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Mindee Albanese

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Social Emotional Learning in Middle School: Examining the Second Step Program

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

Mindee Albanese

Summer 2022

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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**

Social Emotional Learning in Middle School: Examining the Second Step Program

By

Mindee Albanese

Master of Arts in Teacher Leadership

Saint Mary's College of California, 2022

Margaret Coughlan, Research Advisor

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and helping our students to feel a sense of belonging and school connectedness are increasingly relevant in today's world. This study investigated the impact the Second Step direct instruction SEL curriculum would have on seventh- and eighth-grade students' feelings of school connectedness. Approximately 48 students participated in Second Step lessons over a ten-week period. Although the findings did not show a clear correlation to improved feelings of school connectedness, data did show that many students responded positively to SEL instruction, which indicated that continued use of the program could potentially yield positive results. With further implementation of the Second Step program, the goal is that overall school climate and culture, along with students' sense of belonging and feelings of connectedness, will continue to improve. It is hoped that this action research project will enlighten educators about the benefits of implementing SEL instruction into their classrooms.

## **Dedication**

This project is dedicated to my family. To my husband, thank you for supporting my dreams and encouraging me to finish something I started 25 years ago. To my three daughters, never stop learning and growing. I love you all. Lastly, to my work wife and partner in crime, you talked me into joining this program with you, and I can honestly say that I'm glad you did. Yes, it was worth all the time and hard work! We did it!

## **Acknowledgements**

This was a challenging program in many ways and for many reasons. Returning to school during a pandemic, after a year and a half of distance learning, I do not think any of us anticipated the difficult school year and myriad new challenges we were going to face in our schools and classrooms. Therefore, thank you to my cohort. We supported each other and got through this together. Quite frankly, I think we're all a little crazy for taking this on when we did, but the way we were able to come together and commiserate actually helped us to see this through to the end! Also, thank you to my two professors in the program for pushing me to stretch and grow in ways that, at times, I wasn't sure I could. I can honestly say I have a new outlook and fresh perspective on this profession that I love. Finally, thank you to my advisor for your support and encouragement as I navigated my way through the final stages of this process.

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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Middle school can be a challenging time for many students. Students in this age group are experiencing many changes in many areas of life. Regardless of a student's background or identity, many middle school students are going through puberty and experiencing hormonal imbalances, which may affect feelings of self-esteem and sense of belonging. Many students at this age may be changing schools because they are moving from elementary to middle school or junior high, or at the very least experiencing a school schedule that now involves multiple teachers and multiple class periods. They may also experience challenges with friendships and parents as they are trying to find their own identities in their quest to figure out who they want to be. In addition to the usual tumultuous times that early adolescence can bring, students – and teachers – have just experienced (and in reality are still experiencing) one of the most unprecedented academic situations we have ever found ourselves in: we have been in the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic that kept many students isolated in “distance learning” for over a year. These are just some of the reasons it is not hard to imagine why these are very confusing and trying times for all school-aged students, especially young adolescents.

Due to COVID-19, students from across the country, from preschool to college, were sent home in March of 2020. Some of these students did not return to in-person schooling until almost a year and a half later. Students in my Northern California school did not return to face-to-face instruction until August, 2021. The students in my district, and in many others around the world, experienced 17 months without peer-to-peer interactions, awareness of procedures and routines of the school and classroom, and the consistency of day-to-day school environments and teachers. Upon the return to school in 2021, it was apparent that students were struggling with

learning loss and diminished social emotional skills. Anxiety, isolation, depression, and other mental health issues associated with the loss of a connection to peers, teachers, and schools greatly impacted our young people during the COVID-19 pandemic (Raffaele, 2021). Also, as feared, many students did indeed experience learning loss – I have seen it in many of my own students who are below grade level in reading and comprehension, or who have had trouble putting pencil to paper.

The pandemic and distance learning magnified many of the inequities currently being faced in education, both at home and around the world. Many of my students experienced issues with technology or with parents who had to work while they “attended school” from home. Often times, these students were also left unsupervised, and many were even left to supervise younger siblings during the school day. These experiences added to the stress and trauma they were already enduring as a result of adolescence, a pandemic, and other life events. Unfortunately, the digital divide and school “disengagement” became even more extreme for many students around the world (Seymour, 2020). Students throughout the nation had trouble readjusting to being around their peers (Long, 2021). I noticed the awkwardness normally present in middle schoolers was amplified due to the time spent in distance learning for a year and a half. Students demonstrated difficulty socializing appropriately with their peers both in class and at lunch, participating in class activities such as think-pair-share, and having conversations with adults on campus. Although students had missed seeing their peers the previous school year, it was challenging to reacclimate to friendships, routines, and the everyday school environment. Things that used to be simple, natural, even second nature – such as raising hands, respecting school property, and being prepared upon entering the classroom – brought

about stress and a lack of persistence in schoolwork. As a teacher, I could sense the feeling of disconnect in many as they struggled to return to once “normal” routines.

Before we can even begin to tackle the learning loss that resulted from distance learning, we must first attend to our students’ most basic physiological needs, followed by their sense of safety, security, and belonging (Maslow, 1943). Social emotional learning (SEL) is a concept that has been permeating schools for the last several decades. It has many definitions and many ways of implementation – from introducing and practicing informal strategies to direct instruction of an explicit SEL curriculum. However, the core premises of any SEL curriculum are to incorporate the intra and interpersonal skills that young people need to be successful in school and in life (Wallender, 2020). Incorporating SEL into our curriculum is going to be more important than ever not only because of the changes students experience during adolescence, but also due to the added turmoil and trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. I knew that rebuilding relationships – peer-peer relationships and teacher-student relationships – would have to be a top priority after I watched my students struggle to return to the classroom and to social interactions. I began to wonder how this could best be accomplished. My district must have also anticipated such concerns because they adopted a formal SEL curriculum, the Second Step program. The purpose of this project was to determine if the Second Step program would have an impact on my middle school students’ sense of school connectedness.

### **Statement of the Problem**

I am a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher in a suburban Title 1 kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade school. While my diverse school community is 66% socio-economically disadvantaged and 49% Latinx, it was distressing that many of my students across the board fell behind and/or did not participate regularly in distance learning during the time in which schools were shuttered

due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I knew that it was going to be harder for my students to have a successful return to in-person learning, and to reengage after a year and a half of distance learning, if they were not feeling valued and cared for at school. It was imperative to help all my students reconnect to school and rebuild the trust, engagement, and sense of belonging that accompany feelings of school connectedness.

For the past several years, I have averaged approximately 180 students per year across six class periods per day. Pre pandemic, I noticed a general decline in school culture, spirit, and morale. Overall, I noticed that our sense of community was declining, lacking even, and the lack of community seemed to affect the way my students treated each other and interacted with one another in the classroom and during unstructured passing period and lunch time. I wanted to investigate why this observation of low school morale seemed to be insinuating itself into our campus. I also wanted to find ways to improve our school culture and climate as a means to enhance my students' overall feelings of school connectedness, engagement, belonging, and well-being. Internationally, studies have shown that the percentage of students "liking school a lot" decreases from age 11 to 15, along with those who "do not feel they are an important part of their school community" increasing for these age groups (Grover, 2021). Numbers such as these are alarming to me, as a teacher, because this is the last thing I want for my students. In addition, because I observed student apathy and awkwardness in behavior toward one another, I began to think about ways to increase student engagement and connectedness. Then, COVID-19 happened. After almost a year and a half away from our physical school campus, over a year spent in distance learning, I feared these issues would be compounded. Unfortunately, I was right.

I have been teaching for 22 years, and I have been at my current school site since the day the school opened 15 years ago. Although I had witnessed the ebbs and flows of school spirit, I now felt more strongly that we needed to find a way to turn things around. I wanted my students to be proud of their school and to want to come to school. I love my students; I want them to be happy and successful, and I want them to feel that they are cared for and capable of success. When my students returned to campus for the first time, in August 2021, I was looking forward to reconnecting with them in person and rebuilding their connection to school. I also wondered if the Second Step social-emotional learning program that my district adopted would improve my students' feelings of school connectedness and thereby improve the overall school climate.

### **Purpose of the Research**

With the nation – the whole world, actually – still amidst the COVID-19 pandemic that transformed the way in which students and teachers interacted, schools and districts prepared to return to fully in-person learning for the 2021-2022 school year. For many, it had been almost a year and a half since students had interacted in person with their teachers, their classmates, and their school community. While some schools may have previously returned in-person learning, with precautions, or tried to make the best of a hybrid schedule, my district in the northern California Bay Area remained fully virtual – participating in distance learning for the entire 2020-2021 school year.

As a school that was struggling with student engagement and school connectedness pre-pandemic, the return to in-person learning for the 2021-2022 academic year was difficult on many levels. In fact, school engagement and connectedness were such concerning topics nationwide that they dominated a back-to-school issue of the National Education Association (NEA) Today magazine. In an article by Cindy Long, the author described how many of our



students have experienced learning loss, the stress of the pandemic, and possibly trauma in some form or another over the past year and a half (2021). When students returned to school, it was our jobs as educators to not only welcome them with (metaphorically) open arms, but to make them feel welcome so they are ready to learn. We needed to rebuild those relationships and connections that suffered from distance learning. School connectedness, as defined by Robert W. Blum is the “academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals” (2005, p. 16). Fostering that sense of student belonging and engagement – that feeling of school connectedness – was crucial to a successful transition back into the classroom. School connectedness has been shown to have numerous positive benefits for students – ranging from improved engagement and achievement to improved friendships and mental health (Panayiotou, 2019). Social emotional learning (SEL) research, in turn, has shown positive correlations to overall feelings of school connectedness (Lohmeier, 2011).

My district recently adopted the Second Step social emotional learning program for kindergarten through eighth grades. The purpose of this research study is to examine the effects of social emotional learning – specifically, the Second Step SEL program – and its impact on students’ feelings of school connectedness in seventh and eighth grade students. According to the Second Step website, Second Step is “A holistic approach to building supportive communities for every child through social-emotional learning” (secondstep.org, 2021). The Second Step middle school program involves four units; each unit has six to eight lessons that are approximately 25-minutes in length. These teacher-led units include lessons on mindsets and goals; recognizing bullying and harassment; thoughts, emotions, and decisions; and managing relationships and social conflict. This study is intended to examine the effects of this program on

middle school (seventh and eighth grade) students' feelings of school connectedness. Through initial research, I found studies that have reviewed Second Step with overall positive results, and which indicated that Second Step is one of the most widely used SEL programs in schools (Low, 2016). In addition, there are numerous empirical studies surrounding the connections between social emotional learning/competence and school connectedness (Panayiotou, 2019; Lohmeier, 2011; Shochet, 2006).

### **Action Research Question**

I wanted to find out if direct instruction in a social emotional learning unit from the Second Step program would have an impact on my seventh and eighth graders' connectedness to the school community. The question for this Action Research Project was: *How will the explicit teaching of social-emotional learning skills, through the use of the Second Step program, affect seventh and eighth grade students' feelings of school connectedness?* My goal was that students would feel an increase in their feelings of school belonging and connectedness after our social-emotional lessons. In addition, my hope was that this increase in school connectedness would also lead to a more positive feeling in our overall school culture and climate, in both the short- and long-term.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations that were encountered throughout this study. First, the Second Step program is designed to be implemented in the early elementary grades and then continued yearly as students matriculate through the grade levels. The fact that my students were introduced to the program for the first time as seventh and eighth graders may have limited the buy-in from some students when it came to taking the program and its lessons seriously. Additionally, it would be difficult to replicate my findings due to my small sample size of 48

students. Also, the timeframe in which this study was conducted could have impacted the results. The overall time consisted of eight to ten weeks to fit within the parameters of my program's requirements. In addition to teacher observations and field notes, most data were derived from student assignments and assessments while participating in the program, including student self-reflections. Inherently, this type of self-reporting data from students has its limitations. Finally, as a teacher-researcher, limitations from myself – such as how well or how thoroughly I may or may not have implemented the lessons, especially since the program itself was new to me – may have also been a factor in the research as well as in student outcomes.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

As a teacher, I have always held a deep belief in the ability of each and every one of my students to succeed to the best of their ability. I know that all students are different, learn differently, and have different backgrounds and experiences which they bring to school with them. Therefore, I do not believe that they will all succeed in the same way, but I desire for them to succeed in *their* way. All our students have talents and strengths, which we, as educators, should help them to develop. On the other hand, as a white, cisgender woman with immense social privilege, I also recognize that some students may have trouble identifying with and/or connecting with me – and, the reverse is true as well. Because of my strong desire to see my students succeed – in their own way – I, as a teacher have always held high expectations for them. Sometimes these high expectations can lead to frustration and/or disappointment, which may limit my objectivity. With empathy playing a key role in social emotional learning, it is one thing that I have tried to cultivate in myself and in my relationships with my students. Despite this, it is never truly possible to understand the specifics of what each child is going through or has gone through.

As the only seventh and eighth grade English teacher at my small, suburban K-8 school site, I was not only the researcher in this study, but I was also the teacher. As such, I wanted my students to not only feel comfortable with the Second Step lessons, but to also know that it would not affect their grade, their success in my class, or my view of them. Again, the idea was to use social emotional learning to build relationships, to build up our schools' climate and culture, and to increase my students' feelings of school connectedness. It was imperative that I did my best to limit any ways in which my positionality may have affected my implementation of the program and my students' learning of the social emotional competency skills we were trying to develop. I collected data in a variety of ways, including student work and self-reflections, teacher observation and researcher field notes to mitigate these potential biases.

Ultimately, implementing the Second Step program with my students helped me, as a teacher, to also understand my own need for growth in the areas of social emotional skills and social emotional competence. These types of lessons are not always the easiest to implement, but they are necessary to help our students and ourselves to grow and thrive both in academics and in life. For me, personally, a renewed investment in having empathy for my students and my colleagues, in having a growth mindset (especially as a lifelong learner), and in working on personal goal-setting have all helped to reignite my passion for teaching and for my students. It has also been a time for reflecting on how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected my own mental health, along with how it has impacted my teaching. In addition, in reflecting on this action research project, my desire is that this increased promotion of social-emotional learning for my students continues to strengthen my own SEL skills, not only for the benefit myself, but also for my future students and my school overall.

## **Definition of Terms**

### ***Emotion Management***

The ability to cope effectively with situations that provoke strong feelings and students-use of calming-down strategies (secondstep.org, 2020).

### ***Empathy***

The ability to understand and respond to what other people are feeling and an improved ability to see things from others' perspectives (secondstep.org, 2020).

### ***Growth Mindset***

A person's beliefs about whether their abilities or characteristics are malleable and capable of changing over time depending on circumstances and effort. Second Step Middle School targets growth mindset in two areas: intelligence (or the ability to do well in school) and personality (secondstep.org, 2020).

### ***School Connectedness***

An academic environment in which students believe that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals (Blum, 2005). School connectedness occurs when students feel part of their school and an attachment to the adults and students therein (Lohmeier, 2011).

### ***Social Connectedness***

Social connectedness can also be defined as social belonging (secondstep.org, 2020).

### ***Social Emotional Learning (SEL)***

According to the Collaborative for Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and

achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021).

### **Implications**

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of the Second Step SEL program on students' feelings of school connectedness. The short-term implications of this study will hopefully result in a more positive school climate and culture for the remainder of the school year as students' increased connectedness and increased awareness of various intra and interpersonal skills – as taught through Second Step lessons and curriculum – have also increased. Going a step further, implications would be that the seventh graders who experienced this curriculum would continue to participate and carry it forward into their eighth-grade year as positive role models within the school.

Ultimately, this was an important study because the research indicates that school connectedness has been tied to numerous benefits, many of them lifelong. These benefits include, but are not limited to, academic motivation, performance, and achievement; self-esteem and emotional and psychological well-being; social emotional competence and improved mental health; lower instances of health-risk behaviors and delinquency; lower probability of gang membership and violence; and even future success and employability (Shochet, 2006). These positive outcomes are something that can help to support equity both inside and outside of the classroom and are benefits that I would be happy to see all my students experience.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

The purpose of this action research project was to examine the effects of the Second Step social emotional learning (SEL) curriculum on middle school (7th and 8th grade) students' feelings of school connectedness. I chose to integrate this program into my English Language Arts curriculum because I found that my students were struggling with reconnecting with their peers and their teachers after over a year away spent in distance learning.

Research has indicated that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety, isolation, depression, and other mental health issues associated with the loss of a connection to peers, teachers, and schools greatly impacted our young people (Raffaele, 2021). Also, as feared, many students experienced learning loss; a phenomenon which I have unfortunately witnessed among my own students. Adolescence in and of itself is a stressful time for students, but with the trauma of the pandemic, I knew that my students were going to need a welcoming and safe environment in which to return.

By implementing the Second Step program with my seventh and eighth graders, I wanted to find out if direct instruction in a social emotional learning unit would have an impact on their connectedness to the school community. I wanted to provide my students with the tools necessary to cope with this return to in-person schooling and to successfully grow and thrive during this school year and in the years to come. Thus, the question for this Action Research Project was: *How will the explicit teaching of social-emotional learning skills, through the use of the Second Step program, affect seventh and eighth grade students' feelings of school connectedness?* I hoped that this increase in school connectedness would lead to a more positive feeling in our overall school culture and climate as well.

## **Overview of Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to provide an analysis of the primary literature that formed the foundation for this action research project. The literature review begins with the theoretical rationale, which provided the fundamental framework for this study. Multiple theories were used to inform this study; they include Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs theory, Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, and Carol Dweck's theory of growth mindset. Next, the literature review includes current and related research that will explore the concepts of school connectedness, social emotional learning, and how social emotional learning is incorporated into schools and can help improve school connectedness. In other words, the relevant articles reviewed in this study will also help to explain the important positive relationship and correlation between school connectedness and social emotional learning will also be examined. Finally, the applicable research articles which were reviewed as part of this action research project were collected from databases including Education Source, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The key search terms, words, and phrases used in this study include: *school connectedness, student engagement, sense of belonging, social emotional learning, school connectedness and social emotional learning, emotional intelligence, second step, social emotional learning and academic achievement, social emotional learning in schools.*

## **Theoretical Rationale**

In conducting this action research project, three theoretical frameworks were utilized to guide and support the study. The first, the hierarchy of needs developed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, was a motivational theory that describes human needs in an ascending order, with the most basic of human needs being at the bottom of the hierarchy. The second theory used was the



theory of emotional intelligence developed by Daniel Goleman, which also incorporates social emotional learning (SEL). Finally, the third theory incorporated into this research is that of Carol Dweck and the theory of growth mindset. This theory was an influence on this action research because growth mindset is one of the tenets of the Second Step SEL program, which was the focus of this project.

### ***Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory***

In 1943, the American psychologist Abraham Maslow developed his motivational theory that incorporated his Five Level Hierarchy of Needs. This hierarchy is often demonstrated in the shape of a pyramid, with the most basic of human needs being represented on the bottom level. According to Maslow, basic human needs (the bottom level of the hierarchy) include physiological needs such as food, water, shelter, and sleep, among others (Maslow, 1943). The next level, that of safety needs, incorporates a human's need to feel safe and secure, including in the areas of health and wellness and personal, financial, and emotional security (Maslow, 1943). As teachers and mandated reporters, we feel a sense of caring and empathy for our students that makes us want to ensure that these two basic levels of needs are met in the children that we are entrusted with so that we can then help them progress on to the higher levels. The third level, belongingness and love needs, includes the concept that humans are social beings who need to feel accepted, socially connected, and feel as if they belong. The purpose of this action research was to investigate whether the Second Step SEL program could increase students' feelings of school connectedness, which is directly related to this third level of Maslow's hierarchy. Beyond belongingness and love needs, the next level in the hierarchy describes esteem needs, including self-esteem, achievement, and respect (Maslow, 1943). The highest level in Maslow's original

hierarchy is that of self-actualization which is described as the desire for one to become all that they can be (Maslow, 1943).

Although the concept of this hierarchy of needs intends for one level to be met before progressing to the next, Maslow continued to refine his theory throughout his lifetime and eventually contended that the hierarchy, including the order, “is not nearly as rigid” as he may have originally implied (Maslow, 1987, p. 68). Maslow’s theory, including his hierarchy of needs, has implications for my research project because helping my students to meet level three of the hierarchy, belongingness and love needs, through an increase in their feelings of school connectedness is a desired outcome of my research. Furthermore, progressing beyond level three and being able to experience positive feelings of self-esteem and self-actualization are goals above and beyond those of this project, but nonetheless that I ultimately desire for my students. Lastly, Maslow’s theory, when applied in the classroom and as a basis for this action research project, can help to address inequities among traditionally disadvantaged or historically marginalized students by allowing students to meet their educational potential. Through teachers that help ensure that students’ most basic needs are being met and that help to create safe learning spaces which create a sense of belonging and a feeling of connectedness, all students can rise through Maslow’s hierarchy to reach their potential and feel successful.

### ***Daniel Goleman’s Theory of Emotional Intelligence and Social Emotional Learning***

Dr. Daniel Goleman, a journalist, scientist, and psychologist, first shared his theory of emotional intelligence with the world in 1995 with his book, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*. This theory built upon the psychological theory of Emotional Intelligence developed by Salovey and Mayer a few years prior. This body of work was essential to this action research because the concepts of emotional intelligence, emotional competence, and

emotional learning are the foundations of Social Emotional Learning curriculum and instruction in schools. In addition, Dr. Goleman was one of the co-founders of CASEL, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. CASEL has been instrumental in advocating for the systemic implementation of SEL, especially through the use of explicit instruction programs, such as the Second Step program, in schools and classrooms across the country (casel.org, 2021).

According to Goleman, his concept of emotional intelligence incorporates four domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Self-awareness involves knowing one's emotions and how they may affect others, as well as knowing how one really feels about personal decisions. Self-management is the concept of handling (controlling and/or redirecting) one's emotions appropriately, along with the idea of motivating oneself, enjoying the learning process, and perseverance. Social awareness incorporates the important concept of empathy or recognizing emotions in others. Finally, relationship management includes the social competence skills of managing emotions in others (Goleman, 2020). Daniel Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence was a major framework for this action research because of its original focus on education, which led to what is now widely known as SEL in schools, and because Goleman felt that students should not just be lectured about emotional intelligence topics such as empathy, relationships, and managing emotions, they should also be able to practice them in class as they learn them and build upon them. (Goleman, 2020). In addition, the theory of Emotional Intelligence, along with that of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is especially important to this project because, according to Goleman (2020), "emotional literacy programs improve children's academic achievement scores and school performance" (p. 252). This is particularly promising when it comes to helping all students to perform better in school and to work toward closing achievement gaps for the underserved

populations at my school, including those that are English Language Learners and our large number of socio-economically disadvantaged students.

### ***Carol Dweck's Theory of Growth Mindset***

In *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, psychologist Dr. Carol S. Dweck theorized that success in almost every area of life can be influenced by how we think about ourselves and our abilities (2006). A major foundation of her theory is the concept of a fixed mindset versus a growth mindset. Those with a “fixed mindset” feel that their talents and abilities are fixed and are therefore less likely to learn from their mistakes and ultimately less likely to thrive and be successful. On the other hand, Dweck proposed that those with a “growth mindset” believe that their abilities can be nurtured and developed and can, in turn, develop a student’s desire and passion for learning. Dweck (2006) noted, “The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it’s not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives” (p. 7). The theory of a growth mindset had implications for this action research because the notion of growth mindset is one of the concepts focused on and incorporated into the Second Step SEL program, which is what was investigated as part of this project. In addition, the concept of Growth Mindset is also tied to Goleman’s Emotional Intelligence domain of self-management. Finally, it is also important to note that studies around the world have shown that a growth mindset in students can help disadvantaged students to close learning gaps (“Can a Growth,” 2021), which I found to be yet another exciting and relevant reason for this theoretical rationale in guiding this project.

## **Review of Related Research**

The review of the related literature is organized into three segments: school connectedness, social emotional learning, and SEL programs in schools. Each of the three areas includes a summary of pertinent and related literature and a reflection of the correlation between the relevant, contemporary research and the present study of this action research project.

### ***School Connectedness***

With the pandemic still in full swing and students returning from over a year away from their physical school campuses, the topic of school connectedness was even more important than ever. I wanted to learn more about school connectedness – what is it? I wondered why students need to feel connected, and how does this connectedness impact their journey through school? The ultimate goal of my research was, of course, to find ways to help our students reconnect with each other and with their schools when they returned to school.

Education researchers have studied school connectedness for the last few decades. A large longitudinal study in 2002 examined why some adolescents feel connected to school while others do not (McNeely et al., 2002). This was a quantitative study in which researchers analyzed a national survey taken by adolescents in grades 7-12. A random sample of 80 high schools (plus a feeder middle school) was selected from the national surveys, and ultimately there were a total of 71,515 student survey responses from a total of 127 schools that were used for this analysis. Overall, the magnitude of this study strongly showed that students' perceived feelings of school connectedness have a positive correlation to making them less likely to engage in behaviors that are dangerous or unhealthy. The study also looked at four attributes of school - classroom management climate, school size, severity of discipline policies, and rates of participation in extracurricular activities – and how those attributes also relate to students'

feelings of school connectedness (McNeely et al., 2002). Conclusions from this study include the idea that schools can help improve students' feelings of school connectedness and that part of school health promotion should also be fostering school environments that meet student developmental needs, help them to feel cared for, and help them to feel like they belong. This research is related to my study because it serves as a good foundational understanding of the concept of school connectedness and factors that affect it.

Traditionally, the concept of school connectedness has revolved around students' beliefs that the adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals (Blum, 2005). However, the first study which I examined in the area of school connectedness involved a mixed methods research study in which the author wanted to find out how students' peer to peer relationships – not just teacher-student relationships – affected their feelings of school connectedness (Gowing, 2019). The participants included 336 students aged 12-18 (grades 7-12) at a large school outside of Melbourne, Australia. In this study, participants filled out questionnaires and participated in focus groups centered around feelings about school connectedness; diaries were also kept by volunteers (not all participants) for the researcher to utilize as an additional reflective, qualitative tool. The interesting thing about this study, is that although it was looking at peer-relationships as a component important to school connectedness, it also included 71 staff members who participated; this gave the unique perspective of teachers/adults on campus and how they view school connectedness. An important outcome of this study showed students' peer relationships were their most important school relationship, regardless of where they fell on the self-reported school connectedness scale. From this, the author concluded that peer relationships can be utilized as a resource to help build school connectedness and that school staff should provide more opportunities, both inside and outside

the classroom, to facilitate these relationships and thus build connectedness. This research is related to my proposed study because it provides another perspective into what constitutes and comprises school connectedness. Whereas school connectedness used to only be thought of in terms of teacher-student relationships, we now see that we need to also take into consideration peer relationships when measuring students' feelings of school connectedness.

School connectedness has been found to have many positive benefits, whether it involves students feeling that their teachers and other adults on campus believe in them and their success, or whether it means a student is experiencing positive peer-peer relationships at school. School connectedness has positive correlations to myriad attributes, including, but not limited to, academic success and achievement, mental and emotional well-being, reduced risk-taking behaviors, and improved social abilities (Rowe et al., 2007).

I examined another study that researched the positive association between school connectedness and mental health. This study wanted to find out whether school connectedness would correlate (negatively) with self-report symptoms of depression and anxiety; whether school connectedness would predict depressive and anxiety symptoms; and whether prior mental health would correlate with school connectedness (Shochet et al., 2006). This quantitative study used several questionnaires, including: the Children's Depression Inventory (CDI), the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (PSSM), and the Spence Children's Anxiety Scale (SCAS). The questionnaires were given twice, twelve months apart, and the participants were over 2,500 eighth grade students, ages 12 to 14 from 14 public high schools in Queensland, New South Wales, and Tasmania, Australia. Despite the limitations of self-reporting and losing some of the initial participants between the first set of questionnaires and the second set twelve months later, researchers'

evidence did suggest that their hypotheses were overall supported by their study, which adds to the list of benefits that school connectedness can produce. On the other hand, this study also concluded with a discussion of the need for further clinical assessment, preventive interventions, and future research around school connectedness as it relates to adolescents' mental health, particularly regarding depression and anxiety. This study relates to my research in that it strengthens my understanding of the multitude of positive benefits associated with school connectedness, especially in the areas of mental and emotional health – which is what I'm hoping to positively impact through my own study. In addition, the indication that school connectedness is beneficial to all students, regardless of their background or where in the world they are from, is powerful to contemplate.

The final study that I investigated in the area of school connectedness involved researchers who wanted to test a new, more sensitive instrument for measuring school connectedness. It was a quantitative study which used almost a thousand 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grade students in both urban and suburban high schools. These students completed a school connectedness instrument which reimagined the traditional 54-question School Connectedness Scale (SCS) into a 3x3 matrix crossing three relationships (school, adults, peers). Their findings indicated that this reimagined SCS showed promise because of its ease of use, high reliability, validity, and worthiness to be used amongst students of all types of backgrounds (Lohmeier & Lee, 2011). This study was related to my study because it gave me another mode of information gathering to investigate for my own project, an instrument that is user friendly for all students might be worth incorporating into my own research.



## *Social Emotional Learning*

Social emotional learning is becoming more and more common in schools. The mental health of our students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, is a top priority for educators. When students returned to school after a year and a half of distance learning, they were struggling to reacclimate to procedures and routines, to teachers and “school rules,” and to getting along with and socially interacting with their peers. Social emotional learning includes, among other things, the ability to manage and process emotions, to show empathy for others, to engage in supportive relationships, and to make caring decisions (CASEL, 2021). These are all important life skills under “normal” circumstances; in a pandemic, they are even more important. For the purposes of this action research project, I wanted to examine studies involving social emotional learning. Specifically, I wanted to find out what its benefits are regarding our students.

The first study I examined in the realm of SEL involved researchers investigating whether SEL had an impact on academic performance. The researchers wanted to learn whether the acquisition and application of social emotional learning skills in middle school students could offer a link to those who might be or become at risk (Davis et al., 2014). Statistical analysis was used in the quantitative data analysis to review self-reported questionnaire data from 4,797 students entering ninth grade in a large urban western school district. Findings ultimately showed a correlation between lower social emotional skills and lower academic success. Limitations of this study, however, included the fact that the study only included one school district, and therefore it could benefit from replication in diverse districts. Also, self-reported data inherently carries with it its own limitations. Overall, conclusions from this study provide some evidence that helping students with aspects of SEL, such as goal setting, can have

positive effects on student academic success. Finally, this 2014 study by Davis and associates also supports incorporating intervention strategies such as small group and one-on-one social emotional learning opportunities. This study was related to my study because it provided insight and understanding into the different layers of social emotional learning and the far-reaching positive implications that SEL skills can have for middle and high school students.

Another study which I investigated also provided insight into a positive correlation between social emotional skills, also known as social emotional competence, and academic achievement. Panayiotou, Humphrey, and Wigelsworth (2019) conducted a quantitative longitudinal analysis that examined the results of 1626 elementary aged students' questionnaires in northwest England. In addition, researchers also looked at the relationship between SEL and mental health and SEL and school connectedness. This study empirically validated previous studies that showed a positive correlation between social emotional learning and academic attainment (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Their findings suggested that social and emotional skills in middle childhood can have positive effects on both mental health and academic performance. This study was related to my project because it researched the connection between SEL and school connectedness.

### ***SEL Programs in Schools***

Since initial research into what social emotional skills are, what SEL is, and how together they can have a positive impact on many areas of students' personal and academic lives, the logical next step was to research how SEL is being incorporated into schools. Therefore, this section of the literature review focused on studies that specifically looked at SEL curriculum and instruction in schools. In the first study that I investigated, the researchers wanted to find out if

the INSIGHTS SEL program improved classroom emotional support and classroom organization in urban, lower income racial/ethnic minority kindergarten and first grade classrooms.

This study was conducted using multiple “rigorous” quantitative methods studying 435 parent/child dyads and 120 teachers in 22 different schools in a large city in New York. Student participants were mostly five years old when this two-year study began, and 87% qualified for free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, 75% were black, 16% were Hispanic, and the remaining students were biracial. Researchers collected data through a variety of quantitative measures, including administrative data, direct assessments, and reports from both teachers and parents. Students were given pre- and post-tests in both kindergarten and first grade. Although researchers indicated multiple limitations to this study, including the nongeneralizability of the participant population, their overall findings did support their premise that the SEL program being studied (INSIGHTS) would improve both classroom emotional support and organization (McCormick et al., 2015). The researchers found that the INSIGHTS program they were investigating did improve classroom emotional support (at least in first grade) which also led to improved student achievement in math.

The authors concluded that there is a causal relationship between classroom emotional support, classroom organization, and student achievement. Researchers indicated a need for additional targeted research in this area, and for policy makers to take note of studies such as this one when it comes to funding SEL programs and teacher training programs. This study was related to my proposed area of research because it provided me with additional understanding regarding how important SEL instruction is in lower socio-economic schools and in the younger grades. This study also supports the notion that thoughtfully incorporated SEL instruction can lead to increased student achievement.

The next direct instruction SEL program that I examined involved a study of a middle school program, the SPARK (Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience Inside Every Kid) Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum. Researchers in this study conducted quantitative research that gave students a questionnaire evaluating students' understanding of the specific areas of the SPARK SEL curriculum before beginning the program and again after the program (13 weeks later). The final number of students for analysis included 357 middle school students from two diverse middle schools in the same school district in the southwest region of a large southern school district (Green et al., 2021). The researchers analyzed before and after questionnaires from the participants; they looked at overall change in students' knowledge of the SPARK curriculum and pre- and post- scores in several specific categories of the curriculum/SEL program. Through this study, the researchers found that there was evidence for the effectiveness of this SEL program. In fact, results showed a significant increase in the knowledge of SPARK content and SPARK principles. However, this study was limited by the fact that it only included students from two different schools, and the students were all from the same school district in the same state. Despite the limitations of the study, the researchers concluded, based on their findings, that the SPARK Pre-Teen Mentoring [SEL] Curriculum is effective and would be an important component of a school's classroom-based intervention and support system. This study was related to my proposed study because I conducted similar research, but with a different direct instruction SEL program (the Second Step program).

The final two research studies investigated the Second Step formal SEL curricular program. In the first study, the researchers wanted to determine if there was a difference in perceived self-regulation levels of elementary and middle school students after being formally introduced to social and emotional concepts. They also wanted to discover whether there was a

difference in the social skills of elementary and middle school students after being formally introduced to social and emotional concepts. Finally, this research study also wanted to find out if there was a difference in the problem-solving abilities of elementary and middle school students after being formally introduced to social and emotional concepts (Wallender et al., 2020). This quantitative study had a total of 185 elementary and middle school participants from a single public rural midwestern school district. The students completed a pre-test in which they rated their self-perception of certain self-awareness and self-regulation skills, followed by six months of biweekly instruction in the Second Step SEL curricular program and then a post-test of the exact same questions from before the program instruction.

The findings of this study seemed to somewhat surprise the researchers because the findings were “adverse” – meaning that the students’ scores actually went down. However, due to the various limitations of the study, including the small size and the difficulty that young students may have with rating themselves in this manner, the researchers felt it was difficult to say whether the Second Step program was actually successful or not. In fact, on a positive note, researchers stated that the adverse results may have been due to the increased knowledge of the students (from the program instruction) who then rated themselves more critically. In addition, the researchers did make it clear that regardless of whether this particular program was successful or not, there is still a clear need for SEL instruction in schools, especially nowadays. According to the researchers, whether social emotional learning occurs through a direct-instruction purchased program, such as Second Step, or through “kernels” of smaller school and/or teacher created lessons, researchers maintained that the bottom line was that SEL instruction needed to take place. This study was related to my project because it studied the same SEL direct instruction program (Second Step) that I investigated. As with this study, some

of my limitations included a small pool of participants and limited time for program/lesson implementation.

The second research study which I looked at that involved the Second Step SEL curriculum and program involved researchers who wanted to find out if the way in which the program was implemented, and the degree to which it was implemented, would influence the program's success. The study was a mixed-methods approach, which utilized questionnaires, rating scales, and observational data. Participants included over 7,300 kindergarten through second grade students in the states of Washington and Arizona. Findings from the study showed that the "engagement" aspect of implementation of the Second Step program – which the authors described as the extent to which students were following along with the lesson and the estimated percentage of students in the class who were engaged with the lesson – was the most critical (Low et al., 2016). The researchers concluded that, as with past findings regarding SEL research, SEL programs and instruction continue to increase in importance and implementation, but that to fully realize the potential of such programs, additional supports such as whole school programming is needed to enhance the classroom implementation. This study was related to my study because, again, it involved the Second Step SEL curriculum and program that I also implemented as part of my action research project. This study reinforced the fact that I needed to implement the program and its lessons with fidelity and as much adherence as possible if I was to gain the most engagement – and hopefully valid data – as a result.

## **Summary**

Maslow's hierarchy of needs provided much of the theoretical foundation for this action research project, as the need for students to feel a sense of belonging – school connectedness – is one of the more basic human needs. In addition, because this research project worked to

investigate the Second Step SEL curriculum for middle school age children, the Emotional Intelligence work of Daniel Goleman also served as a major theoretical framework. Lastly, since the Second Step program incorporates the concept of growth mindset, the theoretical work of Carol Dweck also served in shaping this investigation. All of these theoretical frameworks serve to remind us of the importance of growth mindset and emotional intelligence/literacy in SEL education as a means to increase students' feelings of and sense of belonging, which is a key component in feelings of school connectedness. According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), "Research has shown that young people who feel connected to their school are less likely to engage in many risk behaviors.... Students who feel connected to their school are also more likely to have better academic achievement, including higher grades and test scores, have better school attendance, and stay in school longer" (CDC.gov, 2018).

The research gathered and reviewed for this action research project involved studies that strengthened the belief that there are positive correlations and outcomes for students who feel a sense of school connectedness. The reviewed literature also supported the positive effects associated with social emotional learning, SEL's connection to school connectedness, and the benefits of implementing social emotional learning instruction in schools. Due to the overall positive research and literature findings regarding school connectedness and SEL, I looked forward to carrying out this project. I was excited to see if my own students would experience an increase in their feelings of school connectedness and the positive outcomes associated with a formal SEL program.

The next chapter in this action research project will review the methods that were used to execute this study of the Second Step SEL program and its effects on the feelings of school connectedness for middle school (7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade) students. Important means for measuring

outcomes in this study include researcher field notes, authentic student work, and teacher observation notes of participant behavior.



## **Chapter III**

### **Methods**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, anxiety, isolation, depression, and other mental health issues associated with the loss of a connection to peers, teachers, and schools greatly impacted our young people (Raffaele et al., 2021). In addition to the mental and emotional trauma associated with the pandemic, many students, as feared, experienced learning loss during the year and a half that they spent isolated at home in “distance learning” (Long, 2021). As a middle school English teacher who has been teaching for almost 22 years, I have personally witnessed this learning loss in many of my own students who are below grade level in reading and comprehension, or who have had trouble simply putting pencil to paper. I have also seen students struggle with tasks that used to be second nature to them: socializing appropriately, using manners, and merely navigating their way through a typical school day. With all the changes of adolescence, along with the turmoil and trauma of the pandemic, I began to wonder if incorporating social emotional learning (Goleman, 1995) into our classrooms would help students in their return to what would hopefully be a more normal-feeling, in-person school year.

In that regard, the purpose of this research study was to examine the effects of social emotional learning (SEL) – specifically, the Second Step SEL program – and its impact on students’ feelings of school connectedness in seventh and eighth grade. The Second Step middle school program involves teacher-led lessons in the areas of mindsets and goals; recognizing bullying and harassment; thoughts, emotions, and decisions; and managing relationships and social conflict (Second Step, 2021). The goal of the study was to investigate the effects of this program on middle school (seventh and eighth grade) students’ feelings of school connectedness

because I wanted to be able to provide my students with the tools necessary to not only cope with this return to in-person schooling, but to be able to successfully grow and thrive during this school year and beyond. Therefore, the question for this Action Research Project was: *How will the explicit teaching of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, through the use of the Second Step program, affect seventh and eighth grade students' feelings of school connectedness?* According to the California Department of Education's Social and Emotional Learning website (California Department of Education [CDE], 2021), "Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) reflects the critical role of positive relationships and emotional connections in the learning process and helps students develop a range of skills they [students] need for school and life" (para. 3). Consequently, my hope, and ultimately, my goal, was that students would feel an increase in their feelings of school belonging and connectedness after our social-emotional direct-instruction lessons. In addition, my hope for my students was that this increase in school connectedness would also lead to a more positive feeling in our overall school culture and climate.

### **Setting**

The school in which this study took place is a Title 1 kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) school on the border of two Northern California cities. According to the Title 1, Part A program description (U.S. Department of Education [DE], 2018), at least 40% of enrolled students must be from low-income families to receive Title 1 funding. Due to its location, the school draws students from two different cities, although they are technically from the same school district (the school district boundaries existed before the city limit boundaries). One city has a population over 100,000 and the other is under 50,000. The school itself is geographically located in the smaller of the two cities. The surrounding neighborhood is quite interesting, as it ranges from vineyards and commercial businesses to single family homes that are middle- to

upper-middle class and apartments that are designated low-income housing – thus all contributing to the diversity of this small school.

Although the school has a full-time principal, it only has a Vice Principal one to two days per week; it does a full-time librarian and a full-time counselor. The school psychologist and the speech teacher both split time between this site and another, and there is no on-site school nurse. However, the two full-time administrative assistants, and one part-time bilingual assistant, do their best to make sure the students are well taken care of. The school also has a credentialed Resource Specialist and Aide for the elementary students (K-5) and another credentialed Resource Specialist and Aide for the middle school students (6-8). Elementary specialist teachers include P.E., music, computers, and reading support. In middle school, students have core classes of English, math, science, history, and P.E., in addition to elective choices of band, orchestra, art, and computers. There is also a dedicated English Language Development (ELD) teacher in the middle school grades who teaches two periods of ELD. All 16 of the elementary teachers are fully credentialed in grades K-5 (this number does not include the resource and specialist teachers, who are also credentialed). There are also ten full-time credentialed teachers in the middle school grades (excluding the part-time ELD teacher who is also credentialed). All of the full-time elementary teachers identify as cisgender women; there are also two cisgender men who teach elementary music and P.E. one day per week each. The middle school staff includes seven cisgender women and four cisgender men. Overall, the teaching staff is approximately 82% White or Caucasian, 9% Asian American/Pacific Islander, 6% Hispanic or Latino, and 3% Black or African American. Unfortunately, these demographics are not very reflective of those of the students.

At the time of this study, according to data obtained from the principal, the student population of the school was just over 600 schoolwide (including all students, K-8), with approximately a 50-50 split in young men and women students. Total school demographics reveal a student body that is approximately 55% Hispanic or Latino, 22% White or Caucasian, 12% Black or African American, 6% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 5% Mixed-Race. In addition, the English Language Learner (ELL) population is approximately 16% of the student body. Lastly, according to the most recent School Accountability Report Card data (CDE, 2022), which contains data from the 2020-2021 (previous) school year, approximately 59% of students that year were considered socioeconomically disadvantaged and 8% were described as students with disabilities.

Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and its effect on schools worldwide, standardized testing data for the Northern California school that was the focus of this study would go back to 2019, so instead I looked at the most recent district-wide math and reading assessment data from December 2021/January 2022. The school in this study showed that, on average, approximately 15% of the elementary students, those in kindergarten through fifth-grade, were at or above grade level in math, approximately 60% were one grade level below, and 25% were two or more grade levels below. In reading, students in grades K-5 were approximately 23% on or above grade level, approximately 49% one grade level behind, and 28% two or more grade levels below. In the middle school grades, the most recent academic data, retrieved from the same district-wide assessment as the elementary data, revealed that approximately 21% of students were on or above grade level in math, 33% were one grade level below, and 46% were two or more grade levels behind. In reading, the middle school data showed approximately 30% of students in grades six through eight were on or above grade level

in reading, 27% were one grade level behind, and 43% were two or more grade levels below.

Although this assessment data may seem dismal, it is important to note that they do show improvement compared to the first round of district diagnostic assessments that were given at the beginning of this same school year.

### **Demographics of the Classroom**

The participants in this study included one general education class of seventh-grade English Language Arts students and one general education class of eighth-grade English Language Arts students that I taught during the 2021-2022 school year. There were 20 students in the seventh-grade class and 28 students in the eighth-grade class. All 48 students were informed via an information letter about the project, and no one declined to participate.

However, attendance has been such an issue this year due to the ongoing pandemic that there were quite often at least a few absences in each class on the days the Second Step SEL lessons and activities were presented.

Of the 48 participants, 23 were identified as young men (48%) and 25 as young women (52%). Their ages at the time of the study ranged from thirteen to fourteen years old. Overall, between the two classes, the demographics were as follows: 42% Hispanic or Latino, 25% White or Caucasian, 17% Mixed-Race, 12% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 4% Black or African American. Eleven of the 48 students (23%) are designated as English Language Learners (ELLs). On the most recent district diagnostic assessments, fourteen of the 48 students (29%) scored at or above grade level in reading, and 10 of the 48 scored at or above grade level in math (21%). Fifteen of the 48 students (31%) were one grade level below in reading, and seventeen of the 48 students (35%) were one grade level below in math. Nineteen of the 48 students (40%) were two or more grade levels below in reading, and 21 out of 48 students (44%)

were two or more grade levels below in math. The academic data from these two participant classes were fairly consistent with the overall middle school and school-wide data from this district-wide assessment. Although there were an alarming number of students one or more grade levels below in both reading and math, more than what I feel we would see in a “normal” school year – a year in which students did not just spend the previous year and a half isolated at home behind a computer screen – this mid-year data showed improvements over the initial reading and math assessment data obtained at the beginning of the school year.

These two classes that I chose as the participants for this action research project were selected primarily because I observed many of the students in these two classes, in particular, having a difficult time interacting with each other and struggling to readjust to social norms and class procedures during the first half of the school year. In short, they were the most socially awkward, overall, upon our return to in-person learning. Demographically speaking, they were a reasonably close representation of our overall school population. In addition, the students in these classes displayed a wide variety of academic levels.

### **Data Collection Strategies**

I utilized a variety of data collection strategies throughout the study to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the Second Step program’s social-emotional learning (SEL) units and lessons (see Appendix A) on students’ feelings of school connectedness. Data were collected and analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively to ensure a comprehensive assessment of the program and its effectiveness. As a form of quantitative data gathering and analysis, I developed and administered a pre- post- School Connectedness Survey (see Appendix B). This survey utilized a 10 statement 5-point Likert-type scale. In addition to this pre-post survey, I also gathered qualitative data using of researcher’s field notes, which were collected shortly after

Second Step lessons (see Appendix C). Lastly, to triangulate data, and to evaluate how students' understanding of the material was evolving, I analyzed student work completed during and after the Second Step SEL activities; student work included notebook entries, Second Step worksheets, exit tickets, and responses to writing prompts (see Appendix D and E).

### ***School Connectedness Survey for Middle School***

The pre- post- School Connectedness Survey (see Appendix B) that I created utilized a 10 statement 5-point Likert-style scale for students to self-assess different aspects of their daily school involvement and sense of belonging that are generally associated with the concept of school connectedness. As part of the survey, students rated themselves on the 5-point scale in which they indicated how they felt about each statement. Answer choices were assigned the following numerical values: 1 point "Strongly Disagree," 2 points "Somewhat Disagree," 3 points "Neutral/Unsure," 4 points "Somewhat Agree," and 5 points "Strongly Agree." Examples of survey questions included: "*I enjoy coming to school on a regular basis*" (#1), "*I feel that there is at least one adult on campus who cares about me and my academic success*" (#3), and "*Teachers in my school truly care about me and my classmates*" (#8). Each participants' responses from the pre-survey were analyzed quantitatively and later compared to the participants' post-survey responses.

### ***Researcher Field Notes***

During this action research project, I kept researcher field notes on a personal Microsoft Word document (see Appendix C). I logged notes a couple of times a week, usually at the end of the day in which a Second Step SEL lesson had been presented. Field notes incorporated researcher observations on student interactions and experiences during lessons, as well as individual student responses that stood out during lessons. The field notes provided a quick

description of that day's Second Step SEL lesson, along with a description of how students were observed to have engaged with the lesson that day. Notes also included observations regarding students' attitudes, behaviors, and comments (quotes), along with my own personal observations, comments, and wonderings as the teacher-researcher. At the end of the research study, a qualitative analysis of the researcher field notes was conducted to determine and examine recurrent and emerging overall themes and trends evolving among students as a result of participation in the Second Step lessons. This data collection technique was chosen and implemented as a valid source of information for this study because it allowed me, as the teacher-researcher, to observe and reflect upon whether or not this particular intervention (the implementation of the Second Step SEL lessons) seemed to be impacting students' overall feelings of school connectedness and our general school climate and culture.

### ***Second Step SEL Program Lesson Activities and Worksheets***

Each Second Step SEL direct-instruction unit involved approximately five to seven lessons (see Appendix A). Each lesson incorporated a variety of activities such as: warm-ups (partner discussions and/or in writing), definition of terms, video clips, scenarios, quick writes, worksheets, wrap up activities, etc. Some of the activities were completed in students' English notebooks, while others were conducted as discussions. For some lessons, students completed the Second Step worksheet (see Appendix D) that accompanied the lesson. At the end of each unit, I administered writing prompts (see Appendix E) which allowed students to reflect on the lessons, their understanding of them, and their relevance to their own lives and our school climate. A qualitative analysis of student responses in notebooks and on worksheets, along with evaluations of their written responses, allowed for further collection of data regarding students'



sense of belonging and feelings of school connectedness based upon the data revealed from these authentic student documents and artifacts.

## **Procedures**

This study took place over approximately 10 weeks during the months of February, March, and the beginning of April, with a one-week spring break toward the end of March. Because the implementation of this intervention was being incorporated into students' English Language Arts classes, and the program itself is designed to be carried out throughout the school year, rather than in two months, lessons were conducted at least twice a week to account for the shortened timeframe of this research project. The study consisted of three phases. The first phase, the introduction (approximately two weeks) involved an overview of the Second Step program and its foundational concepts. This phase involved an overview of middle school lessons that are intended to be taught initially in the sixth-grade, along with some base definitions and concepts from Unit 1, "Mindsets and Goals," that would provide schema before jumping into the two main units being utilized for this research study. The second phase involved presenting Unit 2 of the Second Step SEL program, the "Recognizing Bullying and Harassment" unit (approximately three to four weeks) for each grade level. Finally, the third phase focused on Unit 4 of the Second Step program, "Managing Relationships and Social Conflict" (approximately three to four weeks), with a few related lessons from Unit 3, "Thoughts, Emotions, and Decisions" as an introduction.

### ***Phase One: Introduction to Second Step***

Prior to implementing the Second Step SEL direct-instruction lessons as the intervention for this action research project, I created the pre- post- School Connectedness Survey (see Appendix B) for students to complete before beginning any SEL lessons or activities. In

addition, I created my online Second Step teacher account, completed the online training sessions, and determined which lessons would be most beneficial to my students and our school. Because there are four units, each with five to seven lessons, there would not be enough time to complete all four units within the timeframe of this study. For that reason, I chose two of the units that seemed as if they would be most helpful to our continued readjustment to in-person learning after over a year in distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. After choosing the two units for this study, it became obvious that the lessons built upon prior years' experiences with the program. Since this was our first year of school district adoption and implementation, I determined that a few "introductory" lessons would be needed. Therefore, I pulled from sixth-grade lessons and Unit 1 lessons to introduce students to concepts such as: *What is social emotional learning, Why is SEL important, How can SEL help students be successful in school and in life*, and more. During this phase, students utilized their English notebooks for notetaking and reflection on the "introductory" topics and terms.

### ***Phase Two: Unit 2 - Recognizing Bullying and Harassment***

Phase two of the study involved teaching and implementing a full unit from the Second Step direct-instruction SEL program. Based on the observed needs of my students during the first half of the school year and discussions with colleagues on which of the four Second Step units they thought would be best to focus on, I decided to start with Unit 2 which was titled, "Recognizing Bullying and Harassment." Both the seventh- and the eighth-grade units have the same titles, but the lessons themselves are slightly different from year to year (as they are meant to build upon each other). In seventh-grade, the lessons for this unit focused on the differences between bullying and harassment. The Unit 2 lessons also taught students about different types of harassment, such as sexual harassment and gender-based harassment, along with the short-

and long-term effects that these types of harassment can have on people. The seventh-grade unit culminated with a lesson on student rights and responsibilities at school in regards to bullying and the different types of harassment.

For the eighth-grade “Recognizing Bullying and Harassment” unit (Unit 2), students again learned to differentiate between bullying and harassment. In addition, lessons included learning to identify social and environmental factors that contribute to bullying and harassment. Because this was the first year for these eighth-grade students to experience a direct-instruction SEL program, I also incorporated two of the seventh grade lessons from Unit 2 about sexual harassment and gender-based harassment in lieu of two of the lessons in the eighth grade unit. This modification was made as I felt that it would be most beneficial to my students in terms of helping to elevate their sense of belonging and their levels of acceptance and empathy with one another. For the purposes of this study, I also decided to have the eighth graders complete the same end of unit writing prompt that the seventh-graders completed.

The implementation of this phase of the intervention incorporated approximately two lessons per week into students’ English Language Arts classes, and therefore lasted about three and a half weeks. During this time, students participated in the interactive lessons through the use of their English notebooks, class and partner discussions about topics and video clips, lesson worksheets, and writing prompts.

### ***Phase Three: Unit 4 - Managing Relationships and Social Conflict***

Phase three implementation also lasted approximately three and a half weeks. Again, I incorporated two to three lessons per week into students’ English Language Arts classes and students participated through class and partner discussions, writing in their notebooks, and completing some of the lesson worksheets along with an end of unit writing prompt. The Second

Step SEL unit which I decided to teach as the phase three part of the intervention in this research project was Unit 4: “Managing Relationships and Social Conflict.” Although my focus for this phase was Unit 4, I found it helpful to begin by supplementing with a couple of lessons from Unit 3: “Thoughts, Emotions, and Decisions.” The seventh-grade units consisted of lessons about stress, how conflicts escalate, how to keep your cool in a conflict, and how to take other people’s perspectives into consideration. The final lessons in this seventh-grade unit involved ways to resolve conflict and how to take responsibility for one’s actions.

In the lessons for phase three with the eighth graders, students began by learning about stress and anxiety from Unit 3: “Thoughts, Emotions, and Decisions.” We then incorporated Unit 4: “Managing Relationships and Social Conflict” which included lessons about considering others’ perspectives, finding solutions to conflicts, and making things right. As with phase two, both seventh- and eighth-graders wrapped up their units with a writing prompt. In addition, at the end of the Unit 4 lessons, both grade levels also completed the post-study School Connectedness Survey again so that results could quantitatively be compared to the same pre-study survey to determine the degree to which students’ feelings of school connectedness may have changed as a result of this Second Step SEL intervention.

### **Plan for Data Analysis**

All data, both quantitative and qualitative, were collected with the intention of addressing the following question: *How will the explicit teaching of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, through the use of the Second Step program, affect seventh and eighth grade students’ feelings of school connectedness?* As part of this study, participants completed a 10 question pre- and post-School Connectedness Survey in which each statement required a response on a Likert-type scale (see Appendix B). Results of both the pre- and post- surveys were quantitatively analyzed and

compared. Researcher field notes (see Appendix C) were also kept at least twice a week, as a form of qualitative data. In these field notes, I logged observations of student interactions, attitudes, discussions, and comments during the Second Step lessons. I then evaluated the notes for common trends and themes. Additionally, authentic student artifacts such as notebooks, worksheets, and writing prompts (see Appendix D and E) were analyzed to allow for multiple points of view. I reviewed these various sources of information, which served as a means of data triangulation. As such, I could interpret and understand the results of the study and therefore attempt to determine whether the Second Step SEL program had a positive impact on students' feelings of school connectedness.

Quantitative analysis was used for the results from the 10 Likert-type statements from the pre-post School Connectedness Survey for middle school students that I created. Numerical values ranging from 1 ("Strongly Disagree") to 5 ("Strongly Agree") were assigned to each response, which allowed for scores on the pre-survey to be analyzed for central tendency by calculating the mean for each of the participants and the overall mean for each participant class by grade level. The analysis was repeated at the end of the study when students completed the same School Connectedness Survey again as their post-survey.

Qualitative analysis was conducted on the researcher field notes and themes that evolved therein; the data that emerged from reviewing and examining student work completed as a result of the Second Step SEL direct-instruction lessons were also qualitatively analyzed for this study. I analyzed the researcher field notes and student documents qualitatively to look for common trends and themes surrounding feelings of school belonging and school connectedness that might naturally evolve as a result of this intervention. When evaluating the researcher field notes, I looked for data that showed participants engaging with the lessons which may possibly correlate

with an increase in feelings of school belonging and school connectedness. Upon examination of student documents, I looked for data that showed student engagement with and understanding of the material, along with data that indicated signs of school connectedness via student responses. Ultimately, similarities, differences, and patterns that emerged across all three types of data were utilized to provide analysis of study results regarding the impact of the Second Step SEL lessons on seventh and eighth grade students' feelings of school connectedness.

### **Summary**

The intent of this action research project was to investigate the use of a specific social emotional learning (SEL) direct-instruction program, Second Step, and its effect on middle school students' sense of school connectedness. I had noticed that the COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the year and a half that my students spent away from each other and away from their physical school campus, had greatly impacted their ability to respectfully engage in classroom and social situations like they had prior to the COVID shutdowns. I was hopeful that the eight to ten weeks or so that we would spend together engaging in the Second Step SEL lessons would help to increase their sense of belonging, their feelings of school connectedness, and our overall school climate.

The Second Step SEL program lessons that this study utilized as its intervention lasted approximately eight to ten weeks. It began with introducing students to key foundational concepts to the program that they would have learned in sixth grade (but our district had not yet adopted the program at that point, which is why they needed this mini-introduction). The intervention then involved the explicit instruction of two of Second Step's four SEL units. Based on what I felt were our school's most pressing issues, I first taught Unit 2 titled, "Recognizing Bullying and Harassment," and followed it up with instruction of Unit 4, "Managing

Relationships and Social Conflict.” Data collection strategies included a quantitative analysis of a pre- post- study School Connectedness Survey (see Appendix B), researcher’s field notes (see Appendix C), and the authentic documents and artifacts that students completed. Qualitative data were collected and analyzed as a result of students completing the Second Step SEL activities, worksheets, and writing prompts (see Appendix D and E), along with the researcher’s field notes.

This chapter included the setting of my study, including the school and classroom demographics and those of the participants. It also introduced the procedures used to implement the intervention (the SEL lessons), along with a description of the methods used to collect and analyze the quantitative and qualitative data gathered with this intervention. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings of the study.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

The year 2020 will be forever etched in our minds as the year that our lives changed due to a worldwide pandemic. On March 13, 2020, I said goodbye to my students. I wished them well for spring break and told them I would see them in two weeks. As a middle school teacher with 22 years of experience, I had no way of knowing that I would not be seeing students in person again for almost a year and a half. The COVID-19 pandemic that forced millions of children into distance learning had repercussions that students and teachers alike are still recovering from. Not only have students experienced varying degrees of learning loss over the last two years, but they are also still reeling from the emotional and social damage inflicted upon them due to the isolation of distance learning. I had no doubt that returning to in-person school in August of 2021, almost a year and a half after leaving for spring break, was going to be a struggle in many ways.

Middle school and the trials and tribulations of adolescence are difficult times in a young person's life under ordinary circumstances. Throw in a worldwide pandemic, along with distance learning and the social isolation that accompanied it, and more students than ever were suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues associated with the loss of a connection to peers, teachers, and schools (Raffaele et al., 2021). In addition to this new plight, my school had already been experiencing a decline in school climate and community, our students exhibiting lowered signs of connectedness, prior to the pandemic. Returning to school knowing all of this, and the need for social emotional learning (SEL) in school became even more necessary, important, and urgent than ever before. In response to and anticipation of this need, my school district adopted a formal direct-instruction SEL curriculum called Second Step



(Second Step, 2021). This was the first time that our district had adopted such a program, and it would be the first time that I had formally incorporated SEL into my instruction. The purpose of this action research project was to investigate the effectiveness of the Second Step program. Specifically, I wanted to investigate whether it would benefit my students with the social and emotional problems we were sure to face upon our return to in-person schooling. I wanted to know if it would help them in their feelings of connectedness and belonging, especially after having been physically and emotionally disconnected for so long. Therefore, the question guiding this Action Research Project was: *How will the explicit teaching of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, through the use of the Second Step program, affect seventh and eighth grade students' feelings of school connectedness?*

Prior to implementation, a review of related literature was conducted, and a theoretical framework was constructed to assist in guiding the overall foundation of this action research project. The theoretical framework guiding this project included the work of Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs because it is important for us as teachers to realize that our students must have their most basic human needs met before we can begin to work on their feelings of belongingness and connectedness at school. The other main theoretical foundation for this project was that of Daniel Goleman and his work in Emotional Intelligence, as that is the basis for social emotional learning (Goleman, 1995)). In addition, Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset theory (Dweck, 2006) also came into play as it is an important concept in many SEL programs, including the Second Step program. The literature review itself allowed me to focus on three main areas: school connectedness, social emotional learning, and SEL programs in schools. I learned that school connectedness has been found to have positive correlations with students' mental health, academic success, and social abilities, among other positive outcomes (Rowe et

al., 2007). In addition, the teaching of social emotional skills, known as social emotional learning (SEL), has also been found to have positive effects on students' mental health, academic performance, and school connectedness (Panayiotou et al., 2019). Finally, the literature review allowed me to examine several prior studies of direct-instruction SEL curriculum programs that had been implemented in other school settings, including the one I wanted to investigate –  
Second Step.

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

The intervention for this action research project, the implementation of the Second Step direct-instruction lessons (see Appendix A), took place over the course of approximately eight to ten weeks in three phases (this timeframe included a week away from school for Spring Break). Data were collected quantitatively with a pre- and post- School Connectedness Survey which I created (see Appendix B) and then administered at the beginning and the end of the study. The survey included 10 questions with a 5-point Likert-style scale for each. In addition, I collected and analyzed data qualitatively utilizing a log I kept of researcher's field notes (see Appendix C). Lastly, I conducted a qualitative examination and evaluation of student work, including notebook entries, Second Step worksheets, exit tickets, and responses to writing prompts (see Appendix D and E).

Phase one of the intervention was approximately one week and involved administering the pre- School Connectedness Survey. I also introduced students to the Second Step program itself and to the concept/definition of social emotional learning. Phases two and three each lasted approximately three to four weeks. They involved the actual direct-instruction of the Second Step modules and lessons. The Second Step lessons that I taught as part of the intervention for

this action research project were incorporated into students' regular English Language Arts class period approximately two to three times per week; lessons were generally half an hour long.

### **Demographics of the Participants**

The school where this research study took place is in Northern California at a Title I kindergarten through eighth grade school. Overall, approximately 59% of the school's total population is socioeconomically disadvantaged. I chose the participants for this action research project from two of my six general education seventh- and eighth-grade English classes during the 2021-2022 school year. One seventh-grade class of 20 students, and one eighth-grade class of 28 students were selected to participate. Of the 48 participants, 23 were identified as young men (48%) and 25 as young women (52%). Their ages at the time of the study ranged from 13 to 14 years old. Overall, between the two classes, the demographics were as follows: 42% Hispanic or Latino, 25% White or Caucasian, 17% Mixed-Race, 12% Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 4% Black or African American. In addition, 11 of the 48 students (23%) were designated as English Language Learners (ELLs).

### **Analysis of School Connectedness Survey**

The School Connectedness Survey (see Appendix C) was a 10-question survey that I created after conducting research into elements of school connectedness. It utilized a 5-point Likert-style scale, and it was administered pre- and post- intervention to get an overall sense of perceived feelings of belongingness and feelings of school connectedness amongst my seventh and eighth graders; both grades were administered the same questionnaire. Survey response choices were assigned points ranging from a score of 1 point ("Strongly Disagree"), to 2 points ("Somewhat Disagree), to 3 points ("Neutral/Unsure"), to 4 points, ("Somewhat Agree"), up to 5 points ("Strongly Agree"). Examples of survey questions included: "*I enjoy coming to school on*

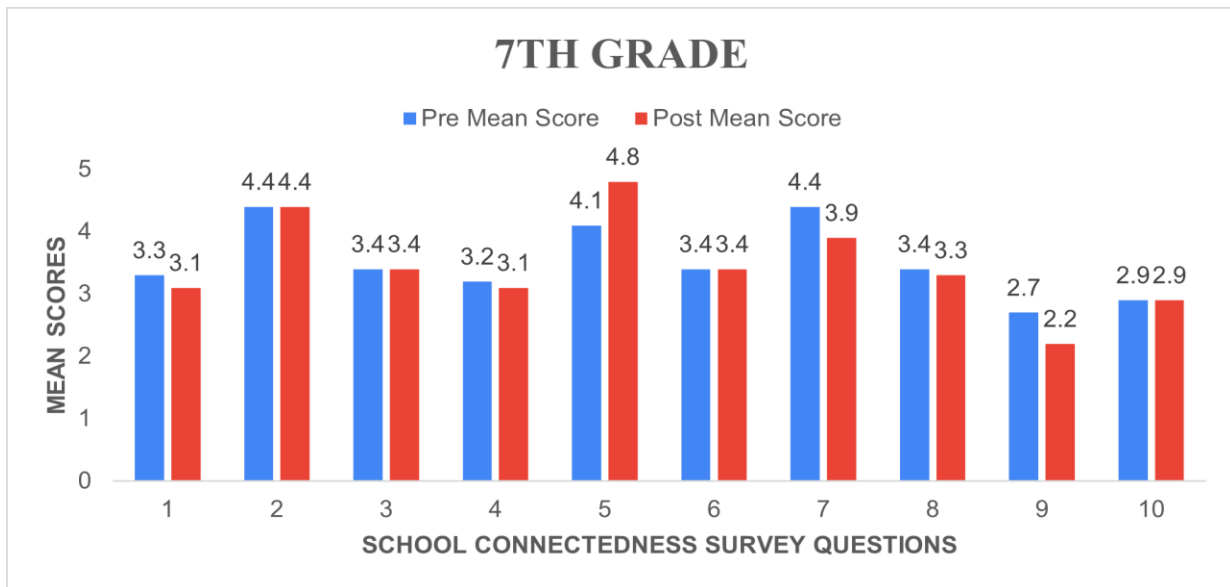
*a regular basis” (#1), “I feel that there is at least one adult on campus who cares about me and my academic success” (#3), and “Teachers in my school truly care about me and my classmates” (#8).* The results were analyzed for overall mean response to each survey question pre- and post- intervention. Figure 1 demonstrates the mean response for each question, pre- and post- survey, for the 20 seventh-grade participants, and Figure 2 demonstrates the mean response for each question, pre- and post- survey, for the 28 eighth-grade participants.

The seventh-grade survey responses (Figure 1) show pre- survey mean scores that ranged from a low of 2.7 in 7<sup>th</sup> grade on question #9, *“The students at this school treat each other respectfully,”* to a high of 4.4 on question #2, *“I care about my schoolwork and try to do my best,”* and question #7, *“All students are given a chance to succeed at this school.”* These mean scores show that student responses to the statements were varied from “disagree” to “somewhat agree.” This pre-intervention data was collected prior to beginning any Second Step lessons and activities.

Overall, the mean results for seventh-grade post-intervention scores did not show significant improvements; in fact, some questions showed a decline in the average response score. In the seventh-grade post-survey, average scores for questions 1-4 either stayed the same or demonstrated a slight decline of 0.1 or 0.2. Question #5, however, showed an increase of almost a full point (0.7). Question #5 involved students identifying whether they felt they had at least one friend on campus who cared about them. Questions 6, 8, and 10 were all approximately the same mean response as in the pre-survey. Finally, on question #7 (students being given a chance to succeed) and question #9 (students treat each other respectfully), seventh-grade results indicated a decline of 0.5 for each of those two questions.

**Figure 1**

*Pre- and Post- School Connectedness Survey Results for 7<sup>th</sup> Grade*

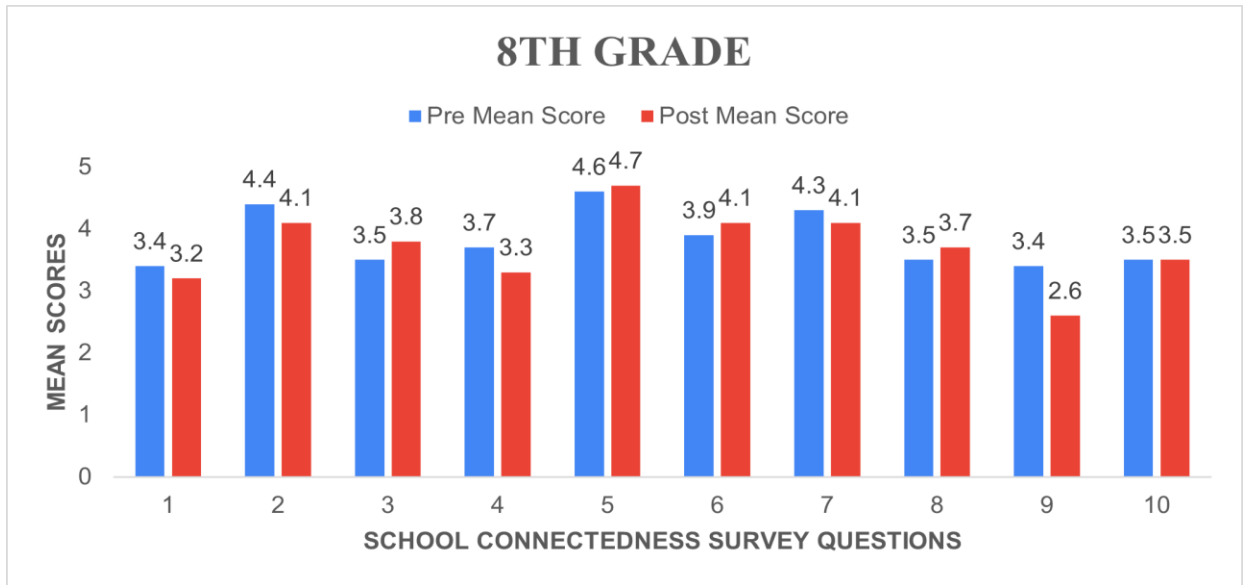


*Note.* Pre- and Post- School Connectedness Survey results by question ( $N = 20$ ).

The eighth-grade post- School Connectedness Survey (Figure 2) results were somewhat similar to the seventh-grade post-survey results in that mean response scores did not show significant increases. Questions 1 (an adult on campus who cares) and 7 (all students given a chance to succeed) each showed a decline in their mean score of 0.2; additionally, question 2 (caring about schoolwork) indicated a decline of 0.3 in the average response, and question 4 (an adult on campus to talk to) demonstrated a 0.4 decline in mean response. The most significant mean response change came on question 9 (students treat each other respectfully), with a decline of 0.8, almost a full point. On the other hand, there were a few eighth-grade responses that did show improvements. For example, questions 3, 5, 6, and 8 all showed slight increases ranging from 0.1 to 0.3 in their average responses. Ideally, mean scores would show an increase after the intervention, which was the implementation of the Second Step lessons.

**Figure 2**

*Pre- and Post- School Connectedness Survey Results for 8<sup>th</sup> Grade*



*Note.* Pre- and Post- School Connectedness Survey results by question ( $N = 28$ ).

Overall, this quantitative data (Figures 1 & 2) showed some interesting results. The mean scores were slightly different for seventh- and eighth-grade students. Out of 10 mean scores for the 10 survey questions, five of the seventh-grade post-survey mean scores decreased (questions 1, 4, 7, 8, and 9) and four eighth-grade mean scores decreased (questions 1, 2, 4, and 9), thus indicating there was generally a minor decrease in mean score. In addition, several mean scores remained the same pre- and post- survey in both seventh- and eighth-grade responses (seventh-grade – questions 2, 3, 6, and 10; eighth-grade – question 10). Conversely, one seventh-grade post-survey score increased (question 5), while there were five eighth-grade post- survey scores that increased (questions 2, 3, 6, and 8). For the most part, the mean scores were fairly close pre- and post-survey, and several mean scores were the same pre- and post-survey. Next, I will provide qualitative data in the form of an analysis of the researcher field notes that I collected throughout this action research inquiry process.

## **Analysis of Researcher Field Notes**

I recorded and kept a log of Researcher Field Notes in a Microsoft Word document (see Appendix C) on my personal OneDrive. These notes were recorded at the end of each day in which a Second Step lesson had taken place, generally two to three times per week. Notes ranged in length from a few sentences to a few paragraphs. My notes included topics such as: observations regarding student attitudes, behaviors, and comments; observations regarding student engagement; and my own personal wonderings and comments. At the end of the intervention, after the Second Step lessons had been taught, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the Researcher Field Notes to review them for common themes that emerged and any possible connections to social emotional learning (SEL) and school connectedness. General themes that emerged included: engagement with the lessons, engagement in partner and whole class discussions, willingness to complete activities and assignments, my own personal musings and observations regarding student engagement, and a certain level of discomfort that manifested itself in students making light of certain topics or doing things like giggling.

Table 1 presents the most prominent of the researcher field note findings, which I have narrowed down to four overarching themes: student engagement in lessons and discussions, student engagement in written assignments and activities, student feelings of uncomfortableness and/or reluctance to engage, and teacher-researcher musings. Regarding student engagement in lessons and discussions, I took note of how many students appeared engaged versus how many did not seem to be paying attention and/or were not discussing assigned topics with their partners. I tried to formally note this information at least once a week and realized that at most there were only two to three students per class, on average, who seemed genuinely disengaged. However, those students would generally refocus and at least partially attempt to participate if

they were redirected. In terms of student engagement in written assignments and activities, students were allowed to keep some assignments for their own reference, or simply because they were private, but I did frequently observe most students working on them. Additionally, the worksheets and written response items that were turned in showed that almost all students consistently participated in most activities and assignments. I observed in my notes that there were no blank worksheets or writing prompts among those that were collected, although there were a few that were incomplete. Another main theme that emerged from my researcher field notes involved the times in which I noticed that some students giggled, or even joked about, the topic of that day's lesson; for example, when we discussed sexual harassment, I observed a certain level of discomfort among some of my students. This led me to wonder if the students were giggling because they felt uncomfortable, or if they truly thought it was funny. Similarly, I noted that my seventh-graders, especially, seemed to make light of things, or try to joke around, when we discussed certain other topics as well, such as stereotypes or gender-based harassment. Lastly, my own personal thoughts, questions, and wonderings about the Second Step program itself, and the impact it was – or was not – having on my students' level of SEL and school connectedness emerged as a final main theme in my researcher field notes.



**Table 1**

*Common Themes from Researcher’s Field Notes*

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Example 1</u>	<u>Example 2</u>	<u>Example 3</u>	<u>Example 4</u>
1. Student Engagement (lessons and/or discussions)	First week of Second Step lessons completed; observed that almost all students in all classes, including the two participant classes, seemed engaged and interested. 2/3/22	Bullying and harassment discussion today: all students in 7 <sup>th</sup> grade participating class were observed to have participated in their partner discussions; all but two students in the 8 <sup>th</sup> grade participating class were observed to have participated in partner discussions. 2/24/22	Observed most 8 <sup>th</sup> grade students in participant class engaged in discussion about the environmental factors that influence bullying and how those factors are also exhibited (or not) at our school. 3/8/22	First Second Step lessons after returning from spring break: all 7 <sup>th</sup> graders in participant class were engaged; 26 of 28 8 <sup>th</sup> graders were engaged/actively participating in discussions with their partners. The other two students had to be reminded to participate. 4/1/22
2. Student Engagement (written assignments and/or activities)	Students were engaged in and having fun with a small group (Second Step) game that was designed to show the power of teamwork. 2/8/22	The participating 7 <sup>th</sup> grade and the participating 8 <sup>th</sup> grade classes completed all writing assignments and reflections in their notebooks this week. 2/11/22	Observed all students in the 8 <sup>th</sup> grade participating classes working on a worksheet about social factors that contribute to bullying (independent and partner written response activities). 2/25/22	Many students enjoyed/appreciated the Second Step lesson that incorporated an interactive stress-relieving technique called “Progressive Muscle Relaxation” (as evidenced by those who participated and those who wrote about how they will use it in the future). 4/5/22
3. Student Discomfort	While reviewing Second Step’s “class norms” (for discussion of “sensitive” topics), a few 8 <sup>th</sup> grade students were observed rolling their eyes. 2/16/22	Observed some 7 <sup>th</sup> graders giggling and fidgeting while discussing sexual harassment lesson today. 2/24/22	Reported to my by another teacher today that some of her 8 <sup>th</sup> grade students (same students that I also teach) were making fun of the gender-based harassment lesson. 3/17/22	Several students in both 7 <sup>th</sup> and 8 <sup>th</sup> grade participating classes looking around and giggling/exhibiting signs of discomfort during a stress-management technique video (“Progressive Muscle Relaxation”). 4/5/22
4. Teacher-Researcher Reflections	“The first two weeks seem to be going well. I hope this enthusiasm and level of engagement continue.” 2/11/22	“Students overall still seem engaged and interested. I hope these lessons on bullying and harassment will have a positive impact on our school climate.” 2/25/22	“I hear that students are discussing the Second Step lessons in other classes (most of them positively). I hope incorporating SEL in this way will have a positive influence on their feelings of school connectedness.” 3/14/22	“Students seemed really interested in the lessons on managing emotions and stress. I hope that they continue to incorporate what they have learned.”4/7/22

The researcher field note themes, and included examples, exhibited in Table 1 show the various levels of engagement that I observed in my students when it came to the Second Step SEL lessons, worksheets, activities, and written responses. This increased engagement in SEL would hopefully result in increased levels of feelings of school connectedness. In the next section, I conducted an analysis of the written work that my students produced as a result of their participation in the Second Step SEL lessons.

### **Analysis of Student Work Samples**

To complete a triangulation of data, I conducted another qualitative data analysis that incorporated reviewing, examining, and coding some of the many different written activities and assignments students completed throughout the Second Step lessons (see Appendix D and E). The purpose of this examination was to review the student work samples, to look for emerging themes regarding students' social emotional development and feelings of school connectedness, and to qualitatively synthesize this important data. The Second Step SEL lessons were interactive via a PowerPoint-type presentation that often included a short video clip or other type of engaging element for students, but every middle school lesson also included some form(s) of teacher-led instruction, discussion (partner, small-group, and/or whole group), and written work.

Students completed written work for each lesson in the form of answering questions or responding to scenarios on a worksheet, responding to a writing prompt in student notebooks, or reflecting upon that day's topic or lesson through a quick-write activity or an exit ticket. Each Second Step lesson included a student handout (worksheet) that went along with it. Often this worksheet would incorporate lesson vocabulary; it would also follow along with the slide presentation. As someone who does not like to waste paper and is a believer in the usage of interactive student notebooks, I chose not to photocopy every single worksheet for every single

lesson. Instead, I incorporated the definitions by having students write them into their [English] notebooks. In addition, I integrated worksheet scenarios as partner and whole group discussions or as writing activities. Warm-up, wrap-up, and other critical thinking, reflective-type questions were given as quick-writes in notebooks, paragraph exercises, or as exit tickets. Finally, at the end of phase two (which focused primarily on the bullying and harassment lessons) and the end of phase three (which included the units on emotions and conflict), I created a written response activity for students to articulate what they had learned and how it could be helpful to them as humans and citizens of our school (see Appendix E).

Table 2 highlights some of the major insights gleaned from student work samples – primarily from the end of unit/phase written response activities. The first item in the table, which I called “Feelings of Positivity and Hope,” illustrated some of the ways in which students demonstrated a positive grasp of the material and a level of understanding which may lead to increased feelings of school connectedness. The table also includes student revelations about how Second Step could help them as humans and how it could help our school be a better place (these questions appeared on both end of unit written response assignments). The final item in the table, on the other hand, indicates that not all responses to the Second Step lessons and topics were as encouraging, as evidenced by the label, “Feelings of Cynicism and Wariness.”

**Table 2**

*Analysis of Quotes from Students' Written Work*

<u>Student Themes and Written Responses</u>	<u>Example 1</u>	<u>Example 2</u>	<u>Example 3</u>	<u>Example 4</u>
1. Feelings of positivity and hope.	“Now I will be able to identify bullying and harassment and I can help.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“If we see someone getting bullied, we could go over and try to stop it.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader	“I know now that I can speak up for myself and others. We have a voice.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“It helped me learn that communication is key, and it taught me different coping mechanisms.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader
2. How can the Second Step SEL lessons help you as a person?	“It taught me what to look out for so I can keep an eye out for any harassment.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“I learned why bullying and harassment are wrong and how they can mentally affect someone.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader	“I can be more responsible about what I do or say, and I know more positive ways to deal with a conflict.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“It has been helpful to me to know that I’m not the only one going through the struggles that I go through.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader
3. How can the Second Step SEL lessons help our school?	“I learned that I can and should report bullying and harassment to an adult.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“It can show us how to make school a safe and comfortable environment. It can also show us how to respect each other’s rights.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader	“It can help kids to know that there’s people who care for them and who are willing to help.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“It can be helpful because kids can learn to manage stress and it can also help them to manage conflict. They can learn to see both sides of conflicts.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader
4. Feelings cynicism and/or wariness.	“...it won’t make a huge impact on making the school a better place because sadly not many people will keep it in mind after we get out of the classroom.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“...other people are going to ignore it and still bully/harass people at school.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader	“...some kids are just jerks and don’t care and will most likely make a joke of these lessons.” ~ 7 <sup>th</sup> grader	“I think it can be useful if kids actually follow it. Personally, I would use this information in the future, but I don’t think others will.” ~ 8 <sup>th</sup> grader

*Note.* The names of students have been removed to ensure confidentiality.

The student quotes utilized in Table 2 demonstrate a wide range of responses in student thinking regarding the Second Step SEL lessons. They also indicate varied levels of school connectedness emerging among these seventh- and eighth-graders. Overall, they indicated ways

in which the student participants in this study were able to internalize and potentially utilize the social emotional concepts and learning that took place. On the other hand, they also displayed a brutal honesty in their leeriness to just automatically accept and embrace these new concepts – a bluntness that sometimes only children are often capable of.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this action research project was to determine the effectiveness of the Second Step SEL lessons in improving middle school students' feelings of school connectedness. The intervention for this inquiry involved the actual teaching and implementation of the Second Step SEL lessons over a period of approximately eight to ten weeks. I incorporated the lessons into all six of my seventh- and eighth-grade English classes; however, only one seventh-grade class and one eighth-grade class were chosen to be the participants for this study, for a total of 48 students. I utilized three forms of data gathering to analyze the effectiveness of this program and its effect on my students: a pre- post- School Connectedness Survey, researcher field notes, and an analysis of student written work.

The pre- post- School Connected Survey enabled the collection of quantitative data. I collected qualitative data through analysis of both the researcher field notes and the student written work. An analysis and synthesis of these three data sources allowed me to see that students were clearly engaged in the material, and many students were finding positive value in the SEL lessons. On the other hand, the data – the pre- post- School Connectedness Survey, in particular – were not explicitly clear in whether there was an actual increase in students' feelings of school connectedness.

I will further discuss and articulate these findings in the next chapter. In Chapter V, I will compare and contrast the related literature discussed in Chapter II and consider the present

and future implications for this particular inquiry. In conclusion, Chapter V will also include plans for further work in the area of SEL and its implementation in my classroom as I continue my work as a transformative teacher leader.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusions**

The COVID-19 worldwide pandemic that shut down many schools and businesses in early March 2020, had far-reaching global effects. In education, in California and many other locations around the world, students and teachers were sent home on March 13, 2020, and did not return to our classrooms and in-person instruction until almost 18 months later. Prior to this unprecedented shutdown, I had already noticed a lack of connectedness in my middle school students. I teach 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English at a kindergarten through eighth grade school, and it was clear that school spirit, morale, and a sense of belonging seemed to be troubling everyone from our students to our staff. Fights were becoming more common, a disrespect for each other and for teachers was more prevalent, and an overall feeling of disconnect was permeating the campus. I wanted to find ways to bring back the sense of joy and connectedness that we used to have, so I began talking with other staff members for ideas. Then, COVID happened. We were forced into “distance learning” for almost a year and a half. Students and teachers were behind screens without any face-to-face interaction. Sadly, some students did not even bother to log in on a regular basis, which led to learning loss. On top of that, it was clear that in addition to the normal hormonal trials and tribulations of early adolescence, students were suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues associated with the loss of a connection to peers, teachers, and schools (Raffaele, 2021).

When we finally returned to in-person learning again, I knew that we were going to have to take it slow. Students were going to have to relearn basic school etiquette and social interactions: raising your hand, entering and exiting a classroom, getting materials out and being prepared for class were all basic things that teachers were going to have to reteach. In addition

to classroom behaviors, I observed students being socially awkward both inside and outside of the instructional environment. It was as if they no longer knew how to engage in basic friendly conversations. My school district must have anticipated this as well because they purchased our first-ever SEL curriculum, called Second Step. I began to wonder if this could help with our transition back into a somewhat “normal” school environment. Would SEL help my students in their return to school? More importantly, would Second Step be a beneficial program for my middle schoolers? Thus, the question for this Action Research Project was: *How will the explicit teaching of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills, through the use of the Second Step program, affect seventh and eighth grade students’ feelings of school connectedness?* School connectedness traditionally involves students feeling that the adults in a school care about them as individuals and about their learning (Blum, 2005). In addition, SEL instruction has been found to have positive benefits and outcomes in promoting school connectedness (Panayiotou et al., 2019), while school connectedness has shown positive correlations to academic success and achievement, mental and emotional well-being, reduced risk-taking behaviors, and improved social abilities, among other things (Rowe et al., 2007). With all of the benefits surrounding school connectedness and SEL, this inquiry into the Second Step program for my action research project intrigued me because I genuinely wanted to both help my students reacclimate to in-person learning and to help strengthen their sense of school connectedness.

In the previous chapter, I presented the data that were triangulated during the action research study. The Chapter IV data showed that although there was not a significant difference in students’ pre-post school connectedness survey results, many students did find value in and appreciation for the topics being taught through the Second Step direct-instruction lessons. In this chapter, I will present the following sections: summary of findings, interpretation of



findings, limitations, summary, and plan for future action. The first section, the summary of findings, will provide an overview of the data from the three measured sources: the pre-post school connectedness survey, the researcher field notes, and the analysis of student written work. The next section provides an interpretation of these quantitative and qualitative data sources. The third section explains possible limitations to this study, and the fourth section gives a concise summary of the entire action research project. Finally, the fifth section discusses some of the future actions I am planning to pursue as a result of my action research project.

### **Summary of Findings**

I utilized a mixed methods approach to examine the effects of the Second Step SEL program quantitatively and qualitatively on students' feelings of school connectedness. Three methods were used to measure student engagement and sense of connectedness; they were: a pre-post School Connectedness Survey for middle school (see Appendix B), researcher field notes (see Appendix C), and an analysis of student written work (see Appendix D and E). Students from one of my 7<sup>th</sup> grade English classes (N = 20) and one of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade English classes (N = 28) were the participants for this study, for a total of 48 participants. This Second Step SEL intervention included three phases and lasted approximately ten weeks (including a one-week spring break). The first phase was approximately two weeks and provided students with background information regarding SEL and the Second Step program, since the program was new to them. The second phase lasted approximately three and a half weeks and incorporated a full unit of the Second Step program. The third phase also lasted approximately three and a half weeks and included a combination of lessons from the last two Second Step units. During the study, I created a pre-post School Connectedness Survey for Middle School that all 48 students completed. This survey was used to analyze students' feelings quantitatively.

Qualitative analyses were completed utilizing the researcher field notes, which I completed two to three times per week on days in which I taught a Second Step lesson, and via examining the written responses on various student work samples.

### ***School Connectedness Survey***

I created and administered the same ten-question survey, which utilized a Likert-type scale, as a pre- and post-intervention way of quantitatively analyzing students' perceived feelings of school connectedness. The data for these surveys were then examined and compared pre- and post- intervention. Survey response choices ranged from a score of 1 point ("Strongly Disagree"), up to 5 points ("Strongly Agree"). Examples of survey questions included: "*I enjoy coming to school on a regular basis*" (#1), "*I feel that there is at least one adult on campus who cares about me and my academic success*" (#3), and "*Teachers in my school truly care about me and my classmates*" (#8). The results were analyzed for overall mean response to each survey question and disaggregated by grade level.

In the pre-survey, prior to beginning the Second Step SEL intervention lessons, mean scores for individual survey questions ranged from a low of 2.7 in 7<sup>th</sup> grade on question #9, "*The students at this school treat each other respectfully*" to a high of 4.4 on question #2, "*I care about my schoolwork and try to do my best,*" and question #7, "*All students are given a chance to succeed at this school.*" On the other hand, mean scores calculated for each question on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade pre-intervention surveys resulted in the lowest score being a 3.4 on question #1 and question #9. Also on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade pre-intervention survey, mean scores revealed a high score of 4.6 on question #5, "*I have at least one friend on campus who cares about me and my feelings.*"

On the post-intervention surveys, the mean results for each individual question in both 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades did not show significant differences. On the 7<sup>th</sup> grade post- School

Connectedness Survey, average scores for questions 1-4 either stayed the same or demonstrated a slight decline of 0.1 or 0.2. Question #5, however, showed an increase of almost a full point (0.7). Question #5 involved students identifying whether they felt they had at least one friend on campus who cared about them. Questions 6, 8, and 10 were all approximately the same mean response as in the pre-survey. Finally, on question #7 (students being given a chance to succeed) and question #9 (students treat each other respectfully), results indicated a decline of 0.5 for each of those two questions.

On the 8th grade post- School Connectedness Survey, results also did not show significant changes. Questions 1 (an adult on campus who cares) and 7 (all students given a chance to succeed) each showed a decline in their mean score of 0.2; additionally, question 2 (caring about schoolwork) indicated a decline of 0.3 in the average response, and question 4 (an adult on campus to talk to) demonstrated a 0.4 decline in mean response. The most significant mean response change came on question #9 (students treat each other respectfully), with a decline of 0.8, almost a full point. On the other hand, there were a few 8th grade responses that did show improvements. For example, questions 3, 5, 6, and 8 all showed slight increases ranging from 0.1 to 0.3 in their average responses.

### ***Researcher Field Notes***

After the Second Step lessons had been taught, I conducted a qualitative analysis of the Researcher Field Notes, analyzing them for common themes that emerged and any possible connections to social emotional learning (SEL) and school connectedness. I derived four major themes during my qualitative examination of the researcher field note data. These themes were: *student engagement in lessons and/or discussions, student engagement in written assignments and/or activities, student discomfort, and teacher-researcher reflections* (see Table 1). To

qualitatively assess student engagement, I took note of how many students appeared engaged versus how many did not seem to be paying attention and/or were not discussing assigned topics with their partners; I also assessed engagement based on the completeness and effort level of worksheets and written response items that were turned in. At most, there were usually only two to three students per class, on average, who seemed genuinely disengaged in lessons and discussions. In terms of student engagement in written assignments and activities, students were allowed to keep some assignments for their own reference, or simply because they were private, but I did frequently observe most students working on them. I observed in my notes that there were no blank worksheets or writing prompts among those that were collected, although there were a few that were incomplete.

Another main theme that emerged from my researcher field notes is the one that I labeled, “Student Discomfort.” It involved the times in which I noticed that some students giggled, or even joked about, the topic of that day’s lesson, possibly out of embarrassment, fear, anxiety, or discomfort. I noted that my seventh graders, especially, seemed to make light of things, or try to joke around, when we discussed topics such as sexual or gender-based harassment. Lastly, my own personal thoughts, questions, and wonderings about the Second Step program itself, and the impact it was – or was not – having on my students’ level of SEL and school connectedness emerged as a final main theme in my researcher field notes.

### ***Student Written Work Samples***

My final measure in the triangulation of data involved another qualitative analysis. This time, the data analyzed were student written responses on selected Second Step lesson worksheets and on teacher created end of unit (phase) writing prompts. The primary takeaways, or themes, from the examination of students’ written work provided four key points to ponder:

*feelings of positivity and hope; how the Second Step SEL program can help individuals; how the Second Step SEL program can help our school; and feelings of cynicism and/or wariness* (see Table 2). Student quotes, from their written work, illustrated important findings that included some of the ways in which students demonstrated a positive grasp of the material and a level of understanding which may lead to increased feelings of school connectedness. Analyzing student written work also illustrated student revelations about how Second Step could help them as humans and how it could help our school be a better place (these questions appeared on both end of unit written response assignments). On the other hand, there were also some student reflections that indicated not all responses to the Second Step lessons and topics were positive and/or encouraging, as evidenced by quotes such as, "...some kids are just jerks and don't care and will most likely make a joke of these lessons," which was expressed by a 7<sup>th</sup> grader.

Overall, the mixed-methods utilized for data measurement, collection, and analysis in this study provided an encouraging indication of how the Second Step SEL program, and explicit direct-instruction of SEL, can lead to positive outcomes in middle school students' sense of belonging and feelings of school connectedness. These data are in line with many of the findings in the reviewed literature. Studies conducted by McNeely et al. (2002), Rowe et al. (2007), Lohmeier and Lee (2011), and Gowing (2019) all demonstrated the importance of, and many positive benefits of, school connectedness for all learners, regardless of demographics. Previously reviewed literature by Panayiotou et al. (2019) also provided evidence supporting the positive correlation between SEL and school connectedness. The data in this study further contributed to the existing body of research regarding SEL and school connectedness.

## **Interpretation of Findings**

The quantitative data gleaned from the pre- and post-intervention School Connectedness Surveys did show some promising results, even though the changes (both positive and negative) for both grade levels were minor. Although there were some mean scores that decreased, they were generally a minor decrease. Conversely, there were scores related to SEL and to feelings of school connectedness that did show an increase. Additionally, qualitative data from both the researcher field notes and the analysis of student work samples allowed me to draw the following conclusions: school connectedness is indeed an important factor in helping my middle school students to feel successful and a sense of belonging, SEL is a valuable tool in helping to increase and improve my students' feelings of school connectedness, and there is much work still to be done in both SEL and building school connections at my school site.

### ***School Connectedness and Middle School Students' Sense of Belonging***

Much research has been done over the past several decades highlighting the importance of school connectedness and its positive correlations with academic achievement, mental and emotional health, and even reduced risk-taking behaviors (Rowe et al., 2007). In addition, as teachers, if we want to see our students feel successful and push toward the upper levels of Maslow's hierarchy (1943) – such as esteem, where they feel confident and respected, and self-actualization, where they feel they can be creative and problem-solvers – we must first help them attain a sense of belonging. This can be done by working toward improving students' feelings of school connectedness. Using data from both the pre- and post- School Connectedness Surveys, I cannot definitively state that the results pointed to an overall increase in students' feelings of school connectedness, as there were some scores that showed slight declines in mean response. However, the increased mean scores did tend to be on questions more closely correlated to

feelings of school connectedness. For example, there was an almost full point increase on question #5 on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade post-survey: *“I have at least one friend on campus who cares about me and my feelings.”* This connected to related literature that demonstrated peer-to-peer relationships can be just as strong, if not stronger than, student-teacher relationships when it comes to establishing a student’s sense of belonging and feeling of school connectedness (Gowing, 2019). On the 8<sup>th</sup> grade post-survey, increases were seen in questions that involved having adults on campus who cared about them, their classmates, and their academic success. This correlates to the foundation of what school connectedness is: *a belief that adults in the school care about their learning and about them as individuals* (Blum, 2005).

Moreover, when synthesizing data from the researcher field notes and the analysis of the student written work, it became obvious that school connectedness was something that my students were craving to feel a greater sense of belonging and to feel happier and more successful in their academic endeavors. In the researcher field note observations, I noted several instances in which students were genuinely engaged in discussion with their partners about meaningful topics that they might otherwise have never taken the time to address. Topics that the Second Step program taught such as bullying, harassment, stress, and managing emotions were all important in helping my students to feel more connected to one another. On written assignments, I observed instances when students would make comments about how they now knew to go to an adult on campus if they experienced harassment, or that they had at least one teacher they could talk to if they were feeling stressed. This further corroborated the conclusion that the qualitative data did indeed illustrate positive results in students’ overall feelings of school connectedness. Pertinent data such as these point to the continued relevance of the importance of school connectedness and that our schools continue to find ways to support it.

### *SEL as an Important Factor in Improving School Connectedness*

When you walk onto a school campus, it is often easy to tell what the climate and culture are like based on certain factors. Observing students who seem happy and engaged, who are kind and helpful to one another, who feel safe and who want to be there – those are some of the things that are important to many educators when it comes to their school climate. In addition, when you walk onto a school campus and observe teachers and staff who are supportive of one another and who are happy to be there, who model the tenets of social emotional competency such as empathy, a growth mindset, and problem-solving skills, that also speaks volumes as to the culture and climate of that school. We all want our students to feel safe, happy, cared for, and a sense of belonging so that they can learn, grow, and thrive, especially in today’s chaotic and often uncertain times. This action research project has made it clear to me that explicit, direct-instruction of Social Emotional Learning skills is one of the many tools that educators can utilize to work toward such goals.

Through studies such as this inquiry and those of Panayiotou, Humphrey, and Wigelsworth (2019), it becomes apparent that SEL is a valuable resource in helping to increase and improve students’ feelings of school connectedness. Through my researcher field notes, I was able to determine that almost all of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade participants were engaged in the lessons, discussions, activities, and assignments. This indicated that they were interested in these topics and how they could incorporate them into their daily lives to both be more successful at school and to help make our school a better place. In addition, in reviewing written student work that was completed after Second Step lessons, it was clear that many students did find value in these SEL units of study. For example, student quotes such as, “I learned that I can and should report bullying and harassment to an adult” and “It has been helpful to me to know that I’m not



the only one going through the struggles that I go through” demonstrated the impact that these Second Step lessons had on some of my students. They are also an encouraging indicator that these SEL lessons were making a positive impact on our school culture and on my students’ sense of belonging and feelings of connectedness.

### ***Continued SEL and Building Connections***

In the initial review of related literature, including the theoretical rationale that became the foundation for this action research study, it became clear that social emotional learning and school connectedness are important factors in our student’s lives – at any age, and for any demographic. This is true to the extent that there is an entire section devoted to it on our own California Department of Education’s website. In 2021, on the CDE’s Social and Emotional Learning web page, they described the importance of SEL and its role in building positive relationships and connections needed for success in school and in life. Daniel Goleman (1995), author of *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, pioneered work in Emotional Intelligence, emotional literacy, and emotional competency that later became the foundation for much of the social emotional learning that was introduced in schools.

More recently, institutions such as CASEL, The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, which was co-founded by Daniel Goleman, have been instrumental in advocating for the systemic implementation of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), especially using explicit instruction programs, such as the Second Step program, in schools and classrooms across the country (casel.org, 2021). As far as I know, the Second Step adoption by my school district this past year is the first time that my district has taken such a huge leap and commitment toward SEL instruction in our district. In fact, prior to our district’s Second Step adoption and my work for this action research study, I must admit that I had little knowledge of just how

important SEL instruction is to my students and their well-being. I also was woefully unprepared to teach such a meaningful topic on my own. For this reason, and through the completion of this study, I now realize the potential and importance of direct instruction SEL programs.

While I was overall pleased with the outcome of this study in terms of the level of engagement exhibited by most of my students during this Second Step intervention, there is clearly still work to be done. When students were giggling or uncomfortable during discussions, about topics like harassment or stereotyping, it became clear that this cannot be a “one and done” program for students. It is something that should begin in younger grades and continued throughout the years. In addition, when students made comments like, “...*some kids are just jerks and don’t care and will most likely make a joke of these lessons*” or “...*other people are going to ignore it and still bully/harass people at school,*” I must admit that I was, unfortunately, not necessarily surprised. If we want to continue to work toward building a safer, more empathetic, caring, inclusive, and connected school environment for our students, we undoubtedly need to continue to implement SEL instruction, and the use of formal programs such as Second Step is one obviously beneficial way to work toward such goals.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations that may have impacted the outcome of this research study. To begin with, the short timeframe in which the study took place, approximately ten weeks, undoubtedly influenced the outcome. The Second Step direct-instruction curriculum is designed be taught approximately one time per week throughout an entire school year. However, for the purposes of this inquiry, I taught lessons two to three times per week over the course of the ten-week intervention to expose my students to as much of the program as possible. Despite

this, I still did not have time to teach every single lesson, so that in itself can be considered another limitation. The Second Step program is also designed to begin in elementary school and continued from year to year so that students are continually exposed to the content and can become more familiar with the concepts and strategies from year to year. Since this was the first time our school had access to the Second Step lessons and curriculum, my students were unfamiliar with the foundational concepts associated with an SEL program such as this. Also, as such, the lack of familiarity may have also impacted how seriously some students took the program and its lessons.

Another limitation is that of sample size and demographics. With only 48 participants, students from a small, suburban, K – 8<sup>th</sup> grade school, it would be difficult to generalize these findings. Additionally, since the qualitative data resulted from researcher field notes and analyses of student work, it is important to keep in mind that these types of data can also have their limitations. As their teacher-researcher, students may have appeared more engaged than I thought because they knew that participation in class lessons and discussions were a part of their overall grade. Also, in reviewing student work and self-reported surveys, it is important to note that this type of student self-reported data has its own inherent limitations. Lastly, my own personal limitations as a teacher-researcher – such as how well or how thoroughly I may or may not have implemented the lessons, especially since the program itself was new to me – may also be considered a limitation to the research findings.

## **Summary**

During the 2019-2020 school year, I noticed a decline in the climate and culture around our school. It felt as if students seemed more disengaged and disconnected than in past years. I teach 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade English at a suburban kindergarten through eighth grade school, and I

have been there since the school opened about 15 years ago. I love my school, and I want it to be a place where all students, regardless of grade level or background, feel safe and cared for; I want it to be a place where they want to be, where students are happy and learning. I began to have discussions with colleagues about how we could improve morale: what could we do to improve school spirit and students' sense of belonging? Research has shown that school connectedness has positive correlations to myriad beneficial attributes for all students (Rowe et al., 2007).

Then, in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut our schools down and sent us all home. Students who had already been exhibiting signs of disconnect, who were already suffering from all that adolescence and puberty have to offer during “normal” times, spent almost a year and a half in “distance learning.” They were isolated at home, away from friends and teachers, and expected to “attend class” from behind a computer screen. Many students returned to school in August 2021, not only behind academically, but also having suffered emotional and social trauma from the pandemic as well (Raffaele, 2021). As we were preparing to return to school, I found out that my school district had adopted the Second Step Social Emotional Learning curriculum, and I began to wonder if this would not only help my students in their return to in-person schooling, but if it could also be helpful in improving my middle school students' feelings of school connectedness.

The theoretical rationale that guided this action research project included the works of Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs and theory of human motivation (1943). If we, as teachers, can help students to feel connected, to feel a sense of belonging at school, then we can help them to progress further along the hierarchy toward becoming confident, independent learners who are caring, empathetic students working to reach their full potential. The emotional

intelligence work of Daniel Goleman also helped to frame this research inquiry, as his body of work became a foundation for SEL curriculum and instruction, such as that of the Second Step program. Lastly, the growth mindset work of Carol Dweck was also used a theoretical framework for this action research project because her work involving a “growth mindset vs. a fixed mindset,” and how it can be beneficial to students of all backgrounds, is incorporated into the Second Step SEL lessons. In addition to the theories that helped to support this inquiry, a review of related literature further indicated the positive benefits associated with school connectedness, social emotional learning, and formal SEL instruction in schools. After reviewing this related literature, I hoped that formal SEL instruction, through the utilization of the Second Step program, would be a transformative intervention in helping to improve my students’ overall feelings of school connectedness.

This action research project involved 48 participants, 20 seventh grade students and 28 eighth grade students, all from my general education English classes. The inquiry took place over the course of approximately ten weeks and involved teaching the Second Step SEL lessons two to three times per week. Before beginning any of the lessons, students completed a pre-intervention ten-question School Connectedness Survey, which they then completed again at the end of the intervention. The pre- and post- mean responses were then recorded for each question and for each grade level so they could be compared quantitatively. I also collected researcher field notes after school on the days that I taught a Second Step lesson. Each lesson usually involved some sort of written work from students; this may have been in the form of journal writing, completing Second Step worksheets, or exit tickets. I also created writing prompts for students to reflect upon and respond to at the end of the two main units. The researcher field

notes and the student written work samples were then coded and qualitatively analyzed for common themes that emerged.

After a thorough analysis of the three mixed-methods data sources, I concluded that although there were not significant differences in the pre- and post- surveys, the qualitative data did provide evidence that my students were showing an improvement in their understanding of important topics such as bullying, harassment, and managing emotions, stress, and conflict. In addition to this increase in understanding, I also observed what seemed to be improvements in peer-to-peer relationships, and some students even self-reported improved connectedness with at least one teacher or adult on campus. Qualitative data analysis also affirmed that the Second Step SEL lessons had the potential to make a positive impact on our school culture and on my students' feelings of connectedness. Though there were limitations to this action research study, the data that I did collect demonstrated a clear need for SEL instruction at my school to persist so that we may continue in our effort toward improving our school climate and our students' sense of belonging.

### **Plan for Future Action**

Overall, the results from this action research project indicated that utilizing the Second Step direct-instruction Social Emotional Learning program will aid in the improvement of middle school students' feelings of school connectedness. I have already discussed these findings with my principal, and together we have come to the conclusion that in order for this to truly be successful in helping our students, we must – as a staff – do our best to implement it as fully and as consistently as possible in all classrooms. Working together, we came up with a change to our middle school schedule that will allow for 30 minutes every Wednesday to be set aside for Second Step instruction in all middle school classes on the same day and at the same

time. In addition, it is imperative that all staff – certificated, administrative, and classified – be on board with this plan and follow through with the program implementation. Teachers at all grade levels, of course, are key in making this happen, as they are the ones responsible for lesson facilitation in their classrooms. All other school staff are instrumental as well because they can help to reinforce the things being taught in the classroom by modeling the Second Step language and strategies involving things like empathy, growth mindset, conflict management, and more. In that regard, I plan to discuss with my principal ways in which we can incorporate trainings for our classified staff as well.

I plan on presenting the findings of this action research project to my middle school team during our staff development meetings prior to the beginning of the next school year. My hope is that by sharing this information, they will see the importance of following through with the planned Wednesday Second Step time. I will share with them the benefits of SEL in terms of helping our students be more successful and feel more connected, especially as we continue to recover from the damages that COVID-19 and distance learning inflicted upon our students' social and emotional well-being. As this will be our first full year with schoolwide implementation, I will also offer now – and in the future – to work with others to plan our school's pacing so that we are all following through with this important curriculum. In addition, since I am at a K-8 school, I also plan on presenting my findings to the entire school either during the same timeframe, or at the very least during our after-school staff meetings at the beginning of the school year. I will emphasize the benefits of the Second Step curriculum and how starting it in the early grades will be foundational to making it a successful school-wide program. I plan to emphasize the reality that Second Step can be helpful in rebuilding our school climate and culture into one where both students and staff want to be there and look forward to

each new day. Our school can again be a place where students care for each other, feel safe and cared for, and are able to thrive as engaged, socially-adjusted, happy learners. I firmly believe that all students, regardless of background or circumstances, should be able to feel a sense of school connectedness, and, in turn, all of the positive benefits associated with that sense of belonging. I am also optimistic that the full implementation of the Second Step program will be a step toward accomplishing this goal at our school and hopefully within our district, along with any surrounding schools or districts who may be considering adopting a formal SEL curriculum.

Moving forward, I plan to not only continue to utilize the Second Step SEL program in my own classroom with my own students, but I also plan to advocate for it to be implemented with fidelity across all classes in our school and district. Should it occur that the district no longer wants to fund the program, I will be an outspoken proponent of its benefits and why we should continue to integrate it into our academic programs. In addition, I plan to continue to learn more about SEL and other ways to develop my students' feelings of school connectedness so that I can continue to help our school climate and culture to improve. The participants in my study showed growth in important social areas during this study, and I hope that my 8<sup>th</sup> graders will remember those lessons as they move on to high school. For my 7<sup>th</sup> graders, I will continue to reinforce what they learned this past school year as we move forward into the 8<sup>th</sup> grade lessons in the next school year.



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## Appendices

## **Appendix A**

### **Second Step Scope and Sequence for Grades 7 and 8**

Both the seventh- and eighth-grade Second Step curriculums include four units. Each unit consists of six to seven lessons. The lessons are intended to be taught once per week throughout the school year. The units for both grade levels are: Unit 1 – Mindsets and Goals; Unit 2 – Recognizing Bullying and Harassment; Unit 3 – Thoughts, Emotions, and Decisions; and, Unit 4 – Managing Relationships and Social Conflict.

In seventh grade, Unit 1 incorporates lessons about learning from mistakes and overcoming roadblocks. Unit 2 teaches students about different types of harassment. Unit 3 topics help students with emotions, managing their thoughts, and practicing positive self-talk. The final seventh-grade unit, Unit 4, covers conflict escalation and resolution, along with how to take responsibility during a conflict.

The eighth-grade units share the same titles as the seventh-grade units, but the lessons differ somewhat, as they are intended to build on the information learned in previous years of the program. The first unit in the eighth-grade curriculum, Mindsets and Goals, is comprised of lessons intended to help students identify their own strengths and interests. Unit 2 teaches students about different factors related to bullying and how they can help make changes at their schools. In Unit 3, students learn about stress, anxiety, and stress management strategies. Finally, the Second Step eighth grade Unit 4 lessons help students with topics such as figuring out their own values, identifying healthy relationships, and recognizing the perspectives of others.

## Appendix B

### School Connectedness Survey for Middle School

Use the scale to respond to the statements below (1 = low and/or strongly disagree ; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = high and/or strongly agree) to rate the following statements:

1. I enjoy coming to school on a regular basis: 1 2 3 4 5
  
2. I care about my schoolwork and try to do my best: 1 2 3 4 5
  
3. I feel that there is at least one adult on campus who cares about me and my academic success:  
1 2 3 4 5
  
4. If I have a problem, I can think of at least one adult on campus that I would feel comfortable talking to and that would listen and help: 1 2 3 4 5
  
5. I have at least one friend on campus who cares about me and my feelings:  
1 2 3 4 5
  
6. I feel safe at school: 1 2 3 4 5
  
7. All students are given a chance to succeed at this school: 1 2 3 4 5
  
8. Teachers in my school truly care about me and my classmates: 1 2 3 4 5
  
9. The students at this school treat each other respectfully: 1 2 3 4 5
  
10. There is a feeling of belonging at this school: 1 2 3 4 5

## Appendix C

### Researcher Field Notes Template

Date	Field Notes

## Appendix D

### Description of Second Step Student Lessons, Activities, and Handouts (worksheets)

- Every lesson incorporates an interactive video piece in the form of a PowerPoint-type slideshow.
- Every lesson has an included “Student Handout” (worksheet).
- The interactive video element and the student handouts are designed to work together to keep students actively engaged and to be a multimedia way of presenting the information.
- Most lessons begin with a warm-up: this could be a reflective quick write, a partner discussion, a vocabulary term, activating knowledge from a prior lesson, etc.
- Interactive lesson elements and handouts might include: reviewing, discussing, and/or writing about scenarios on the handout and/or in the slideshow, responding to video clips from the slideshow, writing about and/or discussing personal connections to the day’s topic/lesson, etc.
- Lessons include whole class discussion, partner and small group activities/discussions, individual work on handouts, etc.
- Most lessons end with a wrap-up in which students demonstrate learning from the lesson, reflect on an aspect of the topic, consider ways to integrate their new learning/skills into their daily lives, etc.



## Appendix E

### End of Unit Teacher Created Writing Prompts

Writing Prompt #1 (used for both 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade):

***We have come to the end of Second Step unit 2, which was called "Recognizing Bullying and Harassment." Please be thoughtful and honest in your responses to the following questions. Using a separate sheet of paper, answer each question/writing prompt as completely as possible.***

**Remember to use complete sentences.**

**1.** In your own words, how would you describe the difference between bullying and [the different types of] harassment?

**2\*.** How has learning this information been helpful to you as a human being and/or as a student at our school?

**3\*.** Do you think this information is (or can be) useful in helping to make our school a better place? How so? And/or why or why not?

Writing Prompt #2 (7<sup>th</sup> grade):

***We have come to the end of these Second Step units, which incorporated lessons from Unit 3, "Thoughts, Emotions, and Decisions," and Unit 4, "Managing Relationships and Social Conflict." Please be thoughtful and honest in your responses to the following questions. Answer each question/writing prompt as completely as possible (use binder paper if you need more space to write).***

**Remember to use complete sentences.**

1. In your own words, how did learning about your emotions, thoughts, and decisions affect the way you view conflict?

2. How did learning about your emotions, thoughts, and decisions affect you as a learner/student?

3. How has learning this information been helpful to you as a human being and/or as a student at our school?

4. Do you think this information is (or can be) useful in helping to make our school a better place? How so? And/or why or why not?

Writing Prompt #2 (8<sup>th</sup> grade):

***We have come to the end of these Second Step units, which incorporated lessons from Unit 3, "Thoughts, Emotions, and Decisions," and Unit 4, "Managing Relationships and Social Conflict." Please be thoughtful and honest in your responses to the following questions. Answer each question/writing prompt as completely as possible (use binder paper if you need more space to write).***

**Remember to use complete sentences.**

1. In your own words, how did learning about your stress and anxiety affect the way you view conflict?
2. How did learning about stress, anxiety, and managing stress affect you as a learner/student?
3. How has learning this information been helpful to you as a human being and/or as a student at our school?
4. Do you think this information is (or can be) useful in helping to make our school a better place? How so? And/or why or why not?