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Let's Talk About It: The Impact of Social Skills in the Classroom

An Action Research Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education

Saint Mary's College of California

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership

By

Joshua R. Garibay

Spring 2020

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This action research project, written under the direction of the candidate's master's project advisory committee and approved by members of the committee, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the Kalmanovitz School of Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership degree.

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## Abstract

Let's Talk About It: The Impact of Social Skills in the Classroom

By

Joshua R. Garibay

Master of Arts in Teaching Leadership

Saint Mary's College of California, 2020

Karl Meyer, Research Advisor

This study was conducted in a northern California Title I, low performing, elementary suburban school. Daniel Goleman's Emotional Intelligence theory and Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory was used in conjunction with Sanford Harmony's social and emotional learning curriculum. The question that guided this research question was: *How might social and emotional learning implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support group, affect problem behaviors in first, second, and third grade students?* Data were collected from 10 participants using a mixed methods approach to create a triangulation of data. Results from two data collection strategies revealed that students overall decreased problem behaviors which include: anxious behaviors, aggressive behaviors, inattentive behaviors, and depressive behaviors. Furthermore, analysis of data disclosed that students increased social skills by participating in a social and emotional learning curriculum. An added observed benefit was an increase in cooperation, relationship, empathy, and problem-solving skills.

## **Dedication**

On July 9, 2019 you left this world. Ever since I was a toddler, you always found a way to provide for me. You gave what little you had, so that I may succeed. During this challenging, sacrificial, and stressful year, you were the reason I continued to fight. Although you are not here to see this research, I know you are present in spirit. Thank you, To you, Grandma. I love you.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

For the past three years, the State of California has made efforts to incorporate more social and emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2019). Though educators may know the benefits of SEL, schools have traditionally directed their curriculum toward academic content such as reading, math, science, and history. Educators have typically been less dedicated to supporting the social and emotional skills, which some would say are just as important to life success. As research supporting SEL continues to grow, SEL has been proven to be essential to student academic success and it should be incorporated in classrooms nationwide (California Department of Education, 2019a).

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of implementing an SEL curriculum is being able to meet student needs. According to Rowe and Trickett (2018), student diversity and characteristic traits play a pivotal role when implementing an SEL curriculum. Just like teaching any other academic subject, all students learn differently from one another. Another problem is the amount of time SEL is being taught in schools. The California Department of Education does not specify how much time is required to teach SEL, thus leading toward an ineffective implementation of SEL on campus.

In my self-contained classroom, I teach students who receive about one hour of SEL a month. While the one hour of SEL may work for some, I have seen it prove meaningless for others. Negative behaviors, bullying, and fighting are all problems that continue to occur; and as these problems present themselves, consequences usually follow. Some common consequences include detentions, office time-outs, trash pick-ups, and recess takeaways. Although consequences are important, the use of a positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) has

proven to be more effective. PBIS has shown to reduce office discipline referrals and improve student behavior, teacher satisfaction, and school climate (Martin, 2013). Another intriguing factor of PBIS is its ability to help improve mental health. When PBIS is implemented, it has appeared to produce additive effects on mental health outcomes including internalizing and externalizing behavior problems (Cook et al., 2015).

One in five children between the ages of eight and 15 experience a mental health condition at some point during their life (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2020). An estimated 12% of children are developing mental illnesses that such as depression, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2020). The statistics rise even more when talking about youth aged 13-18, with 21.4% of youth experiencing mental health concerns (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2020). As I conceptualized this study, I wondered if an SEL curriculum would help students discover the main core competencies of SEL as well as decrease negative student behavior at an urban-suburban elementary school.

### **Statement of the Problem**

At the time of this study, I was a PE teacher at an under-resourced suburban school in the east bay region of San Francisco. In that role, I taught around 600 students in 32 classrooms, and I found that the same problem behaviors continued to occur throughout the school year. I have tried using detention and other types of consequences, but these methods have not been successful. I was interested in trying a different approach to counseling students and have explored several ideas. I wondered if, with the help of staff, implementing a daily SEL curriculum would decrease negative behaviors and conflict.

For the past five years, I have seen a common occurrence with negative behavior and conflict amongst several students. These problem behaviors can occur within the classroom, but a majority of the conflicts arise during recess. According to school district records, in 2019, 1437 of students enrolled in the school district that was the setting for this study were admitted office referrals, and 2551 students in the same district received suspensions. Out of the district-wide referrals and suspensions, 988 occurred throughout elementary school - 532 referrals and 456 suspensions. It has become such a significant issue, that the teaching staff have had to increase supervision during the recess hours of the day.

With the recurring behavior problems my school faces, my concern was that these students may not be receiving the resources they need to take full advantage of an SEL curriculum. Currently, students at my school receive around one hour of SEL training a month. This SEL training usually consists of a school-wide assembly that focuses on teaching students' conflict resolution skills and empathy. Soul Shoppe, an east bay non-profit, has partnered with not only the school in this study, but the entire school district to host the assemblies for elementary students (Soul Shoppe, 2018). Although Soul Shoppe does a good job with the assemblies, there are always a number of students who either choose not to care, or do not understand the lessons. The assemblies are often filled with distractions and the content can be difficult to understand if the student doesn't have the necessary prior knowledge. For example, if Soul Shoppe decides to teach a lesson about empathy, students are expected to know feelings such as frustration, trust, and fear. Many times, when I asked lower elementary students what these feelings are, they were not able to tell me. Hewitt (2015) claims that one of the main reasons that children do not express their feelings, is because we are not teaching them what

feelings are. One hour a month is simply not enough time to expect children to understand what they are feeling as well as to learn to express these feeling appropriately.

My school site has addressed problem behaviors in the same way for the past five years. Detentions, trash pickup, and office time-outs have shown not to work. Students who are disciplined on campus often repeat the same negative actions that got them in trouble in the first place. Even with the Soul Shoppe assemblies, conflict continues to occur. A multi-tiered support model such as PBIS, has connections to school-wide applications of behavior systems and interventions to achieve behavior change in schools (Astor & Benbenishty, 2018). With the integration of SEL presented in the form of a PBIS, students may finally receive the resources they have been missing.

### **Purpose of the Research**

Over the past two decades, peer victimization has been a major health concern for children (Kochenderfer & Ladd 1996). Peer victimization, also known as bullying and peer harassment, can be defined as verbal, physical, or psychological abuse that typically occurs at school (Graham, 2006; Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Because of this issue, there has been increased interest in SEL and PBIS. Bear, Whitcomb, Elias, and Blank (2015) assert that social and emotional learning (SEL) interacts directly with positive behavior interventions (PBIS) in a way that will benefit and support all students. According to Cook and colleagues (2015), mental health issues among elementary aged children have become a growing national concern which has led schools making an effort to promote wellness and prevent problems.

Social emotional learning and so-called “non-cognitive learning” has a robust literature that gives evidence of their importance and efficacy. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is the best source of longitudinal studies in this area of study.

CASEL claims that SEL is more than just a bright idea. SEL has grown to the point where it has become scientifically sound. Through SEL, students can use a realistic approach that can improve the social, emotional, and academic performance for elementary school students throughout the country (CASEL, 2003).

Additionally, SEL strategies have also been shown to provide longer-term benefits for students. Khine and Areepattamannil (2014) point out that policies regarding education and job preparation too often exclude the “critical importance of social skills, self-discipline, and a variety of non-cognitive skills that are known to determine success in life” (p. 91). Amabile and Kramer (2007) argue that investing in teaching emotional management is a cost-effective approach to increasing the quality and productivity of the workforce through fostering workers’ motivation, perseverance, and self-control. Emotions have been shown to have a strong impact on the performance of employees in the workplace. In addition, a growing body of research connects SEL to revamped attitudes about school, social behavior, academic progress, and reductions in anger, mental health issues, and substance abuse (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011)

Furthermore, social and emotional training focuses heavily on peer to peer communication and understanding. It teaches kids how to understand and deal with certain feelings they may not understand yet. One specific strategy that seems promising is the use of nonviolent communication (NVC). NVC involves consciously expressing one's self with clarity, compassion, self-responsibility, empathy, and the common good in mind (Rosenberg, 2002). Observers have pointed out that NVC consists of using direct and nonjudgmental language while also being able to express the needs and feelings of people as opposed to more of a demand from another individual (Rose, 2006). There are findings that by using NVC, conversations with



students are examined to be more rewarding with behaviorally/emotionally challenged students (Rose, 2006).

### **Action Research Question**

This study examined whether the implementation of a social and emotional curriculum used through the form of a positive behavioral intervention impacted problem behaviors. The question that guided this project was: *How might social and emotional learning implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support system group, affect problem behaviors in first, second, and third grade students?* My expectations were that students would emit self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, social awareness, and relationship skills. It was my hope that my students would feel safe and more comfortable discussing personal issues.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this action research project was that I had a small participation group of 10 students. Of the 10 students, there were mixed socio-economic statuses and genders, but there was little variation between age and grade level (1-3). This prevented my ability to distinguish data from upper elementary students grades four and five.

Another challenging limitation to the study was coordinating my staff members in their observations. Classroom teachers, prep teachers, and afterschool program leaders were all considered additional observers. Having to gather their data and input proved to be very difficult to manage in addition to my own.

Furthermore, I cannot ignore the fact that my students did not start with a blank slate of SEL knowledge. The fact that they received SEL training before, might imply that some of the

results I had may have come from the Soul Shoppe lessons instead of my own. Although Soul Shoppe only consisted of one hour a month, it was still considered valuable instructional time.

Perhaps the most impactful limitation to this study was the limited amount of data collected during my research. Due to COVID-19, schools in California were issued a mandatory shelter in place on March 16, 2020. Unfortunately, the shelter in place restrictions continued through the end of the school year, impacting my ability to complete my planned data collection. Even though the data collection period was cut short, I was able to collect data for the four weeks prior to the shelter in place. These limited data are examined in this study.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

As the person conducting this research, I was very conscious of my positionality regarding this study. I grew up in the same community where I conducted this research, and I was very well aware of the social norms and culture that surrounded the community. Because I am an insider in this community, I believed that I had an understanding of what was needed to be successful.

The struggle that I saw in my students was the same struggle that I saw growing up. A strong sense of masculinity, specifically in the area of sports, was part of the culture. Boys never spoke about their feelings, and they never knew how to control their emotions. Conflict was usually handled by fighting, and students never had any kind of remorse for their negative actions.

I often found myself connecting with these students. Because my students and I share a considerable amount of the same childhood cultural norms, I have always been conscious of the different kinds of behavior support strategies. I am acquainted with the way students perceive behavior interventions because of the experiences my peers and I had when we were in school.

The lack of social and emotional skill development that I experienced as a young student is what drives my current stance regarding SEL in school.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Social and emotional learning (SEL).** Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process through which people develop knowledge and skills related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Cressey, 2019).

**Positive behavior interventions and support (PBIS).** Positive behavior interventions and supports evolved to improve and extend comprehensive interventions for individuals with severe problem behavior and developmental disabilities (Carr, 1999).

**Recess.** Recess is the scheduled time children get to experience physical, cognitive, and social, and emotional benefits, engage with peers, usually on playgroup equipment, that is monitored by teachers, administration, and staff. Many middle schools also offer a recess to provide students with a sufficient opportunity to consume quick snacks, communicate with their peers, visit the restroom, study, and various other activities (Tran, Clark, & Racette, 2013).

**Culture.** Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other, as conditional elements of future action (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952).

**Non-violent communication.** Non-violent communication (NVC) is a form of communication that is compassionate. NVC creates human connections that empower

compassionate giving and receiving. It also creates governmental structures that support compassionate giving and receiving. (Rosenberg, 2002).

### **Implications**

A successful implementation of an SEL curriculum could significantly decrease problem behaviors. Perhaps with a partnership of a PBIS group, students will also be more receptive to improving overall mental health. Students who have a negative viewpoint on receiving help could be encouraged to challenge their insecurities and take the first step in receiving aid.

This research also has the power to inform faculty and staff members the usefulness of SEL. It has the potential to show educators the benefits of incorporating SEL on a daily basis. It can guide teachers and give them the proper knowledge of how to incorporate positive lessons that are easy to do in their own classrooms.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, it has the potential to equip the students with a skillset that will be beneficial for the rest of their lives. With the experiences and lessons learned throughout this study, it is possible that my students will be able to understand and control their emotions in a way that will collectively decrease conflict amongst themselves and others, years beyond childhood.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

The purpose of this action research study was to evaluate the impact of social and emotional teachings for lower elementary students in grades 1 through 3. As students participated in this action research study, it was important to recognize and implement an instruction that will teach the five core competencies of social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, social awareness, and relationship skills. Research supports teaching an SEL curriculum, suggesting that students have shown to decrease behavior problem behaviors with the teachings of a social and emotional curriculum (Bracket & Rivers, 2014). With mental health issues rising each year, there is a need for SEL in schools. Additionally, students who have shown to display physical aggression and violence have seen to significantly benefit from an SEL program that teaches empathy, communication, and critical thinking (Espelage, Low, Polanin, & Brown, 2013). Therefore, the guiding question of this research was: *How might social and emotional learning implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support group, affect problem behaviors in first, second, and third grade students?*

#### Overview of the Literature Review

It is necessary to understand how a PBIS group and social skills can work together to decrease problem behaviors. First, Goleman's emotional intelligence theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is explained as it relates to decreasing negative behaviors. Second, the literature reviewed explores disruptive student behaviors followed by behavioral strategies that help support problem behaviors. Finally, the review of literature includes an analysis of how integrating social skills is a benefit for students. The majority of research studies were retrieved

from online databases such as EBSCOhost and Google Scholar. The key terms used in database searches included: *social emotional learning AND positive behavioral interventions and supports, behavior problems in the classroom, behavior problems outside the classroom, emotional intelligence theory, sociocultural theory, and social skills.*

### **Theoretical Rationale**

The two theories that framed this action research project were Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence theory and Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. In 1995, Goleman published *Emotional Intelligence* which helped pave the way for an ever-evolving SEL curriculum in schools. Even today, his work continues to help shape the way SEL is emphasized throughout education. While Goleman's studies helped prove that SEL is beneficial to students, Vygotsky's theories have shown to be just as successful. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has been considered one of the dominating theories in the field of education. Although sociocultural theory does not specifically promote SEL like Goleman's emotional intelligence, it plays a pivotal role in understanding the students' cognitive development during this action research project.. Both Goleman and Vygotsky's theories include the idea of intellect being connected to factors other than the brain. Emotional Intelligence and sociocultural theory both connect in the cultural aspect of learning; and while social and emotional learning may include culture, there are many other factors that contribute to understanding the process of this action research process.

**Emotional intelligence theory.** The action research question of this thesis was strongly influenced by Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence theory. Goleman proposed that individuals have a different way of being smart and that intelligence is social and emotional (Goleman, 1995). The history of this concepts started with psychologists Salovey and Mayer

(1990) documenting aspects of intellect. When thinking of the history of intelligence, Salovey and Mayer (1990) focused on cognitive factors like solving problems and retaining memory. Salovey and Mayer (1990) believed that emotional intelligence is a type of social intellect that includes the ability to track self and peer feelings and emotions. Emotional intelligence has also been linked to knowing how and when to express emotion as well as controlling it. It is the ability to control feelings and manage stress levels for individuals in need.

In addition, Goleman (1995) believed that emotional intelligence had five main components: self-awareness, self-regulation, internal motivation, empathy, and social skills. Goleman also argued that emotional intelligence is just as important as intelligence quotient (IQ) (Goleman, 1995). Scientists have also recognized at an early stage that non-cognitive factors were just as significant as cognitive aspects of learning. American psychologist, David Wechsler once said that intelligence is the total effort of an individual to act with purpose, think rationally, and deal effectively with their environment. (Wechsler, 1958)

Goleman (1995) also explains that emotional intelligence plays a huge role in education. Goleman understood that students' emotional skills relate heavily to academic success. In the field of education, emotional intelligence incorporates skills like being able to resist impulsivity or delaying gratification in pursuit of a long-term goal. The traits that are promoted through emotional intelligence, such as persistence and zeal, have shown to increase scholastic assessment test (SAT) scores. In brief, of all the qualities that emotional intelligence focuses on, developing character is said to be at the forefront of it all (Goleman 1995). Emotional intelligence relates directly with this action research project because the teachings of social skills share similar traits. Having the ability to focus on feelings and emotions plays a pivotal role in how emotional intelligence is incorporated in the intervention.

**Sociocultural theory.** Sociocultural theory characterizes learning and developing as being embedded in social events, and as learners interacting in the collaborative environment with other people, objects and events (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020). Furthermore, sociocultural theory supports the belief that human cognition must be developed by engaging in social activities and social interactions. When considering teaching students, it is near impossible to separate cognitive development from the social, cultural, and historical contexts and kind of learning (Javadi & Tahmasbi, 2020). Sociocultural theory also acknowledges that cultural instruments such as language, objects, signs and symbols make for a unique human form of higher-level thinking (Wang, Bruce, & Hughes, 2011).

According to Vygotsky, the process of cognitive learning occurs twice: first on a social level and later on an individual level. In other words, it first happens interpersonally through the interactions of others, and then it occurs intrapsychologically through the mind of the individual (Vygotsky, 1978). At the center of sociocultural theory is the belief that intelligence is not given but rather gained through real life experiences that hold purpose and meaning to the learner, and others (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). With a focus on social interaction and environment, sociocultural theory relates directly to this action research project. Through the teachings of social skills, sociocultural theory plays a critical role in understanding how students will learn to interact amongst each other in a positive way.

### **Review of Related Research**

This section will focus on how problem behaviors occur within school as well as prior research that incorporates social skills in the classroom and support groups for students who exhibit problem behaviors. The review of related research is organized into three sections; behavior, behavioral supports, and social skills. Each of the three sections includes a summary of



the relevant literature and a discussion of the connection between existing scholarship and this action research study. These topics were chosen because they help understand why problem behaviors occur, the benefit of incorporating social skills in the classroom and how created support groups are necessary.

**Disruptive student behavior.** In 2019, approximately eight million children were diagnosed with mental health disorders in the United States (National Alliance on Mental Health, 2020). In a classroom of 25 students, the chances are high that at least one or two students are dealing with mental issues of trauma related to poverty, domestic violence, abuse, and neglect. In many ways, it is important to understand the perspective that teachers have on behaviors as well as the behaviors that occur outside the classroom.

*Teachers' perspective on disruptive behaviors in the classroom.* Nash, Schlösser, and Scarr (2016) conducted two studies which focused on teachers' perceptions of disruptive behavior. The researchers wanted to understand the psychological aspects related to disruptive behavior and how understanding those psychological aspects may help further unpack challenging student behavior. According to Nash and colleagues (2016), disruptive behavior is any behavior that is sufficiently off-task in the classroom. Nash and colleagues (2016) discussed how disruptive behavior within the classroom is one of the greatest stressors that teachers have to deal with. According to Nash and colleagues (2016), pupil misbehavior is the number one reason for half of those leaving the teaching profession within their first four years of teaching. With disruptive behavior being an issue in the classroom, Nash and colleagues argued that attachment theory could be the start to addressing some of the key issues that teachers face within the classroom.

Nash and colleagues' (2016) first study included a survey which asked teachers if they understood what attachment theory was. Nash and colleagues used attachment theory as the psychological framework for understanding what drives disruptive behavior. The survey also included asking teachers if attachment theory had any impact on classroom management regarding disruptive behavior. A total of 548 primary and secondary schools located in England participated in this study. Out of the 548 schools, 426 schools participated in a postal questionnaire and the remaining 122 schools took part in the survey via website SurveyMonkey.

For the first study, Nash and colleagues found that 104 out of 460 postal questionnaires were completed and returned. Out of those who answered the survey, only a minority of respondents reported that they had received training in attachment theory. Most participants had never heard of attachment theory before. In addition to not knowing about attachment theory, a low number of teachers believed that attachment theory had an effect on classroom management regarding disruptive students. Most teachers did not believe that attachment theory had any relevance to classroom management.

Nash and colleagues' (2016) second study involved asking the following questions:

- 1) To what extent do primary and secondary school teachers think that pupils can control their disruptive behavior at school?
- 2) To what extent are teachers aware that disruptive behavior is a means of communicating the pupil's personal emotional turmoil?

The second study of Nash and colleagues had interesting results which concluded that many teachers felt that pupils can mostly control or have total control over their behavior. The researchers pointed out that if teachers made the assertion that if students are thought be controlling their own behavior, then they liked believed that students must be purposely choosing

to be disruptive at school. The logic of this thought is that students must be disciplined in order know the consequences of their negative behavior.

Nash and colleagues conclude their research by claiming that there is a need for school staff awareness of the psychological underpinnings of disruptive behavior. The researchers state that there is a need for basic compassionate human interaction, in supporting and nurturing the most vulnerable members of the school community (Nash et al., 2016). Nash and colleagues also claim that there is a need for further research in developing more compassionate and nurturing approaches to behavior management.

*Understanding disruptive behaviors and conflict during recess.* With negative behaviors occurring inside the classroom, it is common for those same behaviors to travel outside the classroom onto the playground. Warren and Anderson-Butcher (2005) conducted a study which focused on aggressive behaviors of elementary school boys during three successive recess periods. The researchers wanted to see if the aggressive behavior would spread to other recess periods throughout the day.

According to Warren and Anderson-Butcher (2005), students are more likely to experience bullying and aggressive behavior during the recess periods of the day as opposed to inside the classroom. One way to remove problem behaviors form recess is to eliminate recess entirely, but recess has often served as a benefit to increase social skills, relationship building, and problem-solving skills (Warren & Anderson-Butcher, 2005). With conflict occurring so rapidly throughout the day, it is vital to understand that aggressive behaviors and bullying has led to a growing need of social skill interventions. (Warren & Anderson-Butcher, 2005)

In Warren and Anderson-Butcher's (2005) study, aggressive playground behaviors were observed during recess periods for an urban Title I elementary school. Approximately 450

children attended the school, and a checklist was created for the students every time they attended recess. The checklist included observing aggressive behaviors such as hitting, kicking, pushing, tackling students, throwing objects, and offensive language. Any time one of these behaviors were observed, the research would track it and compare throughout different recess periods.

Warren and Anderson-Butcher (2005) found that the second recess period mediates a relationship through aggressive behaviors between the first and third recess periods. Ultimately, the findings support the hypothesis that peer contagion in aggressive behaviors occurs between successive recess periods at school. The researchers also found that group interventions such as controlled recess activities made a positive difference in negative behavior. In conclusion, Warren and Anderson-Butcher (2005) believed that aggression and negative behavior would stop traveling to other recess periods if the behavior were identified at an earlier time. The researchers also felt that if a group intervention was initiated sooner, a more positive behavior experience would occur.

**Behavioral supports.** In many cases of schools experiencing negative behavior, educators will often incorporate support plans to help deal and monitor aggressive behavior. Lewis, Powers, Kely, and Newcomer (2002) decided to focus their research on reducing problem behaviors on the playground, because most incidents occur during recess time. The purpose of this research was to investigate the efficacy of positive behavior supports prevention during the recess periods. Due to the lack of adequately trained staff, recess supervision, structure, and safety are all diminished components of the recess period (Lewis, Powers, Kely, & Newcomer, 2002). The team targeted the positive behavior supports as early as possible or as fast as the rate at which problem behavior occurred. This study makes the effort to point out that one of the

greatest challenges for a teacher can be managing student behavior. With respect to the high management issues, a report indicated that one in 10 American schools had a least one serious violent crime in the previous school year, and 57% reported that one or more of those incidents involved the police department (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). It has been a common theme to see problem behaviors in the classroom and recess. Lewis and colleagues decided that there was a need to implement an early prevention program; a program designed to build on social skills and reduce problem behavior. They also decided to implement individualized support plans that would allow them to practice positive behavior.

In the Lewis et al. (2002) study, all students who were in grades kindergarten through sixth were participants. The suburban elementary school had about 450 students. Prior to and during this study, the school was part of an ongoing process to implement a schoolwide positive behavior support system (Lewis et al., 2002). The intervention consisted of two components, teaching rules and desired behaviors, and group contingency. While teaching rules and desired behaviors, members of the team would create social skill lessons that incorporated the school rules, such as being kind, being cooperative, and being peaceful. When it came to incorporating group contingency, members created a system that allowed teachers to hand out tokens to classes. A token represented that a classroom was following appropriate behavior. If a classroom eventually gained enough tokens, the classroom would be given candy or be rewarded with an extra recess period throughout the week.

Lewis and colleagues found the rewarding results of their intervention. The results indicated to the research team as well as the staff, that these interventions were successful in reducing problem behaviors. In addition to reducing negative behaviors during recess, the results contributed to the notion of a schoolwide positive behavior support intervention working. In

conclusion, the researchers suggest that their study supports the usefulness of social skills programs being paired with day-to-day strategies used in the classroom. Moreover, they concluded that it is better to incorporate positive interventions to address problem behaviors, rather than penalize students for their actions.

Teerlink, Calderella, Anderson, Richardson and Guzman (2017) also conducted a study which focused on the growing concern of school violence caused by bullies. While witnessing these problem behaviors, the researchers questioned if using peer praise notes would be effective in making a difference in behavior. During recess, students are presented with the opportunity to spend time and work together. According to Teerlink and colleagues, recess provides students with an opportunity to improve social skills and team work. Recess also has been associated with improving learning in the classroom as well. Students who are allowed the time for recess have shown to be more focused and engaged in the classroom (Teerlink, Calderella, Anderson, Richardson, & Guzman, 2017). The researchers made an effort to point out that recess supervision is becoming more commonly supervised by classified staff as opposed to certified staff members who have more training experience with students and conflict management.

Because of the widespread problems of inadequate supervisors and inappropriate behavior, Teerlink and colleagues (2017) implemented a peer praise note program which allowed students to help monitor behavior amongst their peers and themselves. In addition to enabling students to evaluate themselves, the program shifted the traditional focus from “stop” and “do not” negative behaviors to a “do” and “keep doing” positive attitude (Teerlink et al., 2017). The participants included 462 students from a Title I school located in a suburban school district in the Western region. The procedures of this study involved choosing 12 to 15 students a week throughout a 34-week span. Each week, different students were selected to be "peer praisers"

which involved going out during recess to seek out positive behaviors such as being safe, being responsible, and being respectful.

During the course of research, Teerlink and colleagues (2017) established that students found the positive peer notes to be rewarding, especially if they had the opportunity to become a peer praiser. The researchers agreed that the use of a positive behavior support such as peer praise notes was an effective strategy to decrease problem behaviors. Not only did it help improve behavior, it also helped increase positive peer interactions as well as helped promote school rules on a more regular basis. The level of office detention referrals also decreased throughout the study which indicated that the intervention was working to decrease bad behaviors. In conclusion to this study, Teerlink and colleagues argued that it is important for all students to receive all of the potential benefits of a positive recess experience.

James Cressey (2019) also conducted a study that focused on developing culturally responsive social, emotional, and behavioral supports. The researcher's study sought to provide evidence of what a multiyear process/system looks like while incorporating social, emotional, and behavioral supports. According to Cressey (2019), positive behavior interventions (PBIS) have shown to help modify behaviors, which in turn can be used to promote social and emotional learning (SEL) skills such as relationship building, social awareness, and personal reflection. Although research in the past has often studied SEL and PBIS separately, Cressey (2019) challenged to blend the two together for his research.

Participants in Cressey's (2019) study were students and staff in a bilingual Spanish/English elementary school in an urban/suburban school district in the Northeast. Around 681 students attended the school. Cressey (2019) conducted this study over a three-year timeframe. The first year, the researcher focused on building a new system for the school. He

along with the teachers at the school decided to use a PBIS approach because of past experience and easy availability. They also decided to create a schoolwide evaluation tool that was given to teachers to complete throughout the school year. After creating the systems and the teams to implement the strategies, Cressey moved on to start thinking about the next year. Year 2 was focused on introducing those targeted support systems in the classroom. The strategies that were created in the first year were now being used in every classroom on campus. By the time Cressey and the teachers got to the third year, the research team was trying to improve upon what they already had created.

Once the study ended, Cressey (2019) found that in order to promote SEL effectively in the classroom, educators must be prepared to face many complex challenges. He also found himself faced with very limited resources to work with. In conclusion, Cressey observed that when a school brings a large variety of social emotional, and behavioral needs, the educators must be willing to adapt to needs of their students. Educators must look at a variety of intervention strategies which include individualized supports.

**Social skills.** As social and emotional education continues to grow, the research of incorporating social skills in school are become more available. Anderson-Butcher partnered with researchers Newsome and Nay to conduct a study which focused on the hypothesis of social skills significantly decreasing behavior problems during recess (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Nay, 2003) This study highlights the lack of supervision during recess as well as the negative viewpoints that students have during recess periods. The uncontrolled aggressive behavior displayed during recess was shown to ruin the recess experience for students (Anderson-Butcher, et al., 2003). Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, and Nay (2003) also claim that due to the amount of unsupervised problems that occur during recess, it is necessary for students to build social skills.



Many times, even if teachers are present during a conflict at recess, they only intervened if absolutely necessary (Anderson-Butcher et al., 2003).

Anderson-Butcher et al.'s (2003) study took place in an urban elementary school located in Salt Lake City with approximately 462 students attending the school. Similar to Warren and Anderson-Butcher's (2005) study, Anderson-Butcher et al. (2003) decided to target 12 behaviors based on school rules. These behaviors included hitting, pushing/shoving, kicking/tripping, verbal abuse, throwing objects, playing chase, standing on equipment, twisting swings, tying people with ropes, climbing on equipment, tackling, and swinging upside down. In addition to tracking the targeted behaviors, the number of recess supervisors each day were also recorded as well as the students' overall attendance for the study. The researchers tallied behaviors in three phases with each phase including two sets of treatment: baseline data and social skills intervention data.

At the end of their study, the baseline data appeared to have increasing amounts of problems over a period of time. However, when students received social skills intervention, the results were opposite indicating that the negative behaviors decreased. The researchers also emphasized the importance of intervention programs during recess where problematic behaviors are prevalent. Perhaps the most significant take away is that problem behaviors decrease significantly when students receive social skills intervention.

## **Summary**

In conclusion, the two theories that provided a rationale for this action research project were Daniel Goleman's (1996) emotional intelligence theory, and Lev Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. The studies examined in the review of related literature address behavior,

social skills, and behavior supports which are all valuable tools in supporting social and emotional learning in the classroom.

Using the prior research as a guide for future practice, this review of literature has explored teacher's perspectives on behavior as well as being understanding disruptive behaviors outside the classroom. Furthermore, the prior research provides encouraging findings with regard to teaching social skills as well as the benefits of allowing strategic supports interventions for problem behaviors. The next chapter will describe the methods used to conduct this action research project. Information such as school setting, subject population, school demographics, and data collection techniques will be thoroughly presented.

## Chapter III

### Methods

Emotional self-awareness is the building block of the next fundamental emotional intelligence: being able to shake off a bad mood. (Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*)

Consistent and convincing data have shown that mental health needs are not being met for the school age population; and although mental health services are readily available outside of a school setting, those services are hardly utilized (Mathur et al., 2017). Untreated mental health concerns have been seen in the form of juvenile delinquency, comprised physical health, substance abuse and underemployment (Mathur et al., 2017). Although mental health issues have a negative impact on health, the idea of incorporating social and emotional learning is an area of education that seems promising for students (Biber, 2020).

The purpose of this research is to investigate ways to address the problem behaviors that occur during an educational setting. Implementation of an SEL curriculum has been shown to reduce negative behaviors as well as support mental health concerns (Cook, 2015). By integrating a positive behavioral support such as SEL, students will have the opportunity to learn about the negative feelings that occur so frequently. The goal of this action research study was to explore the impact of a social and emotional curriculum on student-to-student conflict and negative behaviors. Therefore, my action research question was: *How might social and emotional learning implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support group, affect problem behaviors in first, second, and third grade students?*

### Setting

This study took place in a transitional kindergarten through fifth-grade low income Northern California public suburban school. The 2014 School Accountability Report Card (SARC) reported that the school met overall adequate yearly progress (AYP), a measure of

growth that is determined by individual states for schools receiving Title I funds, financial assistance for schools with high percentage of children from low-income families.

During the time of this study, there were no gifted and talented education (GATE) programs on campus. There were, however, three special day classes that specialized in autism. These three classrooms include grades K-1, grades 2-3, and grades 4-5. According to the 2018-2019 California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) only 19% of students in grades 3-5 met or exceeded grade level standards in language arts, and 13% met or exceeded grade level standards in math (California Department of California, 2019b). The data show that the school is a low-performing school, according to California state standards. Even though the school was underperforming, it was able to meet AYP because they showed adequate increases scores. In this case, the school was recognized for making progress in the right direction while still underperforming. According to CAASPP, only 6% of English learners in the district met or exceeded grade-level expectations in math and only 7% in language arts, indicating they are the most disadvantaged group of students.

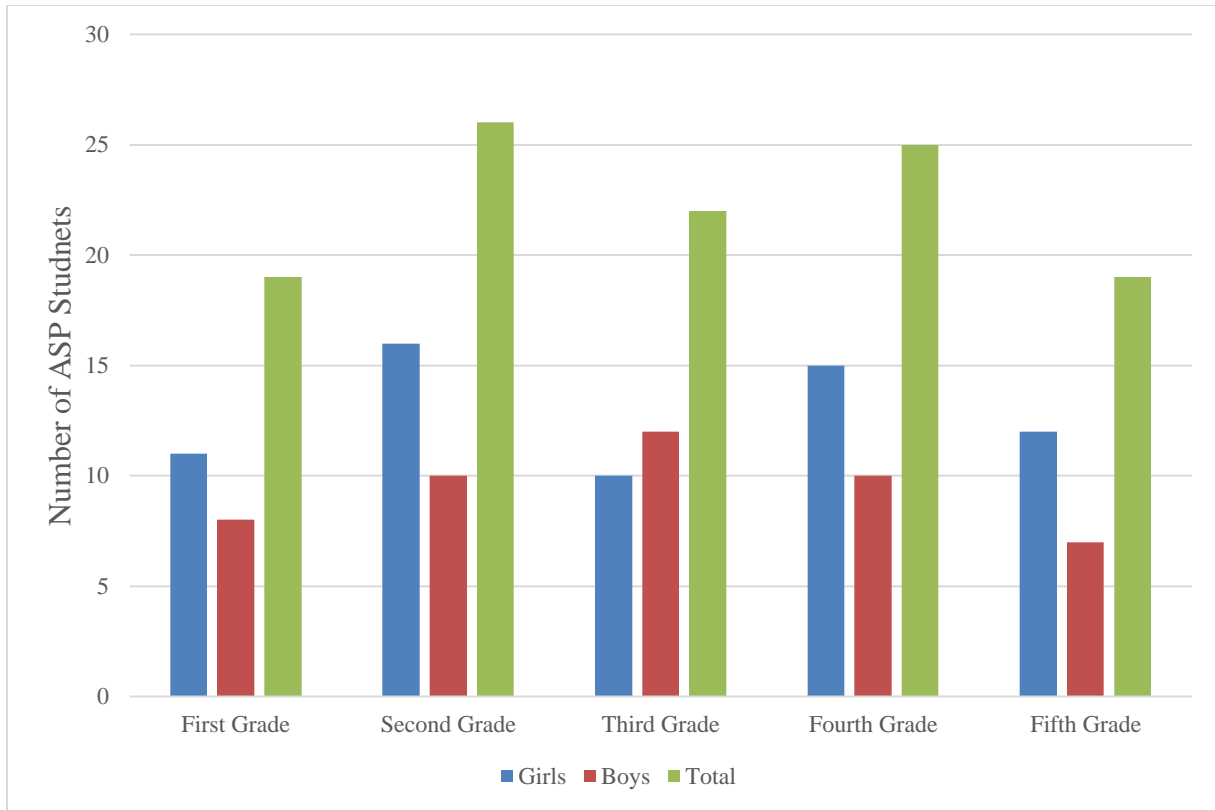
The school has also been one of two elementary schools within the district to allow dual immersion (DI) instruction. The dual immersion program started in 2014 and consists of classes taught in both English and Spanish. This program starts in kindergarten and goes through 12th grade amongst the district. There are currently 12 DI classrooms on campus with two classrooms at every grade level. If the students decide to continue through the dual immersion program after elementary school, they are automatically enrolled to a junior high school and high school that will allow them to continue the DI program. According to California Department of Education (CDE) 49% of student population were English language learners (ELLs) (California School Dashboard, 2019). The California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores also

indicated that the highest percent of language learners (42%) were identified at the intermediate level, followed by early advanced (25%) and only 4% were at the advanced level (California School Dashboard, 2019).

At the time of this study, there were 705 students in total enrolled at the school. This included: 80% Hispanic, 5% African American, 4% White, 3% Filipino, 2% Asian, and 5% two or more races (California School Dashboard, 2019). Out of the population of teachers, 33 teachers held a clear teaching credential while two teachers were still in the process of completing their credentials (SARC, 2019). The school employed a total of 36 teachers, comprised of 31 females and 5 males. With the site being a dual immersion institute, many teachers hold a Cross-Cultural Language and Academic Development (CLAD) certification, authorizing them to teach the English learner (EL) population. Furthermore, many of the teachers carried a Bilingual Cross-Cultural Language and Academic Development (BCLAD) credential to be able to teach Spanish and English simultaneously in the DI classrooms.

### **Demographics of Classroom**

Since I do not see a specific classroom every day, I recruited my participants from those students who attend the afterschool program. There was a total of 125 students in the after-school program (ASP). Students who are selected to attend the after-school program are chosen from a lottery system. Each year, the ASP coordinator is responsible of filling up to 25 spots for first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade. This year, there were 19 students in first grade, 26 students in second grade, 22 students in third grade, 25 students in fourth grade, and 19 students in fifth grade (Figure 1). In first grade, there were a total of eight boys and 11 girls. Second grade had 10 boys and 16 girls. Third grade consisted of 12 boys and 10 girls. Fourth grade had 10 boys and 15 girls, and fifth grade had 7 boys and 12 girls (Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Total number of students by grade level and gender in the after-school program. (N=111).

During this study, I was able to work with a total of 10 students in grades 1-3. Of the 10 students, eight were male (80%) and two were female (20%). In first grade, I had four males and one female. In second grade, I worked with three males and one female, and in third grade, I worked with one male student. Of the 10 students chosen for this research, 70% were Hispanic, 20% White, and 10% African American. Of the students who were selected for participation in this action research project, 70% were English language learners. Every student who was selected for this study shared a common factor: they had attained one or more written referrals in the after-school program. Any behavioral data gathered from the school day was not used during the recruitment process. Only students who had received referrals during the afterschool program were considered for participation in the study.

**Data Collection Strategies**

This action research study used a total of two data collection instruments to examine the effects of social and emotional learning. The first tool used was a behavior checklist which was used to track negative and positive behaviors throughout the day (Appendix A). The second data collection tool were student drawings (Appendix B) which were used to assess the social and emotional learning curriculum. In order to achieve triangulation in data collection, three unique perspectives were solicited during data collection: the classroom teacher, the after-school program youth development leader, and myself. Both data collection strategies produced quantitative and qualitative data that were later calculated at the time the intervention was canceled due to the COVID 19 pandemic.

**Behavior checklist.** A behavior checklist was created with the intent to monitor student behavior daily (Appendix A). With the implementation of an SEL curriculum, I needed a way to assess if the program was working. The checklist includes five main behavior categories: anxious behaviors, aggressive behaviors/disruptive behaviors, inattentive behaviors, depressive behaviors, and social skills. For every category of behavior, the checklist had several positive or negative behaviors associated with it. Of the five categorical behaviors, four of them were considered to be negative: anxious behaviors, aggressive behaviors/disruptive behaviors, inattentive behaviors, and depressive behaviors. The remaining categorical behavior, social skills, was the only behavior that was deemed positive. Once the intervention started, the behavior checklists were given to the participants' classroom teachers and after school program youth development leaders (YDL) to assess behaviors.

Every day, the classroom teachers and YDL would complete a behavior checklist for each participant. The checklists were available in two ways: electronically and hardcopy. If the teacher or YDL completed the checklist in hardcopy, I would wait until the end of the week to

collect the checklists together. If the teacher or YDL decided to complete the behavior checklist electronically, the responses were automatically sent to me and stored securely online.

Each behavior category has a list of specific behaviors that educators will be able to check either yes or no. Every day, the teacher and YDL would go about teaching their day-to-day curriculum. Every time a particular behavior was noticed, the teacher and YDL would note that particular behavior and continue teaching. If the same behavior was noticed more than once, it still counted as one behavior observed during the day. It is important to note that both teacher and YDL were informed to keep the behavior checklists confidential. The only people that knew of the checklists were the parents of the participants, the classroom teachers, YDL, and the researcher. In order to maintain confidentiality and honest results, it was important that the students did not know about the checklists.

**Student drawings.** Illustrations were created by the students and completed at the end of each instructional unit (Appendix B). With support from Sanford Harmony, the SEL curriculum that I decided to use during this research, I created prompts that the students would have to complete in the form of a picture (Appendix C). I decided that by allowing my students to draw pictures, I would be able to receive more honest responses. I also wanted to meet the needs of my students whose reading comprehension and writing skills were limited.

The prompts were created with the following factors in mind: diversity and inclusion, empathy and critical thinking, communication, problem solving, and peer relationships. When designing the prompts, I looked closely with Sanford Harmony instructional unit goals. Each unit in the Sanford Harmony curriculum included a list of student goals that were supported by the curriculum. My prompts consisted of asking students to draw a specific scene in a way that would indicate if the learning goals were met.



I also developed a rubric (Appendix D) to objectively evaluate the drawings. The purpose of the rubric was to assess the overall learning of my intervention. Sanford Harmony's curriculum was not consistent in their way of assessing student learning. The Sanford Harmony curriculum initially had worksheets that could be used as a form of assessment, but the worksheets were not included in every lesson or unit. Because of the irregularities of Sanford Harmony's assessments, I decided to create my own that was interconnected with my research.

The rubric included the following categories: cooperation, relationships, empathy, and problem solving. I chose these categories based on the idea of reducing conflict amongst students. Along with these categories, I created a scale with the following zones: developing, approaching, and mastery. By using the rubric, I was able to assess the work that my students created in relation to my action research question.

## **Procedures**

This study was initially intended to take place over an eight-week period of time, from mid-February to early April. However, the innovation phase of the research was only implemented a total of four weeks. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, the school district announced an emergency shelter in place, resulting in incomplete data collection. With the shelter in place being implemented, the intervention resulted in started in mid-February and ending in mid-March. Part of designing the program included implementing three different phases: the pre-intervention phase, the intervention phase, and the post-innovation phase.

**Pre-intervention phase.** During the pre-intervention phase, the first step I took was to create a parent letter. The parent letters were not necessarily created to ask permission to participate in the program, but rather ask the parent their permission to gather data on the

participants. Once I delivered the letters, I had to wait a couple of weeks to receive the letters back.

I also consulted with the principal and after school program coordinator to gather baseline data of behavior reports. The data I received were used to select my participant group. Any lower elementary student who attended the after-school program, who had one or more written referrals during the after-school program, was selected as a participant. These data also served as a baseline of behavioral data that would later be used to show the overall growth in my SEL curriculum. In addition to gathering the behavior data, I took the time to create the behavior checklist and drawing rubric. The checklist and rubric took a few weeks of editing before finally coming to fruition. Both checklist and rubric would later play a huge role in how the entire data collection is process and viewed.

Before the implementation of the intervention, I also had to consult with the classroom teachers and after school program leaders. I first had to make sure that they were willing to participate, but I also wanted to make sure they understood how to use the behavior checklist. Although I was teaching the SEL lessons four times a week after school, I was not present with the participation group throughout the school day, so it was critical that teacher feedback was accurate and honest.

**Intervention phase.** The goal of teaching social and emotional skills was to decrease problem behaviors. By this phase, I utilized the SEL curriculum Sanford Harmony to conduct lessons to my students. Sanford Harmony is a free online SEL curriculum designed for students in grades pre-K through 6. I chose to use the curriculum designed for 1st- 2nd grade. Even though I had one third grader, I decided that the first and second grade curriculum was better suited for my participant group.

The intervention was split into five different units. Unit lessons were taught four days a week during the after-school program for 30 minutes. I was not able to teach on Wednesdays due to mandatory staff development meetings. If a lesson needed longer than 30 minutes to complete, I split teaching the content throughout the span of two days. Unit 1, Diversity and Inclusion, was about promoting a community and environment in the classroom. Throughout teaching this unit, children were educated to recognize and appreciate one another's similarities and differences. Unit 2, Empathy and Critical Thinking, was about children developing empathy and the ability to identify with and understand another person's emotions. It also covered the ability to reduce stereotypical thinking and learn critical thinking skills.

Unit 3, Communication, was all about exploring healthy and unhealthy communication patterns. The students also learned effective ways to engage with others. Unit 4, Problem Solving, was designed for children to learn constructive approaches for resolving conflict. This unit focused on conflict resolution steps that facilitate healthy relationship patterns. Finally, Unit 5, Peer Relationships, focused on children practicing positive social skills and learning the qualities that are important to friendship. This unit also covered the consequences of bullying and how to provide peers with support.

Each unit had multiple lessons integrated within the curriculum. Each lesson covered a different topic associated with that unit. It is important to note that some units require more lessons to complete than others. Most lessons include a short story and activity be involved within the lessons. If needed, every lesson would offer additional activities to use. In addition to the lesson goals, each unit also provided a learning objective, key concepts, and vocabulary.

The behavior checklists were distributed to teachers weekly. Although teachers received the checklists once a week, they were asked to complete them daily. At the end of each week, I

collected the checklists from teachers and recorded the data. I would complete the same process with the after-school program leaders. Those who worked with my participant group completed the checklists and turn them in at the end of the week.

In addition to the checklists, the participants completed a drawing at the end of each instructional unit. Each illustration had a prompt that related directly to the unit they had just finished (Appendix C). There was a total of five prompts:

Unit 1. Draw a picture of two people meeting for the first time.

Unit 2. Draw a picture of someone who is happy, sad, surprised, etc.

Unit 3. Draw a picture of someone talking to a friend who is crying.

Unit 4. Draw a picture of two students telling their teacher about their fight in PE.

Unit 5. What would you do? Draw a picture of someone spilling their milk on you.

**Post-intervention phase.** The post-intervention phase was dedicated to collecting all of the data. During this part of the intervention, I had four weeks of behavior checklists, and drawings. It was during this time in which I used the drawing rubric to assess student performance (Appendix D). The rubric was created as an assessment tool to observe if the participants would retain the knowledge received from the instructional units. This rubric was also used to classify their performance. By using the rubric, I graded all of the illustrations and categorized the participants on a scale of developing, approaching mastery, and mastery with regards to social and emotional skills and solving conflict and problem behaviors.

## **Plan for Data Analysis**

The purpose of this action research project was to examine the effects of an SEL curriculum on negative student behaviors. The data collection throughout the course of study was done with the goal to decrease conflict and negative behaviors. Data collection for this action research included both quantitative and qualitative measures. The quantitative data consist of the student behavior checklists and drawing rubric while the qualitative data consist of the student drawings. The triangulation of data provided from the quantitative and qualitative sources were able to provide substantive evidence about the results of the study.

**Quantitative data.** Quantitative data were collected through the student behavior checklist. In every checklist completed, I was able to tally the number of positive and negative behaviors that were observed. For every behavior observed, I was able to assign that behavior a value via Microsoft Excel, resulting in numerous statistical findings. These findings include the mean, median, and mode of positive and negative behaviors. I was also able to track which behaviors occurred the most frequently as well and which behaviors occurred the least. The drawing rubric was also used to form statistical data. Once the drawings were completed, I graded the drawings on a 3-point rubric from developing, approaching mastery, and mastery. After categorizing these data, I used the data to collect percentages as well as the mean, median, and mode.

**Qualitative data.** I gathered qualitative data by using the student drawings. Every time the student completed an instructional unit, they were required to draw a picture using the prompt. By giving the students a prompt to draw, I was able to interpret the drawings into positive or negative behaviors. In many cases, I would often talk with the students to have them verbally explain to me what they were drawing. The reason I had the participants explain their drawing to me, was for complete understanding about what they were trying to communicate. By

using the same information, I was able to approximate and characterize the behaviors into positive groups and negative groups, or good behaviors and bad behaviors. Using this qualitative data was able to give me a deeper understanding so that I could fairly interpret the data.

### **Summary**

This action research question was created with the purpose to decrease negative behaviors with the use of social and emotional skills. With the lack of social and emotional skills being implemented throughout the school year, the idea of implemented daily social and emotional practices was created. In the first phase of my research, I created checklist, rubrics, and prepared staff to make sure the intervention would be completed. During the second phase, I implemented the SEL curriculum and worked with my staff to gather ongoing data. Although I taught the SEL curriculum, it is important to note that I was not the only person collecting data. In the final stages of my intervention, I gathered any and all of the data together and began to create pre- and post-observation comparing the both together. Through the triangulation of data collected through the behavior checklist and student drawings, my data collection was complete and ready to be analyzed.

## Chapter IV

### Findings

The purpose for this action research project was to provide students with the opportunity to learn social and emotional skills in an educational setting. In his emotional intelligence theory, Daniel Goleman argued that developing students' emotional skills are just as important as developing students' cognitive abilities (Goleman, 1998). Emotional intelligence is a way for students to understand their feelings and make good life decisions. By teaching SEL skills in my intervention group, my participants received instruction in how to manage moods and control impulses. Goleman (1998) asserted that people should be hopeful and optimistic when they have setbacks. His philosophy focused on the idea that people should be taught how to be empathic and that others may understand positive and negative feelings (Goleman, 1998). For many of my students, the amount of SEL instruction received at school had not been not enough to learn how to be empathetic. Through my intervention program, I attempted to provide them the opportunity to understand their feelings and emotions, as well as those around them.

This chapter presents data collected throughout the duration of the study. I collected both quantitative and qualitative data in order to address the research question: *How might social and emotional learning implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support group, affect problem behaviors in first, second, and third grade students?* For this action research project, I focused on first, second, and third grade students in an afterschool program who had received one or more written discipline referrals. This group of students participated in a specific SEL curriculum.

## **Overview of Methods and Data Collection**

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the impact an SEL curriculum has on reducing problem behaviors. Throughout the intervention program, the students used the Sanford Harmony curriculum which focused on social and emotional learning. Although the program was designed for five units, it had no pacing guide. This left me with the option to decide how long I wanted to focus on certain units. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, however, I was not able to get through the total program. I only successfully completed two of the five Sanford Harmony units and engaged in a total of four weeks of data collection.

Because I only see my students for 45 minutes a week, I collected observational data from the students' classroom teachers as well as the youth development leaders in the after-school program. I created a behavior checklist that was used to track certain behaviors. Before starting the program, I contacted both classroom teachers and youth development leaders (YDL) in the after-school program and explained to them how the checklist should be completed. Depending on the student, some participants had the same classroom teacher and others had the same YDL. I made the checklist available both on paper and online. Every time the teacher or YDL observed a specific behavior, they checked that behavior and moved on to the next question. At the end of the week, I collected the behavior checklists and stored them in a secure location. I also had the students create drawings that was used to assess social skills. At the end of every instructional unit, the students created a drawing using a designed prompt. After the drawing were created, I collected them and stored them in the same secure location as the behavior checklists.



## Demographics of Participants

This study was conducted at an elementary school in a lower-middle socio-economic class neighborhood. There were 10 participants in this study. Of the 10 participants, eight were male and two were female. Six students were Hispanic or Latino, two were Black or African American, and two were White. Of the 10 participants, three students spoke Spanish as their home language and the remaining students spoke English. Eight of the participants were also enrolled in programs at school. Two students participated in the dual immersion (DI) program, three students participated in the structured English Language Development program (ELD), one student participated in both ELD and DI together and two students were in special education (SPED). ELD is a program designed to help students become proficient in English. Dual immersion programs are a way for students to learn content while acquiring another language at the same time. SPED is designed for students who have unique needs that need to be addressed.

Table 1

### *Demographics of Participants*

Gender	Hispanic or Latino	Race	Correspondence Language	Programs
Male	Yes	Other Asian	Spanish	Structured English Language Development & Dual Immersion Program
Male	Yes	Declined to State	Spanish	Dual Immersion Program
Male	No	Black or African American	English	
Female	Yes	Declined to State	Spanish	Structured English Language Development
Male	No	Black or African American	English	SPED- Autism
Male	Yes	Latino	English	SPED- Speech
Male	Yes	Pacific Islander	English	Structured English Language Development
Male	Yes	Latino	English	Structured English Language Development
Female	No	White	English	Dual Immersion Program
Male	No	White	English	

**Behavior checklists.** Data were collected using a classroom observation protocol focusing on five targeted factors: anxious behaviors, aggressive behaviors, inattentive behaviors, social skills, and depressive behaviors (Appendix C). These data were collected over the course of four weeks. Due to my teaching schedule, students participated in the intervention during after school hours only. Although my intervention took place during the after-school program, I was collecting behavior checklists throughout the school day and after school. With the help of the students' classroom teachers, as well as the youth development leaders (YDL) in the after-school program, I was able to gather a total of 353 checklists over four weeks of the intervention program. In addition to the number of checklists completed, Table 2 shows that the participants collectively had over 90% attendance and participation. Four students had perfect attendance, and an additional four students missed two or fewer days. Two students had more than 10 missed days throughout the intervention.

Table 2

*Participant Attendance and Checklists Completion*

Student	Absences	Total number of checklists	% Attendance	Number of completed checklists
Student 1	2	38	94.7%	36
Student 2	1	38	97.4%	37
Student 3	0	38	100.0%	38
Student 4	2	38	94.7%	36
Student 5	0	38	100.0%	38
Student 6	0	38	100.0%	38
Student 7	1	38	97.4%	37
Student 8	0	38	100.0%	38
Student 9	11	38	71.1%	27
Student 10	10	38	73.7%	28
Grand Total	27	380	92.9%	353

*Anxious behaviors findings.* Of the 35 total behaviors observed on the teacher checklist, seven behaviors addressed anxiety (Table 3). These behaviors are as follows:

1. Reluctant to engage in social activities.
2. Appeared stress about academic work.
3. Refrained from speaking in class.
4. Said he or she was sick and/or hurt.
5. Was sensitive to criticism.
6. Excessively worried about academic performance.
7. Seemed nervous or timid when in the presence of peers.

A total of 418 anxious behaviors were observed during the four-week data collection period. Out of the seven behavior questions asked, teachers observed the highest level of anxiety in relation to sensitivity to criticism with a total of 152 observations. Teachers indicated the lowest levels of anxiety when students were asked if they seemed nervous or timid when in the presence of peers.

Table 3

*Total Anxious Behaviors for Each Student*

Student	Reluctant to engage in social activities (yes)	Appeared stress about academic work (yes)	Refrained from speaking in class (yes)	Said he or she was sick and/or hurt (yes)	Was sensitive to criticism (yes)	Excessively worried about academic performance (yes)	Seemed nervous or timid when in the presence of peers (yes)
Student 1	12	5	24	0	19	0	10
Student 2	7	0	16	0	0	0	0
Student 3	25	0	0	0	16	17	0
Student 4	22	0	34	0	0	0	7
Student 5	0	3	0	0	34	0	0
Student 6	0	1	0	0	38	0	0
Student 7	11	0	0	0	0	0	0
Student 8	9	0	0	0	18	0	1
Student 9	0	27	0	15	27	11	0
Student 10	0	0	9	0	0	0	0
Grand Total	86	36	83	15	152	28	18

Following the total number of anxious behaviors observed, Figure 2 shows how anxious behaviors changed over a four-week intervention period. Although some of the students show an increase in anxiety behaviors from Week 1 to Week 2, six out of 10 students showed an overall decrease of anxiety behaviors from Week 1 to Week 4. Two of the 10 students showed an increase in anxiety behaviors between Week 1 and Week 4, and two students remained the same. Student 9 leads the participation group with over 30 anxious behaviors observed. Student 7 exhibited the least amount of anxiety behaviors with less than five behaviors observed in Week 3.

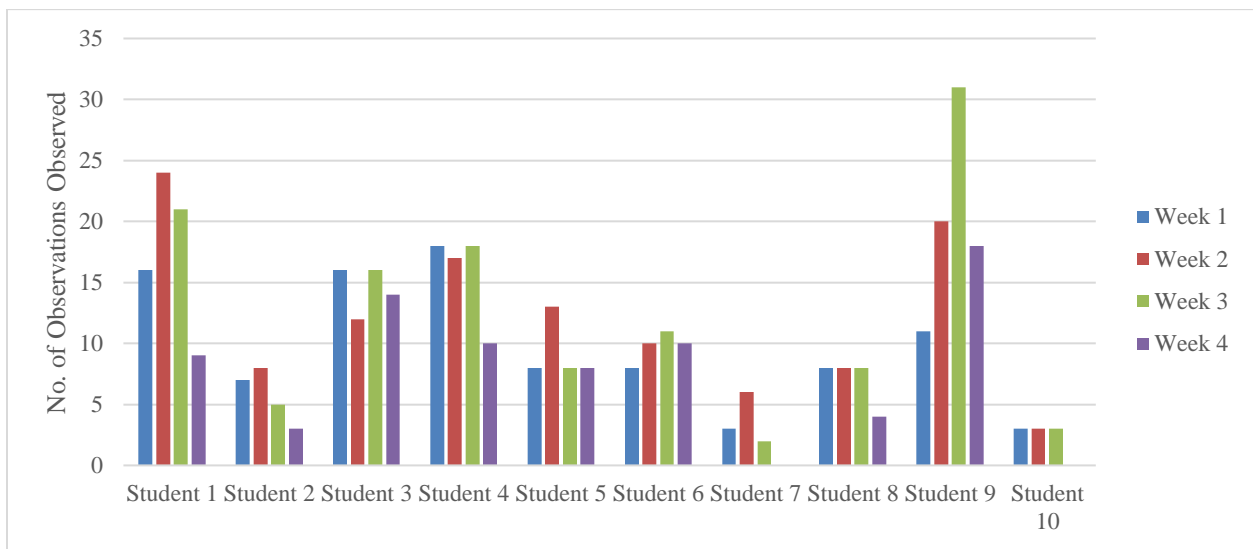


Figure 2. Total anxious behaviors observed for each student by week (N=10).

**Aggressive behaviors findings.** The second category of behaviors labeled on the checklist was categorized as aggressive behaviors. There was a total of seven behaviors that addressed aggressive actions.

1. Threatened other students.
2. Was physically aggressive toward peers.
3. Bullied other students.
4. Instigated peers by teasing or saying put downs.
5. Challenged your or other teachers' authority.
6. Was reprimanded for bad classroom behavior.
7. Argued with classmates when corrected, argued or became upset.

The participants collectively tallied 300 aggressive behaviors throughout the four-week intervention period (Table 4). During this time, the classroom teacher and YDL observed Student 3's aggressive behavior a total of 136 times. Student 3 had the most occurrences while Student 2, Student 4, Student 5, Student 6 and Student 7 were equal with zero aggressive behaviors observed. Of all seven questions asked, 98 observations were made when classroom teachers and YDLs had to correct student behavior in the classroom. When teachers and YDLs were asked to track their students bullying other students, they tracked a total of 14 observations, which was the lowest of all seven questions.

Table 4

*Total Aggressive Behaviors for Each Student*

Student	Threatened other students (yes)	Was physically aggressive toward peers (yes)	Bullied other students (yes)	Instigated peers by teasing or saying put downs (yes)	Challenged your or other teachers' authority (yes)	Was reprimanded for bad classroom behavior (yes)	Argued with classmates when corrected, argued or became upset (yes)
Student 1	0	0	0	0	0	0	21
Student 2	0	0	0	0	0	17	0
Student 3	18	15	14	17	19	27	26
Student 4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Student 5	0	0	0	0	0	34	0
Student 6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Student 7	0	0	0	0	0	13	0
Student 8	0	0	0	0	23	0	15
Student 9	0	0	0	0	12	3	6
Student 10	0	0	0	9	0	4	7
Grand Total	18	15	14	26	54	98	75

In addition, Figure 3 shows aggressive behaviors observed during the entire intervention phase. Throughout the four-week program, most participants stayed under 10 observations.

Student 8 was observed just under 15 times in Week 2, and Student 3 lead the group by a vast

margin of almost 45 observed aggressive behaviors in Week 2. In contrast, Student 4 and Student 6 showed zero aggressive behaviors, indicating they were the students with the lowest amount of aggressive actions. When looking at the data collectively, every participant showed decrease in aggressive behaviors. Even though Student 3 and Student 8 showed the most aggressive behaviors throughout the program, they still showed a decrease in behaviors from the beginning of Week 1 to the end of Week 4.

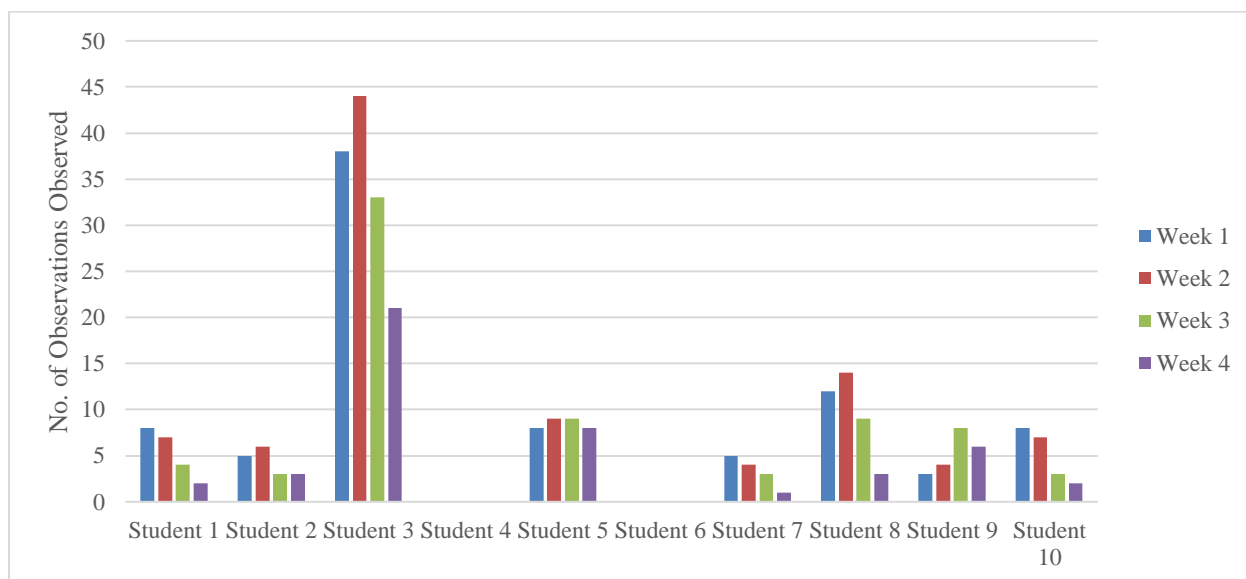


Figure 3. Total aggressive behaviors observed for each student by week (N=10).

***Inattentive behaviors findings.*** The third series of behaviors were labeled as inattentive behaviors. This section consisted of six behaviors:

1. Had trouble staying focused until tasks were completed.
2. Failed to complete assigned work on time.
3. Was easily distracted.
4. Needed prompts/reminders to stay on task.
5. Was caught daydreaming.
6. Was confused about assignment instructions.

Inattentive behaviors were in the top three of the most observed behaviors within the behavior checklist. With 925 observations made, inattentive behaviors placed third out of the five behaviors observed. Amongst the behaviors categorized as inattentive, students were

observed highest (218) when asked if they were easily distracted (Table 5). The least amount of observed behaviors (113) involved students being confused about assigned instructions. Student 2 was noted as displaying the most inattentive behaviors with a total of 197 observations. Student 9 received the least amount with zero inattentive observations.

Table 5

*Total Inattentive Behaviors for Each Student*

Student	Had trouble staying focused until tasks were completed (yes)	Failed to complete assigned work on time (yes)	Was easily distracted (yes)	Needed prompts/reminders to stay on task (yes)	Was caught daydreaming (yes)	Was confused about assignment instructions (yes)
Student 1	8	12	10	3	0	10
Student 2	21	36	34	34	37	35
Student 3	0	0	12	7	0	0
Student 4	15	13	11	1	22	32
Student 5	32	35	33	34	0	32
Student 6	35	0	38	38	38	0
Student 7	20	15	33	22	0	0
Student 8	20	0	19	16	16	0
Student 9	0	0	0	0	0	0
Student 10	21	4	28	20	19	4
Grand Total	172	115	218	175	132	113

Figure 4 shows the students' weekly progression of inattentive behaviors. By Week 2 and Week 3, six out of 10 students showed an increase in inattentive behaviors. Student 2 showed the most inattentive behaviors on Week 2 as well as Student 5. They were the only two students who had been observed over 40 times. Although Student 2 remained above 40 inattentive observations, Student 2 showed a great decrease in inattentive behaviors from Week 2 to Week 4. When looking at total progress from Week 1 to Week 4, Student 2 and Student 6 were the only

participants who showed growth in inattentive behaviors. Seven students showed that they had decreased their inattentive behaviors from Week 1 to Week 4, and Student 9 remained the same.

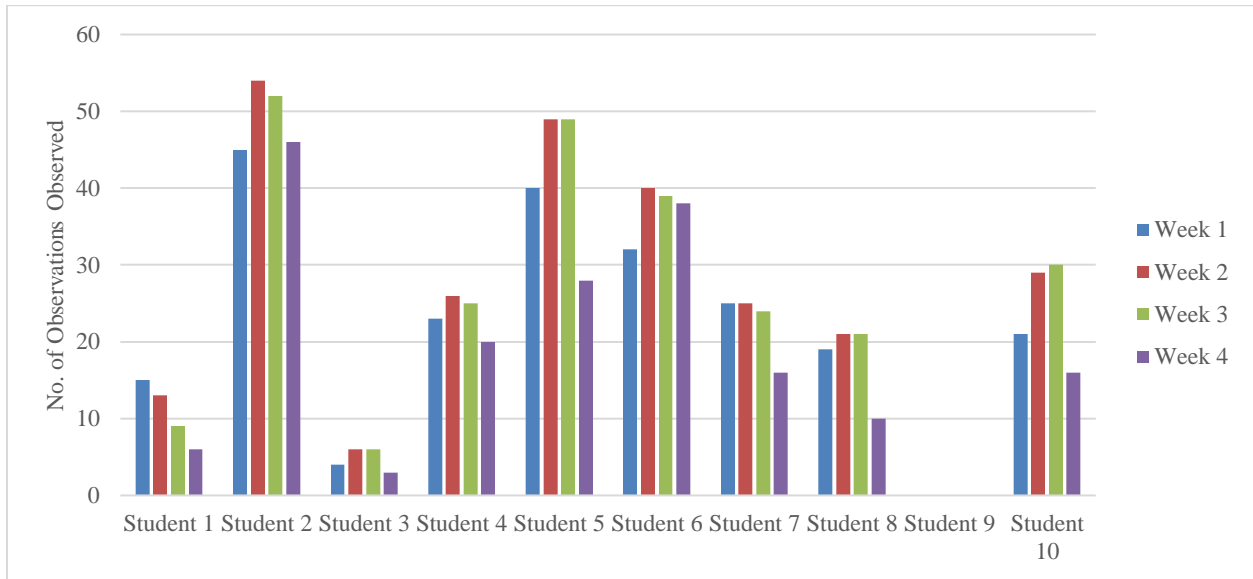


Figure 4. Total inattentive behaviors observed for each student by week (N=10).

**Depressive behaviors findings.** The fourth category in the behavior checklist falls under depressive behaviors. There was a total of seven behaviors that were categorized as depressive:

1. Appeared sad or bummed out.
2. Seemed cranky, irritable, or agitated.
3. Was disinterested in schoolwork and other activities.
4. Appeared tired or worn-out.
5. Had difficulty following instructions.
6. Sulked or shut down.
7. Preferred to be alone during unstructured times (free time, lunch, recess, etc.).

The participants were observed 620 times displaying some kind of depressive behavior. Students appeared disinterested in schoolwork the most with a total of 125 observations made. The least amount of observations (46) were made when the students preferred to be alone during unstructured times. Out of the 620 total observations made, Student 8 displayed the most depressive behaviors, tallying a total of 140 observations and Student 7 displayed the least amount of depressive behaviors with 12 (Table 6).



Table 6

*Total Depressive Behaviors for Each Student*

Student	Appeared sad or bummed out (yes)	Seemed cranky, irritable, or agitated (yes)	Was disinterested in schoolwork and other activities (yes)	Appeared tired or worn-out (yes)	Had difficulty following instructions (yes)	Sulked or shut down (yes)	Preferred to be alone during unstructured times (free time, lunch, recess, etc.) (yes)
Student 1	27	28	0	4	1	18	24
Student 2	0	4	36	0	29	0	0
Student 3	0	20	0	0	0	16	0
Student 4	0	0	22	0	1	0	0
Student 5	0	0	31	0	36	5	0
Student 6	8	0	0	0	14	11	0
Student 7	0	0	0	0	12	0	0
Student 8	29	33	9	0	24	23	22
Student 9	27	18	0	13	0	13	0
Student 10	27	7	27	0	0	1	0
Grand Total	118	110	125	17	117	87	46

Figure 5 shows the weekly progression of depressive behaviors. Student 1 experienced the largest change from Week 3 to Week 4, decreasing from over 25 observed depressive behaviors, down to six. Student 8 was observed the most, reaching more than 40 depressive behaviors observed within a week. Student 7 had the least amount of observations with less than five observation made throughout the entire four-week intervention, suggesting that student was the least depressed.

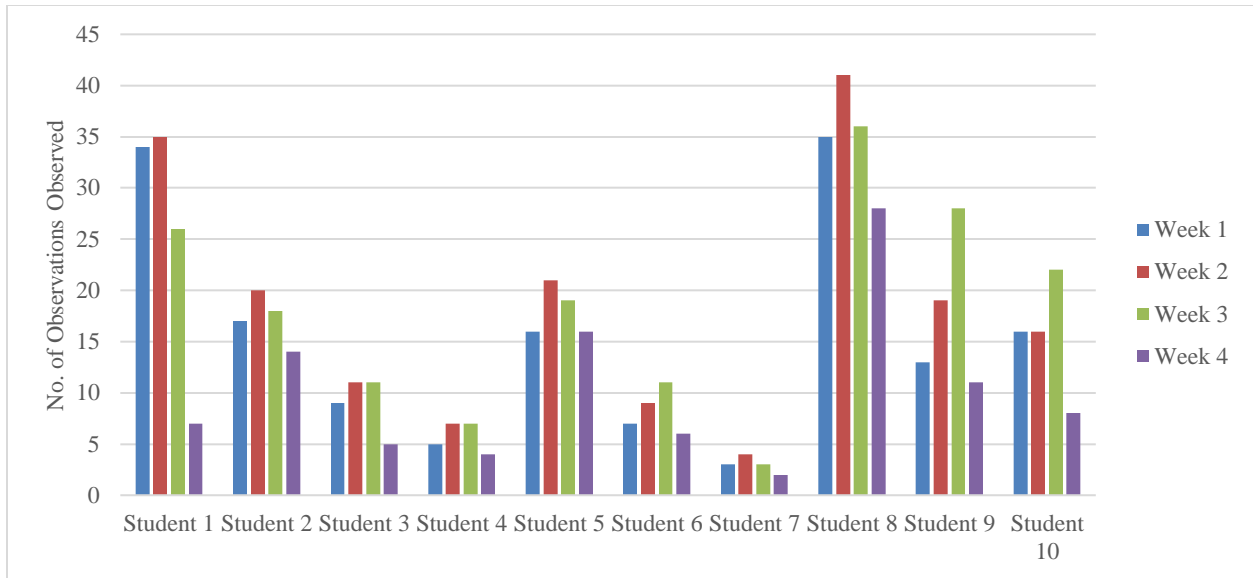


Figure 5. Total depressive behaviors for each student by week (N=10)

**Social behavior findings.** The final category within the behavior checklist was considered social behaviors. Social behaviors were also the only category in the behavior checklist that was considered a positive behavior. Unlike the other behaviors in the checklist, the number of observations made through social behavior are viewed as something positive and rewarding. There was a total of eight social skill behaviors in the checklists:

1. Followed classroom rules.
2. Was sympathetic towards others' feelings.
3. Complied with adult directions/requests.
4. Managed frustration appropriately.
5. Cooperated with classmates.
6. Requested help appropriately.
7. Accepted classmates' ideas.
8. Ignored distractions by classmates.

Amongst all of the categories in the behavior checklist, Table 7 shows that social skills had the most behaviors observed with a total of 1764 observations. For the category, *complied with adult directions*, 261 observations were made. The second most observed behavior (258) was of students accepting their classmates' ideas. Student 4 gathered the most amount of social

observations with 263 while Student 5 was observed with the fewest number of socially acceptable behaviors, a total of 55 observations.

Table 7

*Total Social Behaviors for Each Student*

Student	Followed classroom rules (yes)	Was sympathetic towards others' feelings (yes)	Complied with adult directions/ requests (yes)	Managed frustration appropriately (yes)	Cooperated with classmates (yes)	Requested help appropriately (yes)	Accepted classmates' ideas (yes)	Ignored distractions by classmates (yes)
Student 1	36	10	36	11	16	2	30	34
Student 2	37	37	26	37	12	0	37	4
Student 3	17	17	29	17	38	38	10	15
Student 4	36	36	36	36	24	36	36	23
Student 5	1	1	5	4	6	0	38	0
Student 6	34	38	38	29	38	38	38	1
Student 7	11	37	37	37	37	23	3	3
Student 8	21	17	23	7	38	12	19	14
Student 9	27	27	9	10	27	27	27	12
Student 10	28	16	22	19	13	14	20	9
Grand Total	248	236	261	207	249	190	258	115

Figure 6 shows the numbers of social behavior observations made from Week 1 to Week 4. For the first time in all of the data collection, almost every student showed a continuous increase in observations made by week. Student 4 was observed displaying the most social behaviors with a total of 78 observations in Week 3. Student 5 was observed the least amount while remaining under 19 social observations between Week 1 and Week 4.

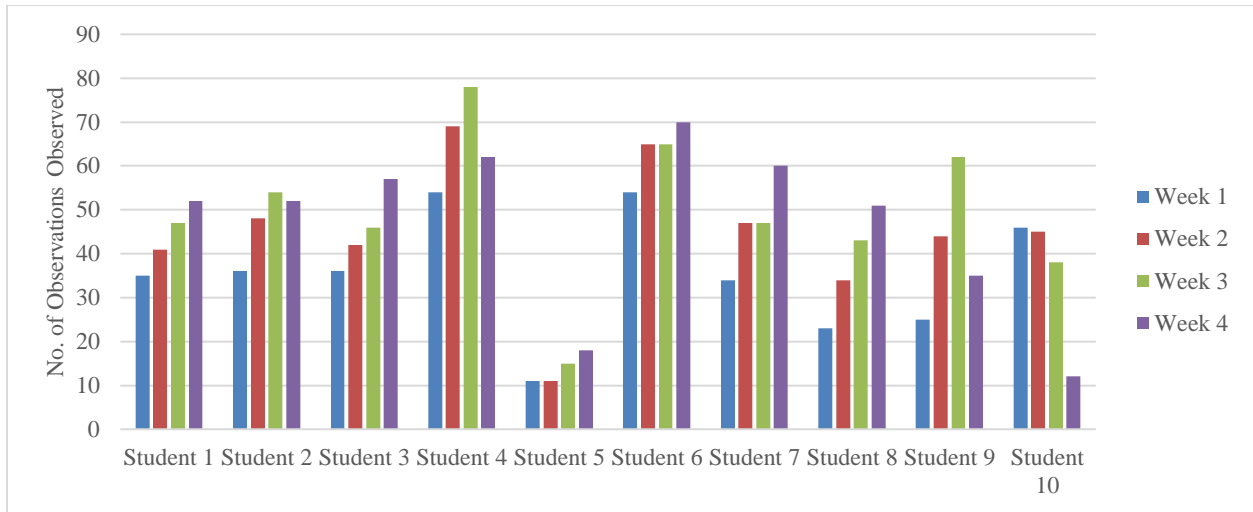


Figure 6. Total social behaviors observed for each student by week (N=10).

**Drawings.** In addition to collecting data through the behavior checklists, the participants of the study were required to complete a drawing after each instructional unit was completed. The Sanford Harmony SEL curriculum had five different instructional units. Unit 1 was diversity and inclusion, Unit 2 was empathy and critical thinking, Unit 3 was communication, Unit 4 was problem solving and Unit 5 was peer relationships. Each instructional unit had a different amount of lesson plans associated with it, so some units took longer to complete than others. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, Unit 1 and Unit 2 were the only instructional units that were completed, resulting in a total of two drawings per student.

At the end of this research, I had received 20 pictures total which were evaluated using a rubric (Appendix D). The rubric was created to assess student learning. The rubric had four main categories which assessed the participants on cooperation, relationships, empathy, and problem solving. Of the two instructional units completed in my intervention, student demonstrated a wide range of results in these drawings.

**Drawing results (cooperation).** The first category of the drawing rubric was cooperation skills. Table 8 shows the students’ results for the Unit 1 and Unit 2 drawings. These results were only graded on the cooperation category. I had evaluated my participants on a three-point scale:

developing, approaching mastery, and mastery. For the first unit, 20% of students were at developing level, while an additional 20% received approaching mastery level. The remaining 60% of students received a mastery rating in cooperation. Unit 2 resulted in 10% of students at developing level, 30% of students at approaching mastery level, and another 60% of student who were at a mastery level. When you combine Unit 1 and Unit 2 together, the students collectively scored 10% in developing, 30% in approaching mastery, and 60% mastery in cooperation (Figure 7).

Table 8

*Drawing Scores for Cooperation*

	Unit 1	Unit 2
Student 1	Mastery	Mastery
Student 2	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 3	Mastery	Mastery
Student 4	Mastery	Mastery
Student 5	Developing	Approaching Mastery
Student 6	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 7	Developing	Approaching mastery
Student 8	Mastery	Mastery
Student 9	Mastery	Mastery
Student 10	Mastery	Mastery

## Collective Drawing Results

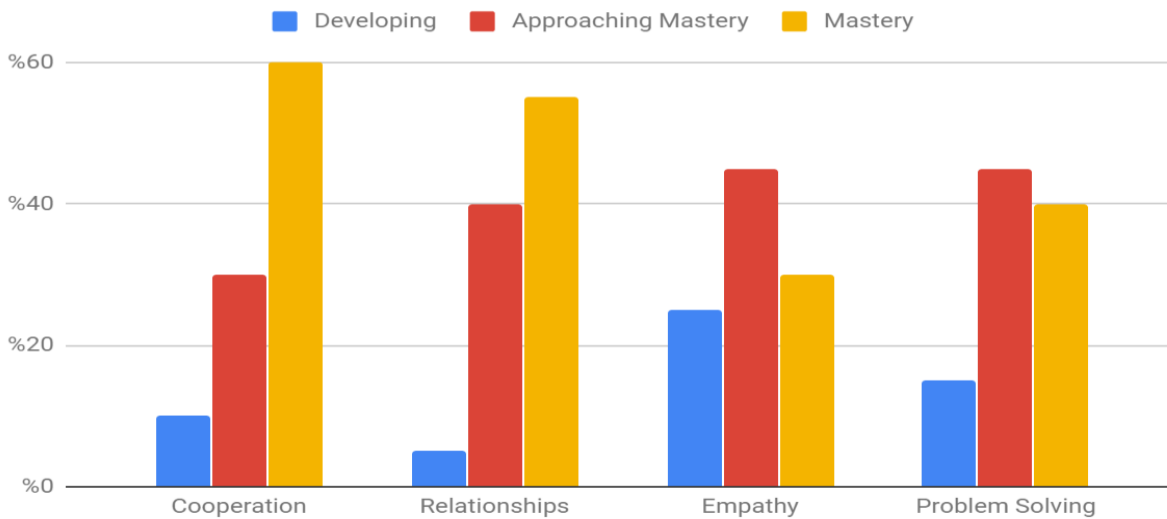


Figure 7. Total number of assessed drawings by rubric category (N=10).

**Drawing results (relationships).** The second category of the drawing rubric was relationship skills. Table 9 shows the results from Unit 1 and Unit 2 of the drawings. For unit 1, 10% of the participants that were evaluated as being in the developing category, 30% of the participants were approaching mastery, and 60% of students were at mastery level. For unit 2, 0% of the participants were in the developing range, 50% in approaching mastery range, and 50% at mastery. As shown in Figure 6, the students collectively were scored at a 5% developing, 40% approaching mastery, and 55% mastery level in relationships skills.

Table 9

### Drawing Scores for Relationships

	Unit 1	Unit 2
Student 1	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 2	Approaching Mastery	Mastery
Student 3	Mastery	Mastery
Student 4	Developing	Approaching Mastery
Student 5	Mastery	Mastery
Student 6	Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 7	Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 8	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 9	Mastery	Mastery
Student 10	Mastery	Mastery

***Drawing results (empathy).*** The third category of the drawing rubric was graded on how well the students depicted empathy. Table 10 shows that of the drawings that were evaluated, Unit 1 had 30% of students assessed as developing empathy, 40% of student in the approaching mastery range, and 30% of students as meeting mastery level of empathy. Unit 2 resulted in 20% developing, 50% of approaching mastery, and 30% as mastery level. Figure 6 shows that when looking at the results from Unit 1 and Unit 2 together, 25% of students were graded as developing empathy, 45% of students were graded as approaching mastery, and 30% of students were at mastery level of understanding empathy.

Table 10

*Drawing Scores for Empathy*

	Unit 1	Unit 2
Student 1	Developing	Developing
Student 2	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 3	Developing	Developing
Student 4	Mastery	Mastery
Student 5	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 6	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 7	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 8	Developing	Approaching Mastery
Student 9	Mastery	Mastery
Student 10	Mastery	Mastery

***Drawing results (problem solving).*** The final category of the drawing rubric was problem solving. Table 11 shows the results of the participants when being graded on the ability to problem solve with others. Unit 1 showed 10% of students at a developing level, 40% at an approaching mastery level, and 50% at a mastery level. Unit 2 showed a 20% population at developing level, 50% at an approaching mastery level, and a 30% at mastery level. The combined statistics of Unit 1 and Unit 2 yield a result of 15% developing level, 45% approaching mastery, and 40% at mastery level of being able to solve problems with others (Figure 6).

Table 11

*Drawing Scores for Problem Solving*

	Unit 1	Unit 2
Student 1	Mastery	Mastery
Student 2	Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 3	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 4	Mastery	Developing
Student 5	Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 6	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 7	Approaching Mastery	Approaching Mastery
Student 8	Developing	Developing
Student 9	Mastery	Mastery
Student 10	Approaching Mastery	Mastery

**Summary**

The purpose of this action research study was to determine if explicit social -emotional instruction could reduce conflict behaviors in first, second, and third grade students. The results from the data collected throughout the study suggest that social and emotional skills could lead to decreased problem behaviors. Although observers saw an increase in almost all negative behaviors during Week 2 and Week 3, by the end of Week 4, most students were observed to be developing positive behaviors and social skills. Analysis of the data collected through observations, behavior checklists, and classroom drawings indicates that the social skills category were observed the most out of the five different behaviors groups. While the overall data reflected a small amount of growth, further investigation may be necessary to support the claim that social and emotional skills may reduce conflict. Lastly, it is important to remember this eight-week long research project was cut short to four weeks because of the COVID 19 pandemic.

In the next chapter, the findings from this study will be summarized and interpreted in order to determine the overall effectiveness of implementing social and emotional teachings as it



relates to reducing problem behaviors. In addition, I will discuss the overall significance and meanings of the findings and its impact on future research.

## Chapter V

### Conclusions and Next Steps

Each year, mental health issues like depression and anxiety continue to rise in numbers. In 2003, 5.4% of children aged six through 17 years had been diagnosed with either anxiety or depression (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Just four years later in 2007, 8% of those same children were diagnosed with the same issues. Between 2011 and 2012, that statistic rose to 8.4%. Although students with mental health or behavioral issues have often experienced disciplinary actions like detentions or trash pickup, research has shown that students need more support (DeJulius & McLean, 2019).

In the low income, public suburban school where this action research project was conducted, I made it my mission to provide the resources my students need. I constantly witnessed students walking in and out of the office due to a physical or verbal fighting. I also observed students upset during recess or lunch due to name calling or bullying. Although these negative behaviors resulted in some kind of consequence, usually through the form of detention or trash pickup, the student's negative behavior did not change. This led me to believe that something was missing from these students' lives. This is what motivated me to begin this action research.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) group, was the intervention strategy used to carry out this research. Studies have shown that a PBIS group has been beneficial when it is paired with SEL (Cook, 2015). Together, PBIS and SEL have proven to significantly improve overall mental health as well as reduce negative behaviors that have often been externalized (Cook, 2015). It was my intent, that through the implementation of this program, problem behaviors would

decrease. Therefore, the action research question investigated was: *How might social and emotional learning implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support group, affect problem behaviors in first, second, and third grade students?*

Chapter IV presented the findings from the data collection during the action research study. These data are a reflection of two main data collection strategies: behavior checklists and drawings. The behavior checklists show several different findings based on five targeted behaviors: anxious behaviors, aggressive behaviors, inattentive behaviors, depressive behaviors, and social skills. The drawings also incorporated its own categories which included cooperation, relationships, empathy, and problem solving. This current chapter is organized into the following five sections: summary of findings, interpretation of findings, reflections on study limitations, plan for future action, and summary. The first section, summary of findings, focuses on the data from the two measured sources: behavior checklists and drawings. The second section delivers an interpretation of those findings, and the third section explains any limitations as well as a reflection of the action research study. The fourth section discusses the future plan of action as well as a response for which the data revealed. Lastly, the final section will give a concise summary of the entire action research.

### **Summary of Findings**

Two instruments were used to measure the participants' behavior in this action research study. The first instrument used was a behavior checklist which was created by the researcher for the main purpose of tracking positive and negative behaviors (Appendix A). This checklist focused on five categories: anxious behaviors, aggressive behaviors, inattentive behaviors, depressive behaviors, and social skills. Of the five categories, four of them were considered

negative behavior traits (anxious behaviors, aggressive behaviors, inattentive behaviors and depressive behaviors) and one category was considered a positive behavior trait (social skills).

The second instrument used was a drawing rubric (Appendix D). The participants were required to complete an illustration at the conclusion of each instructional unit. These illustrations were then graded using a drawing rubric to assess four categories: cooperation, relationships, empathy, and problem solving. The rubric also consists of three performance levels: developing, approaching mastery and mastery. By using both instruments to assess the participants, the data showed a variety of interesting findings.

**Behavior checklists.** Data collection gathered from the behavior checklists presented a multitude of findings. The behavior checklists were completed by two separate parties: the classroom teachers and the after-school program youth development leaders. The classroom teachers completed the behavior checklists during the school day and the youth development leaders completed the checklists after school. The checklists tracked the participants' behavior from the moment they stepped on campus to the moment they left. Behavior checklists were not completed when the participants were absent from school. However, every time a participant was present, a behavior checklist was completed on every occasion, resulting in 100% behavior checklist completion by the teachers and youth development leaders. By the end of the data collection period, there were a total of 353 completed checklists.

In the first week of implementing the SEL intervention, 18% of the participants displayed anxious behaviors, 16% of the participants displayed aggressive behaviors, 49% of the participants displayed inattentive behaviors, 29% of the participants displayed depressive behaviors, and 58% of the participants displayed social skills. By the second week 18% of the students displayed anxious behaviors while the number of students displaying aggressive

behaviors dropped to 46%. Inattentive behaviors showed no change, resulting in 46% participant observation. Twenty-eight percent of the participants displayed depressive behaviors, an overall decrease in number. The results also showed that 58% of the participants displayed social skills resulting in no progression. In the third week, the participants displayed a decrease in aggressive behaviors (11%), inattentive behaviors (44%), and depressive behaviors (63%) while the participants showed an increase in social skills (63%). Once again, 18% of the participants displayed anxious behaviors. In the fourth and final week, the participants show a decrease in all negative behaviors. Thirteen percent of participants showed anxious behaviors, 8% of participants showed aggressive behaviors, 36% of participants showed inattentive behaviors, and 17% of participants showed depressive behaviors. The data once again showed that 69% of participants showed an increase in observed use of social skills. Once the data were collected from the four weeks, a percentage was calculated by including the overall change in observed behaviors. From the beginning of Week 1 to the end of Week 4, the participants displayed an 8.6% decrease in aggressive behaviors, 13.2% decrease in inattentive behaviors, 12.2% decrease in depressive behaviors, and 10.7% increase in social skills.

**Drawings.** Illustrations were used as an assessment tool for the intervention. While teaching the social and emotional learning curriculum, the illustrations were completed by the participants. After the instructional units were completed, the participants were required to draw a picture of specific feelings and emotions that were taught throughout the SEL lessons. Drawings were the chosen method of assessment because some participants struggled with writing at grade level. After the participants turned in their drawings, I used a rubric (Appendix D) to grade the illustrations on a scale from: developing, approaching mastery and mastery. The rubric was used to grade the following four categories: cooperation, relationships, empathy, and

problem solving. At the end of the intervention, each participant had completed two drawings resulting in a total of 20 drawings for two separate instructional units.

In Unit 1, 20% of students were developing, 20% of students were approaching mastery and 60% of students were demonstrating mastery of cooperation skills. Unit 1 also shows 10% of students were developing, 30% of students were approaching mastery and 60% of students demonstrated mastery of relationship skills. In addition, 30% of students were developing, 40% of students were approaching mastery and 30% of students demonstrated mastery of empathy skills. Lastly, 10% of students were developing, 40% of students were approaching mastery, and 50% of students demonstrated mastery of problem-solving skills. Unit 2 shows 0% of students were developing, 40% of students were approaching mastery and 60% of students were demonstrating mastery of cooperation skills. A 0% of students were developing, 50% of students were approaching mastery and 50% of students demonstrated mastery of relationship skills. A 20% of students were developing, 50% of students were approaching mastery and 30% of students demonstrated mastery of empathy skills. Lastly, 20% of students were developing, 50% of students were approaching mastery, and 30% of students demonstrated mastery in problem solving skills.

When looking at cooperation skills with units 1 and 2 combined, 10% of the participants were in the developing stage, 30% were approaching mastery, and 60% were able to demonstrate mastery of the skill. When relationship skills were observed, 5% of the participants were in the developing stage, 40% of the participants were approaching mastery, and 55% of the participants were able to show mastery skill level. When observing empathy, 25% of the participants were in the developing stage, 45% of the participants were approaching mastery level, and 30% of the participants were indicating mastery of the skill. Lastly, problem solving skills had 15% of the

participants at the developing stage, 45% of the participants approaching mastery, and 40% of the participants representing mastery of the skill.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Based on the data gathered during this action research project, it seems that social and emotional skills implemented through a positive behavior intervention program, have a positive effect on problem behaviors for first, second and third grade students. Although at times, the data showed an increase in problem behaviors, the majority of the findings indicate that teaching social and emotional learning is likely to decrease problem behaviors.

**Anxious behavior interpretations.** An interesting finding centered around the results of anxious behaviors, which happened to be observed the most. Teachers and youth development leaders (YDL) observed students being sensitive to criticism 152 times. That particular behavior was observed more than double the amount of times than any other anxious behavior. The fact that this behavior occurred so frequently suggests that the participants felt remorse when they were getting criticized. Throughout the Sanford Harmony SEL curriculum, the participants and I also discussed how to be self-aware of individual actions affecting other people. Often times, the problematic action committed by the participants, usually resulted in an adult criticizing their actions. Although the participants struggled with criticism, giving them an opportunity to talk about these issues in a positive way was rewarding. It is likely that the participants were able to discipline themselves through the social and emotional learning. Similar to Nash and colleagues' (2010) research study, which found that SEL helped students gain control of their own behaviors and that SEL helped students get through consequences of their behavior.

**Aggressive behavior interpretations.** When aggressive behaviors were tracked, it was noted that this particular behavior category was observed the least amount of time than any other

category. With 225 total aggressive behavior observed, the data indicate that this category received the least amount of observations. Perhaps it had something to do with the behaviors themselves. Some of the aggressive behaviors included: threatening other students, being physically aggressive toward peers, and challenging authority. These behaviors were by far the most negative behaviors in the entire checklist. In a way, it was a positive outcome that these behaviors were observed the least amount. Warren and Anderson- Butcher (2005) observed the same aggressive behaviors in their study. For Warren and Anderson-Butcher (2005), their research concluded that aggression and negative behaviors were likely to stop if the behaviors were identified sooner. It is likely that the aggressive behaviors displayed by my participants decreased due to the behaviors being recognized much sooner. Perhaps our daily meetings were enough time to address the aggressive behaviors, ultimately leading to a decrease in aggressive behaviors by 8.6%.

**Inattentive behavior interpretations.** The inattentive behaviors category highlighted the concept of focus. For example, some of the behaviors included: having trouble staying on task, failing to complete assignments on time, and being easily distracted. What I found fascinating was the relationship found between inattentive behaviors and emotional intelligence theory. Part of emotional intelligence is having the ability to regulate emotions in order to promote intellectual growth (Goleman, 1998). It is likely that due to teaching social and emotional skills, the intervention program allowed the students to be aware of their feelings. The findings show that the participants were more vocal in their misunderstandings of instruction and that they received help from others more frequently. By the end of Week 4 of the intervention, all of the participants dropped inattentive behaviors by 18%, suggesting that the participants were becoming more focused in the classroom.



**Depressive behavior interpretations.** The depressive behaviors category had seven behaviors that focused on the mood of the participants. Throughout the intervention group, the students were given multiple opportunities to share their real-life experiences in relation to depression. During this time, students were often rewarded for their bravery in sharing their experiences. With a reward system set in place, Lewis and colleagues (2019) found that similar strategies were successful in reducing problem behaviors. By using a reward system, this current study allowed an opportunity for the participants to focus on positive thoughts. It is possible that the use of the reward system resulted in a decrease of depressive behaviors. The findings of Lewis and colleagues (2019) also recognized the benefit of finding positive ways to reduce negative behaviors as opposed to penalizing students. With the implementation of a positive reward system, the participants were able to decrease depressive behaviors by 12%.

**Social skills interpretations.** For the entirety of data collection, social skills showed the most growth. With a total of 1764 behaviors observed, the social skills category leads the entire behavior checklist by almost double. It is important to note that social skills were the only behaviors in the behavior checklists that were considered to be positive. With the checklists being designed the way it was, it allowed a major opportunity for social skills to lead in observed behaviors. The fact that the social skills is in a category by itself, gives a huge advantage over other behavior categories. It makes sense that social skills are in the lead by such a large margin.

The findings of Teerlink and colleagues (2017) indicate that peer praise notes are an effective way to decrease problem behaviors. Additionally, Teerlink and colleagues (2017) found that students became invested when given the opportunity to compliment other people. This current research also suggests that problem behaviors decreased through positive

interventions. It is encouraging to see SEL at the forefront of instruction, providing students the opportunity to learn how to communicate and be kind with one another.

**Cooperation interpretations.** The data used to find cooperation skills were one of four categories that incorporated the student drawings. Through the use of drawings, 60% of the participants demonstrated an understanding of how to cooperate at a mastery level while 30% of participants were approaching mastery. With 90% of the participant group meeting expectation, the findings suggest that that most participants knew how to communicate efficiently. These findings support the work of Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, and Nay (2003), who found that when students receive a social skills intervention, negative behaviors decrease. With social skills intervention being the focus of Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, and Nay's (2003) study, the researchers claim that the intervention itself helped mold students' cooperation and social skills. Furthermore, cooperation and communication are considered to both be factors of social skills (Anderson-Butcher, Newsome, & Nay, 2003).

**Relationship interpretations.** Whenever we had a lesson that incorporated building relationships, it often included a really fun activity. It is implied that the experiences that the participants had during the lesson contributed to why relationship skills scored so well. According to Teerlink (2017), relationships are continuously being formed and students are learning how to interact amongst each other during recess. Perhaps through the SEL lessons, students entered recess with a new set of skills that allowed them to excel so well.

**Empathy interpretations.** Of the four skills that were assessed using the drawings, empathy had the lowest number of participants who scored at mastery level. Empathy was probably the most difficult skill to teach. To educate someone on empathy involves being able to understand other peoples' emotions. I found that it took a little longer for the students to learn

concepts such as understanding others' emotions and feelings. While the data show that the students had lower levels of mastery, the shortened length of the study limited the measured outcomes. Perhaps the success that was accomplished can be explained through the lens of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. According to Vygotsky (1978), learning happens through real-life experiences. The findings suggest that those who did accomplish understanding in empathy were able to empathize through real life experiences.

**Problem solving interpretations.** The findings show that 45% of the participants scored at the approaching mastery stage while 40% of the participants scored mastery level. These findings suggest that 85% of the participants understand basic problem-solving skills as well as the ability to forgive and accept other people. I found that these concepts were very challenging to teach, especially for a lower elementary student. Many times throughout the intervention group, I had to experiment with several different strategies to teach problem solving skills to the participants. Previous findings by Cressey (2019) indicate that in order to promote SEL effectively, educators must be prepared to face many complex challenges such as dealing with acculturated stress for students and meeting deadlines. Although our strategies and lessons may have been different, the challenges presented by Cressey (2019) were the same.

### **Reflections on Study Limitations**

This study was subjected to many limitations throughout the action research process. Perhaps the biggest limitation was the time frame in which this research took place. This study was initially intended to be eight weeks long, but due to the COVID 19 pandemic, the intervention was ended early. It was shocking the amount of data that were collected within the four-week time frame. The findings show that the intervention was working in reducing conflict

behaviors; however, if I had more time to finish the Sanford Harmony SEL curriculum, the results may have differed.

Another significant limitation included the fact that I was teaching students independently. For example, the students who participated in this study were chosen based on their behavior reports. I did not have the opportunity to teach an entire classroom together. At first, I thought this gave me an advantage because I knew these students focus better in small groups. However, I started to notice that the participants would act differently when they showed up to my after-school intervention group versus the regular day-to-day classroom. Future research may be necessary to understand if teaching an SEL curriculum to a class of 20 or more would be successful.

Another significant limitation included the participation group size. The sample size of this study included a total of 10 students, which is very small. Because of the small number of participants, there were very little variations in backgrounds. The participants were Hispanic, Black, or White, and they only spoke English or Spanish. Because of this, the findings cannot be generalized amongst other racial and ethnic groups.

A third limitation was my ability to meet the needs of all grade levels. The SEL curriculum that I decided to use contained lessons and activities designed for first and second grade students. Although most of the participants fall under that category, not all the participants met those requirements. There was one third grader in the intervention group and they completed all the lesson and activities that were designed for students who were younger than him/her.

Lastly, I relied on multiple people to complete observations of the participants. While there were many benefits associated to this process, I acknowledge that using having observations completed by different people could be considered a limitation to the study. I can

only assume that the classroom teachers and youth development leaders completed the behavior checklists honestly. Although I trust that the research was completed truthfully, I cannot say that every behavior and emotion was tracked perfectly.

### **Plan for Future Action**

The data from this action research project suggest that integrating social and emotional skills within a first, second and third grade setting can reduce problem behaviors. With this information, I plan to present these findings to the teachers and staff of my school site. Every Wednesday, my school site meets to discuss various topics that relate to our teachers. Sometimes the meetings are instruction-focused and other times they are problem-focused. As a school that has a common history of fighting and bullying, it is my belief that the teachers and staff would find this research helpful. A Wednesday staff meeting would be the perfect opportunity to present these findings.

When I first started this research, it was my intent to make a positive change in my school culture. It is also likely that these findings will be valuable to other schools in my district with similar demographics. My school has similar problems with student behavior as other schools in the district; and as an educational leader, I plan to share my findings with other school sites. By sharing this research, I am encouraged to help shift the mental health crisis that rises each year among children.

In addition, this study provides other opportunities for future research. Although these findings suggest that incorporating SEL for lower elementary students can prevent problem behaviors, one cannot assume that it will have the same effect for upper elementary students. Perhaps research for upper elementary, grades 4 and 5, will be beneficial. Using the same Sanford Harmony curriculum may have a different outcome with older students. I am also

interested in learning about the longer-term benefits of SEL. With my research being limited to four weeks, it would be interesting to see what a full eight-week program would yield.

When considering Cressey's (2019) research regarding developing culturally responsive social, emotional and behavioral supports, I realized that if I wanted to incorporate SEL successfully throughout the entire school, it would take at least a couple of months to plan and implement. Cressey (2019) found that preparing teachers ahead of time would allow for greater buy-in from the staff. If my research happens to inspire other educators, I plan to introduce the idea of incorporating SEL on a daily basis. I will have to coordinate with the leadership team on when the staff would be able to teach SEL. With instructional minutes being as critical as they are, I will have to find creative ways to make it easy for teachers to incorporate SEL in their own classrooms.

The students who were able to participate in this research study were able to partake on a unique experience. As first, second and third students, many do not have the opportunity to visit a safe place and talk about how to handle difficult feelings and emotions. I was constantly reminded by my participants that the emotions they struggle with were no different than that of an adult. I found great joy in being able to educate and relate to real life issues that people face every day. As these students continue to grow older, I hope they remember what they learned during this intervention. I plan to remind them if they forget, but I also hope that they would take action and spread their knowledge to their peers so they themselves can mold a future that understands social and emotional learning.

## **Summary**

As an educator in a socio-economically disadvantaged neighborhood, who works directly with a historically oppressed student population, I wanted to transform the school culture so that

my students would have an equitable educational experience compared to those who have had the opportunity to learn social skills outside of school. Part of the issue includes students not having enough access to social and emotional learning. Another problematic issue includes the mental health concerns that student deal with every day. Therefore, I investigated how social and emotional learning implemented through a positive behavior intervention and support group affects problem behaviors in first, second, and third grade students.

Emotional intelligence, first defined by Daniel Goleman in 1995, suggests that there is a direct link between emotions and learning (Goleman, 1995). With the implementation of social and emotional learning, I wanted to allow an opportunity to explore and learn about the emotions they feel every day. Negative emotions would often lead to behavior problems inside the classroom. In order to help solve these problems in a positive way, I created the intervention to allow students a way to control their feelings and learn to be empathetic amongst others.

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978) provides an important perspective. I drew from Vygotsky's theory when teaching the Sanford Harmony SEL lessons. Since all my students exhibited problem behaviors, sociocultural theory was used to incorporate unity and culture amongst the group. Part of social and emotional learning included qualities like community building and relationship skills, all which worked in conjunction with sociocultural theory.

I developed and implemented an eight-week study comprised of three phases: pre-intervention phase, intervention phase, and post-intervention phase. For each part of the action research study, I collected quantitative and qualitative data using behavior checklists, student drawings, and rubrics. I, along with the classroom teachers and after school program youth development leaders all contributed to collecting data. Unfortunately, complete implementation

of the Sanford Harmony program was not possible. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic and associated shelter in place, this action research project was forced to end early.

Of the four weeks of data collection, the findings show that with an implementation of SEL, anxious behaviors decreased by 5.7%, aggressive behaviors decreased 8.6%, inattentive behaviors decreased 13.2%, depressive behaviors decreased 12.2%, and positive social skills increased 10.7%. In addition, 60% of students developed mastery cooperation skills, 55% of students developed mastery relationships skills, 30% developed mastery empathy skills, and 40% developed mastery problem solving skills. Collectively, the data support the conclusion that social and emotional learning, implemented throughout a positive behavior intervention and support group, decreases negative behaviors in first second and third grade students.

Through this action research project, I have learned a vast amount of information regarding educational theory, strategies, and practice. Not only can social and emotional learning benefit problem behaviors, but it can substantially help students who are struggling with mental health issues. Although this research project ended early, I do not regret the experience and the journey that my students and I took together. My hope is to continue to grow as an educational leader and expand on the knowledge that was gathered through this extensive action research project.



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## Appendix A

### Behavior Checklist

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Teachers,

Please check any and all behaviors observed during the day. Use the back for help identifying behaviors.

#### **Anxious Behaviors**

- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Appeared stressed about academic work
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Reluctant to engage in social activities
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Refrained from speaking in class
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Said he or she was sick and/or hurt
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was sensitive to criticism
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Seemed nervous or timid when in the presence of peers
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Excessively worried about academic performance

#### **Aggressive/ Disruptive Behaviors**

- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Threatened other students
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was physically aggressive toward peers
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Bullied other students
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Instigated peers by teasing or saying put downs
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Challenged your or other teachers' authority
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was reprimanded for bad classroom behavior
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Argued with classmates when corrected, argued or became upset

#### **Inattentive Behaviors**

- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Had trouble staying focused until tasks were completed
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Failed to complete assigned work on time
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was easily distracted
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Needed prompts/reminders to stay on task
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was caught daydreaming

Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was confused about assignment instructions

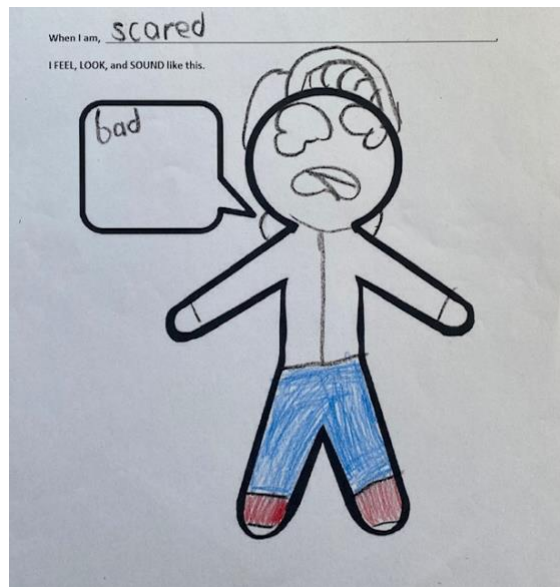
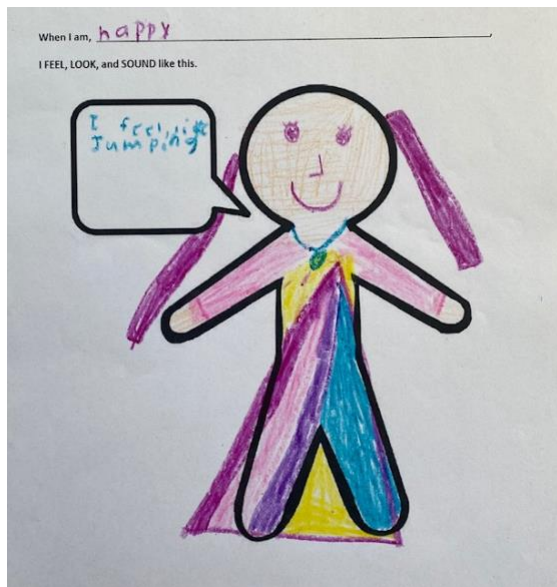
#### **Social Skills**

- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Followed classroom rules
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was sympathetic towards others' feelings
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Complied with adult directions/requests
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Managed frustration appropriately
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Cooperated with classmates
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Requested help appropriately
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Accepted classmates' ideas
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Ignored distractions by classmates

#### **Depressive Behaviors**

- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Appeared sad or bummed out
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Seemed cranky, irritable, or agitated
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Was disinterested in schoolwork and other activities
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Appeared tired or worn-out
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Had difficulty following instructions
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Sulked or shut down
- Y\_\_\_ N\_\_\_ Preferred to be alone during unstructured times (free time, lunch, recess, etc.)

## Appendix B



## Appendix C

### **Writing prompts:**

**Unit 1 Prompt-** Draw a picture of 2 people meeting for the first time.

**Unit 2 Prompt-** Draw a picture of someone who is happy, sad, surprised, etc. (different emotions).

**Unit 3 Prompt-** Draw a picture of someone talking to a friend who is crying.

**Unit 4 Prompt-** Draw a picture of 2 students telling their teacher about their fight in PE.

**Unit 5 Prompt-** What would you do? Draw a picture of someone spilling their milk on you. (Draw your reaction)

## Appendix D

### Drawing Rubric

*The rubric below is used to assess a summative activity at the end of each unit. The activity will be in the form of a drawing in which will be guided by a prompt. The assessment refers to social and emotional skills in regards to solving conflict and problem behaviors.*

	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Approaching Mastery</b>	<b>Mastery</b>
<b>Cooperation</b>	Drawing does not show a desire to work collaboratively with others.	Drawing shows no more than 1 indication of cooperation. (taking turns, listening, explaining, etc.)	Drawing shows engagement and eye contact, and subjects are depicted as working with others. .
<b>Relationships</b>	Drawing indicates that student struggles with making friends and building relationships. Drawing may depict subjects avoiding or refusing to work with others.	Drawing shows no more than 1 indication of relationship building. (playing games, expressing feelings, etc.)	Drawing shows multiple indications of relationship building. . Student’s drawing does not demonstrate negative feelings towards others.
<b>Empathy</b>	Drawing fails to show empathetic emotions.	Drawing shows no more than 1 indication of empathy (feeling sorry, checking in, hugging, etc.)	Drawing displays an image of someone lending a helping hand, or having a shoulder to lean on when upset.
<b>Problem Solving</b>	Drawing fails to show people working together. Image rejects communication between 2 or more people.	Drawing shows no more than 1 indication of problem solving (listening, expressing feelings, Understanding)	Drawing indicates multiple people working together to solve issues.