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## **Social-Emotional-Learning and the Impact on Student Achievement**

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**Social-Emotional-Learning and the Impact on Student Achievement**

Kristi Pitlik

Northwestern College

A Literature Review Presented  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Education

### **Abstract**

The purpose of this literature review is to gather evidence on the effect of implementing social-emotional-learning (SEL) in schools and the impact of SEL curriculum has on student achievement. Social emotional skills are essential skills people use to interact with others, manage and regulate their own emotions, make appropriate decisions, and address social circumstances. Teachers use SEL programs to directly and indirectly address social skills and social interactions in the classroom. This review of the research shares the outcomes of studies that highlight a variety of methods available to teach children social skills and the benefits of mastering those skills, including the long-term benefits from implementing SEL in the classroom and schools. The wide-spread financial commitment by schools for implementation of SEL programs indicates the benefits of the social emotional development of young children through their journey in school and in life. This literature review explores research about the growing topic of social emotional skills, the effect of social emotional skills on student achievement, research of social emotional learning (SEL) programs, the implementation and the effective strategies to teach social skills to all children, especially those come from a diverse background. Several researchers recognize a positive connection between a child's social emotional skills and development and achievement in school.

*Keywords: SEL, student achievement, SEL programs, CASEL, ACEs-, At-Risk, Teacher perceptions, Teacher Training.*

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### **Social-Emotional-Learning and Student Achievement**

As the percentage of minority student enrollment increases in America's public schools, so does the need for inclusive education. In order for inclusive education to occur, both teachers and students need social-emotional skills so that all students can learn in a safe and welcoming environment (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Joseph A. Durlak Professor of Psychology at Loyola University Chicago, stated; "In recent years, it has become commonplace among American educators to argue that if schools aim to prepare young people for life in today's complex and diverse world, then they must provide instruction in more than just academic content and skills" (Mahoney et al., 2018, p.18). These needed skills include self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills. Specifically, what is critical is a social-emotional learning (SEL) approach that fosters an equitable learning environment, where all students feel respected, valued, and acknowledged in their individual interests, strengths, social and cultural identities, and values.

SEL is receiving more and more attention in educational circles. SEL is the process in which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop and manage emotions and achieve goals, feel and express empathy for others, create and maintain caring relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (Barnes, 2019). Researchers have sought to discover the effects of implementing SEL in classrooms. They have determined that academics and social and emotional learning are equally important in schools, and both should be a priority (Durlak et. al., 2011). Studies have shown that social-emotional skills impact students' academic achievement and even future employment (Ng & Bull, 2018). The purpose of this literature review is to is gather evidence on the effect of the implementation of

SEL on students' achievement. Analysis of each study will illuminate how providing SEL in the classroom affects student outcomes.

Negative student behaviors often get in the way of academic success. One major argument for SEL becoming an integral part of learning in the classroom is to support a more inclusive environment that supports and bridges all students from diverse backgrounds. SEL helps students develop their own identities, communicate value and respect to those who are different, and become aware of their own emotions. Durlak (2011) mentions in his study the significant positive effects on targeted social-emotional competencies and attitudes about self, others, and school. The results from his meta-analysis study add to a growing body of research indicating that SEL programming enhances students' connection to school, classroom behavior, and academic achievement in all grade levels (Durlak et. al., 2011).

Schonfeld et al. (2015) evaluated the results of a social and emotional learning (SEL) program on academic achievement among students attending a large, urban, high-risk school district in the United States. The results confirmed the outcome of the Durlak (2011) study findings of the impacts of SEL. There were 705 students who participated in this study, students who remained in the same group from grade 3 to grade 6 (intervention or control) across all years of the study (Schonfeld et al., 2015). Students' academic achievement in reading, math, and writing data collected on state assessments increased compared to those who did not participate in the SEL program and intervention (Schonfeld et al., 2015). The results demonstrated promising outcomes contributing to academic proficiency, especially among young students attending a high-risk school setting.

The research for this literature review took place on three different database websites: ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), DeWitt Library (Northwestern College), and

Google Scholar. Peer-reviewed journal articles dating between 2011-2021 were gathered and analyzed. Keywords searched included social emotional learning (SEL), strategies for SEL in the classroom, SEL and teacher perceptions; SEL and student achievement in elementary, middle school; and high school; SEL programs; school climate; at- risk; and adverse childhood experiences.

This literature review is organized into four main sections beginning with background information on social emotional learning. Next, the review will cover SEL programs and student achievement, at-risk students, and teacher perceptions and training. This review will summarize how SEL implementation affects academic achievement. Recommendations for future research are included as well.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Social-Emotional Learning Background**

Many educators now claim that if schools aim to prepare children and adolescents for life in today's complex and diverse world, then they must deliver instruction in more than just academic content and skills. There have been increasing reports of teachers seeking ways to help students learn and practice skills such as managing their emotions, collaborating with peers, building relationships, developing social and self-awareness, and decision-making skills within the classroom (Lawson et al., 2018). Many educators are saying students need direct instruction on these essential skills for students to be able to access learning (Lawson et al., 2018). Students are entering school buildings without the social-emotional skills that are essential to be successful in a classroom environment (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011). Furthermore, Kilgus et al. (2017) found that there is a correlation between student's behaviors and their academic performance. Based on findings and analysis using the Social, Academic, and Emotional



Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS), based on teacher rating scales and the outcomes of the three-subscale assessments predicted future academic performance. Students who score low on the rating scale and in the three-subgroups were considered at risk for academic and behavioral problems in the future and need an intervention to prevent future academic and behavior concerns (Kilgus et al., 2017).

The concerns noted above have driven interest in SEL. SEL as a named concept dates back to 1994 with the founding of the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL). A group of people came together because they believed students' social and emotional skills needed to be addressed and become a priority in education. This multidisciplinary collaboration team consisted of researchers, educators, practitioners, and child advocates who believed that schools needed to address and teach the whole child. CASEL described SEL as a development where people learn and apply knowledge surrounding emotions, goal-setting, empathy, positive relationships, and responsible decision-making. The founders believed schools must attend to all children's social and emotional needs along with academic needs. They felt there was a connection between students' academic performance and social and emotional skills. CASEL set forth on a goal to establish high-quality, evidence-based SEL as a critical part of preschool through high school education (Niemi, 2021).

CASEL has been a leading force in the analyzing, defining, and promoting of SEL in schools. CASEL has divided social-emotional learning into five essential skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (Duginske, 2017). Social-emotional factors continue to be a vital variable when studying student achievement.

SEL is a methodology that helps students of all ages better understand and manage their own emotions and demonstrate empathy for others around them. As students develop these skills to regulate and identify their emotions, they are better equipped to make positive and responsible decisions, build positive relationships with others, and be motivated to learn with increased levels of engagement, and a better outcome as adults. Jones et al. (2015) and his colleagues studied kindergarten students from low socioeconomic neighborhoods in three cities and one rural setting. They assessed associations between measured outcomes in kindergarten and outcomes 13 to 19 years later (1991-2000). The results found that there are significant associations between measured social-emotional skills in kindergarten and key young adult outcomes across multiple domains of education, employment, criminal activity, substance use, and mental health (Jones et al., 2015). Furthermore, this research shows that students with at-risk social-emotional skills could experience more negative outcomes in their adult lives, which is why it is important to provide early interventions for those in need (Jones et al., 2015).

As research has continued, it has become apparent that social-emotional skills are critical to promote students' self and social awareness, emotional management, citizenship, and work ethic, especially as they become adults functioning beyond the educational setting. Implementing SEL curriculum in the classrooms as early as preschool and continuing throughout high school can increase students' academic performance, prevent risky behaviors with the development of appropriate decision-making skills, and improve students' attitudes and beliefs about self, others, school, and the future. Schools can help prevent or decrease negative behaviors (e.g. drop out, violence) when SEL is implemented. The development of essential social-emotional skills in students, is best achieved through effective classroom instruction delivered consistently throughout their school experience.

Research conducted over the past twenty years shows that high-quality, well-implemented SEL can also have a positive effect on school climate (Bavarian et al., 2013). As students develop these skills and are given opportunities to practice SEL implementation, studies show lasting effects on students in the classroom and as they progress throughout school and into their adult lives (Bavarian et al., 2013). With growing evidence of the positive benefits of SEL, schools across the nation have integrated SEL into the school day by providing systems and strategies for educators to prioritize each day in their classroom with appropriate programs and resources provided by school districts (Niemi, 2021).

### **SEL Programs and Academic Achievement**

Studies have been conducted to examine when and how social-emotional learning takes place in schools. There are many programs and interventions available to schools to help implement and teach students SEL in the classroom. Since the development of interventions and programs in schools, researchers have investigated their impact. Some programs and interventions that have been researched in depth are You Can Do It Early Childhood Education, PATHs, PBIS, SPARK Pre-teen, Mentoring Curriculum, and Culturally Responsive Interventions (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011; Schonfeld et al., 2015; Cook et al., 2015).

Studies have occurred to determine the effectiveness of explicit instruction in SEL curriculum. Classroom interventions in the classroom has shown positive impacts on students' reading and math outcomes. One study conducted in first-grade classrooms found that explicit instruction in social-emotional learning improves the social and emotional competence of young children and increases students' reading achievement (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011). Based on these results, not only does explicit direct instruction in SEL enhance emotional competency, it reduces problem behaviors and has a positive impact on students' reading achievement.

The teachers who participated in the Ashdown and Bernard study (2011) were expected to complete two questionnaires—the ACER Wellbeing Survey and the Social Skills Rating System—Teacher Form. In both surveys, teachers rated each student in response to social-emotional questions throughout the course of the study. To measure students' reading achievement, teachers used the Independent Text Reading Level baseline assessment for each student and monitored students' independent reading level throughout the study. Students who participated in this program improved in their social-emotional skills and were more engaged in their learning than those who were not part of the study (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011). The data showed that those most impacted from SEL were the lowest performing students: they displayed greater gains in reading achievement than students who did not participate in the program (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011). The results also showed positive impacts of implementing SEL on student achievement, especially for the lowest performing students.

According to Ashdown and Bernard (2011), the explicit teaching of SEL in the classroom positively impacts students' social-emotional well-being and academic achievement (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011). When students are given direct and explicit instructions in the area of social skills with guided lessons including progression of skills, students become more emotionally competent. Based on the data, it's essential to explicitly teach these skills and allow time for students to practice in order for them to develop these essential emotional skills themselves. When students are allowed time to practice the skills they are learning with explicit feedback throughout the day, problem behaviors decrease and more time is available for student engagement in learning.

Many schools around the United States have adopted a widely known SEL program called Second Step. It is an evidence-based, universal, classroom-based, social-emotional

learning curriculum for Kindergarten–Grade 5 that fosters children’s social-emotional competence and foundational learning skills. Second Step offers explicit instruction, opportunities to practice and apply skills, and strengthen student’s understanding of social-emotional skills. The explicit instruction is projected to improve problem solving and skills for learning and academic achievement.

A specific study was completed over a two-year period on the Second Step Curriculum with the aim of examining the overall impact of this widely adopted SEL curriculum on students’ emotional and academic outcomes (Low et al., 2019). Included were 61 schools, with 321 teachers and 8,941 students in grades kindergarten through third grade. Teachers were required to have professional training in how to implement Second Step. Throughout the trainings, teachers were given additional tools and strategies to implement beyond the guided lessons, such as greeting at the door in the morning, building student-teacher relationships, teaching, modeling, and reinforcing positive behaviors, providing explicit feedback, and using effective cues to regain students’ attention. This curriculum emphasizes the importance of teacher actions and modeling of expected positive behaviors in the classroom throughout the day to promote expected, positive behaviors of students. Funding was also provided for coaching teachers (Low et al., 2019).

Data was gathered via weekly self-reports from teachers. Results showed positive gains in student outcomes. Data regarding academic achievement was gathered from aims web (curriculum-based), a progress monitoring system that measures oral reading fluency (RCBM) and math calculation (M-CBM). A baseline was developed and monitored over the period of the study to track students’ progress. The data was collected twice per year tracking students’ growth in reading and math. Behavior observations were also completed in each classroom. The

behavior observations of students captured on-task behavior during academic times throughout the day as well as disruptive behaviors. Some examples of disruptions that were observed and tracked were blurting, talking to peers when expected to listen, getting out of seat, and distracting others. A trained graduate student completed the observations of each student, and the observations were repeated after each interval (Low et al., 2019).

The findings from this study suggest an overall decrease in student problem behavior in classrooms participating in the Second Step curriculum. Changes in student social-emotional skills only indirectly affect academic skills because the program does not directly influence academic instruction or learning approaches. However, as students decreased their disruptive behaviors and increased on-task behaviors, students' academic skills increased over time, especially for those who were lower performing on the behavior observation student check list (Low et al., 2019).

SEL programs reinforce social and emotional competence and serve as a foundation for future developing milestones, including the ability to access and maximize student's learning in the classroom. Schonfeld et al. (2015) studied the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum. This program has been recognized as a Model Program for elementary age students by the National Registry of Effective Programs. The question Schonfeld et al. investigated was, "What is the impact of this social and emotional learning (SEL) program on academic achievement among students attending a large, urban, high-risk school district?" (Schonfeld et al., 2015). The study included 24 elementary schools and 705 students. The participants were followed over a four-year period, from third-grade year through sixth grade. This study focused on the effect of PATHS curriculum and student's academic achievement within the at-risk schools. The researchers hypothesized that students who participated in the

interventions group would most likely achieve basic proficiency on state mastery tests in reading, math, and writing, specifically those who are at-risk (Schonfeld et al., 2015).

The findings from this study showed that implementing the PATHS curriculum had positive outcomes on students social, emotional, and academic achievement. There were positive intervention effects of the curriculum for some grade levels in all three academic areas. Specifically, the intervention group presented greater basic proficiency in 4<sup>th</sup>-grade reading and math, in addition to 5<sup>th</sup>- and 6<sup>th</sup>-grade writing when compared to the those not participating in the PATHS program. The outcome of this study is consistent with other studies completed on the PATHS program, studies that also found positive outcome on student performance in school (Schonfeld et al., 2015).

Other SEL programs, such as the Slowly but Steadily universal program, SAFE, SPARK Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum, Mind-Up, and afterschool programs have all been studied in-depth over time to identify the impacts. Many of the results have shown a positive effect of SEL programs on students behaviorally and academically in grades ranging from preschool through high school (Schonfeld et al., 2015).

For example, the research of Raimundo et al. (2012) analyzed the impacts of Slowly but Steadily. Slowly but Steadily is a universal program that gathers perceptions and methods from the SEL framework by integrating competence-promotion and youth-development frameworks that followed CASEL's recommendations of SEL. The participants of this study consisted of 213 fourth-grade Portuguese students over one academic year. The results showed significant gains in some social-emotional competencies, specifically, peer relations and social competence. However, little to no gains were found in internalizing and externalizing problems (Raimundo et al., 2012).

The method for collecting data was student self-reports using Emotional Knowledge through the Assessment of Children's Emotions Scales (ACES). Teachers answered questionnaires from Social Competence from the School Social Behavior Scales (SSBS) and Aggressive Behaviors Questionnaire, which assesses students' frequency of aggressive behaviors that occur (Raimundo et al., 2012). The students assessed before and after implementation of the program. Based on the results, boys showed greater gains in self-management, aggressiveness, and social problems than girls. There were no significant differences regarding socioeconomic status. The outcome of this one-year study showed significant effects on behavioral outcomes, which is consistent with the results from the Durlak et al. (2011) study, confirming that SEL programs increase positive student behaviors in the classroom and lead to increased academic achievement (Raimundo et al., 2012).

Some students thrive transitioning from elementary school and adulthood while others lose some drive. Some students have struggled with the same challenges they have faced as young children growing up. In school settings, for those who lose momentum or carry over their struggles, educators are uncertain how to boost test scores and engage student who become disengaged. Based on a group of studies, students who have educators who explicitly teach social-emotional skills from a researched-based program and are dedicated in implementing, modeling, providing feedback, and allowing students to practice skills throughout the day will experience improved academic performance (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). Some skills students develop as a result of SEL programs are an increase in positive collaboration with peers, positive relationships, self-awareness and management, social awareness, and responsible decision-making, which all impact students' engagement and academic achievement (Strahan & Poteat, 2020).



Over time there have been many studies completed around the topic of SEL and student achievement. Mahoney et al. (2018) examined four meta-analyses on student outcomes associated to participating in school-based SEL programs. Based on the review of the studies' results, the researchers strongly conclude that SEL programs do, in fact, have substantial benefits for participating students.

The first meta-analysis the researchers reviewed was from Durkac et al. (2011). The study was completed of 213 school-based, universal SEL programs, including outcomes data for more than 270,000 students from kindergarten through high school. The findings from this study showed that students participating in SEL programs enhanced their social-emotional skills in students' attitudes, exhibited more positive behaviors in social situations, and made gains in academics. To be exact, students made an 11 percentile gain in achievement, which confirms the correlation of academic gain from SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011). The other three meta-analysis studies concurred with Durkac: strong evidence supports that SEL programs do enhance students SEL competencies and academic achievement for all students.

Strengthening students' social and emotional abilities through the implementation of school-based SEL programs has been advised as one approach for encouraging positive development and avoiding negative outcomes especially as students transition to middle school. There have been positive impacts on students' social-emotional development and academics when SEL programs have been implemented. The Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid (SPARK) Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum is targeted towards children between the ages of 10-13 years old to establish SEL skills essential as students approach adolescents. SPARK was designed to decrease risk factors, build resiliency, promote emotional security, and facilitate school success in youth (Green et al., 2021). The curriculum

includes a series of coordinated lessons that are taught in a detailed order and integrate multiple learning activities (e.g., group discussions, role plays, videos, demonstrations) to help students master content and skills.

To determine the impacts of the SPARKs Program, Green et al. (2021) conducted a randomized controlled, mixed-methods research study of the Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid (SPARK). The participants were 357 students from two schools. Green wanted to determine if SPARK program would increase participants' knowledge of the values of mind, thought, and consciousness, whether it increases participants' communication, problem-solving, and decision-making skills; improves students' emotional regulation skills; and finally, whether SPARK program increases participants' resilience level. The participants from this study were 357 middle school students from two schools in the southern area of the United States. The study was completed during the spring semester of the 2018–2019 school year and the fall semester of the 2019–2020 school year (Green et al., 2021).

The findings from Green et al. (2021) study demonstrated that students who participated in the SPARK Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum made gains in their knowledge and understanding of their mind, thought, and consciousness. Green et al. (2021), findings indicated, “85% of students in the intervention condition showed a positive change in their knowledge of the SPARK curriculum from Time 1 to Time 2 compared with 41% of students in the comparison condition. 78% of students in the intervention condition showed a positive change from Time 1 to Time 2, compared with 45% of students in the comparison condition when assessing their communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. 69% of students in the intervention condition showed a positive change in their levels of emotional regulation from Time 1 to Time 2 compared with 42% of students in the comparison condition. 78% of students

in the intervention condition showed a positive change in their levels of resiliency from Time 1 to Time 2 compared with 49% of students in the comparison condition” (Green et al., 2021, pp. 1063-1065). These results are encouraging and provide support for the effectiveness of the curriculum that addresses the needs of those in early adolescence. Students who received the curriculum showed significant improvements in knowledge of curriculum content and principles in the area of communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills; emotional regulation; and resilience compared to students in the comparison group. These results align perfectly with the CASEL model framework that identify these as essential elements for all students to acquire and develop throughout their lives (Green et al., 2021; Niemi, 2021; Durlak et al., 2011).

### **At-Risk and ACEs**

Student achievement has many different factors that can impact how a successful a student is academically. Some barriers that may impact achievement are trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Melanie Hinojosa, who is sociologist, who researches health outcomes of vulnerable populations, and her colleagues explain, “Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) include extreme economic hardship, abuse neglect, household and family dysfunction, and exposure to community violence. Children with ACEs are at a higher risk of developing mental, physical, and developmental disorders that can lead to difficulty in school” (Hinojosa et al., 2019, p. 401). School practices, social disadvantages, and neighborhood risks all contribute and impact academic outcomes for students emotionally and academically. While success at school can help to compensate for these wider patterns of disadvantage, studies suggest that disadvantaged, at-risk youth are more likely to be less engaged in school and not complete school. “Children who grow up in poverty are at elevated risk for school adjustment difficulties at the transition into kindergarten; as many as 40% demonstrate delays in learning behaviors and

emergent literacy skills, and over 20% exhibit high rates of social difficulties and disruptive behavior problems that undermine school adjustment” (Lee & Bierman, 2015, pp. 383-384). These delays commonly set the stage for future problems, contributing to a socioeconomic gap in school achievement. Learning engagement and emergent literacy skills in primary elementary school predict future school achievement and proclivity toward aggression and social withdrawal at school. Deficits also foresee later behavior problems and learning difficulties, as well as reduced high school graduation rates and access to long-term employment (Lee & Bierman, 2015).

Many teachers make a point at the beginning of each school year to build positive relationships with their students to help students feel safe and secure in their learning environment. Lee and Bierman (2015) conducted a mixed-method study that examined student-teacher relationships and classroom emotional support, focusing on the changes in child aggression, social withdrawal, learning engagement, and literacy skills as students transition from Head Start Preschool through kindergarten and 1<sup>st</sup> grade. Head Start preschool programs promote the school readiness of infants, toddlers, and preschool-aged children from low-income families. Head Start programs support children's development in a positive learning environment through a variety of services, including early learning and development, health, and family well-being. Twenty-two Head Start programs in Pennsylvania that consisted of 22 Head Start classrooms then in to 113 kindergarten classrooms and then into 121 first-grade classrooms. The study was over a two-year period (Lee & Bierman, 2015).

Teachers in this study completed the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS), and Teacher Observation of Child Adaptation-Revised (TOCA-R) (Lee & Bierman, 2015). Teachers completed questionnaires and surveys

about students' behaviors in the classroom and their performance on achievement tests. The achievement test scores analyzed include the Letter–Word Identification subscale of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement III–Revised (kindergarten and first grade assessment) and Test of Preschool Early Literacy (TOPEL) (head start assessment). The findings were that a positive student–teacher relationship is believed to enhance feelings of emotional security. In addition, the findings from this study indicated that children are more motivated to work harder to please the teacher with whom they have a positive relationship with. Teachers who have built positive relationships with students provide positive attention and foster opportunities for learning in the classroom, leading to future success academically and socially for all students, especially for those at-risk (Lee & Bierman, 2015).

Risk factors, such as living in a single-parent family or low parent education levels, especially when combined with poverty, can distinctly increase children's chances of adverse outcomes; children affected by multiple risks (three or more risk factors) are likely to experience school failure and other negative outcomes (Robbins et al., 2012). Zeng et al. (2016) researched at-risk students' response to summer program and examined the effectiveness of a summer learning program for students who were at risk for emotional and behavioral disorders and were below proficiency on standard literacy assessment. This quasi-experimental five-week study was designed with a pre- and posttest given to the 92 fourth grade students who participated (Zeng et al., 2016). The findings from this study showed the treatment group make significant improvement in students' social emotional regulation and peer conflict, while the comparison group social, emotional, and behavioral remained the same. When analyzing the results of students reading scores, they increased by 2.33 points, from 25.07 to 27.40 whereas the comparison group improved by 1.83 points, from 25.06 to 26.89 (Zeng et al., 2016).

When a student comes to school with environmental risk factors that could place the child as “at-risk”, teachers hesitate to label students “at-risk” solely based on the known factors. With the increase of tiered systems in schools and implementation of SEL, FASTBridge learning has developed a universal screener to help identify those students at risk academically and emotionally. Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS) is a teacher-based rating electronic scale of student risk for social-emotional and behavioral problems for K–12 students. The SAEBRS is intended as a universal screener to identify school, class, and individual-level SEL needs (Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener-teacher version, 2020). Kilgus et al. (2017), has examined teacher ratings of student behavior by the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SAEBRS) and determined that students’ scores predicted academic achievement in math and reading. A secondary purpose was to compare the projecting of three SAEBRS subscales corresponding to social, academic, or emotional areas of behavior (Kilgus et al., 2017).

Students who are at risk have many variables that impact their learning and performance in school. Kilgus et al. (2017) conducted research at four elementary schools and one middle school located in a suburban public-school district in the northeastern United States with 1,058 students who participated in the study. To measure students’ academic progress and data, FASTBridge learning was used. For measuring math achievement, students completed the adaptive Math (aMath) measures. This computerized assessment assesses broad math proficiency for students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Adaptive reading (aReading) was used to measure students’ achievement in reading. Items fall into one of four categories: print, phonological and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and comprehension. All students are given 30 items, but item difficulty and the proportion of items from each category are automatically

adapted in response to student response (Kilgus et al., 2017). Finally, the students were given the SAEBRS screener, which has three subscales: problem behavior (arguing, cooperation with peers), academic behavior (academic engagement, difficulty working independently), and emotional behavior (sadness, positive attitude) problems.

Students who participated in the Kilgus et al. (2017) study took aMath and aReading on the computer; the teacher completed the teacher rating SAEBRS assessment on each student. The results of the study showed that there was a correlation between students' academic performance in reading and math to the results from the SAEBRS assessment. The results supported the main hypothesis, indicating that the composite scale and all three subscales were associated with student math, reading performance, and a standardized composite score from SAEBRS. Students who perform below benchmark on the FASTBridge universal screener are considered "at-risk" and require interventions. Continuing to use this universal screener to monitor students who are at risk and persistently at risk for academic failure regardless of their environmental factors could have an impact on student achievement.

Schools often have a system in place to monitor and track student's progress to make sure those who are academically and behaviorally at risk are closely monitored. With mental health concerns for youth on the rise, there is increased pressure for schools to implement programs and practices that address youths' mental health, ensuring that all students have the abilities necessary for succeeding socially, emotionally, and academically (Cook et al., 2015). Providing a universal screener that identifies those students who may be at risk behaviorally and academically allows educators to proactively help build the skills the student needs to be successful.

Multitiered systems of support (MTSS) is a service delivery framework that is to put in place as a preventative or proactive measure. MTSS provides a range of evidence-based practices and means for making data-driven decisions. The intentions of MTSS are to prevent, reverse, and minimize mental health concerns while encouraging social, emotional, and academic success among all students in a school. Within the MTSS system, Cook et. al. (2015) focused on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and SEL, which are both widely implemented universal programs. Both PBIS and SEL focus on prevention of problems that interfere with academic success, and both promote positive interaction and environments. Both focus on positive approaches to students' behavior rather than punitive responses and place priority on teaching students to learn the skills that will allow students to be socially and academically successful. These approaches integrate a universal support, preventatives, and integration with specific systems in place to track students' growth behaviorally and academically. With these systems in place, students are provided preventative supports, more supportive and nurturing environments that allow students to promote wellbeing and academic success, and more intense supports for those who have mental health concerns (Cook et al., 2015).

PBIS and SEL have been used in schools to integrate positive and preventatives to support all students' mental health outcomes. Cook et. al. (2015) examined the preventative effects of an integrated approach to universal prevention, specifically between PBIS and SEL and students' mental health. This study took place at two large elementary schools located in the Southeastern Region of the United States. The participants consisted of eight 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms with a total of 191 students. The study had a total of four treatment conditions that were used to examine the effects of PBIS and SEL. The four groups were: "(a) PBIS only, (b)



SEL only, (c) PBIS-SEL combined (i.e., COMBO), and (d) business-as-usual control condition” (Cook et al., 2015).

The teachers were provided professional development and training in PBIS. The professional development training was provided over the course of one day for the PBIS group and the SEL only group. A two-day training was provided for the PBIS and SEL combined condition group. Teachers were then given a week to review, create materials, and prepare to implement their new training. Later, they were given an hour and half follow-up to review content and ask questions they may have.

The measures Cook et. al. (2015) used were Student Internalizing Behavior Screener (SIBS), Treatment Acceptability, and Feasibility Acceptability Intervention Rating Profile (IRP), and the check lists to monitor fidelity. The findings from the study showed a positive effect on students’ overall achievement. Consistent with predictions, findings provided promising results for the integration of SEL and PBIS. When examining the impact of the COMBO, SEL-only, and PBIS-only groups on the measures of teacher ratings on externalizing and internalizing behaviors, the findings offered support for the value of an integrated approach to address externalizing behaviors. Specifically, as students in the COMBO group demonstrated significantly greater change from pre to post than the SEL and PBIS only groups in this study (Cook et al., 2015). These universal systems, when put in place, help identify those students who are at risk, provide preventative interventions, and monitors students to prevent them from becoming further behind and discrepant from their peers. These supports are put in place to address students’ academic and mental health needs (Cook et al., 2015).

As students’ progress through school it’s important to monitor students to ensure they continue to stay engaged in their learning. When students are unsuccessful in academics and

drop out of high school, they confront a multitude of social and professional challenges for the rest of their adult lives. Dropping out of high school is not the ultimate predictor of future success; however, those students have a higher chance of encountering unemployment and poverty (Montgomery & Hirth 2011). Montgomery and Hirth (2011) completed a mixed methods study examining the impact of a freshmen transition program for at-risk students at a large urban high school. This study searched to find what essentials of the Helping Everyone Aim for the Right Target (HEART) program had an effect on academic achievement while helping students continue in school and work in the direction of graduation. The participants in this study consisted of 130 HEART transition program freshman students compared with a similar group of students from previous years who did not participate in the program.

The data collected in the Montgomery and Hirth (2011) study was from students' GPA and the number of credits students earned. Based on the results, students who participated in the HEART program performed better academically than those who did not participate in the transition program (See Table 2) (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and *t* Tests for Grade Point Average and the Number of Credits Earned After Ninth Grade

	Group		<i>t</i> Value	<i>df</i>	Significance (One-Tailed)	SED
	HEART <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ), <i>n</i> = 130	Non-HEART <i>M</i> ( <i>SD</i> ), <i>n</i> = 122				
Grade point average	1.949 (0.89)	1.56 (0.77)	3.71*	250	.0001	.105
Number of credits earned	11.56 (4.78)	10.10 (4.20)	2.57**	250	.0042	.569

Note. SED = Standard Error of the Difference.

\*\**p* < .05. \**p* < .001.

The statistical investigation of the data for GPA and the number of credits earned after students' freshmen year presented that the HEART program was making a substantial difference

in school success for this group of students at high risk for failure. Although these data and statistical examination signify only one year of the HEART students' high school career, the data does prove that these students were off to a better academic start compared with similar students not participating in the HEART program (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011). Through interviews with students and teachers, the importance of relationships between the students and teachers was noted. These strong relationships built between the students and teachers were one of the most significant aspects of the HEART program. The influence of caring adults in the HEART program was a main part of the students' successful transition to high school and aided in their academic success (Montgomery & Hirth, 2011).

Behaviors can directly impact student achievement. Students who struggle emotionally disengaged from school at a younger age. Some students who display problematic behavior struggle being in the classroom with their peers and struggle with authority, potentially impacting their success as an adult. Tan et al. (2019) completed a study entitled, "Examining Family and School Factors as Predictors of Delinquency: A Study of Juvenile Offenders, At-risk Students, and Low-risk Students in Malaysia" (Tan et al., 2019). This study aims to examine family and school aspects as predictors of delinquency among teens in Malaysia. There were 101 juvenile offenders, 86 at-risk students, and 92 low-risk students who participated in this study. Multinomial logistic regression was used to predict the likelihood of an adolescent being in a group of juvenile offenders or of being an at-risk or low-risk student based on four predictor variables: family structure, family relationships, school relationships, and commitment to learning. The measures used in this study was a self-reporting method, with the questionnaire consisting of three sections: their demographics, school experiences, and family relationships (Tan et al., 2019). The findings from this study showed family and school relationships, and

motivation to learn, predict the likelihood of different levels of delinquent behaviors. Tan et al. (2019), suggests, based on the results, keeping young people in school can be a strong factor in which, can prevent at-risk students from moving towards the route of serious delinquent behaviors (Tan et al., 2019).

There are many factors that need to be considered when discussing student behavior and achievement. Casillas et al. (2012) investigated the different effects of prior academic achievement as well as psychosocial, behavioral, demographic, and school context factors on early high school grade point average (GPA) using a prospective study of 4,660 middle-school students from 24 schools. High academic failure and dropout rates remain a major concern in the United States, with estimates of over 25% of public-school students dropping out of high school (Casillas et al., 2012). These researchers examined the role of middle-school students' previous academic achievement, behavioral indicators, demographics, and school-level factors to determine factors predicting students' high school outcomes. The findings confirm that academic achievement indicators are among the strongest predictors of future academic success. This conclusion is consistent with the findings of previous studies in which students' previous performance was an important indicator of high school outcome and graduation (Casillas et al., 2012).

It has been identified which behaviors do contribute to the prediction for future academic outcomes and achievement (Casillas et al., 2012). Identifying students beyond elementary school who are at high risk of falling behind and becoming disengaged in school can prevent high school dropout and struggles socially, emotionally and academically. The results of Casillas et al. (2012) has shown the need for combining psychosocial and behavior with academic

achievement. The results demonstrate the need to identify and place appropriate interventions for those who are at risk as a preventative measure.

### **Teacher Perceptions and Training**

Developing evidence strongly suggests that schoolwide and teacher-focused interventions and implementation of SEL are among the most effective methods for improving student behavioral outcomes and achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Professional development and the amount and quality of training, including consultation and coaching, is frequently connected with higher program fidelity in school settings (Anyon et al., 2016). Social, emotional, and behavioral challenges are major barriers to students' academic achievement; however, teachers feel they are not prepared with the knowledge and skills required to handle these challenges in their classrooms (Kaye et al., 2020). Although teachers are often strong supporters of SEL and acknowledge the need for SEL in their classrooms, they are provided limited SEL training and skills, as well as limited access to evidence-based interventions and resources to support children's behavioral health in the classroom.

Professional development and training provided to teachers can alleviate the concerns teachers are struggling with in their classroom when implementing SEL. Meeting the social and emotional needs of students requires building a comprehensive SEL program training that often starts with increasing teacher awareness, perception, knowledge, and skills in SEL. Kaye et al. (2020) analyzed an intervention program that was an innovative school-based behavioral health professional development and consultation model intended to address SEL needs for urban educators (Kaye et al., 2020). Teachers at participating schools attended a total of 11 professional development workshops over the course of two years, totaling 27.5 hours of training. The schools were each provided with a program consultant who provided a minimum of

120 hours on-site meetings to each school over the course of the study to support each school's targeted needs and goals (Kaye et al., 2020). The results from this study indicated this innovative two-year school-based social, emotional, and behavioral health professional development and consultation is needed in schools. The results from the staff's feelings were highly valued and believed to be necessary in building knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy to address students social, emotional, and behavioral needs. The results also discussed the need for systematic changes in school wide implementation. Kaye et al. surveyed staff members to determine the need for resources and Services, "Almost three-fourths (74 percent) of staff across the five partner schools reported that behavioral health concerns substantially impaired their ability to focus on teaching, and almost all (95 percent) viewed behavioral health concerns as a significant barrier to learning for their students" (Kaye et al., 2020, p. 82).

Educators who teach at K-8 students in an urban setting have identified the need for more professional development based on the needs identified by school staff with regard to social, emotional, and behavioral concerns. Providing these opportunities for staff to effectively build their own knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy with additional coaching support to address student social, emotional, and behavioral health needs, will impact teachers' perceptions and how they implement SEL in their classrooms. Kaye et al.'s (2020) purpose of the study conducted, was to evaluate the effectiveness of this model of professional development and consultation to improve teachers' implementation and perceptions of SEL when teaching in the urban school setting. There were twenty-two educators from five schools who participated in the study (Kaye et al., 2020).

The following measures were completed by all school staff in participating schools at the beginning of the first year of participation. The measures included an initial survey of 19 items

assessing the social, emotional, and behavioral health needs of greatest concern to the teachers, need for of behavioral supports in the school, and self-efficacy and perceptions of the staff members when addressing student behavioral needs in the classroom. Other surveys that were included were based around the workshops and consolation survey, and team reflection surveys. Teachers were provided a post survey that assessed teachers' satisfaction with the intervention from the professional development and consolation experiences to build their knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy to be able to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs in the school and their classroom (Kaye et al., 2020). Results showed that teachers felt the professional development and consultation impacted how they taught SEL in the classroom and school-wide. Teachers reported making significant progress towards meeting behavioral needs as well as developing systems, procedures, and protocols at their schools. Teachers also felt more prepared to handle the behaviors in the classroom based on the professional development and the assistance from their consultations (Kaye et al., 2020).

The shift in education with the focus to educate the “whole child” through SEL has been critical in improving students' mental health as well as their academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011). Since teachers are the ones who deliverer and implement SEL in their classroom, their attitudes about and support for SEL can affect the implementation, sustainability, and impact of SEL programs (Brackett et al., 2011). Brackett et al. (2011) completed a two-phase study in which they developed and created a measure of teachers' beliefs about SEL. In the first phase, survey items were given to 935 teachers; the teachers also completed three reliable scales relating to teachers' comfort with teaching SEL, their willingness to learn more about SEL, and their perceptions about whether their school supports SEL. The scales assessed were Comfort (sense of confidence in teaching SEL), Commitment (desire to participate in SEL training and

teaching), and Culture (schoolwide support for SEL) (Brackett et al., 2011). The second phase of this study provided suggestion for the simultaneous and analytical validity of the scales with a subsample of teachers implementing an SEL program as part of a randomized controlled trial (Brackett et al., 2011).

Teachers beliefs and their own social emotional awareness can impact how SEL is taught and implemented in the classroom. Brackett et al. (2011) wanted to assess different components of teachers' beliefs about SEL in general, considering teachers responses on this scale may affect program delivery and outcomes for any SEL program. In this study the intervention teachers used was the RULER Approach, which teaches students to recognize, understand, label, express and regulate their emotions. Like many SEL programs, RULER emphasizes the importance of SEL instruction to build relationships, promote positive decisions, prevent problematic behavior, and increase academic achievement (Brackett et al., 2011). The results indicated that teachers who reported both greater comfort teaching SEL and greater commitment to SEL training reported a better sense of accomplishment in teaching. Those with higher comfort scores also had higher adaptive self-efficacy and lower scores on depersonalization, one aspect of burnout. In other words, teachers who reported greater comfort teaching SEL saw students as individuals and formed positive relationships through which they adapted their teaching to better meet students' needs. Teachers with higher culture scores had lower levels of emotional exhaustion and reported administrators who were more supportive in general.

Teacher beliefs are key indicators of their perceptions and decisions on handling problematic behavior in the classroom, which, in turn, affect their teaching practices and classroom management. Among the several barriers to students' academic difficulties is not acknowledging and addressing the crucial role of SEL in the classroom. Finally, leadership from



the school principals is an important component of school culture which affects implementation at the time of a program's adoption and will continue to affect program sustainability over time.

Teachers' beliefs impact the type of learning environments and climate they create in their classroom, as well as their students' academic performance and feelings about their own abilities in the classroom. Students perform better and are more motivated to engage in learning when their teachers believe they will succeed, in part because teachers treat students differently when they set high expectations for their students'. For instance, the RULER encourages teachers to model how to effectively regulate a range of emotions and deliver emotion-related content through the teaching of vocabulary related to feeling words (Brackett et al., 2011).

Teachers with low expectations and those do not feel comfortable teaching SEL are less likely to implement with quality and fidelity. As a result, teachers may be less engaged during SEL training and less likely to integrate SEL purposefully throughout the day. "Schools that successfully deliver SEL programs report an increase in academic success, improved quality of teacher-student relationships, and a decrease in problem behaviors (Durlak et al., 2011), which emphasizes the urgency of identifying and measuring the factors that impact effective SEL programming" (Brackett et al., 2011).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Recommendations and suggestions for future research are broad when looking at all the research articles presented in this literature review. The most common theme amongst the articles is the need for larger sample sizes. Several articles mentioned the limitations to their study was that the number of participants were relatively small, making it challenging to state a general conclusion. Larger-scale studies are needed to determine if the effects of various programs can be generalized to the outcomes of the study that centered around SEL.

Another need expressed was for the length of longer studies. Many of the limitations of the studies presented in this literature review noted the need for conducting the studies for a longer period of time to truly test the impacts of SEL in the classroom and students' futures. There have been many arguments stating interventions on students' behaviors and SEL programs may take several years to have a noticeable impact on students' academic achievement (Low et al., 2019). Some of the studies did have greater longevity, like over a two-year period. But a common theme expressed by researchers was that one to two years of implementing the study was insufficient time for data to confirm the differences on academic achievements and observations of student engagement in learning (Low et al., 2019). A longer-length study can investigate whether the benefits of the program are maintained in the long term and over several grade levels. It's important to study the impacts of SEL from the k-12 through those who have graduated to truly be able to see the immediate benefits academically and the future benefits as students get older.

Lastly, another limitation encountered during the literature review was the lack of studies completed in the secondary level and beyond. More studies need to be completed beyond the elementary setting to grasp the understanding of the long-term impacts of SEL. Elementary schools have ample amount of studies completed around implementation of SEL; however, it would be beneficial to investigate more in depth SEL at the secondary level. Casillas et al. (2012) investigated the different effects of prior academic achievement, as well as the psychosocial, behavioral, demographic, and school context factors on early high school grade point average (GPA) using a prospective study of 4,660 middle-school students from 24 schools. They identified the need to explore how these factors become evident across development, particularly in the transitions from one educational level to another and from school to the work

force and/or college. It was questioned whether these same factors predict the broader range of outcomes relevant to their future success in career and their participation within society (Casillas et al., 2012).

### **Conclusion**

The results from data that were gathered by numerous researchers indicate that academic success is improved with social and emotional interventions. As SEL has been a growing topic in education, researchers have sought to discover the effects of implementing SEL programs in classrooms. Researchers have determined that academics and social and emotional learning are equally important in schools, and both should be a priority (Durlak et. al., 2011). From the studies gather around SEL and students, many researchers identified similar themes surrounding their work on SEL and academics. Some things that were discussed were teacher-student relationships, interventions and implementation with fidelity, strategies such as mindfulness and movement in the classroom were simple ways to incorporate within the school day.

The findings from this literature review impact education and how we support our students academically and behaviorally. Placing SEL as a priority in school districts and providing sufficient training and support for educators impacts students' academic outcome, student engagement in learning, and future successes (Durlak et al., 2011). The current findings from studies documented that SEL programs produced noteworthy positive effects on targeted social-emotional abilities and attitudes about self, others, and school. The results strongly support that SEL enhanced students' behavioral adjustment in the form of increased positive behaviors, reduced problematic behaviors, and improved academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011).

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