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The Impact of Dialogue Journals and Circles on Social and Self-Awareness in 6th Grade

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The Impact of Dialogue Journals and Circles on Social and
Self-Awareness in 6th Grade

Submitted on

May 12, 2023

In fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all my professors at Saint Catherine University for all their guidance through this program. I would especially like to thank Megan Hall, my project coach and Catherine Kelly, my professor through this whole process. This research would not have been possible without the cooperation and participation of my students; keep trying to be the best you can be! I want to thank my family and friends who encouraged and always believed in me, and especially my parents for instilling a lifelong love of learning in me that inspired me to be a teacher.

Abstract

This action research project aims to measure the social and self-awareness of 6th grade math intervention students in a suburban school in central North Dakota from the end of January to the beginning of March 2023. This study focused on two methods to promote student-teacher relationships and build a classroom community. The two methods employed were Circles for whole group activities and Dialogue Journals for individual correspondence between students and teachers to build that relationship. Surveys were done before and after the six-week intervention to gauge student perceptions on their own emotions, academic, and social-emotional activities in school. Students were interviewed after the intervention to collect qualitative and quantitative data on their opinions about the activities in the intervention. This study concluded that students see the importance of Social Emotional Learning and enjoy building relationships. All schools and communities that play a role in the development of children need to take time to teach and practice Social Emotional Learning.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, middle school, dialogue journals, circles

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every person's life for the past 3 years, with known effects and the unknown consequences that will be discovered for years to come. The children of this nation are among those who have been impacted the most. Seemingly overnight, their worlds were turned upside down and became isolated in their homes during one of the most formative parts of their development for months, and for some, up to two years. According to McGraw Hill's 2021 Social and Emotional Learning Report, "53% of educators said COVID-19 and/or the shift to remote learning has caused their students emotional distress and created attendance problems" (2021, p. 2). The lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are yet to be seen, but are starting to emerge and be noticed by educators in their students today.

As an educator, I have witnessed changes in students' habits, behavior, and especially their social skills and the way they speak to and interact with one another. Most of these changes are not for the better. They lack empathy and patience, and they struggle to see a situation from a perspective other than their own. Because we forced our young learners in front of screens and pulled them away from their peers, many students suffered a lack of social interaction with anyone outside of their homes for the better part of a school year, for some even two years. Then, we went back to school with masks (for everyone's safety) and reading social cues through facial expressions and vocal inflection was nearly impossible. Everyone experienced trauma during the pandemic, and many students were deprived of their friends and peers their own age.

This study aims to measure social and self awareness in 6th grade math intervention students in a suburban school in central North Dakota by answering the question "What teaching strategies and activities can educators use to foster and promote social and self awareness in small group 6th grade math intervention students?" A six week intervention was conducted to

develop student relationships with one another through the use of Circles and to develop a student-teacher relationship through the use of Dialogue Journals.

Theoretical Framework

Social and Emotional learning is just as much a part of school as is academics. School is often the first time students encounter others outside of their homes or communities that may have different cultural backgrounds, perspectives, and opinions than their own. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) encompasses skills such as understanding one's emotions and developing a healthy identity, fostering and maintaining empathetic and supportive relationships, setting and achieving personal and team goals, and making responsible decisions (CASEL, 2023). Students encounter opportunities to practice these skills in school every day.

Social Emotional Learning has been linked to the reduction of mental health problems among adolescents, or at the very least, increased knowledge about mental health (Early Intervention Foundation, 2021). There is an extensive array of research that supports the notion that the mastery of social-emotional skills is linked to greater school performance and overall well-being and the failure to master such skills can lead to a "variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties" (Durlak et al., 2011, p 406). In a meta-analysis of 213 studies that involved 270,034 students, it was found that students who showed higher levels of SEL competencies and skills also demonstrated fewer conduct problems and lower levels of emotional distress. Academic performance also significantly improved after SEL interventions (Durlak et al., 2011). The benefits of SEL for individual students as well as schools as a whole are varied and easily outweigh any disadvantages of teaching Social Emotional Learning.

This study focused on two aspects of Social Emotional Learning: social awareness and self-awareness. Self-awareness is the ability to understand one's own thoughts and emotions and

comprehend how they affect decision-making and behavior (CASEL, 2023). Young people are egocentric, focusing on their own feelings without much regard for others. Students develop the ability to correctly act in social settings through practice, interactions with others, and guidance from the adults in their lives.

Social awareness encompasses one's ability to take a different perspective, empathize with others, understand different supports from family, school, and communities, and recognize social and societal norms, oftentimes from diverse cultures and backgrounds of others (CASEL, 2023). School is the place where students meet others from many different backgrounds and have to navigate the complexities of interacting with them on a daily basis. It is often the first place young people will encounter someone who has a different culture or simply a different opinion than themselves. School may be the first place outside the home where students need to resolve conflicts with others besides members of their own families. Schools try to capitalize on these opportunities to teach their students how to handle themselves and the proper ways to respectfully disagree with teaching Social Emotional Learning.

This study's aim is to focus on classroom strategies and activities that can foster and promote healthy and positive social and self awareness in 6th grade math intervention students. Eight boys and fourteen girls, ages eleven to twelve were in the study. Weekly circles and dialogue journals were implemented over a six week period from the end of January 2023 to the beginning of March 2023.

Two strategies were implemented. Circles were introduced to give the students opportunities to share and learn from each other about various topics. Dialogue journals were created for an open line of communication between individual students and the teacher where students were free to write without judgment from their peers and the teacher could write back

and offer support and advice in a low-pressure environment. Both activities were completed weekly for six weeks while quantitative and qualitative data were collected before, during, and after the intervention through observation, pre and post-surveys, and individual student-teacher interviews.

Review of Literature

Introduction

It is becoming increasingly apparent that schools are not only responsible for the academic needs of their students, but also their physical and emotional well-being. Education has expanded from simply teaching students reading, writing, and math to educating the whole child and supporting their development of interpersonal skills and emotional competence (Ormiston et al, 2020). This concept of social-emotional learning (SEL) is defined by The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as

the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2022).

The need for social-emotional learning in all grades has become a major focus for educators recently. With the signing into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in December 2015, states are seeing more funding for programs surrounding more than simply academic success. ESSA allows for the definition of success to include nonacademic indicators such as safety and student engagement (CASEL). States have since adopted learning goals focused on SEL. In 2018, North Dakota implemented Social-Emotional Learning Goals through Multi-Tier Support Systems (MTSS) by grade spans of K-2, 3-5, 6-8 and 9-12. This indicates

that states are finding it important to include SEL guidelines for teachers and making an effort to make clearer the expectations for teachers and students.

CASEL's framework comprises five competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2022, see Figure 1 for more information). Children practice social and self awareness, self management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making in all the environments in which they learn and grow: in their communities, with families and caregivers, in schools, and in classrooms. These skills cannot be developed without the participation of schools as well as homes and communities.

Figure 1

CASEL Framework



Note: The CASEL SEL Framework demonstrates the five core social and emotional competences and the settings in which children grow and develop.

<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework>

Why is Social Emotional Learning important?

The literature clearly illustrates that various SEL programs have positive impacts on students and their attitudes toward school, as well as (either directly or indirectly) academic achievement and performance, and interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. Schools understand the importance of SEL as demonstrated by the quote “student outcomes valued in school environments include not only academic performance but also development in students’ psychological and social capacities.” (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021, para 1). These skills are fostered and practiced in schools, but are useful and transferable all the way into adulthood (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021; McBride et al, 2016; Paolini, 2020).

Paolini’s (2020) literature review posits that SEL is the key to career readiness and success for students in the future as adults. SEL encompasses interpersonal skills such as communication, empathy, problem solving, and conflict resolution; intrapersonal skills such as leadership, resilience, time and stress management, and growth mindset (Paolini, 2020). These skills are not only linked to student success, but success in a future adult career. Adults who possess the ability to build trusting relationships, regulate emotions, possess empathy, collaborate and communicate effectively, resolve conflict proactively, as well as appreciate diversity experience enhanced grades, and report an increased job performance and satisfaction in the workplace (Paolini, 2020).

Furthermore, in a study by Lemberger-Truelove, Ceballos, Molina, & Carbonneau, (2021) students in an ethnically diverse Title I school were exposed to a counselor-based SEL program, Advocating Student-within Environment (ASE) and their academic growth on standardized tests in mathematics, science, English, and social studies as well as changes in social emotional factors such as stress tolerance, executive functioning and social curiosity were measured. Although students in both the control and experimental groups exhibited positive

change in the factors measured, students who were exposed to ASE showed greater positive change in all four areas tested: academic achievement, stress tolerance, social curiosity, and executive functioning (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021). This study points to the fact that SEL interventions and practices do improve student academic achievement and outcomes, as well as social emotional competencies.

In another study by McBride, Chung, and Robertson (2016) students in an urban middle school received Wyman's Teen Outreach Program (TOP) program embedded in their 7th grade social studies curriculum for an entire school year while a control group at a similarly diverse school received a delayed intervention the following school year. Data was collected on both groups in the areas of academic achievement and negative school behaviors. At the end of the year, positive changes in the school receiving the intervention were seen in a decrease of students' poor behavior such as failing grades, suspensions, and skipping class. However, students' self-reporting on academic efficacy (the ability to believe they can do difficult academic tasks) and emotional engagement (I believe my classes are fun, I feel good when I am in class, etc.) had downward trends from pre and post surveys from students at the school receiving the intervention (McBride et al., 2016). Although these positive outcomes are not directly showing effects in academic achievement, students' negative behaviors such as skipping class and poor behaviors that result in suspensions were impacted, and these factors are directly related to student academic performance.

McClain (2019) however, noted that there was no statistically significant relationship between high SEL engagement and academic achievement in reading and mathematics and low SEL engagement and academic achievement in reading and math. McClain (2019) noted that this could be due to the weakness of the measures of both SEL and reading and math achievement or

other confounding factors such as family support, safety of the community, high stress levels, among other factors that could not be controlled in that particular study (McClain, 2019).

In order for SEL to be successful, school administrators as well as a few influential teachers with influential opinions need to be supportive of SEL in the school to get everyone on board with the SEL programs (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017). Schools need to have a strong leader, with a clear vision for their schools. However, there are roadblocks and limitations to principals being the ones with all the decision-making power for SEL programs. According to Jones & Cater (2020), while principals agreed on the importance of SEL in schools, not all of them were proactive in their approach. Some were simply neutral or passive when it came to their own programs in SEL while others were intentional and empowered. Some even claimed that the focus on SEL can take away from precious academic learning time (Jones & Cater, 2020).

To disprove this assertion that SEL takes away from students' learning time, there are a number of studies with evidence to prove that SEL is invaluable in the school setting. According to Yang, Bear, and May, (2018), "SEL interventions significantly improved students' attachment and attitudes toward school, leading to better social attendance, higher motivation, and higher morale" (p.46). When students feel connected to their school, peers, and teachers, they are more likely to feel motivated to come to school and complete their work.

Educators Understand Their Role in SEL Implementation

It is increasingly important for middle school students to be getting SEL taught to them during school. At this stage, children are making closer connections with adults outside their homes and trying out their independence from their parents (Yang et al., 2018). The adults that

spend the most time with children besides their parents are their teachers, so it follows that this relationship would develop subsequently.

Teachers' relationships with students are critical in developing and maintaining a positive and supportive classroom environment that plays an active role in SEL (McClain, 2019, pp. 9-10). Well-developed SEL curriculum that is implemented with fidelity can increase student-teacher relationships, although what a teacher perceives as being highly committed to SEL and what a student perceives as having a warm relationship may not be completely in line with one another. According to McClain (2019, as cited in Poulou, 2017) and a survey conducted on preschool students and teachers who were committed to SEL with their students, teachers who reported they were not actively working on their SEL skills had students who perceived having a warmer relationship with their teachers than those who were actively trying to improve their SEL skills. McClain (2019) notes that this could be due to the fact that the teachers who did not report actively trying to improve their SEL skills could already have that warm relationship with their students and therefore not feel the need to actively improve their skills (McClain, 2019, pp. 11-12). Teachers who already have developed their own SEL skills understand that students first need to develop trust and recognize others' feelings in order to have a successful student-teacher or any other kind of relationship.

Social-Emotional Learning and mental health go hand-in-hand. Self awareness and self management are key components of CASEL's framework and are closely tied to mental health. Ormiston, et al (2021) article explores teacher perspectives on student mental health and what role teachers play in the mental health of their students. Some teachers were hesitant to say they were responsible or had a key role in the mental health of their students, others acknowledged that they are one of the adults that spends the most time with adolescents, and they are a big

influence on their students' personal, emotional, and academic lives (Ormiston, et al., 2021, p. 2160).

It is imperative that teachers and all school personnel buy into the SEL practices and are willing to maintain a successful and sustainable SEL program, ensuring that SEL is being modeled and practiced not only inside the classroom, but also at break times, in the cafeteria, playground, and everywhere else (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017, p. 7). Students must feel supported in their classroom with their teachers but must also be able to transfer those skills to work with their peers and other adults they encounter anywhere in their lives. The best way to support this transfer of skills is to give students a place to foster and practice these life skills (Wallender et al., 2020). Schools are in the best position to be the center of Social Emotional Learning and development for their students.

Administrators are also responsible for ensuring SEL practices are implemented with fidelity in their schools. Other school personnel must be involved other than classroom teachers and evaluation of the program should be conducted regularly to establish their school as an SEL school (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017, p. 15). When schools adopt a whole school approach to SEL with the use of multiple tiers of interventions and programs embedded in the school's environment, SEL programs are much more effective and see positive outcomes in students' behavior and attitudes towards school (Early Intervention Foundation, 2021). SEL cannot be practiced in only one setting; it needs to be implemented throughout all the places in which students learn and develop.

Obstacles for Educators Teaching SEL

Teachers are at the forefront of developing and implementing a successful SEL program in their schools and classrooms. However, this cannot always be accomplished as seamlessly or

easily as intended or hoped for. Teachers cite their heavy workload and lack of time as obstacles in their own implementation of all SEL lessons as prescribed in certain programs. According to Martinsone and Vilcina's results of their interviews after their study, teachers were expected to teach SEL lessons during homeroom time, but this time was not solely dedicated to SEL. There were other activities and planning with the students that needed to be accomplished during this time as well. Teachers understood that it was important to teach these SEL lessons, but there was only so much time in a school day and with all the other things going on, they did not always teach every SEL lesson in a unit or dedicate as much time as prescribed (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017). SEL often gets overlooked or overshadowed by other academics, activities, or programs in schools.

Although educators understand the importance of SEL and its benefits, there are still roadblocks for proper implementation and consistency of SEL programs in schools. Teachers cited the lack of resources and training as a big obstacle in giving students the help they need. One teacher from the study by Ormiston et al (2021) stated "...we haven't been trained or taught how to help socially and emotionally" (Ormiston, et al., p. 2164). Educators cited the difficulty of adding more things to their plates without taking other responsibilities away from them with no compensation of more time or money, lack of support from families and communities, and a need for more resources and professional development on SEL as obstacles to maintaining an effective SEL program (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017, pp. 14, 17). Schools need to dedicate proper amounts of time, training, and resources to SEL in order for teachers to be prepared to foster and promote SEL in their classrooms and schools.

Methods for Teaching SEL

Explicit teaching of social skills is a relatively new concept in the scope of education. Even though SEL curriculum is new, there is no shortage of teaching strategies, methods, programs, and curriculum to support social emotional learning. Schools just need to utilize these resources. Even though curriculum exists, SEL should never be an isolated lesson, rather it should be integrated into daily routines and instruction as well (Wallender et al., 2020). It is going to be far more effective if SEL is practiced in all areas of a school, not just in classrooms.

Teachers are not the only ones who have a strong influence on their students; their classmates also play an integral role in their school experience. Middle school students are looking for ways to fit in and rely on their peers to show them the way to participate in school and social activities (Yang et al., 2018). A study found that “the effects of supportive peer relationships on student engagement increased from sixth to eighth grade,” (Li, Lynch, Kalvin, Liu, and Lerner (2011) as cited in Yang et al., 2018 p. 47). Students rely on their peers to feel accepted and those relationships are an integral part of their school experience. With an increasing demand on academic outcomes and responsibility in the middle grades, students look to one another for guidance and examples of how to navigate this new territory.

To demonstrate positive examples for their peers, some SEL practices that would be most beneficial for middle school students are the ones that allow students to take a leadership role. Allowing and inspiring students to organize programs or find new ways to generate kindness and inclusivity in their school can be a powerful tool. Setting up peer mentoring programs or friendship lunches between students and staff are some strategies that successful schools have used (Allbright et al., 2019). This allows students to feel like the leaders of their school experience and that they have the power to enact real change in their world. The following sections expand on specific programs and strategies to teach SEL.

Dialogue journals

Dialogue journals are notebooks that students keep and can write on various topics to their teachers in an informal environment and the teacher reads and responds to the students' writings in a conversational rather than a corrective manner. The journal process is fourfold: First, teachers write individualized letters to each student, introducing themselves and making a connection with each student. Second, the journal is used for students and teachers to write back and forth openly, creatively, and engaging in critical thinking on academic topics. Third, the journal is used in small groups of peers in a "write around" where students initially respond to a prompt in writing and then the journals are passed to the student next to them for them to read and respond. This goes on for a few rounds, engaging the students in a written dialogue where they will finally feel comfortable sharing their thoughts in a discussion with their peers (Konishi & Park, 2017, pp. 247-248). The techniques and strategies implemented with dialogue journals are varied, and can be adapted to any classroom and its unique needs.

The use of dialogue journals would benefit both the student-teacher relationship and encourage students to express themselves in writing in a "safe place" such as a journal rather than verbally in class. In fact, over the course of a school year where dialogue journals were implemented, students started with "safe topics" related the academics, but after using the dialogue journal for some time, they found ways to express themselves and their feelings of frustration and complaints to their teacher (Konishi & Park, 2017, p. 248). This process not only gives the teacher insight into their students' thoughts, feelings, struggles, and successes, but gives the student an opportunity to practice self-reflection and recognition of their own feelings in written expression. The development of social emotional learning is embedded in this process and allows students to practice the academic skill of writing as well.

Circles

Circles are an activity that teachers use to build and foster relationships with students, can be used to repair broken trust or relationships among peers often after a shared traumatic experience, and allow students a safe space to express their feelings and practice active listening with their peers. Circles are unique in that the facilitator or keeper, oftentimes the teacher or school counselor, of the circle is more of an active participant rather than a leader or guide that prompts particular outcomes of discussions and the issues that are raised. The role of the keeper is to establish a safe space for all participants to take a responsible role in sharing open and honest dialogue, actively listening to another's perspective, and developing new insights from the discussion (Boyes-Watson, Catherine & Pranis, Kay, 2015, p. 33).

The shape of the circle is important, allowing each participant to see one another face to face and creating a "sense of focus on a common concern without creating a sense of 'sides', [and]...emphasizes equality and connectedness" (Boyes-Watson, Catherine & Pranis, Kay, 2015, p. 29). An opening ceremony is used, engaging the group in a mindfulness moment to transition into the circle. A talking piece is employed, being passed around the circle so each participant may speak without being interrupted and emphasizes the importance of each participant's contribution to the conversation (Boyes-Watson, Catherine & Pranis, Kay, 2015, p. 30). Group core values and guidelines are discussed and established with each member actively suggesting and agreeing to each guideline that is introduced and accepted. Particular guidelines should not be added unless all participants are in agreement and understand their importance. The circle then goes on with guiding questions designed to go beyond surface level answers that focus on feelings, invite the sharing of stories or experiences, and may assist in the discussion of difficult or painful events that are prepared by the facilitator ahead of time. Each participant has an

opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings on each topic, but always has the option to pass if they feel they need to. If the purpose of the circle was to make decisions, the group makes agreements if necessary. Finally, there is a closing ceremony where participants have a moment to reflect and show gratitude to one another for their efforts in the circle (Boyes-Watson, Catherine & Pranis, Kay, 2015, pp. 31-32). Circles are designed to build deeper relationships among peers, teachers, and students and gives learners an opportunity to take an active leadership role.

The Problem of Getting Accurate Data

One of the biggest challenges with SEL is how to properly measure progress and efficacy in students. In some schools where students do self-reporting on their own SEL skills, they report high self-regulation, social, and problem-solving skills (Wallender et al., 2020). The problem with this self-reporting of skills is that students cannot accurately measure their own performance or deficits in these areas; they don't know what they don't know, making measuring progress a challenge.

This raises some questions about the accuracy and methods that should be used when measuring SEL in students. If teachers are not teaching SEL the same way or focusing on the same skills at the same grade level, the expectations are going to be less rigid, making it harder to set clear benchmarks and expectations. Teacher competency, administration buy-in, and the unclear definition of SEL all pose problems when attempting to measure progress (Voith et al., 2020). Measuring SEL has its difficulties, but with a consistent curriculum or set of standards teachers can more effectively assess their students in the areas of Social Emotional Learning that are developmentally appropriate for their students.

Discussion/Conclusion

While it is apparent that students' social and emotional skills are affected by all the environments in which they live and grow, it is not yet determined how big of a direct impact that SEL has on academic achievement. It is difficult to measure efficacy in the skills SEL aims to teach and even more difficult to claim that high SEL engagement will lead to high academic engagement. SEL undoubtedly benefits students, and teachers will continue to explore new ways to develop and strengthen relationships while modeling positive coping strategies, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, self management, and social skills for their students.

Gaps in the Literature

The amount of literature on the topic of SEL is growing quickly, but there are still gaps. There is a lot of emphasis on SEL in the primary through elementary grades, and less as you move into middle and high school (Eklund et al., 2018). Perhaps more studies done on older students focusing on SEL will further our understanding of how SEL impacts students' engagement, achievement and overall performance.

The questions this topic raises for educators and all stakeholders in education are vast. The question of what practices and professional development need to be implemented across the board to increase teacher understanding and implementation of SEL in their classrooms needs to be addressed. How can we clarify the definition of SEL and have some consistency in our practices? How is the growing emphasis on SEL going to affect teachers? How is this increased responsibility for teachers going to affect teacher burnout rates? What is a reasonable set of expectations for our administrators, teachers, parents, and students so that there is the best possible outcome for all involved? While there are additional questions to be answered, educators are moving in the right direction toward a more positive learning environment and

understanding of how to properly educate all their students in academic, emotional, and social skills- preparing them for success in their ever-changing worlds.

Methodology

In order to answer the question, “What teaching strategies and activities can educators use to foster and promote social and self awareness in small group 6th grade math intervention students?” I conducted an intervention in my classroom. I implemented two strategies, circles and dialogue journals weekly with my students for six weeks. The group of participants consisted of 22 students in the sixth grade with an age range of eleven to twelve, with twelve 11-year olds and ten 12-year olds, eight boys and fourteen girls, split into two groups or class periods. Measuring social and self-awareness, or social emotional learning as a whole, is a challenging process. Without one specific criterion, or even a short list of criteria to demonstrate mastery of the intricacies of participating in a society and understanding one’s own emotions and emotional capacity, it can be difficult to determine if learning or growing has taken place. I used two methods for Social Emotional Learning in my action research, one to connect with students individually and one to build community among students in my classroom.

Strategy One: Circles

The first intervention strategy I implemented was circles. Circles have been used for centuries by many First Nations of Indigenous Peoples and were developed for the use in schools in the book *Circle Forward* by Carolyn Boyes-Watson and Kay Pranis (2015). The purpose of circles is to give each member of the group a safe space to share their thoughts and celebrate themselves and one another. The circle’s goal was to promote relationships among students, giving them a safe space to share their thoughts, feelings, and perspectives.

The circle begins with an intentional movement to a different ‘space’ both physical and mental. We utilized an opening and closing ceremony with a doorbell chime where the transition from a traditional classroom to the circle is emphasized and different norms and procedures are followed. Participants move their chairs into a circle shape and sit, thereby moving into a different physical space. The movement into a different headspace is just as important to start the circle. The shape of the circle is significant, allowing each participant to see one another face to face and creating a “sense of focus on a common concern without creating a sense of ‘sides’, [and]...emphasizes equality and connectedness” (Boyes-Watson, Catherine & Pranis, Kay, 2015, p. 29).

We made a distinction between traditional class time and circle time as a safe space where my role as the facilitator was different from my role as the teacher. The leader of the circle is more of a facilitator than a leader, sitting as a part of the circle, not at the head or center but rather as an equal participant guiding discussions. A talking piece is passed around the circle, emphasizing each participant’s role and importance in contributing to the conversation without being interrupted by other participants.

There are different norms and procedures in the circle than the typical classroom and it is important to establish those norms as a group, so all participants can agree to, abide by, and uphold those values. The first circle was dedicated to each group of students coming up with a list of norms or expectations that would serve as the centerpiece of the circle each week. We had discussions about what values are important to us, and what we could all agree would be our guidelines while we were in the circle that we could all uphold and agree to follow. It is important for each member of the circle to agree to each guiding principle, not just a majority rule. I took notes as each member suggested norms or values, and we made lists of what our

circle norms would be. Then each member was passed the talking piece and agreed to uphold those values created by the group (see Appendix A). These norms were typed up and printed out and served as the centerpiece in our subsequent circles.

I began each circle with a chime from a doorbell and a short, thought-provoking story (see Appendix B). For each circle, I would pass the talking piece around while we had a discussion about our values, important people in our lives, things we want to accomplish, and significant events that have shaped our lives so far, as well as some less-serious questions such as “what superpower would you want”. Students were always welcome to share, but they could pass if they wished to actively listen and appreciate their classmates’ contributions. I encouraged everyone to share because without participation we couldn’t have a discussion. Many students chose to pass on their turns in the first few sessions but as the weeks went on that changed.

Strategy Two: Dialogue Journals

The second intervention strategy I implemented was the dialogue journal. The dialogue journal was designed to promote relationships between me, the teacher and each individual student. It gave students a space to write with no academic agenda, where they can express feelings, share thoughts and experiences, and seek advice if they wanted. The dialogue journals were not shared with anyone, and I responded to each student individually every week. There was a writing prompt on the board such as “something I am really interested in right now is...” and “someone who is older than me that I look up to and admire is...” Students were given six minutes to write or more if they wished, but most finished before the time was finished.

Data collection procedures

Pre and post intervention participant surveys

Students were given surveys before the intervention with questions gauging students' understanding of their own emotions as well as the role school plays in Social Emotional Learning in developmentally-appropriate language. The first question on the survey was an emotions checklist with 16 different emotions listed, eight positive and eight negative emotions. Students were to check the box if they have ever felt the emotion, gauging their understanding of the emotions they have felt in the past. The following eight questions were students ranking academic and social activities' importance in school using a Likert scale from "very important in school" to "not at all important in school." There were five ratings to choose from. Some examples of the social activities listed were making friends and being kind to others, and academic activities listed were completing assignments and getting good grades. This was done to see if students would rate the importance of social emotional activities lower, higher, or the same as the academic activities in school. The last six questions each were a Likert scale of "agree" to "disagree" with questions such as 'my actions affect others' and 'others' words affect me'. This was to gauge students' opinions and self-awareness of whether or not their words and actions affect others and whether others' words and actions affect them. After the intervention, students were given the same survey questions to see if there was any change in their answers after the intervention (see Appendix C).

Teacher activity log

To keep track of each week, I completed a log at the beginning and end of each week during the intervention. A Google Form was used to track the weekly activities planned and implemented as well as how I was feeling about the week in general and the intervention activities at the beginning and end of each week (See Appendix D). The teacher activity log was

used to keep track of the intervention data and remind myself to continue the intervention each week.

Dialogue Journals

Dialogue journals were implemented as a part of the intervention, but also served as a data tool (see Appendix E). This was a journal that students wrote in weekly, with an open-ended prompt for them to respond to in the form of writing to their teacher. Examples of these prompts are “something I am interested in right now...” and “someone I look up to who is older than me is...” I then wrote back to each student each week, with the goal of promoting communication and developing and deepening relationships between me and my students. Students were assured that these would not be shared with the class, and that they could write freely.

Post-intervention interviews

After the intervention, participants were interviewed one-on-one in a semi-structured interview and asked questions about their feelings about the activities that were implemented (See Appendix F). Questions ranged from what they liked about circles and dialogue journals, what they would change about each one, and whether or not they would like to do them in the future. Finally, I asked students if there was anything they would like to add or comment on for the closing of the interview.

Observation Checklist/Field Notes

During each activity, I took brief notes of the engagement and outcomes of the activities. I also conducted observations for ten-minute intervals before and after the intervention with a checklist of desirable and undesirable behaviors (See Appendix G). Behaviors listed included helping others, making fun of or being mean to others, and recognizing emotions in self or

others. I also included a brief comment section to note a bit more about the behaviors and to record a tally mark each time a behavior was observed.

Analysis of Data

The purpose of this study was to test whether dialogue journals and circles would foster and promote the Social and Emotional Learning aspects of social and self awareness in middle school students. Twenty-two 6th grade students in a math intervention course in a suburban school in central North Dakota participated in the study from the end of January 2023 to the beginning of March 2023.

Students participated individually in weekly dialogue journals with writing prompts and as a whole group in circles. The students were split into two class periods, which will be referred to as group one and group two. Students took a pre and post-intervention survey with questions about what emotions they have felt and Likert scales rating the importance of social activities and academic tasks in school. I reviewed this quantitative data and compared the pre and post surveys to see if there was any significant change in students' ratings of social and academic activities or recognizing their own emotions. I took field notes and recorded observations before, during, and after the intervention of notable trends or occurrences in positive and negative behaviors using a checklist. Students were interviewed by me, the teacher, after the intervention and were asked what they learned, what they liked, and what they would change about dialogue journaling and circles. I then analyzed this quantitative data to find commonalities and trends in what the students shared during their interviews.

Strategy One: Circles Findings

Students participated in weekly circle time. For the very first circle, I spent the time going over the procedures of the circle and how each piece is important and to be followed. We

then went around the circle and brainstormed ideas for norms that we would follow each time as a group in the circle. Students offered suggestions like respecting others by being quiet, staying in your seat, not sharing what is said in the circle with others, and to listen with empathy. I took notes during the discussion and asked for input on the list of norms that we would all agree to uphold while we were in the circle. Each group came up with their own list (see Appendix A) and we went around the circle with the talking piece as each individual agreed that those norms were reasonable and that they would follow them while in the circle. All students agreed to their group's particular norms, and almost everyone contributed some kind of input into creating these norms. There was a majority of students who participated in this first week of circle time. They seemed to enjoy creating the list of norms and taking an active role in what would be expected of them. We closed the first circle with a discussion about what values we would need to have in a best friend and some breathing exercises.

Each week, I had prepared a short, thought-provoking story (see Appendix B) that I read aloud after the doorbell chime that signified the opening of the circle. We had a short discussion about various topics such as someone you look up to or admire and expanding on that by sharing why you admire them and which one of their character traits do you want to possess or work on. There were less students willing to share during this circle, but we still had enough to have a discussion and reflect on what one another said.

Another topic in a different circle time was where we had a discussion about setting goals and we expanded on that discussion by helping one another figure out steps they can take to reach those goals. The guiding question for this circle was, "What is something you want to accomplish this year?" This discussion had a majority of students participating either in sharing their own personal goal with the group, or offering suggestions or advice to another student

toward reaching their goal. Students were able to share these things, and in doing so shared more about themselves to one another.

Overall, during circle time, the students were good listeners and did not talk out of turn. They were respectful to each other and followed the norms. Group one participated more consistently and more students in group one answered questions than group two. When the questions were less serious (ex. what would your superpower be) as opposed to more serious questions (ex. what is a character trait you want to have in a best friend?) students would answer the less serious questions more frequently.

There was a difference between the two groups of students that I had as the intervention continued. Group one opened up and participated more as the intervention went on, but group two was the exact opposite. In the last circle, two students who had not shared aloud in the previous sessions in group one chose to share and participate in our discussion. This was a personal victory to see all students in group one participating. However, I saw the opposite effect in group two. Towards the end of the intervention, group two was less responsive and passed on their individual turns more than in the first few weeks of circles. It is interesting to note that both groups of students have been together for most of the school year, with the exception of a few that were added to class in the second semester but group one was much more responsive and participatory than group two.

Strategy Two: Dialogue Journals Findings

Students also participated in weekly dialogue journals between themselves and me, their teacher. They were assured that their journals were between themselves and the teacher, and they would not have to share what they wrote with anyone, share in small groups, or read it to the class. The goal of the dialogue journal was for me to get to know students better on a deeper

level and foster the relationship between teacher and student by asking them questions and responding to them with my own thoughts and experiences. I put the writing prompt on the board at the beginning of class and students could answer in writing right away. After the bell to begin class, I set a timer for six minutes to give the students time to write their responses in their journals.

Before journal time the next week, I sat down with each journal and wrote a response to each student, asking questions about what they wrote to show interest, offering advice, encouragement, or support. This was a time-consuming process but an invaluable resource to delve deeper into my students and try to connect with each one. Students were open and honest about their experiences and feelings. Some wrote about family members who have passed, or about relationships and friendships. This was a great resource for me as their teacher to see more than just the academic abilities of my students; I got to know more about their lives outside of school. I noticed that students wrote longer entries in the beginning of the intervention than towards the end in the final weeks.

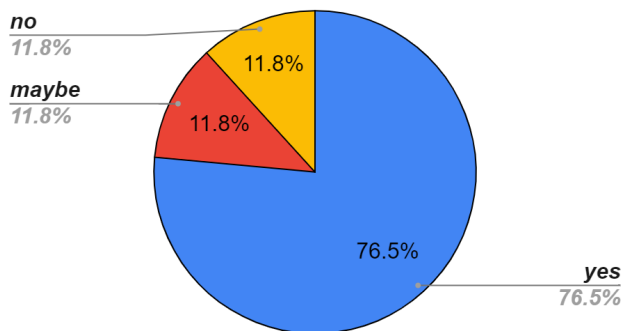
Post-Intervention Interviews

After the intervention, I conducted interviews with individual students. I asked the students to share something they learned, what they liked about circles, what they would change about circles, and if they would like to continue doing circles in the future. The majority of students reported that they enjoyed circles and journals. Out of the seventeen students interviewed, thirteen students said that they would like to do circles in the future, two said maybe and two said no. See Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

Would You Like to Do More Circles in the Future?

Would You Like to Do Circles in the Future?



Note: Seventeen students were surveyed after the intervention. Thirteen said yes they would do circles in the future, two said maybe and two said no.

In the interviews, one student said they even wanted to have circles more often. When asked to share something they learned from the interventions, eleven students said something about learning about others and their emotions, and two students said something they learned about themselves. One student shared “I learned that some people can be really kind-hearted and have the same interests as each other”. Another student said that they learned many things: to listen to what others have to say because it can be important, it is important to be patient with others, and to express their own emotions.

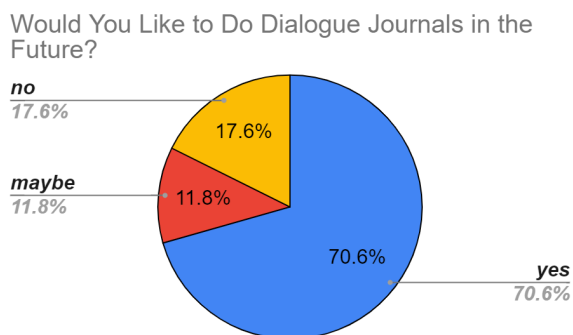
I then asked students what they enjoyed about circle time. Four students specifically mentioned they enjoyed circles because it was quiet or peaceful. Eight students said something about spending time with one another or communicating in a positive way. Five students shared that they learned something about themselves. One student said “I liked that we were all confident to share, and I am not always confident to share”. When it came time to offer suggestions about what they would change about circles if they could, there were not many suggestions but there was one common one. Five students said they wanted to have a seating

chart to minimize distractions or others messing around with their friends. It was clear from the qualitative data from the interviews that the students took circle time seriously, and that they enjoyed it and learned something from it about themselves or others, most of those things surrounding emotions, safe spaces, and confidence in themselves.

During the post-intervention interviews, I asked students what they liked about dialogue journals, what they would change if they could, and whether or not they wanted to continue to do them in the future. The majority of students said that they would continue to do dialogue journals in the future. See Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Would You Like to Continue to Do Dialogue Journals in the Future?



Note: Of the seventeen students interviewed, twelve said yes they would do dialogue journals in the future, two said maybe, and three said no.

When asked what they enjoyed about dialogue journals, students reported that they liked the journals because they were free to write without judgment from others or having to share and that the teacher responded in writing to them. Ten students mentioned something positive about dialogue journals and how it benefited them in some positive way. One student said “I could go over happy thoughts and memories.” Another student commented, “I liked how I could talk about things and not get judged.” Four students commented that they enjoyed the fact that the

teacher wrote back to them as evidenced by one student's quote "I liked reading the responses the teacher wrote." Students did not have much feedback on how to improve or change dialogue journals other than the length of time being given to write. Two students said they want to be given more time to write in their journals. Two students said they want to be given less time to write in their journals.

Pre and Post Intervention Surveys Results

Before the intervention, twenty-one students took the pre-survey to show quantitative data of students' awareness of their own emotions as well as their ratings of the importance in their opinion of both academic and social emotional activities in school. The mean ranking for social emotional activities and academic activities were both 1.61 in the pre-survey. This points to the fact that students already see the importance of social activities along with academic ones in school.

In the post-survey, both mean rankings went down from the previous survey. This could be due to the fact that less students took the post-survey than the pre-survey. Seventeen students took the post-intervention survey while twenty one took the pre-intervention survey. Because the surveys were anonymous, it was not possible to track down the students who did or did not complete the surveys. This difference in the amount of students taking each survey could have skewed the results. It should also be noted that the survey was set up so that a lower number on the Likert scale meant a higher ranking. In the survey, a ranking of 1 was "very important in school", 3 was "somewhat important", and 5 was "not at all important in school". If I were to do this again, I would set up the survey so that a 5 was the highest ranking and a 1 was the lowest ranking in terms of importance. Figure 4 shows the mean rankings of academic and social

emotional activities from the pre and post survey. In fact, all the rankings went down from the pre to the post survey.

Figure 4

Average Rankings of Importance by Students of Academic and Social Emotional Activities in School

Academic		Social Emotional	
Pre survey	1.61	Pre Survey	1.61
Standard Deviation	0.47	Standard Deviation	0.36
Post Survey	1.99	Post Survey	2.01
Standard Deviation	0.36	Standard Deviation	0.32

Note: A lower number means a higher ranking, as 1 was the highest ranking on the Likert scale on the survey.

Figure 5 breaks down each question from the survey and shows the average rankings as well as the change in rankings from pre survey to post survey. All Likert Scale rankings went down from the pre survey and the post survey. This could be due to the fact that twenty one students took the pre survey, but only seventeen students took the post survey, which could have skewed the results of the survey. According to these results, students showed no statistically significant change in rankings from the pre and post survey but it should be noted that the average rankings between academic and social emotional activities are very close to one another. This demonstrates that students already had a good understanding of the importance of social emotional learning in school because they ranked social emotional learning activities the same as academic activities in the presurvey before the intervention.

Figure 5

Changes in Students' Ranking of Importance of Social Emotional and Academic Activities in School

Question	Pre-survey rating	Post-survey rating	change
making friends	2.24	2.94	-0.7
being kind to others	1.48	2.29	-0.81
asking questions	2.24	2.47	-0.23
getting good grades	1.1	1.71	-0.61
completing assignments	1.48	1.71	-0.23
building relationships with peers and teachers	2.19	2.24	-0.05
learning social skills	2.14	2.59	-0.45
learning academics	1.62	2.06	-0.44
my actions affect others	1.62	2.24	-0.62
others' actions affect me	2.24	2.29	-0.05
my words affect others	1.76	1.94	-0.18
others' words affect me	2.29	2.29	0
what I say and do matters to me	1.86	2.12	-0.26
what I say and do matters to others	1.95	2.29	-0.34

Note: All likert scale ratings' average went down in rating of importance in both social emotional questions and academic questions with the exception of "others' words affect me" showing zero change, this could be due to the different number of students taking the pre survey and the post-survey.

Another goal of the survey was to measure students' understanding of their own emotions, and to see if they would recognize that they have felt both positive and negative emotions in the past. Students were given a list of emotions, and to select all that they have felt before. The percentage of students who said they had felt each positive emotion and the percentage for each negative emotion was calculated and compared in a bar graph. (see figure 6) Also included in the bar graph is the average percentage of negative emotions and positive emotions pre and post survey. There was not a statistically significant difference in those percentages. The average percentage for negative emotions pre survey was 39.88% and post survey was 41.19%. The average percentage for positive emotions pre survey was 49.40% and

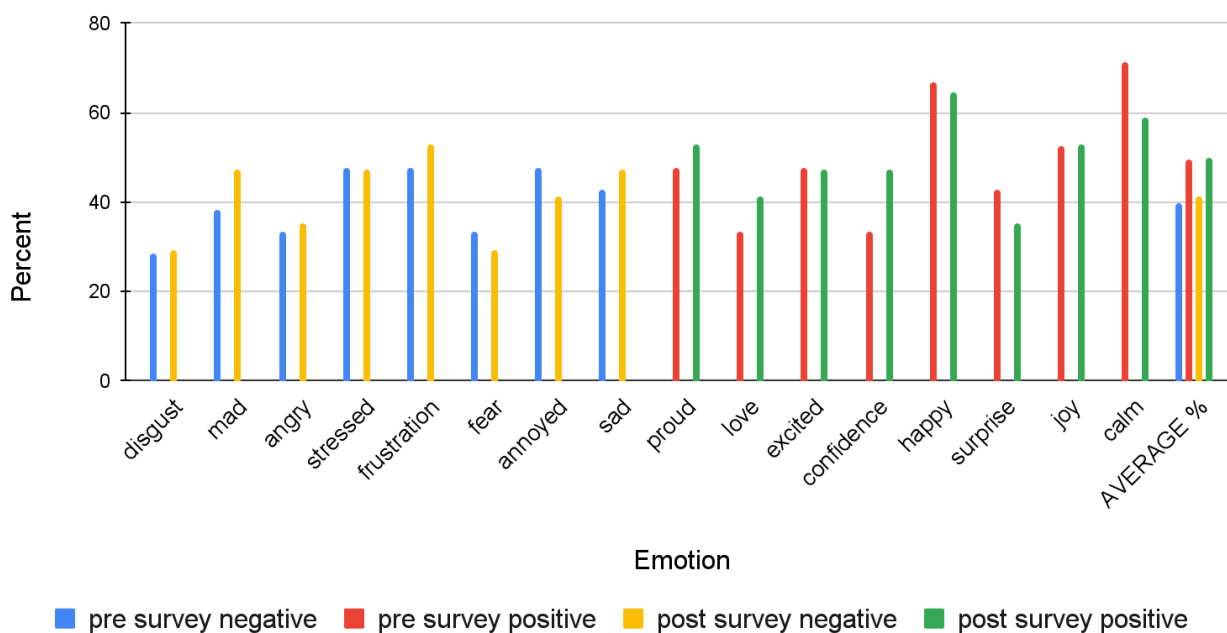
post survey was 50.0%. This demonstrates further that the students already had a good understanding of their own emotions, and were able to recognize them in themselves.

Figure 6

What Emotions Have You Felt Before?

What emotions have you felt before?

Pre and Post Survey Comparison



Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore strategies for increasing student social and self awareness and to answer the question “What teaching strategies and activities can educators use to foster and promote social and self-awareness in small group 6th grade math intervention students?” Although the results of the data from the survey showed no statistically significant change in students' rankings of importance of Social Emotional Learning activities, it should be noted that students’ ranking of SEL activities were already quite high in the pre-survey. This shows that students already understand the importance of making friends, being kind to others,

and developing relationships in school. Not only should students understand this, but all stakeholders in education should see the value in Social Emotional Learning. It is no secret that kids learn by first watching and then trying out what they witness. Teachers, administrators, counselors, and parents are at the forefront of students' lives and set examples for young people in their words and actions.

Once everyone understands how important SEL is, only then can we explore ways to foster these skills and competencies in our students. While conducting this action research and in the weeks following, students have asked to do more circles and have tried to find ways to connect with one another. While doing this action research, it was shocking to discover that some students that have been in class with each other for five months did not know each other's names. In the weeks following the intervention, I am seeing a change in my classroom community. In my classes, they visit more with one another and argue less. The simple task of taking some time to get to know one another and build a relationship has brought a sense of community to my classroom.

People crave connections with one another, especially young people. But if we do not give students an opportunity and that extra push to build relationships, some students may never take those steps on their own. Middle school is very different from Elementary, in that classes are mixed and students don't stay with the same group of 20-30 kids all day. Students are expected to be much more independent and have to navigate not only the new pressures of more rigorous academics but also connecting with peers on a much larger scale. The school I work in splits the grades into teams, with about 150 students per team so that each team has the same core teachers with the same group of students to make planning, data tracking, and building connections easier.

Even so, this is a much larger scale than what the students are coming from in Elementary school.

Academics are the core of school, but without social connections and other activities, school is missing a large piece of the puzzle. If school was only about learning content such as math, grammar, science, social studies, and English, we would all just stay in our homes and learn from a computer. We even accidentally experimented this possibility in 2020 and the years following with the pandemic shutdown of schools and businesses. The majority of educators and students would agree that this was not successful or even sustainable; we need schools and everything they bring to the table. Students and teachers alike missed the social interactions with each other and ‘online school’ was miserable for many Americans. In the years following, the mental health and social abilities of students have been affected in a negative way. We as schools are only beginning to see these effects and will continue to experience its consequences for years.

As schools, it is our duty to find the balance of academics and social emotional learning activities for our students. Educators have cited that there simply isn’t enough time in a day or school year to teach SEL, but its benefits outweigh the negatives for the ‘lost time’ for teaching academic standards (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017). According to the research, social emotional learning mastery improves all of the following: academic performance, student attitudes toward school, college and career readiness, life skills, and student’s behaviors in school (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021; McBride et al., 2016; Paolini, 2020; Yang, Bear, and May, 2018). Social Emotional Learning is integral to student success and running a successful and well-balanced school.

In order to run a successful SEL program, schools need to dedicate time, money, and resources to training its teachers and all staff in the building. SEL is important in the classroom, but it should be practiced in all places in the school like during break times in hallways and the lunchroom (Martinsone & Vilcina, 2017). Students need to feel safe with one another and staff in all places in the school building.

Although this action research had few participants, more research should be done on a larger scale and for a longer period of time to see the effectiveness of circles and dialogue journals in a classroom setting. These two interventions are simple to add to any classroom, and can be adapted to almost any setting. The skills practiced are transferable, and circles can be effective in restorative justice, using the same process. Students would have already practiced the norms and procedures of circles, a discussion can be had, and all parties can make decisions or reparations.

Conducting this action research has inspired me to continue to find new ways to build relationships with students and give them opportunities to build a classroom community. I encourage all schools and educators to implement social emotional learning into all aspects of their day and to remember the importance of human connection in working and learning. This time will not be wasted, and the benefits will be seen throughout the school, student body, classroom, and even beyond school.

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Appendix A

Group One's Circle Norms

Trust

Respect

Empathy

Safe Circle

Responsibility

Group Two's Circle Norms

Keep it to yourself

Be a good listener

Be kind

Accept others for
who they are (don't
judge)

Appendix B

Mindfulness Stories at the Beginning of Circles

1. The Elephant Rope (Belief)

A gentleman was walking through an elephant camp, and he spotted that the elephants weren't being kept in cages or held by the use of chains.

All that was holding them back from escaping the camp, was a small piece of rope tied to one of their legs.

As the man gazed upon the elephants, he was completely confused as to why the elephants didn't just use their strength to break the rope and escape the camp. They could easily have done so, but instead, they didn't try to at all.

Curious and wanting to know the answer, he asked a trainer nearby why the elephants were just standing there and never tried to escape.

The trainer replied; "When they are very young and much smaller, we use the same size rope to tie them and, at that age, it's enough to hold them. As they grow up, they are conditioned to believe they cannot break away. They believe the rope can still hold them, so they never try to break free." The only reason that the elephants weren't breaking free and escaping from the camp was that over time they adopted the belief that it just wasn't possible.

Moral of the story: No matter how much the world tries to hold you back, always continue with the belief that what you want to achieve is possible. Believing you can become successful is the most important step in actually achieving it.

*Taken from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/readersblog/jblblogs/the-elephants-rope-34225/>

2. Potatoes, Eggs, and Coffee Beans

Once upon a time a daughter complained to her father that her life was miserable and that she didn't know how she was going to make it. She was tired of fighting and struggling all the time. It seemed just as one problem was solved, another one soon followed.

Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen. He filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Once the three pots began to boil, he placed potatoes in one pot, eggs in the second pot, and ground coffee beans in the third pot.

He then let them sit and boil, without saying a word to his daughter. The daughter moaned and impatiently waited, wondering what he was doing.

After twenty minutes he turned off the burners. He took the potatoes out of the pot and placed them in a bowl. He pulled the eggs out and placed them in a bowl.

He then ladled the coffee out and placed it in a cup. Turning to her he asked, "Daughter, what do you see?"

"Potatoes, eggs, and coffee," she hastily replied.

"Look closer," he said, "and touch the potatoes." She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. Its rich aroma brought a smile to her face.

“Father, what does this mean?” she asked.

He then explained that the potatoes, the eggs and coffee beans had each faced the same adversity– the boiling water. However, each one reacted differently. The potato went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but in boiling water, it became soft and weak. The egg was fragile, with the thin outer shell protecting its liquid interior until it was put in the boiling water. Then the inside of the egg became hard.

However, the ground coffee beans were unique. After they were exposed to the boiling water, they changed the water and created something new.

“Which are you,” he asked his daughter. “When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a potato, an egg, or a coffee bean?”

Moral: In life, things happen around us, things happen to us, but the only thing that truly matters is what happens within us.

Which one are you?

*Taken from

<https://medium.com/@vyaschandra/once-upon-a-time-a-daughter-complained-to-her-father-that-her-life-was-miserable-and-that-she-6c77d3c56512>

3. A Very Special Bank Account

Imagine you had a bank account that deposited \$86,400 each morning. The account carries over no balance from day to day, allows you to keep no cash balance, and every evening cancels whatever part of the amount you had failed to use during the day. What would you do? Draw out every dollar each day!

We all have such a bank. Its name is Time. Every morning, it credits you with 86,400 seconds. Every night it writes off, as lost, whatever time you have failed to use wisely. It carries over no balance from day to day. It allows no overdraft so you can't borrow against yourself or use more time than you have. Each day, the account starts fresh. Each night, it destroys any unused time. If you fail to use the day's deposits, it's your loss and you can't appeal to get it back.

There is never any borrowing time. You can't take a loan out on your time or against someone else's. The time you have is the time you have and that is that. Time management is yours to decide how you spend the time, just as with money you decide how you spend the money. It is never the case of us not having enough time to do things, but the case of whether we want to do them and where they fall in our priorities.

*Taken from <https://medium.com/motivationapp/a-very-special-bank-account-4d60ff53a716>

4. The Jar

A philosophy professor once stood up before his class with a large empty mayonnaise jar. He filled the jar to the top with large rocks and asked his students if the jar was full.

His students all agreed the jar was full.

He then added small pebbles to the jar, and gave the jar a bit of a shake so the pebbles could disperse themselves among the larger rocks. Then he asked again, “Is the jar full now?”

The students agreed that the jar was still full.

The professor then poured sand into the jar to fill up all the remaining empty space.

The students then agreed again that the jar was full.

The Metaphor:

In this story, the jar represents your life and the rocks, pebbles, and sand are the things that fill up your life.

The rocks represent the most important projects and things you have going on, such as spending time with your family and maintaining proper health. This means that if the pebbles and the sand were lost, the jar would still be full and your life would still have meaning.

The pebbles represent the things in your life that matter, but that you could live without. The pebbles are certainly things that give your life meaning (such as your job, house, hobbies, and friendships), but they are not critical for you to have a meaningful life.

These things often come and go, and are not permanent or essential to your overall well-being.

Finally, the sand represents the remaining filler things in your life, and material possessions. This could be small things such as watching television, browsing through your favorite social media site, or running errands.

These things don't mean much to your life as a whole, and are likely only done to waste time or get small tasks accomplished.

The Moral:

The metaphor here is that if you start with putting sand into the jar, you will not have room for rocks or pebbles.

This holds true with the things you let into your life. If you spend all of your time on the small and insignificant things, you will run out of room for the things that are actually important. In order to have a more effective and efficient life, pay attention to the “rocks,” because they are critical to your long-term well-being.

*Taken from <https://uh.edu/~dsocs3/wisdom/wisdom/lessonsoflife.htm>

5. Seeking Happiness

There were 200 people attending a seminar on mental and physical health.

At one point, the speaker told the group they were going to do an activity. He gave each attendee one balloon and told them to write their name on it. Then, the balloons were collected and moved into a very small room.

The participants were then asked to go into the other room and were given 2 minutes to find their balloon.

It was chaos...

People were searching frantically for their balloon, pushing each other and running into one another while they grabbed a balloon, looked at it, and inevitably tossed it to the side.

At the end of the 2 minutes, no one had found the balloon that had their name on it.

Then, the speaker asked the participants to go back in the room and pick up one balloon at random, look at the name, and return it to its owner. Within minutes, everyone had been reunited with their original balloon.

The speaker then told the group, "This is what it's like when people are frantically searching for their own happiness in life. People push others aside to get the things that they want that they believe will bring them happiness. However, our happiness actually lies in helping other people and working together as a community."

The Moral:

You will get your happiness if you help other people find theirs. The Dalai Lama says, “If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

Helping others makes us happy because it gives us a sense of purpose

*Taken from <https://www.developgoodhabits.com/inspirational-stories/>

Appendix C

Pre and Post-Intervention Student Survey



Miss Mann's Survey

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this survey. Please answer each question as completely and honestly as you can. This will not affect any of your grades. Thank you again!

Please select any emotion that you have had by checking the boxes below. *

 Exhausted	 Confused	 Ecstatic	 Giddy	 Suspicious
 Angry	 Hysterical	 Frustrated	 Sad	 Confident
 Embarrassed	 Happy	 Mischievous	 Displeased	 Frightened
 Enraged	 Ashamed	 Cautious	 Smug	 Depressed
 Overwhelmed	 Hopeful	 Lonely	 Loved	 Jealous
 Bored	 Surprised	 Anxious	 Shocked	 Shy

Please rate the following activities by how important they are in school. 1 means it is very * important, 3 = somewhat important 5 = not at all important in school.

being kind to others

	1	2	3	4	5	
very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	not at all important

Please rate the following activities by how important they are in school. 1 means it is very * important, 3 = somewhat important 5 = not at all important in school.

asking questions

	1	2	3	4	5	
very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	not at all important

Please rate the following activities by how important they are in school. 1 means it is very * important, 3 = somewhat important 5 = not at all important in school.

getting good grades

	1	2	3	4	5	
very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	not at all important

Please rate the following activities by how important they are in school. 1 means it is very * important, 3 = somewhat important 5 = not at all important in school.

completing your assignments

	1	2	3	4	5	
very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	not at all important

Please rate the following activities by how important they are in school. 1 means it is very important, 3 = somewhat important 5 = not at all important in school.
 building relationships with peers and teachers

	1	2	3	4	5	
very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	not at all important

Please rate the following activities by how important they are in school. 1 means it is very important, 3 = somewhat important 5 = not at all important in school.
 learning social skills

	1	2	3	4	5	
very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	not at all important

Please rate the following activities by how important they are in school. 1 means it is very important, 3 = somewhat important 5 = not at all important in school.
 learning math, English, science, social studies, PE, music, and electives

	1	2	3	4	5	
very important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	not at all important

Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.*
 My actions affect others

	1	2	3	4	5	
agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	disagree

Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements.*
 others' actions affect me

	1	2	3	4	5	
agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	disagree

Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. *
my words affect others

	1	2	3	4	5	
agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	disagree

Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. *
others' words affect me

	1	2	3	4	5	
agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	disagree

Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. *
what I say and do matters to me

	1	2	3	4	5	
agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	disagree

Please share whether you agree or disagree with the following statements. *
what I say and do matters to others

	1	2	3	4	5	
agree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	disagree


Thank you for taking this survey! Please enjoy these smiling animals :)




Appendix D***Teacher Activity Log***

Teacher Log


Fill out this at the beginning of the week for your data!

knmann914@stkate.edu [Switch account](#) 

 Not shared

Today's date

Date

mm/dd/yyyy 

How are you feeling about the day in general?

1 2 3 4 5

Dreading it Excited

Rate your feelings on the scale below

How do you feel about this week's lessons before teaching?

1 2 3 4 5

unprepared confident

Briefly describe the week's SEL activities planned

Your answer

End of Week Reflection

Fill out this form at the end of the week for your data!

knmann914@stkate.edu [Switch account](#)



Not shared

Today's Date

Date

mm/dd/yyyy

How do you feel about how the SEL activities went this week?

1 2 3 4 5

terrible/ the kids weren't
engaged

great!/ the kids did well!

Share any additional information about the above question here

Your answer

How do you feel at the end of this week?

1 2 3 4 5

exhausted/drained

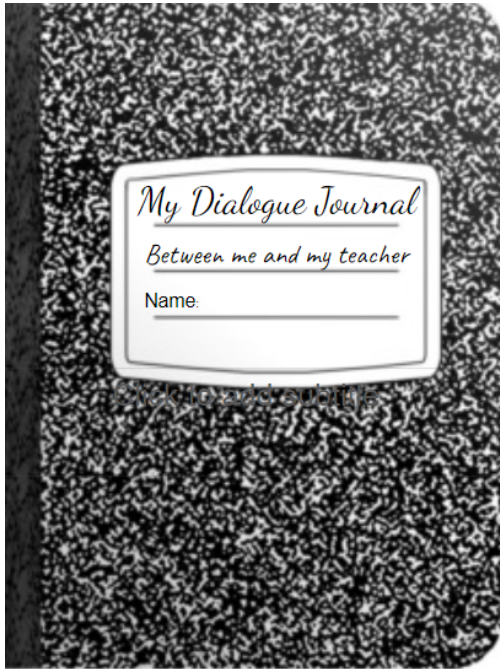
Proud of what you
accomplished this week

Is there any additional information you want to note?

Your answer

Appendix E

Student Dialogue Journals



Date: _____
Writing Prompt: _____

Student Response:



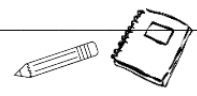
Date: _____
Writing Prompt: _____

Teacher Response:



Date: _____
Writing Prompt: _____

Student Response:



Appendix F

Post-Intervention Student Interviews

We did a couple new things these past few weeks to build relationships with one another and learn about how our emotions can affect ourselves and everyone around us. Can you tell me something you learned from circles or the dialogue journals?

What did you like about circles?

What would you change about circles?

Would you like to do more circles in the future?

What did you like about the dialogue journals?

What would you change about the dialogue journals?

Would you like to continue to do dialogue journals in the future?

Is there anything you would like to add or say more about?

Appendix G

Student Behavior Checklist

Time started: _____

Time ended: _____

Date & Group (class period) _____

Time behavior occurred	Positive Behaviors	Tally	Negative Behaviors	Tally
	Recognizing emotions in self			
	Recognizing emotions in others			
	Using a coping strategy		Losing control of emotions	
	Helping others		Making fun of others	
	Using kind Words		Using unkind words	
Other: Briefly describe here				

Brief field notes/ examples: