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Aligning Instructional Practices and Direct Instruction to Improve the Social-Emotional Competencies of Students

Collin Boekhoff

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**Aligning Instructional Practices and Direct Instruction to Improve the Social-Emotional
Competencies of Students**

Collin Boekhoff

Northwestern College

An Action Research Project Presented
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Education

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Abstract

The action research conducted was brought about by the researcher identifying a need to develop social-emotional skills due to the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent shutdown of schools. Students in this research are in third grade in the researcher's classroom. The research was conducted over two weeks. Students were given self-assessments to rate their scores. During the research, instructional practices were designed or utilized to match desired social-emotional competencies targeted through direct instruction. Findings from the research indicate that instructional practices aligned to social-emotional competencies grow the self-rated ability levels of students. The research conducted highlighted the need to provide opportunities for students to practice social-emotional competencies targeted during direct instruction.

Keywords: social-emotional, instruction

Aligning Instructional Practices and Direct Instruction to Improve Social-Emotional Competencies of Students

The COVID-19 pandemic brought on new struggles for students beyond the virus. Academics were paused in the name of safety. This became the main concern of educational stakeholders but this was not the only part of student well-being that was negatively affected. Social-emotional skills deteriorate as students were forced to stay home. Much research has indicated the power of these skills and social-emotional learning on students. According to a study by Taylor, Oberle, and Durlak (2017), social-emotional learning has shown positive attitudes toward school, prosocial behavior, and higher academic performance. The problem is that embedding social-emotional learning into everyday learning has become difficult, especially with a renewed push to improve the academics of students because of the coronavirus shutdown. Research studies have shown the effects of school-wide systems and interventions based on social-emotional learning. In a meta-analysis of school-level social-emotional programs, students who received social-emotional support from classroom teachers developed higher prosocial skills and more positive relationships with their teachers and peers, which lead to more positive perceptions of emotional engagement (Yang, Bear, and May 2018). While studies have shown positive effects of school-wide social-emotional programs on student outcomes, very little research has studied the effects of everyday instruction on student social-emotional competencies and skills.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether aligning instructional practices and direct instruction from the classroom teacher and school counselor affects the student's mastery of social-emotional competencies. The goal of this research is two-fold. First, the knowledge gained from this research will guide how to best incorporate instructional practices that enable

students to develop social-emotional competencies. Second, a collaboration between teachers will enable all teachers as part of a school system to utilize methods of direct instruction and instructional practices to build their students' social-emotional skills.

In the literature review, articles were collected using the Northwestern College Dewitt Library online database and Google Scholar. The inclusion of research articles depended on different factors. First, the research had to be completed within the last ten years. Second, the research needed to include factors of social-emotional learning. Sample topics searched include school-wide social-emotional programs, social-emotional intervention systems, varying social-emotional competencies, and the effects of social-emotional skills on behavior and academics.

The findings of this research indicate that aligning instructional practices and direct instruction has a positive impact on the development of social-emotional skills and competencies. Providing direct instruction through both counselor and classroom teacher lessons provides a framework students can utilize to incorporate the skills into their daily experiences. The intentional instructional practices supplied students with opportunities to practice those skills, enabling them to internalize the skills taught. Students need more than direct instruction on social-emotional skills. These skills can be taught many times but until students are given opportunities to practice these skills, they are unable to effectively practice and internalize said skills. Even with an increased focus on improving the academic outcomes of students, incorporating instructional practices that include opportunities to practice social-emotional skills balances the academic side and social-emotional side of student learning.

The literature review of this study is focused on the effects of social-emotional programs on student behavior, social-emotional competencies, and the effects of positive social-emotional

learning and skills on student outcomes. First, the review will discuss the current reality of social-emotional skills and learning in the United States. From there, the impact of social-emotional learning on the school experience of students will be explored. Next, the effect of social skill interventions and school-wide programs on negative behavior will be discussed. Last, the connection between social-emotional skills and student academics will be presented.

Review of the Literature

Social-Emotional Learning Today and the Effects on Future Success

When examining the current reality of social-emotional learning in the United States, Eklund, Kilpatrick, Kilgus, and Haider (2018) conducted a systematic review of SEL standards across the United States. Their analysis examined the educational systems in all fifty states and the District of Columbia. To conduct their research, they examined the state education departments and searched for standards related to social-emotional learning. Once the standards were collected, they were coded based on grade level, age-specific bands, standards that were embedded in health or physical education standards, and standards-aligned with the CASEL competencies. In their findings, every state was found to have social-emotional standards in preschool programs with almost all the states having those standards aligned to the CASEL competencies. Regarding K-12 education, all but one of the states had SEL standards in pre-existing health or physical education standards. Eleven states had SEL content standards for all grade levels or grade level bands. This information gathered by Eklund et al (2018) demonstrates that SEL components are present in education, whether in preschool, health, physical education, or in freestanding standards. Understanding this demonstrates the high importance placed on a child's social-emotional development.

In an examination of universal social-emotional programs, Durlak et al (2011) analyzed the effects of these programs on over 270,000 students. The research completed by Durlak et al (2011) examined other studies done on universal social-emotional programs. The results of these studies were studied by Durlak to determine if correlations exist between the use of universal social-emotional programs and the development of social-emotional competencies in students. In

his research, Durlak et al (2011) discovered a positive connection between these programs and the development of students. These programs increased targeted social-emotional competencies. As well, the programs showed positive connections with students' attitudes toward self, others, and school. Results of this study indicate that universal social-emotional programs provide a positive impact on students. These positive results show that social-emotional skills are essential for students.

Building off the research of Durlak et al (2011), Rucinski et al (2018) researched the effects of teacher-child relationships on the social-emotional learning of students. This study was conducted with 526 third through fifth-grade students in New York. Over the school year, teachers completed surveys and self-report measures to assess classroom climate. Through examination of the classroom climate, Rucinski et al (2018) found positive results in classroom climate and social-emotional skills in students. Classroom emotional support, especially related to teacher indicated closeness, was closely and positively connected to students' self-reported relationship quality. As well, teacher-child relationships showed notable effects on child functioning. In classes with higher emotional support, teacher-child conflict was the lowest compared to classrooms with lower emotional support. The study also showed children's perceptions of teacher relationships had a link to those who self-reported depressive symptoms. The research of Rucinski et al (2018) demonstrates how a positive emotional climate, built through the social-emotional learning of students, increases positive relationships between students and teachers.

Social-emotional learning has other positive outcomes for students, as shown in the research of Bubić and Ivanišević (2016). Their research studied how emotional intelligence affected the future career decisions of 303 students in Croatia. Emotional intelligence data was

collected using various self-report questionnaires. The results of this study highlighted a connection between emotional intelligence and career decision-making. The research showed emotional competence as a significant predictor of career decision self-efficacy, whereas emotional stability was revealed as a significant predictor of career concerns. Also, a higher emotional competence may indirectly reduce students' susceptibility to psychological distress during the transition to high school through more positive vocational self-beliefs (Bubić & Ivanišević, 2016). Lastly, a close relationship between emotional competence and career decision self-efficacy indicates that the ability to control one's emotional experiences becomes a prerequisite for having higher self-efficacy to accomplish demanding vocational tasks. As seen in the results of this study, social-emotional learning prepares students for life outside of school, further highlighting the need to teach these skills in school.

Impacts on the Student Experience

Student experiences are affected by the development of social-emotional skills. In a study by Yang, Bear, and May (2018), this idea holds. Their study focused on social-emotional skills and student engagement. Conducted in Delaware, the study included over 25,000 students in grades four through twelve. Data was collected in this study using various surveys filled out by students that focused on student-to-student relationships, teacher-to-student relationships, and social-emotional learning practices and their effects on student engagement. The results of their study indicate student-level effects on engagement. The main factor in increasing student engagement is connected to teacher-to-student relationships. The teaching of social-emotional learning possessed a positive effect on the cognitive-behavioral management of students. When students received adequate SEL instruction from their classroom teachers, they developed higher prosocial skills and more positive relationships with their teachers and peers, which lead to more

positive perceptions of emotional engagement (Yang et al, 2018). Yang et al's (2018) findings highlight the ability to development of social-emotional skills in student engagement. Student engagement enables students to freely participate in their daily learning activities and building their social-emotional skills enables them to do this.

Furthering the research on the student experience, Lemberger et al (2015) focused on the correlation between social-emotional skills and feeling of student connectedness at school. The study was conducted in the Southwestern United States with seventh-grade students. Lemberger et al (2015) studied the effects of the Student Success Skills intervention program. Students in the study completed a pretest before direct instruction commenced and a posttest following the conclusion of the study. The study showed that the program had positive results. The program created a supportive classroom environment, leading to higher feelings of student connectedness to their peers. The importance of these results ties together how social-emotional learning created and fostered a positive classroom environment, enabling them to feel higher levels of connectedness at school.

Building on the school experience of students, Jenkins et al (2016) studied the link between bullying roles and social skills. Conducted with 626 students in the Midwest of the United States, Jenkins et al (2016) wanted to determine if there existed a connection between students' social skills and the role they take in bullying situations. Data was collected using self-assessments to assess bullying behavior and social skills. The results of the study determined many connections between certain social skills and bullying behavior. Students who reported higher levels of cooperation were related to lower levels of bullying behavior yet higher levels of defending actions. High levels of self-reported empathy skills are connected to an increase in defending behaviors. Overall, prosocial skills had a direct correlation to higher levels of

defending their peers who are victims of bullying. The results of this study highlight the need for higher levels of social-emotional skills because it leads to a decrease in bullying behaviors and an increase in other students standing up for those who are victims of bullying.

Kwon, Kim, and Sheridan (2014) investigated how the beliefs of the importance of social-emotional skills held by students relate to social behaviors and attitudes toward school. The study was conducted with 342 third through fifth-grade students in the Midwest of the United States. Students completed questionnaires and nominated their peers who exhibited prosocial behaviors. Teachers also completed a rating system for each of the students in the study. As part of the results, children who valued social skills to a greater extent also displayed more socially skillful behaviors, who in turn reported higher levels of positive school attitudes (Kwon et al, 2014). Students who placed a high level of importance on social skills also exhibited lower levels of aggression. The impact of these results showcases how student-built perceptions of the importance of social skills improve the student experience at school due to lower levels of aggressive behaviors and a higher level of positive school attitudes.

Effects on Negative Behaviors

Social-emotional skills have a connection to childhood behaviors. In the study conducted by Erkul and Sonmez (2020), this topic was investigated. Erkul and Sonmez (2020) experimented with about 600 preschool students in Turkey. Teachers of those students completed surveys after observing their students for three months. Erkul and Sonmez (2020) found relationships between social skills and behaviors. A negative connection was found between the scores of social skills and aggression and anger (Erkul & Sonmez, 2020). The same was seen with social anxiety. As the social skills score decreased, the level of social anxiety

increased. As the scores for aggression and social anxiety increased, the scores for social competency decreased as well (Erkul & Sonmez, 2020). Results of this study show a relationship between lacking social skills and problem behaviors in students.

Hukkelberg et al (2019) also studied the relationship between social skills and student behavior. Their meta-analysis included a total of 46,828 participants in 54 studies. The inclusion of studies in their analysis focused on those referring to social competence, student behavior, and prosocial skills. Through their analysis, two findings are significant. First, higher levels of social competence were linked to lower levels of behavioral problems and vice versa. Second, children with lower social competence at the age four years exhibited more externalizing and internalizing behaviors at 10 years old and more externalizing behaviors at 14 years old (Hukkelberg et al, 2019). Findings from their analysis showcase the correlation between student behavior and the presence of prosocial skills and social competence.

Social skills instruction is paramount to addressing problem behaviors. McDaniel et al (2016) looked to determine the effects of a social skills intervention. Integrating the Stop and Think curriculum, five students in a self-contained classroom. Observations were conducted and surveys were filled out to create data points for the student's problem behaviors. The curriculum was implemented over three weeks. One student, Sid, had their negative behavior score fall to near zero. Bill saw a 20-percentage point decrease in negative behaviors. Mitt's negative behavior score fell to around two percent. Two students showed no signs of negative behaviors in follow-up observations (McDaniel et al, 2016). As seen in this study, social skills instruction and development reduce the occurrences of negative behaviors in students.

Further study was conducted to determine the effects of social skills interventions on negative student behaviors. Green et al (2019) studied the IY Dina Dinosaur intervention on 137 kindergarten and first-grade students over five years. Students were referred to the intervention system by their teachers and were assessed using a scaled system. Those who were referred took part in small group instruction for 30-45 minutes a week. After the completion of the program, teachers filled out the same scaled survey. Results of the study indicated the IY Dina Dinosaur program led to significant reductions in negative behavior intensity. The intervention program also led to reductions in negative behavior occurrences. The findings of this study highlight the effects of direct instruction of social skills on the negative behaviors of students.

Academic Achievement and Social-Emotional Skills

Social-emotional skills have a direct effect on student academics. McKown et al (2015) studied the effects of social-emotional skills on the development of academic competencies in over 350 students. Teachers completed a survey assessing the social-emotional competencies of students. These results were compared to the end-of-year standardized tests students completed. McKown (2015) found social-emotional comprehension was significantly associated with teacher-reported reading and math skills and reading and math test performance. Social-emotional comprehension was positively associated with socially skilled behavior, which was in turn significantly associated with reading (McKown, 2015). The findings of McKown's (2015) study show a connection between socially skilled students and academic achievement.

Schonfeld et al (2015) also studied the relationship between social-emotional learning and the academic achievement of students. Completed with 705 elementary students over 4 years, the intervention tested the PATHS curriculum with two groups, one who received the

intervention and another who did not. Academic data was collected using state standardized assessments which were analyzed as performance levels. From the study, fourth grade students who received the PATHS curriculum were 1.72 times more likely to achieve basic on the reading test and 1.63 times more likely to achieve basic proficiency on the math test. Among fifth-grade students who received the intervention, they were 1.52 times more likely to achieve basic proficiency on the writing test (Schonfeld et al, 2015). Schonfeld et al (2015) results indicate a direct relationship between the building of social-emotional competencies and the academic achievement of students, connecting to the research completed by McKown (2015).

Another method that has been utilized to build social-emotional competencies with students is classroom management. Wiedermann et al (2020) studied the effects of the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management program on the social-emotional competencies and academic achievement of students. Teachers completed the IYTCM program, while others did not, and then used a checklist to rate student behavior and a separate checklist to rate student academic achievement. The program had many different effects on student outcomes. Students whose teachers received the IYTCM training had increased instances of prosocial behavior. The emotional dysregulation of students decreased significantly as a result of the program (Wiedermann et al, 2020). Through the effects on prosocial skills and emotional regulation, the academic achievement of students increased. The study suggests a relationship between prosocial skills and the academic achievement of students. As the prosocial skills of students increase, academic achievement increases as well.

Ashdown et al (2012) studied the effects of a social-emotional learning curriculum on social-emotional development, well-being, and academic achievement. The study utilized the You Can Do It curriculum on 99 preparatory and first-grade students in Australia. Over 10

weeks, an experimental group received lessons using the curriculum. Questionnaires were completed to assess the social-emotional competencies of students. To measure academics, reading levels and questionnaires were utilized. In the experimental group, students displayed greater gains in teacher-rated levels of social-emotional competence and social skills than the students who did not receive the program (Ashdown et al, 2012). Teachers who utilized the program noticed better emotional management, peer relationship skills, and academic engagement compared to those who did not receive the intervention. Among students with the lowest-rated reading scores, those in the experimental group showed greater gains than those who did not receive the treatment. Focusing on the results of the study, a relationship is present between the development of prosocial skills and gains in academic engagement and achievement.

Social-emotional skills act as more than a method to achieve academic success. Armstrong et al (2021) sought to determine a relationship between prosocial skills as a protective factor on academic achievement for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The study took place over three years with 1,175 students in the United Kingdom. Addresses of students were used to determine low socioeconomic status. Questionnaires were completed to assess the social-emotional skills of students. Academic achievement data was collected using two different methods: Early Years Stage Profile and phonics skills. Children's prosocial behavior was positively associated with children's early learning goals, phonics skills, and academic test performance, over and above the neighborhood and family socioeconomic status (Armstrong et al, 2021). Often, students from low socioeconomic statuses struggle with academics due to the various factors in their life, including limited educational opportunities and family dynamics. For

students who live in low socioeconomic status, prosocial skills act as a protective factor for academic achievement.

Summary

Literature regarding social-emotional learning has led to three distinct themes. First, social-emotional skills have a great effect on the future success of students. College and career readiness skills are directly related to the development of prosocial skills. Second, social-emotional skills build a better student experience at school. Programs that built strong social-emotional skills with students enabled them to have better relationships with both peers and staff members while also increasing the sense of safety.

The main effect of social-emotional skills is the positive effects on behavior and academics. Students who have high levels of social-emotional competence exhibit lower levels of negative behaviors. Interventions that targeted negative behaviors showed decreased levels of intensity and occurrences through the development of social-emotional skills. These skills also have a direct effect on student academic achievement. As seen through studies, the development of social-emotional skills had positive effects on the academic achievement of students compared to those who did not have similar levels of social-emotional competence.

Methods

Participants

The action research was conducted in a third-grade classroom in the Midwest of the United States. The total number of participants in the study was 21 students. In the classroom, there were 11 male students and 10 female students. Four of the students received special education services, two of which were in either a Level 2 or Level 3 special education classroom. Nineteen of the students were Caucasian with the remainder of the students being African American.

Procedures

The action research conducted was created to determine if aligning instructional practices, counselor lessons, and direct social-emotional lessons impacted the development of social-emotional competencies in students. This intervention was conducted over two weeks. Over these two weeks, social-emotional competencies were identified to focus on. The social-emotional competencies targeted for this research were empathy, attentive listening, perspective-taking, and utilizing strengths.

After choosing the targeted competencies, discussions with the school counselor occurred to align lessons to the focused-on competencies. Over the two weeks, counselor lessons were taught once each week for 20 to 30 minutes. Instructional practices for upcoming lessons were either strengthened or adjusted to meet the desired outcomes. These practices were embedded throughout the school day over various content areas. Social-emotional lessons were constructed to target the competencies. Social-emotional lessons were taught every day for 20 minutes.

Due to the nature of the research, IRB exemption was sought and approved. The research presented very little risk to students. The practices being used were used in an instructional setting and did not change the daily learning experiences of students.

Data Collection

The research conducted was quantitative. Data for this project was collected using a self-assessment tool. This tool was created as an electronic survey (Google Form). In this survey, there were fourteen different statements. These statements covered the topics of empathy, perspective-taking, attentive listening, and utilizing the strengths of others. As part of the statements, students rated themselves and others. The rating system was on a scale of one to five, with one being never up to five being always.

Before the treatment was started, students completed a pretest. The pretest was completed in a whole group setting. The statements were read aloud to students and questions were answered to provide clarification. After the treatment, students took the same self-assessment tool. Like the pretest, the statements were read aloud to students, and questions for clarification were answered. At the end of the two weeks, the percentage of students who rated themselves each score at the pretest and posttest were analyzed. The data collected did not include the names of students to ensure fidelity. Responses were kept in a spreadsheet using a digital platform (Microsoft Excel).

Findings

Data Analysis

Data from the pretest was analyzed by looking at the individual results from each student. The results from each student were combined and the frequency of each score is shown in Table A. Looking at this data, a widespread of each score is seen in many of the statements. Most students either rated themselves as a 3, 4, or 5 for most of the statements. Data analysis for each statement is also highlighted in Table B. Table B shows the average score, median score, and mode score for every statement. The highest average score is seen in statements focused on listening skills and using the strengths of others with averages of 3.8 or above. Among the lowest scores, the skills of communicating emotions and others knowing someone before judging both had averages below 3.2.

The frequency of scores for the post-test data are shown in Table C. Table D shows the average, median, and mode post-test scores. Post-test data showed growth in average scores for all but two of the fourteen statements. The smallest gain of 0.08 points on the average score was seen in the statement focusing on others giving full attention when they are speaking. Four statements had an increase in their average of over 0.4 points. Those statements were: “I understand others before making judgments about them”, “I listen to others without interrupting”, “I communicate my emotions clearly to others”, and “I use the strengths of others”. These statements received a larger gain in their average scores due to the increase in students self-reporting their abilities of this skill at a four or a five. The largest gain in average was seen for the statement “I communicate my emotions clearly to others” with a gain of 0.84 points.

Two statements showed a decrease in their average scores. The first statement that had a decrease in its average score was “Others get to know me before judging me”. This statement’s average decreased by 0.04 points. This decrease can also be seen with the increase in lower-rated scores for this statement shown in Table C. The second statement to have a decrease in average was “I make eye contact with people when they talk to me” with a decrease in its average of 0.05 points. Like the other statements with a decrease, a higher number of students reporting lower scores increased leading to the decrease in average scores.

Table A: Pretest Data

Social-Emotional Statements	Student Rated Scores (Frequency of students who chose each score)				
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
I understand others before making judgments about them.	1	2	9	5	5
Others get to know me before judging me.	2	2	9	6	2
I give someone my full attention when they are talking to me.	0	2	5	10	4
I make eye contact with people when they talk to me.	0	2	6	7	6
I listen to others without interrupting.	0	2	1	13	5
Others give me their full attention when I speak.	0	3	4	12	2
Others make eye contact with me when I am speaking to them.	0	1	12	8	0
Others listen to me without interrupting.	0	4	5	9	3
I can identify the emotions of others.	1	1	8	7	4
I communicate my emotions clearly to others.	3	3	7	5	3
I can understand how events affect the emotions of others.	1	2	3	10	5
I understand others' perspectives.	2	2	5	8	4
I use the strengths of others.	2	5	4	5	5
I help others improve on their weaknesses in a positive way.	2	1	3	6	9

Table B: Data Analysis of Pretest Data

Statements	Average	Median	Mode
I understand others before making judgments about them.	3.5	3	3
Others get to know me before judging me.	3.19	3	3
I give someone my full attention when they are talking to me.	3.76	4	4
I make eye contact with people when they talk to me.	3.8	4	4
I listen to others without interrupting.	4	4	4
Others give me their full attention when I speak.	3.62	4	4
Others make eye contact with me when I am speaking to them.	3.33	3	3
Others listen to me without interrupting.	3.52	4	4
I can identify the emotions of others.	3.57	4	3
I communicate my emotions clearly to others.	3.1	3	3
I can understand how events affect the emotions of others.	3.76	4	4
I understand others' perspectives.	3.48	4	4
I use the strengths of others.	3.29	3	5
I help others improve on their weaknesses in a positive way.	3.9	4	5

Table C: Post-test Data

Social-Emotional Statements	Student Rated Scores (Frequency of students who chose each score)				
	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5</u>
I understand others before making judgments about them.	1	0	3	11	5
Others get to know me before judging me.	1	4	8	5	2
I give someone my full attention when they are talking to me.	0	1	5	8	6
I make eye contact with people when they talk to me.	1	0	7	7	5
I listen to others without interrupting.	0	0	2	8	10
Others give me their full attention when I speak.	1	0	7	8	4
Others make eye contact with me when I am speaking to them.	0	2	6	8	4
Others listen to me without interrupting.	0	4	3	9	4
I can identify the emotions of others.	0	1	6	7	6
I communicate my emotions clearly to others.	0	1	4	12	3
I can understand how events affect the emotions of others.	0	0	7	8	5
I understand others' perspectives.	0	5	1	10	4
I use the strengths of others.	1	1	5	5	8
I help others improve on their weaknesses in a positive way.	0	1	3	8	8

Table D: Post-Test Data Analysis

Statements	Average	Median	Mode
I understand others before making judgments about them.	3.95	4	4
Others get to know me before judging me.	3.15	3	3
I give someone my full attention when they are talking to me.	3.95	4	4
I make eye contact with people when they talk to me.	3.75	4	4
I listen to others without interrupting.	4.4	4.5	5
Others give me their full attention when I speak.	3.7	4	4
Others make eye contact with me when I am speaking to them.	3.7	4	4
Others listen to me without interrupting.	3.65	4	4
I can identify the emotions of others.	3.9	4	4
I communicate my emotions clearly to others.	3.85	4	4
I can understand how events affect the emotions of others.	3.9	4	4
I understand others' perspectives.	3.65	4	4
I use the strengths of others.	3.9	4	5
I help others improve on their weaknesses in a positive way.	4.15	4	4

Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

Findings from this research highlight a couple of important conclusions. First, direct instruction of social-emotional skills is beneficial in the development of such competencies. Throughout the research, students received daily social-emotional lessons on the concepts of listening, empathy, perspective-taking, and utilizing the strengths of others. Compared to the beginning of the research, students showed higher self-rated reports of their competencies in those areas. The direct instruction of the focused-on skills must have a direct link to this increase. As students learned about ways to implement these skills, conclusions can be drawn that they became more confident in their abilities in the competencies. This conclusion aligns with the thinking of Weissberg (2019) who stated, “through explicit instruction, social and emotional skills can be taught, modeled, and practiced so that children, adolescents, and adults can handle daily tasks, interactions, and challenges effectively”.

A second conclusion that can be made due to the results of the study relates to the embedding of instructional practices that focused on the desired social-emotional competencies. Specific instructional practices were implemented that provided students opportunities to practice the skills that were part of direct instruction. As seen through the data, providing opportunities for practice enabled students to continually build their own beliefs in their competencies seen through their increase in self-reported ratings of their skills. Using instructional time to embed social-emotional learning has two positive outcomes. First, students can build academic skills. Second, social-emotional development can occur during academic times. This idea matches the findings of Daunic et al (2013) who also noticed during a social-

emotional intervention embedded with literacy instruction led to both the improvement of literacy skills but also positive social skills development.

A conclusion that can be drawn from this data is the importance of providing opportunities to practice social-emotional skills. These skills cannot be taught in isolation. Students must receive occasions where they can apply the social-emotional skills being taught to build confidence in those skills and to understand occasions where these skills can be applied. Social-emotional skills do not have only one occasion where they will be applied. These skills are part of the everyday interactions and actions of students. Purposely setting up opportunities for students to practice these skills and receive feedback on their application of skills builds a stronger understanding of social-emotional skills for students.

Limitations of the Study

There are two limitations of the study. The first is a disruption to the schedule. Since this research was conducted during the winter, disruptions from weather-related events affected the application of the intervention tested. During this research, there was one day when the school was canceled due to winter weather, and another day was shortened as well. Although the disruptions were limited, they still resulted in missed opportunities for direct instruction and time for students to practice the focused-on competencies.

The second limitation of this study is the use of self-reporting of social-emotional competencies by students. While statements were read to students and questions were answered about each of the statements, the use of self-reporting skills has some flaws. First, students may have higher confidence in their skills that do not match their actual level of achievement and application in these skills. This idea may skew data due to an inaccurate representation of their

skills. Second, self-reported skills may be impacted by the moods or attitudes of the students during the occasions where the assessment tool was utilized. Especially with a focus on social-emotional skills, events in a student's life may skew their perception of themselves or the perception of others when exhibiting those skills.

Further Study

The research conducted was completed over two weeks. While the results show a positive relationship between the alignment of instructional practices and direct instruction of social-emotional skills, future research should include testing this intervention over a longer period. This longer period will give more opportunities for direct instruction and intentional opportunities for practicing the social-emotional skills thus testing to see if the same phenomenon will occur but on a larger scale. Another topic of future research may also include testing the same intervention on a different age range of students.

As part of the research, students completed self-surveys of their belief in their current level of implementation for each of the desired social-emotional skills. Discussed in the limitations of the study, self-reporting has drawbacks, especially at the age of the participants due to potential distortion of their own beliefs. Thus, future research should focus on using different data collection tools. This may include using teacher-reported assessments or a combination of teacher-reported and self-reported assessment scores.

Conclusion

The research conducted was brought in part by the COVID-19 pandemic. As students missed time in school due to school closures, both academics and social-emotional development were sacrificed for the safety of students. As schools reopened, both academics and social-emotional skills needed reinforcement and instruction. The question that was focused on was whether providing direct instruction of social-emotional skills and an alignment of instructional practices focusing on desired social-emotional competencies during core content would positively impact the development of social-emotional skills in students.

Literature about the topic presented four distinct themes of the benefits of social-emotional skills. First, the development of social-emotional skills improves the future success of students. Those who have higher levels of prosocial skills prepared students for success in college or careers later in life. Second, the development of strong social-emotional skills improves the student experience at school by building a sense of connectedness and reducing the occurrences of bullying. Third, a positive correlation to academic success results from social-emotional skills as students learn cooperation skills, self-management skills, and other prosocial skills. Lastly, students who have strong social-emotional skills exhibit fewer negative behaviors. As part of this, social-emotional skill-focused interventions reduce the occurrences of problem behaviors in students.

The findings of this research indicate that alignment of instructional practices to match social-emotional skills taught as part of direct instruction increased self-reported ratings of focused-on social-emotional competencies. Direct instruction of skills enables students to learn how to apply skills in social settings while providing opportunities within everyday learning in school enables students to practice implementing these skills. The future impact of these findings

highlights the need for both direct instruction of social-emotional skills and the use of instructional practices that support the development of said skills.

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