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The Relationship of Social-Emotional Learning and Self-Advocacy for Students with Disabilities

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The Relationship of Social-Emotional Learning and Self-Advocacy

for Students with Disabilities

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to understand how teachers' knowledge and practice of social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom correlates to feelings of empowerment and "participation" in school settings for students with disabilities. Research has shown that SEL interventions for students has correlated with positive school outcomes including social acceptance, problem solving skills, stress management, and academic success (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009); and that emotional support and instructional management are both very important aspects of creating a positive classroom environment for students (Hughes & Koplan, 2018). This study included interviews with a sample of six participants, composed of four individuals within the field of education and two parents of students with disabilities. Interviews with participants revealed the importance of building intrinsic motivation to do well, that the quality of relationship between teacher and student leads students with disabilities to be more likely to take academic risks, and how the behavioral aptitude available through SEL creates the conditions for students with disabilities to feel like they are "fitting in." The findings of this research have implications for teachers' practice in developing meaningful connections with their students to increase self-confidence, student participation, and intrinsic strengths.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

As a first year teacher, I was full of excitement for the school year to begin. I had so many ideas of how to teach reading, writing, and math. I read through my students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), trying to gain as much information about them as possible. I asked questions of past teachers, looked through old files, and tried to gain a sense of who my students were. In that first year of teaching, I learned that there is nothing more valuable than truly getting to know students yourself - in the conversations with them, the daily interactions, the check-ins when you see them. I will never forget the meltdowns from students who had too much going on emotionally to handle or the tears streaming down a student's face as they told me that they really just needed a hug. While I felt the pressure of test scores, assignment grades, and goal progress, it became clear to me that until the social-emotional needs of my students were met, we would not be able to get to the academics. The social-emotional needs of my students had to come first - they were all encompassing and interwoven into every action and thought they had throughout their day. Not only did these needs have to be met, but my students needed to learn how to ask for what they needed so that they could appropriately function within their school community.

Teachers work constantly to meet all of the needs of their students. This goes beyond teaching them the content standards. It is about more than making sure that their students understand the math, reading, and writing lessons. While that is important, and of course, a primary responsibility of teachers, a teacher must do more than teach academic subjects in order to meet all of the needs of their students. Students have social and emotional needs, too. Furthermore, students with disabilities tend to have less developed social skills, making the instruction on these skills of even greater importance. Yet, how teachers meet these needs looks

different from classroom to classroom or across schools. So the question arises - how do teachers effectively meet the social-emotional needs of their students with disabilities?

Statement of Purpose

The social-emotional learning framework has been well-established and developed over many years. Within the framework, there are five SEL competencies which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Sugishita & Dresser, 2019). At different stages in people's lives, there are expectations of what is developmentally appropriate for them to learn (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). Even so, research shows that despite traditional developmental tracks, people with disabilities tend to have lower levels of self-confidence, and are less likely to self-advocate (Merlone & Moran, 2008). The research also suggests that training and collaboration are key in teacher attitudes and the implementation of effective social-emotional learning programs (Anyon et al., 2016). The literature makes a compelling case for the importance of social emotional learning for students with disabilities; however, this research study sought to further explore whether there are specific social-emotional learning practices that lead to better self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities, such as asking for help or knowing how to request what they need.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between social-emotional learning, self-advocacy, and students with disabilities. This study also sought to understand how teachers' understanding of social-emotional learning impacts their implementation in the classroom, in particular, with students with disabilities. Further, since the study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the research

aimed to determine how emergency situations such as this shift the implementation of social-emotional learning, and how this shift affects students with disabilities.

Overview of the Research Design

The purpose of the study was to explore whether there are specific types of social-emotional learning that cause students with disabilities to be better self-advocates in the school setting. As such, the researcher specifically sought to answer three research questions: (1) How do students with disabilities become better self-advocates as a result of social-emotional learning? (2) How does a teachers' understanding of social-emotional learning impact their teaching practice especially with regards to their students with disabilities? (3) Do social-emotional learning interventions look different during periods such as during a pandemic for students with disabilities?

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a constructivist philosophical worldview. The research study included four educators and two parents, who were interviewed using open-ended questions. All participants in the study were either past or present colleagues of the researcher from public schools in Northern California, or parents of students who the researcher teaches. By conducting interviews with this sample of participants, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of the people within her working world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Interviews were conducted in a one-on-one format, through a video conference format, due to safety precautions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The qualitative data gathered for this study emerged through the transcription of interviews and coding for themes.

The researcher is an educator who has either worked directly with the participants in the study, or has worked with them in the past. Also, the parents who were interviewed in the study are the parents of the researcher's students. Thus, there is the potential that participants would

answer questions in a particular way that would cause the researcher to view them positively, as they continue to have a working relationship. Further, the researcher acknowledges her own bias, in that she believes social-emotional learning helps students with disabilities to become better self-advocates.

Significance of the Study

Findings of the research study indicate that through social-emotional learning, teachers can work to normalize differences in students, and build the intrinsic motivation for students with disabilities to do well. Second, the findings of the study portray that a teacher-student relationship built on trust and respect allows students with disabilities to be more likely to take risks, thereby being better self-advocates in the school setting. Additionally, the research brought light to the need for students with disabilities to, "fit in." As such, it is necessary and important to address this need of students with disabilities before addressing their academic needs.

The findings of the study further emphasize what has been known to be true - that social-emotional learning is important for all students, including those with disabilities; however, what emerged through the study is that students with disabilities have specific needs, such as wanting to fit in, have their individuality feel normal, and to find the intrinsic motivation to succeed in school, which can be met through social-emotional learning. Further, the research suggests that while the shift to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has worked better for some students with disabilities in comparison to others, the importance of strong teacher-student relationships remains of high value.

Research Implications

Findings from the interviews in the research study indicate that social-emotional learning is beneficial for students with disabilities, through both its formal and informal implementation. One of the ways in which social-emotional learning is beneficial for students with disabilities, is by normalizing individuality, so that differences are not seen as bad or out of the ordinary. This means that students with disabilities need to have positive self-perceptions in the school setting, which can build their intrinsic motivation to do well. This can be done through direct instruction in social-emotional learning, so that all students feel valued and accepted regardless of individual differences.

The research also suggests that teacher-student relationships built on trust and respect compel students with disabilities to take academic risks at school. While prior research suggests that students with disabilities have lower levels of self-confidence, findings of this study indicate that when students with disabilities have feelings of trust and respect towards their teachers, they are more likely to step outside of their comfort zone to ask for help when they need it, or try new things. One key way that teachers establish this relationship is through individualized conversations with students, making it apparent that individual check-ins are necessary and important.

Last, it was noted that while students with disabilities may feel comfortable and included within their school community, there is also a desire to, "fit in," with their peers that they address through various coping skills. It is essential for students to be provided direct instruction in social-emotional learning, so that they know how to handle these types of feelings, and can appropriately cope in these situations. The research provides evidence that social-emotional

learning is indeed beneficial for students with disabilities, and suggests that it is a positive pillar in establishing better self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review seeks to explore the effects of social-emotional learning (SEL) on students with disabilities, and how it is implemented within the classroom. Currently, there is a gap in understanding as to whether there are particular SEL practices that cause students with disabilities to be more likely to self-advocate. Further, this study seeks to look at how teachers' understanding of SEL impacts their teaching practice particularly in relationship to students with disabilities, if and how it changes during emergency situations such as a pandemic, and if their understanding of social-emotional learning has positive outcomes for their students with disabilities.

Current research suggests that both students and teachers benefit from SEL, and that it has the ability to increase positive outcomes, and decrease negative outcomes (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). SEL programs are beneficial to teachers, in that they have been shown to reduce stress and turnover of teachers (Dorman, 2015). And SEL programs have been implemented in schools as both classroom interventions and school-wide programs to increase positive outcomes for students (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). It has also been documented that there are different expectations of what is developmentally appropriate for students at different points in their education (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). As such, expectations in terms of self-awareness, confidence, and self-advocacy should be developmentally appropriate. Students with disabilities have contrasting development trajectories and tend to have lower levels of self-awareness and confidence, and, consequently, are less likely to self-advocate in comparison to their peers (Merlone & Moran, 2008). It is important for people with disabilities to know that they are valued members of the community, and that their voice matters; however, teachers do not always have the same expectations for students with and without disabilities. Collectively,

professional collaboration and learning is important as teachers and staff need to be trained in programs and have a certain level of, "buy in," to programs that they are implementing (Anyon et al., 2016).

In this review of literature, I will review SEL, in terms of both its historical context and what is being done in the field of education. Second, I will discuss Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP), as a means of understanding what is appropriate for students at different points in their lives. Third, I will explore the impact of professional development and learning on the implementation of SEL practices in the classroom. Finally, I will look at SEL practices during the present day, to compare what is being done now, during a pandemic, to what was done previously.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL programs are centralized around the goal of fostering the social and emotional competencies of children (CASEL, 2020). These interventions look different when implemented, as they can focus on different skills, and aim to have different outcomes. It is important to gain an understanding of the scope of SEL competencies, and how they have emerged and changed over the years.

Historical Context of SEL

SEL is a framework that has developed over many years. It is believed that the foundation of SEL developed as far back in time as ancient Greece. In *The Republic,* Plato wrote of education as encompassing several factors, and that it should be much more of a, "holistic curriculum," whereby more than standard academics were taught ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011). Plato proposed a theory on education that described the

importance of the interaction between academic, emotional, and social intelligence ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011).

In the 1960's, James Comer, a researcher at Yale School of Medicine's Child Study Center, began a program called the Comer School Development Program (Coulter, 2013). This pilot program was developed to improve the school experience for students in low-income schools by building positive relationships between students and school staff, with the goal of creating more positive school environments. In this study, Comer found that the home and school experiences of students impacted their academic success (Coulter, 1993). Through this study, three key components emerged as important to the academic success of students. First, it was essential to have a planning and management team at each school site, who worked to identify areas that needed social and academic achievement (Coulter, 1993). From there, they were further tasked with developing and implementing a plan to improve those areas. Second, it was necessary to have a team of individuals who were dedicated to monitoring social and behavioral patterns, and to solve recurring issues (Coulter, 1993). Third, a parents' group was created to foster and improve the home-school connection (Coulter, 1993).

Through the Comer program, a collaborative team was formed to improve upon the social, emotional, and behavioral patterns of the students. This, in turn, led to increased academic performance at the schools that piloted the study. By the 1980s, the pilot schools had improved academics, and reduced truancies and behavior problems ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011). Roger P. Weissberg and Timothy Shriver subsequently worked together to create the K-12 New Haven Social Development Program ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011). Around the same time, Weisberg and Maurice Elias created the W. T. Grant Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence,

in conjunction with the W. T. Grant Consortium, who published guidelines on how to incorporate SEL in schools, and outlined some of the emotional competencies that were important for students to have ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011).

In 1994, the Collaborative to Advance Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011). The stated goal of CASEL (2020) is toward "advancing equity and excellence in education through social and emotional learning." CASEL (1997) provided a framework for establishing and implementing a social and emotional learning program in the school setting ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011), and asserting that individuals face many challenges in society that require them to have a skillset of academic, social, and emotional knowledge, and that this can be learned through an effective SEL education program (Elias et al., 1997). Today, CASEL continues to drive the SEL movement, working to bring SEL into schools throughout the nation.

Goleman (2005) asserted that the character of students matters, and that good character is something that can be taught and learned. Goleman discussed social and emotional intelligence in a way that made it approachable in the school setting. His book served as a means of bridging the gap between researchers of SEL and implementation in schools ("Social and Emotional Learning: A Short History," 2011). Goleman's beliefs that social and emotional skills must be taught, continue to be regarded today through SEL programs in schools.

SEL Competencies

There are five SEL competencies that are widely recognized which include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Sugishita & Dresser, 2019). SEL programs target these five SEL competencies, with

the overall goal of improving students' social and emotional skills, thereby decreasing

problematic behavior (CASEL, 2013).

Self-Awareness. Self-awareness is defined as the ability of an individual to understand

their own thoughts and emotions, and how they impact their behavior (CASEL, 2013). As such,

this means that students must have a sense of their strengths and challenges, and how this may

influence their views of themselves. Self-awareness is often connected to self-confidence, as

those who have positively developed in this area have a good sense of confidence in themselves

(Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011).

Self-management. Self-management is defined as the ability to take thoughts and

emotions, and control them in different environments and situations (CASEL, 2013). When

people are able to self-manage, they are able to control their feelings so that they do not

negatively impact their behavior. Additionally, those who are able to self-manage have the

ability to set goals for themselves. These goals can be either short or long-term, and the

individual must be able to find ways to work towards these goals (Belo de Moura Pereira et al.,

2011).

Social Awareness. To have social awareness is to understand and connect with people

of different backgrounds, to understand societal norms, and to recognize available resources and

supports (CASEL, 2013). People who are socially aware are able to understand how others think

and feel (Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011). Individuals who are socially aware also have an

understanding of the world around them, and are able to take on the perspectives of others to

empathize with them.

Relationship Skills. Relationship skills is the ability to have positive relationships with

others. According to CASEL (2013), this includes, "communicating clearly, listening actively,

cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed" (p. 9). People who have good relationship skills are able to appropriately handle their emotions to maintain positive relationship skills with others (Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011).

  Responsible Decision Making. Responsible decision making is defined as the ability to make positive decisions based on realistic, ethical, and safety standards (CASEL, 2013). Students who are responsible decision makers are able to take many factors into account, to determine what the best decision would be. They must be able to think about the consequences of their actions, including how their decisions may affect others and the world around them (Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011). The implementation of SEL takes these core competencies into account as they work to improve student outcomes.

SEL for All Students

  School-wide interventions have been found to have a strong effect on the improvement of behavioral and academic outcomes for students (Anyon et al., 2016). SEL has been found to be correlated with positive school outcomes including social acceptance, problem solving skills, stress management, and academic success (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). Students have varying levels of social-emotional skills, and there are several risk factors related to less developed social-emotional skills. These risk factors have also been shown to be indicative of poor developmental outcomes (Fraser et al., 2014). In a study on an SEL program, results showed that lower risk students who received the training remained in the lower risk group, while students in the higher risk group who received the training transitioned to the lower risk group (Fraser et al., 2014). This showed that SEL programs can be beneficial for all students, as it was not detrimental to any of the groups, and showed improvement for some.

Responsive Classroom. The Responsive Classroom approach encompasses four key domains. This includes engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmentally responsive teaching (Responsive Classroom, 2020). Responsive Classroom is a school-wide intervention that works to improve social, emotional, literacy, and math abilities for students with behavior challenges by building on teachers' skillsets of how to intervene with students who are misbehaving in the school setting (Anyon et al., 2016). The implementation of Responsive Classroom is one approach to SEL in schools, and largely focuses on creating a positive classroom atmosphere.

The classroom environment has the ability to influence the achievement and anxiety of students (Hughes & Koplan, 2018). It has been shown that students with anxiety are more influenced by the classroom environment compared to students without anxiety (Hughes & Koplan, 2018). This means that for students with disabilities, who often tend to have increased levels of anxiety at school, the classroom environment becomes increasingly important. A positive classroom environment could have the most positive effects on vulnerable students, while a negative classroom environment could have the most negative effects on vulnerable students (Hughes & Koplan, 2018). Emotional support and instructional management are both very important aspects of creating a positive classroom environment for students (Hughes & Koplan, 2018). Research has shown that classrooms that implemented Responsive Classroom practices created environments where students' anxiety was less likely to negatively impact their beliefs about their academic success in science and math (Griggs et al., 2013).

Mindfulness. Mindfulness is a form of social-emotional training that has increased in popularity (Dorman, 2015). There has been research that suggests that training in mindfulness and meditation can decrease anxiety and stress, and improve social skills. In a study on a

mindfulness and meditation intervention, adolescents had decreased anxiety, decreased levels of stress, improved social skills, and improved academic performance (Beauchemin et al., 2008). Researchers suggest that the decrease in anxiety may have allowed the adolescents to have more positive social interactions, and be able to focus more in school, improving their academics (Beauchemin et al., 2008).

It is also important for teachers to develop self-reflective practices, and to identify their purpose for what they do. These practices increase connectivity, reduce stress, and increase overall well-being (Dorman, 2015). Mindfulness training can further develop the social-emotional skills of teachers. Additionally, research indicates that social-emotional training can improve teachers' effectiveness in the class, and positively impact their personal well-being (Dorman, 2015).

SEL for Students with Disabilities

In comparison to their peers, students with disabilities tend to have higher anxiety (Alesi et al., 2014), greater school-related stress (Datta, 2014), and less developed social skills (Espelage et al., 2016). As I reviewed SEL for students with disabilities, three main themes emerged which include self-awareness, confidence, and self-advocacy.

Students need realistic views of their abilities, skills, and learning styles in order to develop the foundation necessary for self-awareness and self-advocacy (Merlone & Moran, 2008). Self-awareness is one of the core competencies of SEL (CASEL, 2020). Thus, students with disabilities could benefit from SEL interventions in particular, as SEL programs aim to improve self-awareness. Additionally, if students have an understanding of their abilities, skills, and learning styles, they will be building the foundation to self-advocate (Mishna et al., 2011). Self-advocacy is directly related to self-awareness, as students with disabilities who have

greater self-awareness, such as confidence in themselves and an understanding of their disability, are better prepared to self-advocate (Merlone & Moran, 2008).

Some students with disabilities struggle with social situations (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). It has been found that it is important for students with disabilities to have access to SEL programs, as it is a way for them to receive direct instruction and training in social interaction and emotion regulation, among other skills (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). Research has also shown that schools that implement SEL programs have lower levels of bullying students with disabilities (Espelage et al., 2016). When students experience less bullying, they are also likely to feel better about themselves and have greater confidence. Additionally, many students with disabilities tend to struggle academically (Datta, 2014). Correlations between academic success, social skills, and more confident feelings, suggest that SEL programs are greatly beneficial for students with disabilities.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

External factors such as curriculum constraints can make it difficult to teach in a developmentally appropriate manner (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). Piaget and Vygotsky theorized that students' interactions with their environment influence their learning. Instruction should be appropriate to students' development, rather than external factors such as curriculum constraints (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006).

Understanding of Strengths and Challenges

All students have different strengths and challenges. In general, students with disabilities tend to experience high levels of anxiety and low levels of academic achievement (Datta, 2014). It is necessary for teachers to understand how to handle these feelings of their students. Researchers found that support from teachers could reduce the test anxiety of students

(Datta, 2014). Additionally, research indicates that it is important for teachers and parents to discuss students' learning needs with them, so that they are able to advocate for what will help them to be successful in the school setting. In a study on self-awareness, students felt better able to self-advocate for what they needed in school following lessons on their learning strengths, learning disability, accommodations they needed, and their rights and responsibilities (Mishna et al., 2011). Students with disabilities participated in a program which focused on central ideas including that they can do grade level work, that everyone has strengths, that practice strengthens their areas of weakness, and that self-advocacy is important. This led to students stating that they would now remember to ask for help, organization, and behavior (Merlone & Moran, 2008).

Feelings of Predetermination and Low Expectations

In some school settings, students are grouped based on their academic abilities. In many cases, this means that students who are struggling in school are placed together. Students with dyslexia have reported that once they were placed in lower academic groups, they often felt unable to move up to more advanced groups, which impacted their self-esteem (Gibson & Kendall, 2010). Having good self-esteem can help students to cope with difficult tasks; however, students with learning disabilities often tend to have lower levels of self-esteem in the school setting (Alesi et al., 2014). These feelings of low expectations and predetermination can lead students to have poor feelings of themselves, which can also negatively impact them academically.

Professional Collaboration and Learning

For many years, it has been asserted that a collaborative approach is the best way to implement programs that aim to improve the social, emotional, and academic skills of students (Coulter, 1993). There has been much research on the importance of collaboration within

schools, and in implementing programs with fidelity (Anyon et al., 2016). Further, in order for professionals to work collaboratively and implement school-wide programs, it is necessary for there to be proper training (Anyon et al., 2016). This ensures that the team is on the same page in terms of implementation and progress monitoring. The following sections discuss some of the research that has been done on teacher training and collaboration.

Teacher Collaboration and Learning

Researchers have found that there are three key factors in effectively implementing school-wide interventions with fidelity. The first factor is that it is important for the characteristics of the intervention to align with the beliefs of the teachers and other school staff who will be implementing the intervention (Anyon et al., 2016). Second, it is essential that the principal and teachers, "buy in," to the importance of the intervention (Anyon et al., 2016). Finally, there should be training and technical assistance to support the proper implementation of the program (Anyon et al., 2016).

SEL practices or interventions can be implemented school-wide or within individual classrooms. Some research suggests that it can be beneficial for members within a school to collaborate on SEL programs (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). This allows for students to experience the same routines and expectations throughout their school day, creating a sense of regularity (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). Research has found that it is essential for teachers to receive the proper training for implementation, and to be a stakeholder in the success of the program.

Teacher Training in Special Education

Within special education, there are different models and programs in schools. Research indicates that the inclusion model benefits students in their academic, social, and emotional abilities (Lee et al., 2015). Past research has shown that teachers, however, have varying levels

of agreement with this model for special education students (Lee et al., 2015). Saloviita (2020) found that it is important for teachers to be trained in special education, as training tends to give teachers more positive attitudes towards the inclusion model of special education. Research also indicates that teachers' attitudes towards students with disabilities also affects the success of students in the inclusive model of special education (Lee et al., 2015). In a research study by Lee et al. (2015), teachers tended to be more supportive, and advocated for inclusion, if they had a background of special education training. The results of this study showed that having knowledge and experience with disabilities did not have a consistent impact on whether teachers were in favor of inclusion while training had a positive impact on teachers' acceptance of the inclusion program. Additionally, research suggests that one of the key contributing factors to positive feelings towards inclusion is having the necessary resources and support to effectively meet the needs of students with special needs (Saloviita, 2020).

SEL in Portugal: A Global Perspective and Case Study

While the implementation of SEL within the public school system has grown within the United States, it has in other nations as well. For instance, schools in Portugal have been exploring the implementation of SEL programs in their school system. There is a movement to incorporate more than academics into the school day, including education in social and emotional competencies (Cristovao et al., 2017). This is due in part to the number of people with mental health disabilities in Portugal (Cristovao et al., 2017). In Portugal, the CASEL competencies are highly regarded in developing SEL programs for schools (Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011). It is further asserted that social interactions are important to the overall academic development of students (Franco et al., 2017). Prior research in the field has also indicated that social interactions and understanding drive learning within the classroom, making

it an essential component in the academic development of students, and that emotional competence is correlated to positive academic performance (Franco et al., 2017).

In Portugal, "Project Atitude Positiva," was created with the goal of unifying responses to recurring problems through the use of SEL (Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011). This program was largely based on CASEL's theories, and was built on the premise that the best implementation of SEL programs is intentional, purposeful, effective, and fully integrated school-wide (Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011). Further, research by Franco et al. (2017) found that while social and emotional competencies are correlated with academic achievement, it remains necessary to continue research on whether emotional competence is necessarily a predictor of more positive academic outcomes.

Researchers have further shared that more research could be done in the area of relationships between students and teachers, as research has indicated that positive student and teacher relationships may be predictive of better academic outcomes (Franco et al., 2017). Teachers are key players in effective SEL programs in schools (Cristovao et al., 2017). While it is important for students to practice using their social and emotional skills, they must first be taught how to respond appropriately and interact in a variety of situations. Researchers argue that in order for effective implementation to take place, it is necessary for students to receive direct instruction on SEL skills prior to being expected to practice these skills during their school day (Cristovao et al., 2017). Similarly to the United States, researchers and educators in Portugal continue to review SEL practices, working to strengthen the implementation in schools and gain a deeper understanding of the impact on teachers and students.

SEL During a Pandemic

While it is common knowledge that inequities exist within the education system in the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought even greater emphasis to these inequities. Researchers suggest that the impact of the pandemic may last longer than the current academic year, and cause students to backtrack academically, some students more than others (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Predictions suggest that certain populations will experience the greatest setback, particularly students living in poverty, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities (Terada, 2020).

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the country shifted to virtual learning. With school occurring online, and from the homes of students and educators, a new set of challenges were brought to the forefront. It became increasingly important for students to have access to a steady internet, a safe and quiet place to work, and home support to make distance learning truly work. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau, however, stated that 15% of households with school-age children do not have internet access (Auxier & Anderson, 2020). Additionally, low-income households are increasingly less likely to have access to the internet, with 35% of households with total incomes below $30,000, having no internet connection (Auxier & Anderson, 2020).

The public health crisis has brought feelings of isolation, a new mode of schooling, and potentially increased home responsibilities to students across the nation. The increase in stressors makes mental health an even more important factor to take into account. Further, with the strong link between mental health and academic achievement, it is likely that the stressors associated with this period of time could have a great impact on students' academic progress (Terada, 2020).

Conclusion

This literature review exemplifies that the SEL core competencies including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, are widely accepted and recognized throughout the United States and other parts of the world (Belo de Moura Pereira et al., 2011). Additionally, the relationship between teachers and students is essential to academic success and feelings of belonging for students with disabilities (Lee et al., 2015).

Teacher buy-in and understanding of SEL is an important factor in providing these types of interventions for students. Yet, there is limited research on whether there are particular SEL practices that cause students with disabilities to be more likely to self-advocate. Additionally, as the COVID-19 pandemic is occurring during the time that this research is taking place, there is limited information on how the pandemic situation influences teachers' implementation of SEL practices. As we look towards the impact of the pandemic on the mental health of individuals, it appears that SEL is even more important in the classroom setting. The purpose of this research is to investigate teachers' views of how SEL in their teaching practices affects their students with disabilities, and if their use of SEL has practices has shifted during the pandemic.

Chapter 3: Methods

Research has shown that training students' on the different parts of their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) can lead them to be more likely to self-advocate (Merlone & Moran, 2008); that it is important for students to have feelings of empowerment, and to be in charge of their own learning (Mishna et al., 2011); that social-emotional learning interventions for students correlates with positive school outcomes including social acceptance, problem solving skills, stress management, and academic success (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009); and that emotional support and instructional management are both very important aspects of creating a positive classroom environment for students (Hughes & Koplan, 2018). However, there is a gap in understanding as to whether there are particular SEL practices that cause students with disabilities to be more likely to self-advocate, and how situations such as a pandemic affect the implementation of social-emotional learning in the school setting.

Research Questions

Teachers' understanding of social-emotional learning is an important factor in providing these interventions for students. Specifically, this study seeks to look at how teachers' understanding of social-emotional learning impacts their teaching practice, if and how it changes during periods such as during a pandemic, and if their understanding of social-emotional learning has positive outcomes for their students with disabilities. Thus, this research was guided by the following questions: (1) How do students with disabilities become better self-advocates as a result of social-emotional learning? (2) How does a teacher's understanding of social-emotional learning impact their teaching practice especially with regards to their students with disabilities?

(3) Do social-emotional learning interventions look different during periods such as during a pandemic for students with disabilities?

Description and Rationale for Research Approach

In exploring the impact of social-emotional learning on students with disabilities' ability to self-advocate, the researcher conducted a qualitative research study. Students with disabilities face a unique set of challenges within the school setting, making it important for them to become self-advocates (Mishna et al., 2011). A qualitative research study gave the researcher the opportunity to ask open-ended questions, allowing participants to share their stories (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This allowed the participants to reflect on their experiences with students with disabilities, and to make meaning of the impact of social-emotional learning (Seidman, 2013).

The research approach used a constructivist philosophical worldview. The constructivist philosophical worldview guided the study as the researcher sought to understand the world within which the research participants live and work (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher wanted to understand how different educational professionals have implemented social-emotional learning, and the impact that they felt their practices had on self-advocacy for students with disabilities. There were direct interactions between the researcher and the community with which they hoped to gain a better understanding of (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Overall, the research study aimed to determine whether there are certain forms of social-emotional learning interventions that cause students with disabilities to be better able and more likely to self-advocate.

Research Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative research design. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study were interviewed by the researcher in one or more sessions. Research questions were open-ended in nature, to give the researcher greater insight into the thoughts and experiences of the participant. Interviews were transcribed and coded by the researcher to identify common themes in the study.

Research Site and Entry into the Field

The research took place with educators and parents within the public school system in a rural and suburban Northern California county. All participants had either current or prior working relationships with the researcher. In using this sample of participants with whom the researcher has standing relationships, the researcher hopes to gain greater insight as to the social-emotional learning interventions that are positively impacting the students in their workplace.

At the time of the study, the county enrolled approximately 63,000 students. The student body population currently includes 23.6% White students, 40.4% Hispanic or Latino students, 13.7% African American students, 8.4% Filipino students, 7.9% students who are of two or more races, 3.9% Asian students, 1.1% Pacific Islander students, 0.4% American Indian or Alaskan Native students, and 0.7% of student did not report. Additionally, 52.3% of enrolled students receive free or reduced lunch. At the time of data collection, there were 7,779 students receiving public school special education services in the county.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

Participants in this study are current or past colleagues of the researcher, or are parents (of students) with whom the researcher has a working relationship with. There was a total of six participants in the study. Four of the participants were school personnel, which included

teachers and an administrator. The participants were selected to provide a variety of perspectives on the research topic, and included special education teachers, general education teachers, and a school principal. The four educators in the study are all female. Three of the participants had greater than ten years of experience within the field of education, while the fourth participant had less than five years of teaching experience. All of the educator participants have worked at more than one school site within their time in the field. Two of the participants were the parents of students who the researcher teaches. Both of the parent participants are female. These parents have at least one child with a disability in the public school system. Participants were purposefully selected, as they were individuals that the researcher had established relationships with. Additionally, the researcher ensured that all participants had some experience with both social-emotional learning and working with students with disabilities.

Participants were introduced to the study with a general overview. If they were interested in participating in the study, they were electronically sent an invitation to participate, which included a consent letter outlining the purpose of the study and how data will be collected, used and protected. They were asked to provide an electronic signature if they were willing and able to participate in the study. Individuals who returned a signed consent form were then contacted by the researcher to coordinate a time for their initial interview to take place.

Methods

The use of interviews was central to the research design, as they gave the researcher an understanding of SEL from those who implement these practices (Seidman, 2013). Interviews were essential to gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives and experiences. Educational professionals were chosen who had experience with social-emotional learning and working with students with disabilities. Parents also participated in the study to

provide an alternate perspective on the implementation and impact of social-emotional learning on their children in the school setting. The questions were open-ended, to allow participants to share their own experiences, and to make meaning of different ways that students with disabilities have reacted to social-emotional learning. Additionally, the flexibility and openness of the questions allowed the participants to interpret and respond to questions in a way that they were able to connect with, allowing me to focus on individual meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Participants were individually contacted to arrange a mutually agreeable time for the interview to take place. Questions were sent to the interviewees prior to the interview, and participants were informed of their right not to answer, that they have control over which interview questions they choose to answer, that they may stop the interview process at any time, and that they have the right to retract their agreement to participate at any point during the study. Interview questions (see Appendix A) were designed to answer the three primary research questions listed above. During the interviews, participants were asked to answer questions such as (1) What are your experiences with social-emotional learning in the classroom, in school-wide trainings/conversations, with your students or own children? (2) How has the COVID-19 pandemic shifted your implementation of social-emotional learning? Or, have you seen a shift in the implementation of social-emotional learning in your child's classroom? (3) Are there particular social-emotional learning interventions that you believe lead to better self-advocacy skills?

Each interview occurred during a mutually agreed upon time, and did not exceed one hour. Follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify or extend answers or data based on interviewee availability and interest (Seidman, 2013). Interviews took place via video

conferencing due to the safety conditions at the time of the interview. All interviews were recorded on the researcher's cell phone or laptop, which are password protected. Notes and analytic memos were taken during and after the interviews, to provide backup in the case that the audio recording failed, and to provide additional data to be used in the narrative of the research findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Personal identifying information was kept confidential and protected using codes that only the researcher had access to.

Following the interviews, the researcher wrote analytic memos to capture data about the interactions with the interviewees. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and coded. Participants were given the opportunity to see the quotes that were used for data analysis for respondent validation (Maxwell, 2013). The researcher listened to the interviews while reading the transcriptions. During this time, the researcher took notes and wrote memos regarding tentative categories and themes in the interviews (Maxwell, 2013).

Data Analysis

The interview transcriptions were open-coded by hand, by the researcher, for both expected and unexpected codes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Some of the expected codes included confidence, relationships, asking questions, classroom environment, acceptance, and mindfulness. Additionally, unexpected codes emerged through the research process, which included intrinsic motivation, fitting in, and taking risks. Concept mapping was utilized to determine the major themes of the research. Next, the narrative analysis strategy was used to gain a deeper understanding of the data in the context of what the participant was discussing. This allowed the researcher to see the, "relationships among the different parts of the transcript or field notes" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 113). The qualitative data gathered in this study was coded and analyzed through this connecting strategy in order to provide a more

generalizable analysis of the data. Finally, the transcribed interviews were analyzed using focused coding, as a means of looking for specific words and phrases used across the interviews.

Validity

Participants in this study are either current colleagues of the researcher, leaders in the district, past colleagues, or parents of the researcher's students. This may have influenced data collection as the researcher holds a professional relationship with both her current and past colleagues, and participants may attempt to answer questions in a way that they feel agrees with the researcher's personal views, or portrays them in a positive light. The researcher also holds a direct stake in the success of the children of the parents who participated in the study, as the researcher is their resource teacher. Additionally, the researcher is aware that she has the bias of believing and wanting social-emotional learning to empower students with disabilities, and to make them feel better able to self-advocate. Having seen the benefits of social-emotional learning, the researcher understands that this is a personal bias, and that she needed to ensure that data was valid, by also looking for unexpected codes in the data.

Specific strategies and procedures were implemented to reduce these potential threats to the validity of the study. First, the research design used triangulation, by having participants from three specific groups for the study: teachers, administrators/district leadership, and parents. This form of triangulation allowed for greater validity as the researcher gained the perspectives of different groups of people on the same topic (Maxwell, 2013). Second, all participants in the study were individuals who the researcher has formed relationships and meaningful "long-term" connections with, which can also increase the validity of the findings (Maxwell, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). These relationships have been built on trust, and the participants knew that the researcher would be understanding and open to their honest

input. These long-term connections in conjunction with intensive interviews provided rich data for the study (Maxwell, 2013).

Qualitative data from the interviews was transcribed verbatim. The research model used respondent validation, whereby the researcher offered for participants to review quotes that would be used from their interview, to ensure that their responses and feelings were accurately represented and interpreted in the study (Maxwell, 2013). Finally, the researcher looked for discrepant evidence in the data. The analysis of discrepant data allowed the researcher to confirm that her conclusion was accurate, thereby executing a more valid study (Maxwell, 2013).

Chapter 4: Findings

There is an abundance of research on social-emotional learning that points to the fact that it is important and necessary to embed social-emotional learning within the school curriculum. The research highlights the fact that there are many ways of implementing social-emotional learning, and that it can have a variety of effects on individuals. Overall, it is looked upon as a positive aspect of learning, one that leads to characteristics such as self-confidence and academic success. While the existing literature is extensive, a gap emerged around whether there are specific foundational qualities of students with disabilities that lead them to be better self-advocates, and how teachers' understanding of social-emotional learning influences their teaching practice.

Through this research, three primary themes emerged in relation to social-emotional learning. The first emphasized the importance of normalizing individuality to empower intrinsic motivations to do well. The second significant finding was that especially for students with disabilities, a feeling of trust and being respected is the foundation toward "taking risks." Finally, research participants widely identified how, for students with disabilities, "fitting in" acts as a prerequisite to learning. When this is the preoccupation of the student in a class environment learning is diminished to that degree.

The teacher, administrator, and parent participants in this study come from different schools within one county in Northern California. Social-Emotional learning is implemented in different ways across school settings. Some teachers cite specific programs that target the social and emotional needs of their students. Other teachers share that they have never had any formal training in social-emotional learning, and so work to meet the social and emotional needs of their

students more informally. Both sets of teachers noted how they work to meet the needs of their students by getting to know them, asking questions, and showing that they care.

Regardless of whether formal training has occurred, all educators and parents interviewed discussed the informal implementation of social-emotional learning that occurs. As one resource teacher, Kristin, put it, "For me, it's really informal, and for me, it's trying to make a connection." These informal practices include things such as having conversations with students and getting to know them, being a consistent person in their life, and making connections with them on topics with which they are interested. Additionally, educators also cited the importance of understanding students' triggers, and identifying their ways and spaces for feeling safe. For example, Jessica, a general education teacher shared, "What I've learned as an educator is you have to find the triggers and they're going to be different for everybody." These things can all be done informally, by talking to students, truly listening to them, and making a conscious effort to check in.

In addition to the more casual implementation of social-emotional learning, educators also discussed more formal programs that are implemented in schools to meet the social and emotional needs of students. School-wide pillars such as "Be Safe, Be Responsible, Be Respectful," which is practiced at all of the school sites, were discussed as making students feel welcome and having a sense of belonging in the school setting. At two of the school sites at which participants in this study work, a character trait is taught each month. There are also programs such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), Responsive Classroom, and Restorative Justice being used school-wide at many of the school sites. Some schools in the study that participants taught at are also trained in trauma informed practice, specifically to meet the needs of some of our most at-risk students.

Normalizing Individuality and The Intrinsic Motivation To Do Well

Teachers shared that students need to build the intrinsic motivation to do well in school. Intrinsic motivation is the drive to do something, knowing that an external reward will not be received in response for doing it. Students who are intrinsically motivated to do well, are doing it because it gives them some sense of positive feeling or purpose.

Jessica, an educator, related the idea of a sense of belonging to students needing different things to be successful in the classroom. Jessica has been a general education elementary school teacher for many years. She has worked with students of all ability levels, and has also been a teacher in trauma-informed classrooms, specifically targeted to meet the needs of at-risk students. A central component of participating in this program, was a dedication to meeting the social and emotional needs of her students. She described how she creates integrated groups, composed of students of varying ability levels, in her classroom. Since students in each group have different strengths and weaknesses, it is a way of normalizing individuality and supporting each student's intrinsic strengths and capacities for learning. It allows each student to feel a sense of their own strength and ability to contribute, to be recognized and to feel connected to the community as an important member. Jessica stated:

It wasn't like anybody stood out by any means, and I worked hard to make sure that was it. And we actually had real conversations too, and we talked about an understanding that people are different. Some people are great at sports, some people are great at math. Some people are great at dancing, and some people need my support in different ways. And so, I tell them, you have to share me, and it's my job to figure out what you need from me. So, some people are going to need more help in math, but some people are going to need more help with social skills, and how to follow the rules and some

people are going to need more help with this and that. So we just talked about everybody

being different.

Jessica highlighted the importance by which students continue to feel intrinsically motivated by

being valued as a whole child, unique like all of us and part of a community, and that this drives

them to try to continue to do well in school.

Kristin, a special education teacher, spoke further about the importance of building

students' intrinsic motivation to do well through the classroom community. Kristin is currently a

resource teacher, who has worked in a variety of types of special education classrooms. From

special day classes for students with severe disabilities, to inclusion programs, to resource

specialist programs, she has seen the importance of building students' intrinsic motivation to do

well. She expanded upon the value of community in supporting students intrinsic will by

claiming that for students of all abilities, "Through social-emotional learning, we are teaching

kids to be cooperative, to be team members in a group." Kristin drew attention to how students

can become more motivated to do well when they are influenced by their classmates in a positive

way, and by extension learn to see value in what they are able to contribute to their classroom

community. When they become motivated by the way they feel as a part of their classroom

community, they are building the intrinsic motivation that will continue to guide them forward in

making an effort to do well in school. Several teachers noted that when students with disabilities

do not have the intrinsic motivation to do well in school, they can become disengaged and off-

task in the classroom, rather than attempting to do the work that has been put in front of them.

When students gain a deeper understanding of differences, and that differences are ok,

they begin to feel more accepted as part of the classroom community. As Kristin shared, "We

want our students to have empathy for their classmates." Within a classroom community, we

want our students to gain an understanding of one another, and feel that all are valued and respected. When students feel good about who they are as an individual in the classroom community, they are more likely to continue to participate.

One parent, Diane also contributed that students can gain more of a sense of belonging in the classroom community when their strengths are highlighted. She shared that for her son there are a lot of things that are difficult for him at school. He has difficulty with attention, and due to learning challenges, he struggles with math and reading. However, when he feels recognized and seen in the classroom, he feels motivated to participate, and to try even when the work is hard. Diane noted how when her son gets to see his strength in the mirror of the classroom environment, through such things as the teacher's "Hall of Fame" or for attributes he contributes to the community, it increases his confidence. Her son's teacher recognizes students every week for things that they are doing well in, and they do not have to be academic. When students with disabilities have more confidence, and feel that their successes are recognized, even when small, they become more intrinsically motivated to do well.

In sum, students' needs may vary based on their current levels of academics, behavioral challenges, emotional needs, or some other factor, but when they can understand that in the milieu of diversity each person has strength and important contributions to make to the community, students with disabilities more often find the intrinsic motivation to engage with their learning as opposed to being dependent upon external rewards or punishments.

Trust and Respect as the Foundation for "Taking Risks"

Diane, shares that during her son's experience with distance learning (as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic), he will just leave class telling the teacher he had internet problems when called upon to read in front of everyone. By contrast, when in his small resource program setting

group, he was willing to read aloud in front of his group. Diane shared that her son really feels connected to his resource teacher this year, but not as much with his classroom teacher. Diane noted that her son had felt more trusting of the latter space, and therefore more willing to take a risk. She also noted how this isn't exclusive to his resource group, but that the contrast between the two spaces in this example provided an important contrast in which kinds of conditions supported his learning.

Jessica, an educator, has worked within a district program designed to target students' behavioral and academic needs through social-emotional learning. She is a strong proponent of social-emotional learning, and believes that it is the foundation of all things within education. Jessica shared, "There are a lot of relationship building activities that you can do with your whole class, but then really it's that individual one on one time that you give that student that I feel really makes the difference." Jessica believes that when students have positive relationships with their teachers, the students are then motivated to show them that they are learning and making progress. They will be more likely to try their best in class, even if their answers will not be perfect. Jessica offered that:

> If there's no trust, then they won't open up. They won't believe you when you give them compliments. You have to really work hard to build an honest and positive relationship so that even when things happen that are undesired, or they're having big behaviors, or just moments, that they know that you're coming from a place of love and support and always that you have their best interests at heart.

As Jessica proposes, students need to know that even if they make a mistake, their teacher will still be there to love and support them. Jessica states that students need to have this trusting relationship in order to be willing and able to take the risk of opening up.

Elizabeth, a resource teacher who became interested in pursuing a career in the field of special education after spending many years in the classroom first as a parent volunteer and then as an aide for students with disabilities, described the ways in which she creates positive relationships with her students. She encouraged that to:

Get to know them, ask what they like to learn about. Let them share themselves and what they like, as much as they can. I think just having more of a kind of a collaborative relationship. Each person has something to say, making sure that everybody has an equal opportunity to share, making sure they know that mistakes are valued.

Elizabeth shared that by building relationships with her students in this way, they know that they can come to her with questions and concerns. This allows them to take more risks, try even when they are uncertain, and to ask for help.

To support students with disabilities to take risks, each of the research participants pointed to the importance of teachers being responsible for how they show up, create trust, and listen to and see the students with respect and dignity. Jessica shared that:

Developing relationships and building relationships is, in my opinion, the number one thing that you can do that will not only help your classroom management, but also help all situations. If you don't have a positive relationship with your students, they don't have respect for you, and they don't have that… motivation to work.

In building relationships with her students, Jessica also creates clear expectations for them, which help motivate them to take academic risks. Her students know that she has high standards for them, and they want to do well for her, even if it is outside of their comfort zone. She shared, "If you are not building relationships you're not going to be able to effectively apply rules and

procedures… If they don't have trust in you [it's] because they don't know what to expect [they need] high expectations." Jessica went further to say:

> Once you find what motivates them you can come up with a plan and come up with ways that you can encourage them, ways that you can provide support when needed, and figure out what need is not being met. Once you get the hang of it then, you know, it starts to run like a well-oiled machine.

Jessica was pointing to the way in which creating a space of authenticity and trust, students with disabilities begin to take risks as a normalized expectation and behavior. In terms of expectations, it is important for educators to meet students where they are at academically, socially, and emotionally. As Elizabeth shared, "We really need to make sure that we're supporting the kids emotionally before we're worrying about how they're doing academically," aligning herself with the whole-child approach to teaching. Elizabeth finds it important to look at a child from all aspects, before it can be fairly expected of them to take risks to accomplish increasingly difficult academic tasks.

Jessica described that, "We first need to ensure that their basic [social-emotional] needs are being met," so that they have the capacity to focus on the academic task at hand. By knowing students in this more individualized way, they will be more likely to feel seen and heard, which will lead them to have a greater sense of trust in taking risks in the classroom. Jessica shared that trust is indispensable in motivating students to become risk-takers, and that when students are more self-confident, they are more likely to take risks. Diane shared that when her son is confident, he feels good about himself. He will walk in the room and proudly tell her about something that he did really well.

Julie, an educator who has held roles as both a teacher and administrator, described that the teachers at her school go above and beyond to meet the social-emotional needs of their students. Teachers know that it is important for students to feel connected to them, and that it is in the things that teachers do, such as going out of their way to call parents, that really has a positive impact on students, and helps to make them feel good about themselves. When the social-emotional needs of students are met in some of these ways, students feel more comfortable and confident, and are more motivated to take academic risks.

Relationships During Emergency Situations

During emergency situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, school has shifted to a virtual setting. Students and teachers alike have adjusted to this shift in different ways. Across all interviews, it was shared that one of the ways that teachers create positive relationships with their students is by having a positive attitude, and just making their students feel confident and happy. This is something that has been able to continue, even during the COVID-19 pandemic. While teachers and students may not be able to see one another in person, the effort is still being made to have positive interactions with students, to really meet the social and emotional needs of students.

Diane, a parent, shared some of the challenges her son had experienced in building relationships during distance learning. She also noted with appreciation that she hears teachers trying to make meaningful connections with students and conversations with students on non-academic topics of interest to the students, and humor offered to engage the class.

Another parent, Jill, shared that she actually feels that her daughter has done better socially and emotionally during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that those needs are being met. Jill feels her child with disabilities has only begun to make academic progress after moving

to her current school site. She shared that for many years prior to switching schools, she was continually told that her daughter was not making any progress and remained at the kindergarten level. Now, her daughter is more trusting of and feels respected by her teachers and classmates, and is consequently opening up more and making progress. When asked how the implementation of social-emotional learning has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic she responded:

> The same, actually it's more like, I think it's better now… because they can really talk and say whatever they want… [Traditionally] in classes… they can't really open [up]. So I think it's good… She did talk [in the past], but then not really that much, and now that there's a distance learning she's like more talkative, [and] more open.

It's interesting to note that even during the pandemic, the same conditions of trust and respect create the foundation for students with disabilities to take risks, suggesting it's not a question primarily of platform or physical space. Trust and respect transcend the limitations of classroom walls to support students with disabilities in diverse learning environments.

Fitting In As Prerequisite for Learning

Teachers shared different ways that students cope, and the different ways that students get through their school day. For some students with extreme behavioral needs, they must learn how to manage their intense emotions, so that they can behave in an appropriate way in the school setting. Students need to be taught these coping skills, in order to effectively use them. Alternatively, there are other types of coping skills that students use. Teachers talked about their students with disabilities, and the desire to fit in. While it was consistently noted by teachers and parents that they felt their students with disabilities are comfortable in the school setting, through conversations, there were multiple examples given of the ways that students try

to fit in with their peers. They noted the social stigma associated with admitting to not understand something and asking for help. It was noted how during traditional in-person classes students with disabilities might look at the paper of a friend or copy the paper of a student sitting next to them to hide ways that they might worry about fitting in with regards to academic content. By contrast, in distance learning students can hide a lack of understanding and with a "thumbs up." Yet the participants in this research noted how a "thumbs up," often doesn't mean, "Yes, I've got it," but rather, "Yes, I know how to fit in with everyone else." Building personal relationships with students makes students feel more comfortable asking for the help that they need.

Many students with disabilities experience academic challenges. The ways that they approach these academic challenges are different for all students. While one student may approach these academic challenges by asking many questions, another may approach the challenge by shutting down and avoiding the task. In conversions with educators, the finding emerged that as students get older, it becomes of greater importance to them to fit in with their classmates. Students with disabilities do not want it to be apparent to their peers when they are struggling with a task. Many students do not want to appear to their peers that they are unable to do certain academic tasks, or that they are unable to academically keep up with the pace of the general education classroom.

As students cope in their own way, these coping skills become embedded into the way that they approach difficult tasks in the school setting. One teacher, Jessica, shared in reference to difficult academic tasks, "I think that what happens a lot of times, especially when you get into older grades is that they've had so many years in coping with this, that they rely on copying, or they rely on avoiding the work." Students find a way of dealing with different academic tasks

that allow them not to appear as though they do not know how to do something. Instead, they

may choose to appear as though they simply do not want to do something, which is more socially

accepted by their peers. Alternatively, they may choose to copy off of a classmate, so that it

appears that they know how to do a task, even if they do not understand how to complete it on

their own. These are ways of fitting in with their classmates, so that they do not stand out, or

feel as though their learning disability is apparent and visible to all those around

them. Elizabeth, a resource teacher, stated, "It's like a coping skill that I guess they're trying to

fit in and show that they're not different, and that they can do everything like everybody

else." This shows that as students become more aware of their differences from others, it

becomes increasingly important to them to find ways to hide or mask these differences. As

students with disabilities become older, it is possible that the academic achievement gap

becomes larger, causing students to look for ways to appear as though they fit in with their

classmates, despite the challenges that they face.

Explicit Behavioral Exampling

Educators and parents alike shared that a big part of social-emotional learning was

teaching them about emotions, how they work, and how to handle big feelings. Parents

repeatedly mentioned how they want their children to feel good about themselves, and feel that

social-emotional learning can help with this. As Diane expressed, "There's benefits from

[social-emotional learning] when he feels confident or feels good about himself." It emerged in

the research that students need to receive explicit teaching in behavior and emotions, in order to

respond appropriately in difficult situations. Julie described the way that character education

works as a way of providing explicit teaching in behavior:

> Most of our teachers give scenarios… This is how you show that behavior, which then
> goes into a social story, which then goes into social-emotional learning on how you deal
> with something. Whether it was on the playground or in society… it affects [them]
> socially and emotionally. I feel like for students it's the character education, but then
> being able to talk about it as a whole class. It's not just it's own little category.

Behavior should be taught, modeled, and given opportunities for practice, before students can be expected to independently use these techniques appropriately when they are feeling intense emotions. As Elizabeth, a resource teacher who works with students who struggle academically shared, it is especially important for students with disabilities, who often experience greater challenges in the school setting, which could lead to negative feelings and emotions. Elizabeth gave an example, "I have a couple of students in particular that just tend to shut down… They don't understand [the school work] and they don't want to ask for help. We don't always know what they're dealing with at home… They just shut down." Elizabeth expressed that it can be difficult to reach students with disabilities when they are trying to fit in with their peers. They do not want to stick out by asking for help, so instead shut down. If teachers help students to build the skills they need to ask for help, to feel confident in themselves, and to ask for what they need, they will be more likely to use them in these settings.

Mindfulness and Self-Regulation

Mindfulness was similarly cited as an important way to teach students how to handle their emotions. Julie, a teacher of many years and now an administrator, is a strong advocate of social-emotional learning, and incorporates mindfulness in its implementation at her school site. Mindfulness is the practice of an individual being aware of their own thoughts, feelings, emotions, and present state. Julie believes that it benefits all students, including those with

disabilities. She shared that through teaching mindfulness in the classroom, she has seen

students be more in tune with their emotions. She described some of the practices she had

started to integrate including, Inner Explorer, an online site that leads students through short

mindfulness activities that are presented through audio recordings: "Since we started doing

mindfulness as well, using Inner Explorer, I have a lot more students really being able to

communicate like, 'Oh, I was really angry or upset, or I tried the mindfulness technique.'" The

mindfulness activities give students with disabilities the foundational skills that they need to

communicate their feelings to peers and adults, and allow them to advocate for what they need

when they are experiencing big feelings and emotions. As Julie further stated, "Through

different teaching strategies, just like you would use for math - here's five different strategies

to do multiplication. Choose the one that's best for you. [Instead], here's five different strategies

to calm yourself down in a situation. Try these." Students need to be taught the appropriate

tools to successfully regulate their emotions and ask for what they need. As Julie shared,

similarly to how students are given different strategies to choose from for a math problem, if

they are taught different mindfulness strategies to use, they are able to use the one that works

best for them, in any given situation. The first step, however, is for them to be taught the

different strategies that are available to them.

Additionally, educators discussed the use of regulation stations within the classroom. A

regulation station is an area in the classroom, where students know that they can go when they

need to self-regulate. These are generally quiet areas in the classroom, that are separated from

the general area. Teachers may have fidgets, posters, or other manipulatives that promote

mindfulness and other self-regulation activities that students have learned to use. Jessica, an

educator who has worked with many students with behavioral challenges, discussed the

importance of having the regulation station available to students, but also for teaching specific

guidelines for how regulation stations could be used. Further, Jessica stated that the

implementation of regulation stations were a way of, "identifying the needs of students and what

our expectations are for our kiddos." Students with disabilities need to know that they have tools

available to them to meet their individual emotional needs. By making the regulation stations

available to all students in the class, it takes the stigma away from needing to use it, allowing

students with disabilities to have access to what they need, while still, "fitting in."

Adjustments During a Pandemic

While students have found ways of coping within their classrooms, interviews showed

that coping in the ways that students previously had, does not necessarily work during the

COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, the switch to virtual learning makes, "fitting in," look very

different. Jessica, an educator, shared that during distance learning, she has observed much more

self-assessment, choice, and self-awareness be taught and promoted within the classroom. She

shared that it has been important to teach students that they have a voice, and that it is essential

for them to let their teacher know when they do not understand a concept. Jessica stated:

> Teachers are even doing a little self-awareness or self-assessment on how they
>
> understand that and they're able to communicate that to the teacher. Before, that wasn't
>
> really a thing. You kept it to yourself, and just found a way to copy a friend. Well, their
>
> friend's not there to copy, so they had to find new coping skills.

In this way, Jessica shared that while students may have been able to copy another student's

work to fit in before, the shift to online learning has no longer made this possible. Students are

forced to speak up when they do not understand something, or it becomes very clear from the

work that they turned in. While distance learning has been difficult for many, this shows a way

that it has been positive for some students. Jessica further described how it has made self-assessment an important skill for educators to teach their students, and has led some students to advocate for themselves when they need help. More generally, this shows that self-assessment is an important tool for students to use in the classroom, and that it is a way for our students with disabilities to show us where they are struggling, and what they feel that they need help with.

Conclusion

The research sought to address the questions of whether certain social-emotional learning practices lead students with disabilities to be better self-advocates, and how teachers' understanding of social emotional learning influences their teaching practice, particularly when working with their students with disabilities. In this study, the three primary research questions were: (1) How do students with disabilities become better self-advocates as a result of social-emotional learning? (2) How does a teacher's understanding of social-emotional learning impact their teaching practice especially with regards to their students with disabilities? (3) Do social-emotional learning interventions look different during periods such as during a pandemic for students with disabilities?

Conversations with educators and parents showed that social-emotional learning is about meeting the needs of the whole child. As we look at the whole child, we look beyond their academic needs, beyond whether they have a learning disability, and truly examine what they need in all aspects. It is the job of educators to ensure that they meet students where they are at in all ways. This means that their emotional and social needs must be met in order to meet their academic needs, and if these fundamental needs of our students are left unmet, we cannot expect their brains to have the capacity to access new information. As educators, it is important to look at all needs of the student, and to meet these needs through explicit instruction and

modeling. While the academics are important, it is equally important to provide instruction in social and emotional learning. Parents think of social-emotional learning as something that just makes their child feel really good about themselves, and they can tell when these needs are being met.

Through my interviews, there were three distinct and striking themes that emerged. First, it is important to normalize individuality amongst students and to build the intrinsic motivation for them to do well. Second, the trust and respect between teachers and their students is the foundation to their willingness to take, "academic risks." Finally, the concept of students with disabilities wanting to "fit in" with their peers arose as needing to be addressed before academic success can be expected.

As one parent, Jill, stated, while she does want her daughter to succeed academically, she also wants her to feel confident in herself. In conversation with Jill, it emerged that it was the intersection of these three themes that were important for her daughter to be successful. Jill felt that it was about the classroom community, relationship with teachers, and feeling of belonging that have allowed her to begin making progress. She shared, "I want her to feel that she is on her level. Just to feel confident in herself, like, it's ok if I don't get it yet, but I will. I will learn."

In summary, as an educator, one of the most important means by which to meet the social and emotional needs of students is by creating meaningful relationships with your students, built on the foundation of trust and respect. This goes beyond creating a positive classroom community - it is within the more individualized and personal relationships; students need to know that their teachers are listening and that they care, which leads them to be more willing to reach out for help, attempt to answer questions, and feel seen as an individual. In turn, this will allow our students to feel confident in themselves, and to make more academic progress,

especially when individuality is fostered and normalized. Further, we must provide explicit

teaching in behavior and emotions, so that students have the skills that they need when they have

negative feelings. Without the proper training and support, we cannot expect students to

automatically know how to behave when their emotions become more than they can

handle. When we work to meet the social and emotional needs of our students in addition to

their academic needs, we are working towards meeting the needs of the whole child, which

continues to build their self-confidence and creates safe spaces where students with disabilities

feel comfortable asking for what they need in order to be successful.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of the study show the importance of normalizing individuality amongst students, and creating a classroom community that builds the intrinsic motivation to do well in our students. Additionally, the findings suggest that the quality of the relationship between students with disabilities and their teachers is telling of how willing to take risks the student will be, and that it is essential to create relationships of mutual trust and respect. Finally, the findings show that students with disabilities want to fit in with their peers, and that they benefit from explicit teaching in social-emotional learning to be most successful in their classroom environment.

In the following discussion, I will discuss the importance and impact of social-emotional learning for students with disabilities, and how the present findings align with prior research in the field. Additionally, I will discuss the new themes that emerged in the research, and how they add to the breadth of knowledge on social-emotional learning for students with disabilities, particularly, specific areas that should be addressed for students including the need to fit in, and the necessity of intrinsic motivation. Finally, the section will conclude with a discussion on limitations of the study and possible avenues for future research.

The findings of this research closely align with the existing research on social-emotional learning in many ways. The current research further underlined the importance of social-emotional learning in the school setting, that it has positive implications for both teachers and students regardless of disability, and that it is important for our students with disabilities to receive direct instruction in social interaction and emotion regulation (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2009). Prior research has also found that students with disabilities are less likely to self-advocate in comparison to their peers (Merlone & Moran, 2008). This statement aligns with the findings

of this study, although the present research also offers reasons why students with disabilities may be less likely to self-advocate, such as wanting to fit in with their peers, or not feeling connected enough to their teacher to take that risk.

The existing literature also discusses the importance of providing instruction that is appropriate for the student in terms of their development (Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). Further, it is discussed that students have felt better able to self-advocate for what they needed in school when they were taught about their learning strengths, learning disability, accommodations they needed, and their rights and responsibilities (Mishna et al., 2011). This aligns with the present study, as findings suggest that students should have an understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of their classmates. This begins to normalize differences, and help students to become more accepting of their classmates and themselves.

This study differs from prior research, in part by how it looked at the differences in the implementation of social-emotional learning during a specific point in time, the COVID-19 pandemic, and how it has shifted social-emotional learning from what has been traditionally done. While the mode of teaching may have changed to a virtual format, what was repeatedly emphasized in interviews with educators and parents alike, is that the social and emotional needs of students must be met before academics can be addressed, and that this is done is by creating trusting and honest relationships, building on their intrinsic motivations to do well, normalizing diversity among students to encourage risk taking, and addressing the want of students with disabilities to fit in with their peers.

Implications for the Literature

There were three unexpected themes that emerged through the research. The first, is that it is important to normalize individuality and build the intrinsic motivation to do well in our students. While it is already accepted that the classroom environment has the ability to influence the achievement and anxiety of students (Hughes & Koplan, 2018), this research suggests that one way to create a positive classroom environment is by making individual differences largely accepted and valued. Prior research has suggested that self-awareness is essential in developing self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities (Merlone & Moran, 2008). In contrast, in this study, it was interesting to note that rather while still important for students to have an understanding of their strengths in differences, it is also necessary for these differences to be normalized so that students know that everyone is unique in some way in comparison to others.

Prior research has also discussed the importance of social-emotional learning in giving students with disabilities the skills that they need to self-advocate (Mishna et al., 2011). In this research, however, it was more specifically found that the relationship between the student and teacher is what is essential in having students with disabilities advocate for the help and support that they need. Evidence was found to suggest that when teachers and students have relationships built on mutual respect and trust, students with disabilities are more likely to take academic risks.

Finally, while it is generally accepted that it is necessary to address all needs of students, which encompasses their social, emotional, and academic needs, findings of the current research suggest that for students with disabilities, their desire to, "fit in," must be addressed before they are tasked with academics. The findings convey that students with disabilities have developed their own coping mechanisms to appear that they fit in with their peers, so that they are not seen

as standing out for having difficulty with certain tasks. Students with disabilities can be taught, through direct instruction, specific ways to handle negative feelings, and cope in more desirable ways, and experience greater school success.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings of this research suggest practical implications for practice and policy of social-emotional learning in the public school setting. As such, the findings suggest that in order for students with disabilities to gain feelings of self-confidence and have the ability to take risks in the school setting, the informal and formal implication of social-emotional learning is valuable. The findings have implications for the practice of teachers, implementation in schools, and educational policies.

Teachers

Implications for the practice of teachers are that it is essential for them to create meaningful relationships with each of their students, including those with disabilities. My personal teaching practice has been influenced as I now see the importance of taking the time to check-in with my students, beyond the times that are allocated for them in the resource room. It raises the importance of having time built into the day to have these check-ins, so that students feel comfortable and confident coming presenting their questions and needs, and so that they are more likely to take academic risks in the classroom. Moreover, especially for students who struggle with social situations, the findings show that lessons specifically centered around social-emotional learning are necessary in ensuring that students have the skills for positive social interactions. Students not only need to feel good about themselves, they also need to have the skillset to handle less desirable situations. Direct instruction and modeling are important in ensuring that students have this skillset.

Schools

At a school level, teachers need support in making sure that they have time to allocate to check-ins with students. While the research showed that school-wide and classroom community approaches to social-emotional learning are necessary and important, it also showed that there is a different value in individual relationships. These individual relationships cannot be replaced by the larger group relationship building activities, and are necessary in building the confidence of students. Schools should give teachers opportunities within their work day to connect with students on an individual level. Additionally, it is important for schools to have programs that explicitly teach social-emotional skills to students. While students benefit from the informal practices of social-emotional learning, they need direct instruction in these skills, with opportunities for practice, in order to be most successful. In order for this instruction to be effective, teachers need opportunities to attend professional development aimed specifically at social-emotional learning. Particularly, it would be beneficial for professional development to teach about the importance of building the intrinsic motivation to do well in our students, and in teaching practices that make all students, regardless of needs, feel that they fit in within the classroom. Instruction in social-emotional learning is essential, so that all students feel accepted and valued within their school community.

Educational Policies

Policies around students with disabilities dictate that there are a certain number of minutes in which special education teachers must meet with students on their caseload. The research shows that it is important for teachers to have more informal check-ins with their students, which gives greater opportunity to show students that their teachers truly care about them. Additionally, while informal check-ins are necessary and important, the findings show

that more formal training in social-emotional learning is also essential for students with disabilities. In order for this to be effective, it may be beneficial for policies to be established that require teachers to attend training on social-emotional learning and inclusion, so that all teachers have the necessary background knowledge and training. Since social-emotional learning has been shown to be essential for students, it would also be useful to create more standards built around social-emotional learning, so that they are emphasized more fully in the school curriculum.

Limitations of the Study and Future Research

While the research led to meaningful implications for the practice of social-emotional learning for students with disabilities, the study had limitations. By expanding the research, further information could be uncovered about the benefits of social-emotional learning for students with disabilities. The following sections discuss the limitations of the study, as well as possible avenues for future research.

Limitations of the Study

In reviewing the findings of this study, there are limitations that should be considered. First, one of the major limitations of the study is the sample. The sample was limited in a variety of ways, which included the sample size, as well as the limited geography from which the sample of participants were taken. This study only had six participants, from one county. Expanding the research pool would allow for more viewpoints. Second, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and current safety restrictions, all of the interviews had to be done virtually. While some of the participants were very familiar with speaking over a video conference, there were participants who were less familiar with this format. It is possible that if the interviews had been done in a different format such as in-person, participants would have felt

more comfortable sharing different or additional information. The study was also done in a short time frame, and was not tracked over years. Further, as this study was only qualitative, a mixed methods approach may expand the breadth of knowledge and understanding of the topic. Finally, the sample was limited in that I already had an established relationship with each of the participants. While I did make a conscious effort to make it clear to my participants that nothing they said would change my feelings towards them, it is plausible that they may have answered questions differently had they been interviewed by someone who they were less familiar with, and did not have a working relationship with.

Future Research

Future research could be done to expand the current findings on the impact of social-emotional learning for students with disabilities. One thing in particular that arose during the research, is that the implementation of social-emotional learning virtually worked well for some students, while it did not work well for others. Additional research could be done on whether students of certain age levels, types of disabilities, or some other factor were more likely to have positive experiences with virtual social-emotional learning practices.

Research could also be expanded to include a greater and more diverse sample of participants. Since the participants came from one geographic region, it is understandable that many of the practices that they have in place are similar to one another. It would be interesting to see how practices differ by location, and if a larger sample size would lead to different findings. Also, none of the participants in the study taught at the high school level or were parents of students in high school. The research could be extended to include this population, to determine whether the findings are different when working with older students. Last, future research could include students with disabilities in the interview process, to get their perspective

on which social-emotional learning practices have given them the confidence and ability to self-advocate.

Conclusion

The research on social-emotional learning is vast, and it is widely accepted that it is a beneficial practice for all students, including those with disabilities. Findings of the current study further emphasized this belief, but gave additional insight as to what, specifically, students with disabilities need to have targeted through social-emotional learning. Teachers must continue to address the social and emotional needs of students, before students can be expected to tackle academic tasks, especially when academics are increasingly difficult for a student due to their learning disability. It is the culmination of informal check-ins, whole class practices, and direct instruction in social-emotional learning that truly meet the social and emotional needs of our students with disabilities.

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APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

- What does social-emotional learning mean to you? What are its benefits, drawbacks, etc.?

- What are your experiences with social-emotional learning in the classroom, in school-wide trainings/conversations, with your students or own children?

- Do you believe that social-emotional learning has benefits for you and/or your students?

- How do you implement social-emotional learning in your classroom? Or, what has been your observation of SEL in your child's school experience?

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic shifted your implementation of social-emotional learning? Or, have you seen a shift in the implementation of social-emotional learning in your child's classroom?

- How do you develop relationships and get to know your students while maintaining classroom expectations? Or, how does your child's teacher develop relationships with their students?

- How do you create a positive classroom environment for your students?

- Do you believe that your students (or child) with disabilities feel comfortable and included in the general education environment?

- One of the benefits of social-emotional learning is that students tend to feel more self-confident. What are some ways that students show you that they are self-confident?

- What are some ways that your students (child) with disabilities could be better self-advocates?

- Do you think that students/children with disabilities are aware of the resources available to them?

- Are there particular social-emotional learning interventions that you believe lead to better self-advocacy skills?