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## Teaching Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) in a Pandemic

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## Teaching Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in the Pandemic

### Abstract:

*Teaching social and emotional learning (SEL) has become more common in the American school system, and many districts have adopted curricula or strategies to promote its usage. Research has continued to show that students receive various short- and long-term benefits when SEL is taught in the classroom. However, the COVID-19 pandemic changed how SEL instruction was given, and the implications are far-reaching. The purpose of this study is to describe the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on how SEL was taught. In addition, the study identifies challenges and possible solutions to ensure that SEL is taught during incredibly challenging circumstances.*

### Introduction

Teaching and using social emotional learning (SEL) in a classroom full of diverse learners with various backgrounds requires that the educator know what SEL means, its benefits, and how to teach students to use SEL throughout their day. The benefits of SEL are evidenced by improved academic performance and positive social behavior (Greenburg et al., 2017). Additionally, benefits extend outside the classroom, including into adulthood, as society demands that adults know how to manage stress, work in groups, and get along well with others (Greenburg et al., 2017). Implementing SEL in classrooms has gained recognition across many schools and districts. The purpose of this article is to describe the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on how SEL was taught, discuss barriers, and identify solutions to how SEL can be taught even during challenging circumstances. According to a survey of a nationally representative sample of kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade public school teachers conducted by the RAND Corporation, three-quarters of the respondents received professional development about SEL during the 2018-2019 school year (Hamilton & Doss, 2020). Research shows the benefits and long-term effects of having an SEL curriculum in schools. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an organization that produces scholarly research on SEL implementation and provides resources for educators (CASEL, 2021). CASEL's primary mission is to make evidence-based social and emotional learning part of the preschool through high school curriculum.

Due to the increased risks of the COVID-19 virus, educational practices in the United States were forced to change and adapt to meet the health and safety needs of all school-based educational stakeholders. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) guidelines evolved as the COVID-19 pandemic progressed.

Original guidelines recommended that schools assess risk and close when necessary. When they were in session, schools were supposed to implement social distancing guidelines, proper handwashing, increased cleaning and sanitization efforts, and procedures for handling individual cases with the onset of symptoms (Raspberry, 2020). After the CDC released those guidelines, Education Week magazine compiled and tracked state school closures data. Schools in every state of the United States had closed, and many would remain that way for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Education Week, 2020). The CDC provided additional guidance for in-person learning over the 2020-2021 academic year. In addition to the guidelines for the end of the 2020 school year, the CDC recommended staggered schedules, cohorts, social distancing in classrooms and throughout the entire day, masks, options for virtual and remote learning, and that all staff and students wear masks (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to describe the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on how SEL was taught. In addition, the intention is to identify barriers and solutions to ensure that SEL is taught during incredibly challenging circumstances, such as a pandemic, whether the learning is happening in the physical classroom, virtually, or in a combination of the two settings. One of the authors is also the classroom teacher where this study occurred. She will often be referenced as the teacher-researcher.

The research focused on answering the following three questions: a) What impact did the COVID-19 school guidelines have on the students' understanding of and ability to use SEL skills? b) How can the teacher-researcher develop physical and remote learning SEL practices and SEL lessons to be more effective during the pandemic? and c) How can the teacher-researcher develop the knowledge and mastery of SEL competencies to teach SEL effectively? The answers to the preceding questions assisted with implementing additional adaptations and strategies in the classroom so that students can receive the maximum benefit possible from SEL instruction. While strict COVID-19 guidelines have mostly been removed from classrooms, the reality is that pandemics can and most likely will continue to be a possibility. COVID-19 was not the first pandemic to impact schools; it will likely not be the last. Additionally, the insights gleaned may help practitioners reflect and refine their SEL teaching practices in other challenging circumstances.

## Literature Review

The action research study focused on identifying the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the ability and effectiveness of teaching SEL strategies in the classroom. This research is valuable to the field of education since SEL has been shown to have positive benefits in classrooms, including improved social and emotional competence among students, enhanced academic achievement, and decreased behavioral and emotional problems (Greenberg et al., 2017). The teacher-researcher was compelled to study this topic after witnessing the benefits of SEL in her classroom, yet reading the concerns voiced by educators regarding the inability to teach SEL during the ongoing pandemic (Metcalf, 2020). This literature review examines the theoretical framework that supports teaching SEL in the classroom, schools' responsibilities to their students, and the challenges that schools encounter when filling those responsibilities during a pandemic.

### Theoretical Support for Teaching SEL in Schools

Polyvagal theory is a neurobiological framework developed by Stephen Porges (2017) to understand the role of the autonomic nervous system in regulating social behavior and emotional responses. According to polyvagal theory, the autonomic nervous system (ANS) is composed of three branches, each associated with a distinct set of physiological and behavioral responses: the sympathetic nervous system, the parasympathetic nervous system, and the social engagement system (Porges, 2017). In the context of teaching SEL skills in a P-12 classroom, polyvagal theory can help understand how students may respond to different social situations and stressors. By recognizing the activation patterns of the ANS, educators can create learning environments that promote feelings of safety and calm, which are necessary for optimal social and emotional learning.

Research has demonstrated that the social engagement system is critical for promoting positive social and emotional outcomes in individuals across the lifespan, including children and adolescents in P-12 classrooms. The social engagement system is activated by cues of safety and trust, such as eye contact, facial expression, and prosodic features of voice. When the social engagement system is activated, individuals are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, communicate effectively, and regulate their emotions in a healthy manner (Porges, 2022).

Teaching SEL skills in the classroom can promote the development of the social engagement system and, by extension, engender positive social and emotional outcomes for students. According to a review by Durlak et al. (2015),

school SEL interventions have been associated with improved academic achievement, decreased emotional distress, and decreased behavioral problems. Moreover, a recent study by Travers et al. (2021) demonstrated that an SEL intervention based on polyvagal theory's principles effectively promoted positive social and emotional outcomes in middle school students.

Polyvagal theory supports teaching SEL skills in P-12 classrooms by emphasizing the importance of the social engagement system in promoting positive social and emotional outcomes. Research has demonstrated that SEL interventions in schools can encourage the development of the social engagement system and improve social and emotional competence in students. Recent studies suggest that incorporating the principles of polyvagal theory into SEL interventions may be particularly effective (Porges, 2017). Overall, understanding polyvagal theory can help educators create learning environments that support students' social and emotional development. By promoting feelings of safety and calm, teachers can create the conditions necessary for optimal learning and growth (Porges, 2022).

### **Responsibilities Schools Have to Their Students**

Schools have many responsibilities to their students. One of those responsibilities is preparing them academically, socially, and emotionally to be well-prepared and responsible citizens. Dissemination of research on SEL started in 1997 with the book *Promoting Social and Emotional Learning: Guidelines for Educators* (Elias et al., 1997), which stated 39 concise guidelines with field-inspired examples to see benefits, including improvement in the quality of relationships around children (Elias, 1997). Additional studies found that benefits associated with teaching SEL include improved student grades, academic achievement, student engagement, positive relationships, and positive behaviors. Additionally, there has been found to be less conflict, fewer risky behaviors, declined delinquency, less disruptive behaviors, and lower rates of aggression (Cavioni et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2017; Hoffman, 2018; Lima, 2013; Martinez, 2016; Ross & Tolan, 2017). Furthermore, Greenberg et al. (2017) found that children who participated in SEL programs are more likely to be ready for college, have successful careers, have positive relationships, have better mental health, and be engaged citizens.

Teachers also report personal and classroom benefits from SEL programs. Those benefits include being supported when handling social situations, having a unified way of handling discipline, more explicit and efficient classroom discussions, and teachers' possessing a better understanding of what students are experiencing at school (Haymovitz et al., 2017). Another study found a possible

benefit of using SEL is fewer students receiving special education services and fewer referrals overall (McCormick et al., 2019). Cavioni et al. (2017) found that SEL benefits students with learning disabilities. Specifically, using SEL may reduce the stigmatization that students sometimes experience when receiving special education services. Additionally, SEL promotes good work habits, collaboration, equality, and healthy relationships that positively impact students with learning disabilities. However, teachers must receive training on implementing SEL programs to be fully effective (Haymovitz et al., 2017; Main, 2018; Martinez, 2016).

Dormitrovich et al. (2017) states that SEL programs are a sound investment for schools because they produce young citizens that are caring, responsible, and knowledgeable. These students, no matter their socioeconomic status or special education status, contribute positively to society. Research indicates that teachers need more training on implementing SEL for programs to be fully effective, and training should include modeling of the taught SEL skills (Haymovitz et al., 2017; Main, 2018; Martinez, 2016). CASEL has a multitude of resources that can be used for training purposes. They specifically present core SEL competencies, known as the CASEL 5, that can be taught and applied at all development levels, preschool through adulthood, to enhance students' social and emotional learning. The five core competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Denham, 2018).

Another responsibility that schools have during pandemics is to provide quality education and prevent the spread of diseases if possible (Coombe, 2004; Dooyema et al., 2013; Egger et al., 2012; Ha et al., 2012; Perez et al., 2014). Dooyema et al. (2013) looked at the factors that caused schools to close and how prepared schools were to handle a pandemic. The study found that most schools closed as a reaction rather than prevention. The closures were in response to many staff members and students being out due to sickness. The study concluded transmission rates decreased when schools followed health department guidelines and communicated spread prevention to families in various ways. Egger et al. (2012) looked at H1N1 in New York schools and their responsibility in preventing the spread of the disease. The study found that school closure was a successful strategy to reduce the spread of sickness during a pandemic. It concluded that dismissing schools before a significant illness has spread may be difficult. It may not be feasible to dismiss at the beginning of an outbreak, but waiting to close schools until the outbreak has peaked may limit the effectiveness of the intervention. Coombe (2004) indicated that there are four ways to categorize good practice in the education sector when it comes to breaking the power of a pandemic; they are to 1) contain the virus, 2) provide social support for affected educators and

learners, 3) protect quality education, and 4) create a foundation for action. The quality of education was diminished in areas with a high rate of pandemic cases. One action step should be identifying ways to ensure children receive a quality education in those areas and prepare teachers to handle or address concerns. Schools are also responsible for working with public health officials, adopting preventive measures, and training school personnel on outbreak prevention (Coombe, 2004, Ha et al., 2012; Perez et al., 2014).

### **Challenges Teaching SEL**

Schools face many challenges when teaching SEL during a pandemic. According to CASEL (2020), strategies to teach SEL include cooperative learning and project-based learning, along with direct lessons and modeling on recognizing emotions in themselves and others, conflict resolution, class meetings, participation in team sports, games, and group learning. However, many preventative measures (e.g., social distancing, masks, and partial or complete virtual learning) negatively impact or may diminish the ability to implement the traditionally recommended SEL strategies. By late spring 2020, schools in every state of the United States had closed and would remain closed to in-person learning for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year (Education Week, 2020). The CDC added to their previous 2020-2021 academic year guidelines by recommending staggered schedules, cohorts, social distancing in classrooms and throughout the day, masks, virtual and remote learning options, and that all staff and students wear masks (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; Raspberry, 2020). At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, 52% of students did school virtually, and only 25% went to school in person every day, while 19% had a form of hybrid in-person and virtual learning, creating a barrier to the recommendations on teaching SEL from CASEL (CASEL, 2020; Liesman, 2020).

According to Metcalfe (2020), additional obstacles during the pandemic included a) insufficient time allotted in schedules to teach SEL concepts, b) too few SEL curricula designed for blended or virtual settings, c) a lack of support from families of students of SEL in online school settings, and d) a need for more teachers to deliver online SEL instruction. Kaup et al. (2020) explored the idea that students receiving online-only instruction could virtually watch lectures and collaborate in online discussions. They found that crucial barriers were a lack of student engagement, their mental well-being, and teachers' ability to ensure students use discussion and collaboration to improve problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-directed learning. Zhu et al. (2019) researched conflicts in virtual classrooms. That study determined that emotional expressiveness is an antecedent

to perceived intragroup relational conflict. Therefore, virtual learners with a higher degree of emotional expressiveness are more likely to experience relational conflict, reducing their overall success with virtual learning. Previous studies examined other factors that can exacerbate virtual challenges, such as communication delays, time zone mismatches, personality differences, and absence of face-to-face contact (Bohen & Bailey, 1997; Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Hobman et al., 2002; Zhu et al., 2019).

Another challenge with the pandemic was that only 25% of students participated or attempted in-person learning and were expected to quarantine when necessary, leaving many students at home for virtual or online learning (Liesman, 2020). The lack of in-person instruction is a critical factor because many caregivers were impacted by working from home while overseeing their children's virtual education. Caregivers' work experiences are directly related to their child's health (Almeida & Davis, 2011). Negative experiences adversely impact employees' family lives (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010). One study found that mothers with a more positive mood had children who reported high positive affect, better sleep quality, and longer sleep duration. In contrast, mothers with a more negative attitude had children with higher levels of negative affect and concerning health symptoms (Lawson et al., 2014). Another study found that when work-family enrichment occurs, the positive enhanced mood spills over and leads to increased functioning in the other role, whether that is a better employee or parent (Crain & Hammer, 2013). Another study found that work-family conflicts affect the parent's self-regulatory resources, which causes the child to feel like their overall health is poor and prevents healthy parenting behaviors (Ohu et al., 2016). Part of SEL is that students can self-regulate their emotions and have healthy relationships. However, this becomes significantly more challenging when the student is learning these skills in an environment that may induce dysregulation due to the additional impact of the pandemic on families (Augustyniak et al., 2009; Cavioni et al., 2017; Domitrovich et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2017). Studies on caregiver relationships with students show that a challenge when teaching SEL is the inability to reinforce SEL in the home environment (Metcalf, 2020).

## **Study Description**

### **School and Student Characteristics**

In the 2020-2021 school year, the district where this study took place maintained in-person learning in brick-and-mortar schools. In the specific classroom where the study was done, in-person learning was sustained all year, and neither the teacher-researcher nor the students were quarantined for an unusually



long time. There were instances where some students were quarantined and participated in virtual instruction while others maintained in-person learning. For example, students in quarantine participated in classroom lessons remotely during set times for live teaching and real-time instruction. Continuity of learning was accomplished using Google Meet and Google Classroom. At no point did the teacher-researcher have to quarantine, so educational continuity was maintained for the in-person and virtual students.

The school where this study took place is a Title 1 school in a midsized city in the Midwest. Approximately 90% of the students qualify for free or reduced lunches. Additionally, about 50% of the student body identifies as non-white. The average student-to-teacher ratio is 14 to 1. The studied classroom had sixteen students. Ten of the students were female. Eight students required special education services consisting of co-taught instruction without the need for resource support. The Institutional Review Board granted research approval at the institution where the teacher-researcher was enrolled. Informed consent was obtained through parent permission letters that were sent home. In addition, minor assent forms were obtained by participants. Based on the number of participants that brought back signed parent permission forms and minor assent forms, only nine of the sixteen students participated in the research study. The participatory group consisted of males and females with various racial identities. Students also varied in socioeconomic backgrounds, sexual orientation, religions, and family structures. Student participants varied in where they attended school the previous year; some had previously participated in the virtual academy, which consisted of fully online learning. Some students started the 2020-2021 year as virtual students and later transitioned into a physical classroom. Six of the participants had been on remote learning with the teacher-researcher at some point through the school year.

While teaching SEL had previously been a priority for the school and the teacher-researcher, teaching it during a pandemic required different approaches and adaptations. Some adaptations focused on the way students interacted with each other through collaboration. Others focused on practicing emotional regulation in a classroom where movements and spaces were limited, and students could not share supplies. This delivery and foci differed from the traditional strategies before the COVID-19 guidelines were implemented.

### **Data Collection and Instruments**

Quantitative data collection techniques were the primary research method for this study. After quantitative data was analyzed, qualitative data was collected to provide insight into the quantitative results. This mixed method design included

a strengths and weaknesses survey (see Figure 1 below), a Likert needs assessment (see Figure 2 below), and interviews with select participants. Panorama ED survey data collected by the school district was also examined.

**Figure 1**

*Strengths and Needs Student Survey*

STUDENT SURVEY

**Survey Questions:**

Questions will be answered using a 5-point rating scale appropriate for the section.  
 Questions 1 - 12 Self-Awareness  
 Questions 13 - 19 Self-Management  
 Questions 20 - 27 Social-Awareness  
 Questions 28 - 35 Relationship Skills

1. How clearly are you able to describe your feelings?
2. How sure are you that you can complete the work that your teacher assigns you?
3. When complicated ideas are discussed in class, how sure are you that you can understand what is being discussed?
4. How sure are you that you can learn all of the subjects taught in your class?
5. How sure are you that you will remember what you learned this year in your class next year?
6. How possible is it for you to change being talented?
7. How possible is it for you to change liking the subjects you are learning about?
8. How possible is it for you to change how smart you are?
9. How possible is it for you to change giving a lot of effort?
10. How possible is it for you to change behaving well in class?
11. How possible is it for you to change how easily you give up?
12. How often do you come to class prepared?
13. How often do you follow directions in class?
14. How often did you get your work done right away, instead of waiting until the last minute?
15. How often did you pay attention and ignore distractions?
16. When you were working independently, how often did you stay focused?
17. How often do you set a goal for your learning?
18. How often do you try to think of ways to get better grades at school?
19. How often do you look for things to study outside of what your teacher assigns?
20. How carefully do you listen to your friends' points of view?
21. How carefully do you listen to other people's point of view?
22. How much do you care about other people's feelings?
23. How much do you care about your friends' feelings?
24. How often do you compliment others' accomplishments?
25. How well do you get along with students that are different than you?
26. How much do you ask others about their opinions?
27. How comfortable are you with sharing your opinion with others?
28. How often do you remain calm, even when someone is bothering you or saying bad things?
29. How often do you let others speak without interrupting them?
30. How often are you polite to adults?
31. How often are you polite to other students?
32. How often are you able to keep your temper under control?
33. When others disagree with you, how respectful are you of their views?
34. To what extent are you able to stand up for yourself without putting others down?
35. To what extent are you able to disagree with others without starting an argument?

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**Figure 2**

*Likert Needs Assessment*

STUDENT LIKERT NEEDS ASSESSMENT:

Very Unsatisfied      Unsatisfied      Neutral      Satisfied      Very Satisfied

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neither agree or disagree      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

Please rate how you feel about the following:

1. The self-regulation area in the classroom meets my needs when I am upset.
2. The self-regulation room in the school meets my needs when I cannot be in the classroom.
3. The SEL lessons are engaging.
4. I learn a lot from the SEL lessons.
5. The virtual mindful room is easy to use.
6. The virtual mindful room has many things I can try.
7. Mind-up breathing after transitions helps me get ready to learn.
8. I have coping strategies that I can use at my desk when I am upset.
9. I have tools I need to help me create learning goals.
10. I have tools I need to help me work with a group or partners.
11. I know many ways to help me calm down when I am upset.
12. I know many strategies to help others calm down when they are upset.
13. My teacher lets me use coping strategies during the day at my seat.
14. My teacher lets me take breaks in the self-regulation area.
15. My teacher will call for a refueling break when I need one.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5

The study began with a survey for students to assess their perceived strengths and weaknesses regarding the five core competencies of SEL, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The student survey was administered using Google Forms under the supervision of the teacher-researcher's co-teaching partner. This procedure ensured that students felt no pressure to respond more favorably since their teacher was in the room. The survey was administered in the classroom during the students' arrival time, and all students received their required accommodations. Google Forms was chosen for the survey platform because it was familiar to the students. It also allows for a simplified collection of participant identification since they must log in to Google to participate per a setting in the form. The participant's identity is only accessible to the form's creator, the teacher-researcher. The survey took approximately twenty minutes per student. If a student needed additional time to complete the survey, it was done during the next arrival or dismissal period. There were 35 questions on the student survey. The survey had a 5-point scale for students to use to answer the questions. Questions were grouped by type based on the SEL competency it aligned with, creating four categories of questions. Those categories were self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship skills. A score was generated for each student by averaging the numerical answers to the questions in that category. An overall SEL competency score was generated by averaging the four category scores for each student. This score was used to compare student responses for analysis.

After collecting survey data, a Likert needs assessment was given to participants. This particular Likert Needs Assessment had a five-point scale of varying degrees of smiley faces. It was administered on Google Forms. The Likert Needs Assessment had fifteen questions that focused on satisfaction with self-regulation areas, SEL lessons from the district, virtual mindful room, perception of needed strategies and tools, and perception of teacher support for self-management. It was administered during arrival and dismissal periods of the day, and all IEP and 504 accommodations were followed. Questions were grouped based on the topic to which it was related. Each student was assigned an average score based on the numerical score for each question in each category.

In addition to the survey and Likert Needs Assessment, the district collected Panorama ED data that was also examined. This platform asks students several questions and groups those questions into two category types: SEL skills and SEL supports. It allowed the teacher-researcher to explore changes in scores in those two categories between the previous year and the year of the study. There was exactly one year between the administrations of the Panorama ED surveys. This

data is collected through the district and is part of the district's typical data collection process.

Data from the surveys, Likert Needs Assessments, and Panorama ED were examined, and outlier responses were identified. The teacher-researcher interviewed students with outlier responses to understand why they answered the way they did. Semi-formal interviews were conducted, ensuring that COVID-19 safety guidelines were maintained.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

### **Students' Self-Perception of SEL Competencies**

The following insights emerged from the analysis of all of the data sources. Students' self-perception of their SEL competency was not extremely high or low. Students reported an average SEL score above 3, with the lowest being 3.03 and the highest being 4.2 on a scale of 1 to 5. All but two of the students scored below a 4. A score higher than 3 is considered a favorable response. Students were all aware of SEL competencies. Interestingly, not all SEL instruction came from within the school. Some students reported receiving social and emotional support from family members or therapists outside the classroom. One noteworthy thing to mention is that all the students, except one, scored themselves considerably lower in the area of relationship skills. This area focused on questions such as remaining calm when others are bothering them, keeping their temper, and respecting others' views when disagreeing with them.

Seven of the nine students that participated in the survey had data for Panorama ED. Every student with a Panorama ED data point from the previous year decreased in one category area. The Panorama ED survey splits results into two categories. The first category is labeled SEL Skills. This section has three themes: emotional regulation, self-management, and social awareness. Three of the seven students demonstrated a decrease in SEL skills. In the survey, students self-identified lower relationship skills, and a decrease in relationship skills would decrease SEL skills in a setting where relationships are vital to emotional regulation, self-management, and social awareness.

The second category of questions on the Panorama ED data was labeled as SEL support. These questions focused on teacher and student relationships, rigorous expectations, school safety, and a sense of belonging. Four of the seven students with data showed a decrease in this category. Each of the respondents had lower scores in the area of school safety and a sense of belonging. Interviews with

students said this was due to social distancing, the fear of catching COVID, and the inability to connect with peers or teachers through physical contact. Physical contact was categorized as hugs, high fives, sitting close to each other, and being able to interact without the fear of getting in trouble for breaking safety guidelines. Another aspect that upset students in terms of belonging was the inability to share self-regulation items and materials. Some students said that this highlighted that they didn't have the same ability to obtain these items and that it wasn't an issue in previous years because everyone could share.

### **Self-Regulation Resources**

When students were asked about self-regulation strategies the district SEL program provided, many had issues connecting to the videos describing breathing and other mindful activities. Students given individualized self-regulation strategies by the teacher-researcher or other adults in the building had a higher self-perception of their self-regulating ability. Students who scored lower in this area spoke of self-regulation strategies that depend on peers or adults for co-regulation and visiting other parts of the school or classrooms for breaks. These were rarely viable options for students because of the need for social distancing and remaining in cohorts.

### **Perceptions of School**

Some students reported that school was not a priority because of external factors. Some of these students stated that school was a legal requirement to keep their guardians from being in trouble. Some students felt that school was pointless because of the perception that COVID closed all businesses and "probably would close everything again." Students with a session or more of remote learning reported this more than those that did not engage in remote learning. Students that had previously received remote instruction indicated that they felt that being in school physically was pointless because they could complete assignments at home. Some students did not fully participate during remote learning and often had to be reminded of the expectation that during live instruction, they needed to participate instead of doing preferred activities at home.

### **Practitioner Recommendations**

The insights from the data have been considered and translated into recommendations for teachers implementing SEL instruction. One area that needs to be emphasized more is relationship skills. These relationship skills should include recognizing others' dysregulation, active listening, communicating

effectively, recognizing boundaries, and self-advocating. Additionally, SEL lessons ought to emphasize strategies students can use to remain calm when others are upset. They should also focus on the fight, flight, or freeze response and how to work through that biological response productively and safely. Teachers also need to be more aware of opportunities to teach SEL skills in the classroom as they happen in real-time; this leads to more relevant and authentic examples and instruction. Situations that would allow for the teaching of this skill include peer conflicts, collaborative learning, unstructured segments, and transitions. Furthermore, situations in which a peer is not involved in a peer conflict, such as assessments or difficult academic load, but is still upset could also be an opportunity. These teachable moments can focus on keeping individuals from being emotionally dysregulated when there is conflict involving others in the area.

Another area highlighted in the analysis is that teachers must be mindful of how they interact with students when students violate COVID-19 safety guidelines. When reminded of the guidelines, students felt like they were "getting in trouble." Avoiding physical contact, maintaining social distance, wearing masks when collaborating, and sanitizing personal space require frequent redirection. Students' negative perceptions indicate that the teacher needs to address this concern by re-teaching the plan for the entire class and treating it as a teachable moment rather than punitive. Treating these opportunities as teachable moments establishes a model for effective communication and heightens social awareness. Reminding students that there are interactive alternatives, such as fist bumps, air high fives, and thumbs up, may help increase students' sense of belonging and school safety. Another thing that needs to be considered is asking the school or district to provide individual self-regulation items for students to foster continued and immediate access.

Regarding self-regulation, teachers must focus on providing each student with individualized self-regulation strategies. Strategies could include breathing strategies such as box or mountain breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, positive affirmations, drawing, journaling, or the 5-4-3-2-1 method. Providing individualized strategies will help students use self-regulation strategies that are not dependent on co-regulation. Ideally, it will also engender a sense of belonging because it demonstrates unique care for all students.

Finally, teachers need to intentionally plan lessons around the SEL competency of self-management and social awareness. These lessons should focus on creating goals and acquiring the motivation to achieve those goals. Lessons on social awareness should focus on societal expectations that people graduate high school. Employment opportunities, trade school, and higher education often require

a high school diploma for access. Instead of lecturing on why school is important, focusing on these goals could help students prioritize school. Allowing them to self-motivate will require the teacher to do additional research on resources and strategies to teach these competencies purposefully.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The proceeding content will highlight several limitations of the study and make recommendations for future research. One limitation of this study was the lack of comparison data, which would have allowed the researchers to understand better the pandemic's effects and the influence of SEL learning. A control group would clarify the influence of SEL instruction and how the pandemic impacted SEL instruction. Therefore, future research would add value if there was a control group to compare findings.

Another limitation was that one of the researchers was also a teacher in the classroom. While this duality in roles can be beneficial, it can cause a narrowing in thought since the teacher-researcher is part of the studied system. Replicating this study in a different setting could clarify the generalizability and findings. Additionally, enhancing the qualitative features of the study would allow students' voices to be heard and analyzed, providing a richer understanding of the quantitative data.

### **Final Thoughts**

When examining the data, it is evident that COVID-19 has impacted the students' understanding and use of SEL. Part of teaching SEL is helping students learn to use the SEL competencies to enable their success. Sadly, the pandemic reduced students' ability to use many SEL strategies, negatively impacting their everyday lives. Relationship skills were also affected by COVID-19. Students were not able to interact with a variety of peers or groups. Even in collaborative assignments, students were required to work within the same small group to limit close contact. This limited exposure resulted in less use of relationship skills. Students cannot learn relationship skills if they do not have a variety of interactions and relationships in safe spaces.

Understanding the barriers and the pandemic's effects on teaching SEL to students allows for positive action steps to be taken. The study illuminated several ways teachers can be mindful and intentional when implementing SEL instruction. For instance, teachers should emphasize education's value and long-term importance and the schooling process, particularly in-person instruction, when

possible. Teaching and fostering prosocial relationship skills should be a high priority in the classroom since students often perceive they are lacking in this area. Another area of focus should be training students to effectively navigate biological responses to stress, as posited by the polyvagal theory.

Additionally, lessons should teach students how to develop and achieve goals through sustained motivation; this can be done by looking for authentic classroom experiences to model and teach SEL skills that emphasize self-regulation. Some students may benefit from a more individualized approach to selecting and using self-regulation strategies and tools. Lastly, teachers would benefit from focusing on re-teaching areas that need more support rather than adopting a punitive stance on addressing concerns. Educators can use the tools and information from this action research study to assess the needs of their students and identify solutions to help overcome barriers imposed by the pandemic and other challenging experiences to implement effective SEL instruction.



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