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**Scope and Sequence of Social-Emotional Learning Curricula for Preschool and  
Kindergarten Practitioners Based on Core Competencies**

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## Abstract

Before students are ready to learn the academic components of kindergarten, they need to be “ready to learn” first with the social-emotional skills to follow directions, sit quietly, problem-solve, self-regulate, and organize themselves and materials. Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social-emotional learning (SEL) as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” Social-emotional learning (SEL) is based on the five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. This project will include a literature review to describe social-emotional learning and analyze various social-emotional curricula as well as create a year-long social-emotional learning scope and sequence based on the five core competencies. This resource will benefit preschool and kindergarten practitioners including general education teachers, special education teachers, and school counselors. It will provide research on social-emotional learning, frameworks, and a resource with lesson plans, materials, and targeted skills.

## Literature Review

### Background

Kindergarten is the first school experience for some students. It could be the first time students are expected to follow group rules and plans, sit at a desk to complete tasks, sit on the floor, listen to an adult for at least five minutes, and interact with at least fifteen other students in one room. “Kindergarteners enter elementary school demonstrating a wide range of social-emotional skills; some students arrive knowing how to get someone’s attention, ask a friend to play, and identify emotions, while others have yet to learn these skills” (Steed & Shapland, 2019). In my first year as a kindergarten special education teacher, 80% of the students on my caseload had social-emotional goals and were under the categories of developmental delay, autism spectrum disorder, emotional-behavioral disorder, or other health disabilities. In my building, I had access to pieces of miscellaneous curriculum. The social-emotional needs of my students were increasing daily, and I was stuck trying to piece together appropriate materials and resources for these students. I needed to explicitly teach social-emotional skills to be proactive instead of reacting to the increasing physical and disruptive behaviors. This project will synthesize and organize Pyramid Model, *Second Step*, *We Thinkers!*, and *Zones of Regulation* frameworks and resources to address the gap between various curricula only taking weeks or months to work through and create an enduring scope and sequence that matches the academic school year.

## **Social-Emotional Learning Achievement**

Kindergarteners at my worksite are assessed on their color, shape, and letter identification as well as their counting and name-writing ability as part of the beginning of the year assessment. They are initially assessed on their academic readiness skills but not on social-emotional readiness. Social-emotional learning (SEL) is critical for lifelong success. “Students participating in SEL program showed improved: classroom behavior, ability to manage stress and depression, and attitudes about themselves, others, and school” (CASEL). SEL is based on the five core competencies of self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills.

Minnesota Department of Education (MDE) defined self-awareness as “the ability to accurately recognize one’s emotions and thoughts and their influence on behavior” and developed goals of demonstrating awareness of personal emotions, strengths, challenges, and personal rights and responsibilities. MDE defined self-management as “the ability to regulate one’s emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations” and developed goals of managing and expressing emotions and impulses in effective ways and setting goals. MDE defined social awareness as “the ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others” and developed goals of demonstrating awareness of empathy and respect for others and awareness of external supports. MDE defined relationship skills as “the ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships with diverse individuals and groups” and developed goals of demonstrating effective communication and social skills, building relationships with others, and demonstrating approaches to addressing interpersonal conflict. MDE defined responsible decision-making as “the ability to make constructive and respectful behavior and social

interactions” and developed goals of considering ethics, social norms, and safety concerns in making decisions and applying skills in a variety of situations.

Students need explicit practice to order to resolve conflicts, express feelings, and empathize with others. “SEL approaches are consistently effective with all demographic groups, supporting the positive development of students across diverse backgrounds” (CASEL). “Social and emotional benefits developed through SEL programs are positively correlated with higher levels of well-being up to 18 years later” (CASEL). “Social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula teach children techniques to gain confidence, set goals, make better decisions, collaborate with others in work and play, and navigate the world more effectively” (Second Step).

Students need a foundation of self-regulation skills to be active participants in the classroom. "Having stable, nurturing interactions with caregivers who provide modeling, scaffolding, and positive reinforcement" and "home and school environments with predictable routines and opportunities for creative play and positive peer interaction" help to build these self-regulatory skills (Wenz-Gross et al., 2018). Self-regulation is the ability to do what needs to be done to be in the optimal state for the given situation, including regulating one’s sensory needs, emotions, and impulses to meet the demands of the environment (Kuypers, 2011). Self-regulation requires the integration of sensory processing, executive functioning, and emotional regulation. Sensory input comes from visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, vestibular, and proprioception information (Kuypers, 2011). Sensory processing describes how one makes sense of the sensory input. Students may become over or under-stimulated by information in their environment causing them to be dysregulated. Emotional regulation includes monitoring, evaluating, and modifying the intensity and timing of an emotional response (Kuypers, 2011). Executive functioning describes the cognitive processes involved in the conscious control of

thoughts and actions and includes the functions of attention shifting, working memory, internalization of speech, flexible thinking, planning, and inhibition (Kuypers, 2011).

Wenz-Gross et al. conducted a study on *Second Step Early Learning* (SSEL) Curriculum to determine the effects of the curriculum on social-emotional and executive functioning and pre-academics. The study concluded that “while SSEL did not directly impact academic outcomes and task-related behavior in preschool, it did increase the attentional, memory, and inhibitory control skills that supported academic learning, particularly for pre-math and on-task behavior in preschool, and ultimately, school readiness at the beginning of kindergarten” (Wenz-Gross et al., 2018). Another study that analyzed social-emotional growth in pre-k demonstrated “that students in classrooms that received feedback on students’ social-emotional competencies and targeted strategies to address social-emotional needs improved significantly more in self-regulation, attachment/relationships, and behavior concerns compared to students in classrooms that did not receive the intervention” (Gadarie et al., 2020). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 led to more academically focused preschool and kindergarten curricula, but research is showing that students need to have school readiness skills including social-emotional skills, not only academic skills.

### **Social-Emotional Teaching Strategies**

“Social-emotional skills, such as how to be a good friend, should be taught with general discussion, visuals (e.g., pictures, books, modeling of the skills), break-down of the skills (e.g., getting someone’s attention, inviting someone to join in play, asking for or offering a turn, saying and accepting ‘no’ graciously, and, celebrating someone else’s success), and opportunities to practice the skills in large or small group settings before the teacher acknowledges students’ use of the skills in other parts of the day (e.g., free choice, recess)” (Steed & Shapland, 2019).

Ng and Bull (2018) conducted research to provide information on how and when teachers use social-emotional learning to support students in kindergarten. Within this study, the strategies used by teachers to facilitate SEL include setting a positive tone, suggesting solutions, task allocation, and extension; setting a positive tone was the most frequently used strategy (Ng & Bull, 2018). The study found that opportunities for SEL occurred more frequently during intentional small-group activities and outdoor play (Ng & Bull, 2018).

Visual schedules are a behavioral strategy to help students understand the routine and time throughout the school day. “Having a daily schedule that truly operates to reduce challenging behavior...is about maintaining a routine and keeping all of the children informed about the routine” (Dunlap et al., 2013). Visual schedules are used within the classroom and discussed every day, ideally at the beginning of the day. “When implementing schedules, remember to do the following: prominently display the daily schedule at children’s eye level; use words and pictures to represent entries on the schedule, design your schedule so indicate activities are completed; review the schedule daily with the whole group and with individual children prior to a transition; preview upcoming changes with children; and keep things new and exciting” (Dunlap et al., 2013). Visual schedules are effective strategies for supporting students with transitions. Visual directions and steps can also be used to teach problem-solving, self-regulation, and playing with others. Early childhood practitioners can find visuals to support SEL within the classroom in the following scope and sequence. These skills can be taught during whole groups or small groups and then posted in appropriate places in the classroom for students to reference and utilize.

Another behavioral teaching strategy is explicitly teaching behavioral expectations. Teachers need to make sure children know the behavioral expectations during routine activities.



“Remember the following as your team works to directly teach behavioral expectations: adjust the level of expectations across the year; practice expectations beforehand (practicing after rule infractions may be perceived as punitive by the children); make sure that all children have an opportunity to practice behavioral expectations each day; remember the 5:1 ratio and to catch children appropriately behaving” (Dunlap et al., 2013). At the preschool and early elementary level, children need an explicit explanation of rules and structured activities as well as visual representations of the classroom rules and expectations (Bouck & Gargiulo, 2018). Social stories can clearly explain various social interactions using “I” statements, pictures, and emotional statements about the reactions or perspectives of others around them when this behavior is exhibited (Bouck & Gargiulo, 2018). Students need explicit teaching and practice of each part of their routine and activities to effectively learn and independently practice these skills. The following scope and sequence provides lessons on learning to listen, focusing attention/thinking with eyes, following directions, following the group plan, and keeping the body in the group. Visual supports for behavioral expectations can be found in the materials section of the scope and sequence.

## **Successful Frameworks for Social-Emotional Learning**

### ***Second Step***

*Second Step* is a scripted curriculum used to teach skills on learning, empathy, emotion management, friendship skills, and problem-solving using brain-builder games to build executive functioning, weekly theme activities, reinforcing activities, and home links (“CASEL Guide,” 2013). *Second Step Early Learning Curriculum* is for pre-k and has 28 weekly themes divided into 5 units with daily large or small group activities to practice self-regulation and social competence. Teachers reinforce the skills throughout the week by creating practice opportunities

to notice and reinforce learned skills (Wenz-Gross et al., 2018). The curriculum sets for pre-k and kindergarten include a teacher manual, puppets, theme cards with diverse students in situations that match the scenario of the week, songs, posters, and feeling pictures. Multiple randomized and quasi-experimental studies have been conducted on diverse students in suburban and urban areas and have concluded the students show increased positive social behavior, reduced conduct problems, reduced emotional distress, and improved social and emotional skill performance (“CASEL Guide,” 2013).

### ***Social Thinking Methodology***

“The Social Thinking Methodology provides evidence-based strategies to help people ages four through adult develop their social competencies, flexible thinking & social problem solving and improve conversation and social connection, executive functioning, friendship and relationship development, perspective taking, self-regulation, and social thinking vocabulary” (“Social Thinking”). “The Social Thinking Methodology embraces what the literature tells us about working directly with individuals who have social learning challenges and promotes the use of visual supports, modeling, naturalistic teaching, and self-management” (Croke & Winner, 2021). The Social Thinking Methodology includes *Zones of Regulation* and *We Thinkers!* curricula.

***We Thinkers! Curriculum.*** “The *We Thinkers!* curriculum is designed to help young learners with average to way above average language and learning ability develop the skills they need to be flexible social thinkers and social problem solvers” (Tarshis et al., 2016). This curriculum would not be appropriate for children with sensory processing difficulties or significantly delayed children. This curriculum is taught through the experiences of four children, as they go on adventures in ten different storybooks. The skills, vocabulary, and

concepts build upon each other throughout the books. Recommendations from the authors when teaching this curriculum include incorporating the *Social Thinking Vocabulary* into teachable moments, actively sharing the learning with other staff and families, seizing the moment to introduce a new concept, do not expect learning for mastery, letting the students' learning set the teaching pace, remember that students with social learning challenges will be slow to learn these skills and will not "catch up" to same-aged peers, avoid assumptions, and keep developmental expectations in mind (Tarshis et al., 2016).

***Zones of Regulation Curriculum.*** "The *Zones of Regulation* is a metacognitive framework for regulation and treatment approach that is based on immense evidence in the fields of autism, attention deficit disorders (ADD/HD), and social-emotional theories. It integrates best practices around Trauma Informed Care and mental health supports and aligns with the CASEL SEL Core Competencies" ("The Zones of Regulation"). It is a "curriculum geared toward helping students gain skills in consciously regulating their actions, which in turn leads to increased control and problem-solving abilities" (Kuypers, 2011). Preschool-aged and older students can benefit from the *Zones of Regulation Curriculum*, but it was developed for students with neurobiological and mental health disorders such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), Tourette syndrome, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), conduct disorder, selective mutism, and anxiety disorders (Kuypers, 2011).

### ***Pyramid Model***

The Pyramid Model is a framework of evidence-based practices for promoting young children's healthy social and emotional development. It promotes the social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes of young children from birth to five years old, addresses disparities in discipline practices, promotes family engagement, uses data for decision-making, and fosters inclusion for children with and at risk for developmental delays and disabilities (NCPMI). A randomized study conducted in Florida and Tennessee found that "children enrolled in experimental classrooms implementing the Pyramid Model demonstrated statistically significant differences in their social skills; target children in the experimental classrooms had statistically significant reductions in problem behaviors; teachers in the experimental condition who received training and coaching demonstrated statistically significant differences in their implementation of Pyramid Model practices" (Hemmeter et al., 2016).

### **Scope and Sequence**

A year-long scope and sequence was created to synthesize *Second Step, We Thinkers!*, *Zones of Regulation*, and Pyramid Model curriculums and resources. Each framework individually did not provide enough content to support daily social-emotional lessons for the entire school year. My current worksite has access to kits, manuals, and materials for each of the frameworks, but it lacks an organized and logical way to utilize the resources. The scope and sequence will support all preschool and kindergarten practitioners to provide them with an easy-to-follow spiraled curriculum map to address the five core competencies of SEL. The frameworks are organized into weekly lesson plans with a colored label indicating the core competency addressed. Each week is broken down into 5 daily lessons with the skills and materials listed.

The *Zones of Regulation* curriculum addresses all competencies but emphasizes self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making. The Pyramid Model resources address self-awareness, self-management, and relationship skills. The *Second Step* curriculum emphasizes relationship skills, social awareness, and self-management and has limited lessons on responsible decision-making and self-awareness. The *We Thinkers!* curriculum addresses all competencies at least once in the following order: self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and self-management. The frameworks vary in which competencies they emphasize. Following this scope and sequence will allow practitioners opportunities to teach and practice components of the competencies many times throughout the school year.

**Limitations.** Limitations to this project include the cost of curriculum kits and resources needed to use the scope and sequence. The *Zones of Regulation* paperback curriculum costs \$59.99. The *Second Step* kindergarten classroom kit costs \$459. The *We Thinkers! All-In-One* Bundle cost of \$274.99 includes all 10 storybooks and 3 curriculum books. The National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations (NCPMI) resources and training are free, as they are federally funded by a grant. At my educational site, all classroom teachers and the school counselor have *Second Step* kindergarten kits, and the *Zones of Regulation* and *We Thinkers!* resources are available to the special education department and the school counselor who leads individualized and small group social skills for general education students. At my worksite, all preschool special education and general education staff are trained in the Pyramid Model. Kindergarten special education staff and the school counselor are in the process of being trained with access to the NCPMI resources. Implementation of this scope and sequence requires time to prepare the materials, which could be done all at once or in sections for each week or framework. The

*Second Step* kindergarten kit does not require any preparation. Most of the resources are reusable, especially if laminated and stored appropriately.

## **Conclusion**

Social-emotional learning leads to academic and social benefits when explicitly taught in preschool and early elementary. Frameworks aligned with CASEL's Core Competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making that were analyzed include the Pyramid Model, *Second Step*, *We Thinkers!*, and *Zones of Regulation*. These frameworks are effective tools individually, but when put together, the skills are interrelated and can be strengthened through continuous practice. Each framework does not provide enough content to support students throughout the entire school year. This project addresses the gap of not having enough resources, activities, and social-emotional content to support the various needs of students for the entire school year. The different frameworks are organized in a spiral format for students to learn by building on prior knowledge and deepening understanding. These curriculums are best taught using visuals, explicit teaching, play, small group discussions, role-playing, and multisensory learning opportunities. The literature supports that these tools are effective in strengthening social-emotional skills. A yearlong scope and sequence of these curriculums will support early childhood practitioners in effectively teaching social-emotional skills.

Capstone Project Scope and Sequence

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