bailey, 2014).

Conscious Discipline is a way of organizing schools and classrooms around the concept of a school family. Each member of the family, both adult and child, learns the skills needed to successfully manage life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, communicating effectively, being sensitive to others’ needs, and getting along with others (Bailey, 2000).

According to Bailey (2000), Conscious Discipline has seven basic powers of self-control. Table I provides a list and description of Conscious Discipline Seven Powers of Self-Control.

Table I. Conscious Discipline Seven Powers of Self-Control

Perception	No one can make you mad without your permission
Unity	We are all in this together
Love	See the best in others
Attention	What you focus on, you get more of
Acceptance	The moment is at is
Free will	The only person you can make change is yourself
Intention	Conflict is an opportunity to teach

a Table I provides a list and description of Conscious Discipline Seven Powers of Self-Control (Bailey, 2000).

The Seven Powers of Self-Control identified in Table I have implications for teacher development. First, each power must be taught to teachers as skills necessary to facilitate a SEL classroom. Secondly, in addition to learning SEL skills, teachers must also learn how to design their classroom in a way that supports a culture of SEL. For example, tools for breathing techniques, a safe place for children to relax if they are overwhelmed with emotions, and a comfortable atmosphere for them to practice self-regulation are all vital components of SEL in a classroom setting.

Student Involvement

Students will be part of and involved in the school family. They will be encouraged to encompass their home family and include them into the school family environment meaning there will be actions made to include the family within the school. Additionally students will be provided with a safe school atmosphere where there is consistency, strong adult role models, social emotional classroom setup, and education on social emotional learning. Classrooms will be primed to have a classroom bond with morning meetings, breathing routines, and teachers trained in Conscious Discipline, making it a 'school family' (Bailey, 2014). All students will be provided social emotional education. The school counselor along with teachers and staff will be trained to assist, lead by example, and educate students. The teachers will provide a social and emotionally safe classroom where students feel comfortable and at home. The counselor will teach guidance lessons on breathing techniques for self-regulation and a guidance lesson that will carry into their entire school experience called "Being a Bucket Filler." This lesson starts with discussing responsibility, respect, and caring means. Then the counselor will read "*Have You Filled a Bucket Today?*" Students will be involved in filling the buckets of each of their

classmates. They will also be invited to nominate bucket fillers for the school wide bucket filling initiative. This lesson will extend throughout the year. The school counselor will create a huge bulletin board with a bucket and a drop box where students are able to nominate weekly bucket fillers. Every Friday the school counselor will read the nominations and choose one person to add to the school Bucket Fillers bulletin board.

School Counselor Involvement

The school counselor will be responsible for facilitating resources for teachers, community, parents, staff, and students. The counselor will have an active leadership role that initiates the Conscious Discipline program, implements the Bucket Filling motto within the school, educates and assists teachers in Conscious Discipline, hosts family nights that promote social emotional education and school involvement, etc. The school counselor's responsibilities for Social Emotional Learning are provided in Table II.

Table II. School Counselor's Responsibilities for Social Emotional Learning

Families	Teachers	Students	Other
Host family nights & send home newsletters that involve and make parents aware of things happening within the school	Facilitate a buddy system program that promotes teacher/student relationships	Teach students the 'bucket filling motto' and promote implementation of this motto	Create assessments that identify students who need additional social emotional learning along with pre and post tests
Connect families with the community and community resources	Help implement safe places within the classroom	Educate students on breathing and self regulation	Educate and involve the community
Educate families on Conscious Discipline	Train staff on Conscious Discipline	Create and implement Tier 1, 2, & 3 counseling plans	Write grants and scholarships for Conscious Discipline trainings.
Create parent/guardian assessments	Create teacher assessments	Create, review, and delegate students into appropriate Tiers based on assessments	Lead & implement the school Bucket Filling initiative.

b Table II provides a description of school counselor's responsibilities for Social Emotional Learning.

Tier II

“At Tier 2, targeted support, such as social skills instructions or daily behavior report cards, is provided to the group of students who do not respond to universal interventions and show symptoms of behavior problems” (Yong & Cheney, 2013, p. 844). Students are identified through the use of data and referrals for Tier II services. The data to consider include universal screeners, classroom surveys, pre and post-tests at the Tier I level, teacher referral, parent nomination, discipline referrals, and attendance reports. Students receive Tier II support with greater frequency and duration than Tier I. Types of Tier II interventions include, but are not limited to, check-in and -out programs, mentor programs, group counseling, and behavior contracts. Tier II interventions are delivered in counseling groups of four to eight students.

Before commencing any intervention services, it is vital for counselors to first examine personal biases and recognize the role of culture throughout the intervention process. Counselors must determine the problem within the context of environment and family, examine developmental history, recognize child behavior and development, and acknowledge the role of extended family within the student’s life (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, pp. 47-51). Holcomb-McCoy (2007) details a counselor’s duty to get to know the student’s family, the family’s attitude toward authority and school, and the value placed upon family and school. Certain cultural groups, like some Latino subgroups, place the highest value on family rather than other social institutions (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

Group counseling lesson

An important part of social and emotional learning is the ability to regulate frustration and feelings of anger. For students that struggle with controlling anger in the classroom as evidenced by discipline referrals, teacher input, and counseling surveys, a Tier II anger

management group may be appropriate. The group discussions and activities within an anger management group focus on the internal feelings, external looks, and the effects of anger on others. Group members complete a pre-test prior to the first meeting and a post-test following the final group counseling session. The counselor's role is to ensure that group members have the ability to recognize feelings of anger in self and others as well as develop strategies to de-escalate anger. In subsequent groups, the counselor's role is similar to that of his or her role in the anger management group. Each small group centers around a different emotional or behavioral area with which some students require re-teaching. All small groups have pre-assessments and assessments to measure progress throughout. When a student demonstrates mastery of the skill practiced in group, he or she returns to the Tier I level. However, when a student is continually unable to regulate an emotional or behavioral area, he or she must move to the Tier III level.

Tier III

Much like Tier II, students are identified through the use of data and referrals. The students that require assistance in Tier III have more severe emotional, social, or problematic behaviors than the students placed in Tier I and Tier II. Tier III intervention is for students who need extra support in particular areas, such as anger or depression. This is the highest frequency/duration of all three Tiers. Once placed in Tier III, the student is seen frequently by the counselor individually or in a small group of one to three students. These students would all be struggling with the same issue regarding social skills and/or emotional regulations. Tier III focuses specifically on the individual needs of the student and provides a deeper understanding that may not have been provided previously. This allows the student to feel comfortable one on one with the counselor, where they might not be comfortable sharing with a group. This

additional support will provide the student with the tools needed to become stronger with their social skills and emotional regulations in all settings. Tier III intervention focuses on the remediation and intervention that is needed for the student.

The intervention and remediation for a student strengthening their social skills and emotional regulation could look many different ways. The counselor would discuss with the student the scenario/situation that occurred prior to the behavior. The counselor could ask the questions (Social and Emotional Learning, 2018): “What happened?, What were you thinking at the time?, Who has been affected by what you have done?, How do you think they have been affected?, What do you need to do to put things right?, How are you going to make things right?”

These questions can help address the situation and how it can be fixed. It puts the situation in perspective and leads to what could have occurred instead of reacting negatively. It is important to remember to not ask “Why did you do that?” because the student is not required to justify their actions. This is related to the Strength-based counseling covered in the textbook. In Strength-based counseling, “focus is on determining student strengths and emphasizing those strengths to resolve or at least reduce the frequency of the problem that brought the student to the counselor’s attention.” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 37). The focus is not to fix a “broken student”, but to build on their strengths. This allows the student to believe they have something to offer and achieve (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 37).

Conclusion

Changes within society, the economy, families, and communities call for greater social and emotional education in schools. Stressors outside of school, like the need for parents to work longer hours, as well as stressors inside of the school, like standardized testing, reveal a dire need for emotional support. Students must be explicitly taught to recognize, normalize, and

regulate emotions and behaviors across multiple settings (Swartz, 2017). The ability to regulate emotions and stress translates to success throughout students' lives (Swartz, 2017). Tiered SEL programming tailors social and emotional instruction to the needs of all learners socially, behaviorally, and culturally. If all schools can implement a comprehensive, evidence-based SEL, children will learn how to become ethical, empathetic, productive citizens who will be ready to handle challenges in life.

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