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Stella M. Westhoven

*Stephen F. Austin State University, stwesthoven@yahoo.com*

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## Social-Emotional Learning: A Literature Review

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SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

By

STELLA M. WESTHOVEN, Master of Science

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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May, 2022

Social-Emotional Learning: A Literature Review

By

Stella M. Westhoven, M.S.

APPROVED:

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Dr. Nina Ellis-Hervey, Thesis Director

---

Dr. Jaimie Flowers, Committee Member

---

Dr. Sarah Savoy, Committee Member

---

Dr. Elaine Turner, Committee Member

---

Freddie Avant, Ph.D.  
Interim Dean of Research and Graduate Studies

## **ABSTRACT**

Social-emotional learning targets the development of positive interpersonal relationships, empathy, emotional regulation, healthy identities, personal/collective goal orientation, and responsibility in the decision-making process (CASEL Organization, 2021). Schools, however, have the main objective of ensuring that academic measures are met. Linking social-emotional learning and skills to the school system's principal goal, academic results, can facilitate the greater implementation of such programs within the school setting. This systematic literature review examined the relationship between social-emotional learning programs in schools and academic outcomes, such as grades, test scores, or grade point averages. Secondly, it explored the relationship between students' social-emotional skills and these academic outcomes. After the predetermined inclusionary and exclusionary criteria were implemented, a total of 36 articles were determined applicable to this systematic literature review.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

Schools have the obligation of providing instruction in specific areas of academics, and there are austere accountability measures in place, which clearly make this academic instruction the school's top priority (Jackson, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wood & Brownhill, 2018). Most would agree that a school's purpose is to educate students on a variety of academic skills, but there is much more that students need to learn to be successful in life, and schools are in a unique position to offer instruction on essential social-emotional skills. Specifically, youth need to cultivate skills that will assist them in regulating their emotions, help them handle a variety of challenging social situations, and aid them in getting along with others (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

There is a myriad of factors that youth in our nation contend with. One such factor is the abuse of drugs, often an unhealthy coping mechanism to some of life's stressors. In a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) 2005 survey, 25.4% of students had drugs or were offered drugs while at school (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). The number of drug-related deaths for teens ages 15-19 had shown a decrease from 2007 to 2014, only to again start increasing in 2015 to 3.7 per 100,000 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The majority of these deaths were determined to be due to unintentional overdose. Even when drug use does not result in overdose death, there are greater dangers for young individuals, as their brains are in development until

the approximate age of 25 (MedlinePlus, 2021). Tools, such as those taught through social-emotional learning programs, could help lessen the number of youths who turn to perilous substances.

Youth also encounter violence in schools. The CDC reports that in 2005 survey, 6.5% of high school students brought a weapon to school in the past 30 days, and in the past 12 months, 13.6% were in a physical altercation and 7.9% were threatened or assaulted with a weapon (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). The issue is common in schools, as 35% of public schools recorded at least one episode of violence to their local police department in 2005-2006, and in 2003-2004, 10% of educators in urban schools and between 5-6% of educators in suburban/rural schools reported being threatened with bodily injury by students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008). Furthermore, homicide rates for youth between the ages of 15-19 increased 30% from 2014 to 2017, from 6.7 to 8.7 per 100,000 individuals (Curtin & Heron, 2019).

When it comes to hostile behavior in schools, bullying has been significant. The CDC defines bullying as: Any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths, who are not siblings or current dating partners, that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance, and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). It is assessed that one in five students in high school reports being bullied at school in the past year and that an upwards of one in six reports being cyberbullied (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Furthermore, bullying is found to be even more common in middle

school, where 28% of students experience it in a given year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008).

What is becoming an increasingly troubling phenomena is cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the use of electronic communication, such as text messages and social media posts, to threaten, intimidate, or show another individual in a negative way (Cassidy et al., 2013). It is estimated that 15.3% of students in grades sixth to twelfth experience cyberbullying (Goldstein et al., 2020), with the highest rates in middle school with 28% (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Unfortunately, the anonymity of the internet, the ease to which it can be used by youth, and rapidly changing technology, can make it especially challenging for schools to identify and put a stop to cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2013).

Youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or those who are questioning or do not identify with a specific group (LGBTQ), are at an even greater risk for violence, bullying, and cyberbullying (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; Parks, 2013; Singh, 2017). It is estimated that 40% of LGBTQ members experience bullying compared to 22% of their heterosexual counterparts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). These students experience substantial challenges and schools must be aware to efficiently address these imperative issues.

Often, a result of these significant matters is loss of instruction time so that the school may focus on disciplinary factors. In a report by Losen and Whitaker (2017), California's public schools were shown to have lost an estimated 13 days of instruction

for every 100 enrolled students due to disciplinary reasons, resulting in a loss of over 840,000 days in one school year alone. Another problematic finding of the report was the differences in loss of instruction for African American versus Caucasian students due to disciplinary action by the schools. There were 43 annual days lost for African American students compared to 11 days for Caucasian students (for every 100 students enrolled). Part of the study's recommendations, in addition to teaching educators to target systemic issues of racism and approach problematic behaviors differently, was for schools to help students develop positive skills and prosocial behaviors. Ultimately, the authors cautioned that disciplinary actions are an obstacle to instruction, which in turn translates to a lower level of academic achievement for students.

Death by suicide is also a tremendous concern when it comes to American youth. It is estimated that rates of suicide for youth ages 10-24 increased from 2007, where it was 6.8 per 100,000 individuals, to 10.6 per 100,000 (Curtin & Heron, 2019). Furthermore, for those in the 10-14 age group, there has been an almost three-time increase in suicide rates (Curtin & Heron, 2019). Data also indicates that for every young individual who dies by suicide, there are 100-200 suicide attempts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012), making the true magnitude of the problem even more clear.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Such statistics underscore the urgency of helping students develop the necessary tools they need to help find healthy solutions. Cassidy et al. (2013) suggested the

implementation of social-emotional programs to help students identify and verbalize feelings, develop healthy coping skills, and build empowerment, so that students who experience such challenges could deal with them in healthy ways. They explained that both traditional and cyberbullying victimization are related to low self-esteem, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and somatic symptoms. The earlier the programs begin, preferably in elementary school, the greater the outcomes that could be expected (Cassidy et al. 2013; Lebrun-Harris et al., 2019).

The school's role in the development and nurturing of important life skills, such as social-emotional skills, has evolved over time. Schools have been increasingly seen as another parent of sort for children, often providing physical and mental first aid services (e.g., nutrition, attire) in addition to the academic achievement that has been intensely focused on, especially since the federal passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (Jackson, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wood & Brownhill, 2018). The federal government asserts the importance of high academic standards and holding schools accountable by judiciously measuring academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2021), but youth spend a great deal of their daily lives in the school setting and there is an increasingly identified need and demand for the instruction for social-emotional skills in the school system (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Topp et al., 2016; Wallace & Palmer, 2017). Thus, the school system is in a unique place where it must perform on what it is explicitly intended to do, give children the academic knowledge assigned for each grade level (Jackson, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wood &

Brownhill, 2018), but has the additional obligation to instill necessary skills for students to function effectively in the greater society (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Topp et al., 2016; Wallace & Palmer, 2017). Social-emotional programs give explicit instruction on regulating one's own emotions, identifying the emotions of others, and interacting and communicating in healthy ways, and can facilitate a positive school environment and contribute to student success (Top et al., 2016; Top et al., 2017).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine how social-emotional learning programs, and social-emotional skills in general, may impact the area in which schools put their main focus on, academics. The academic measures included grades, test scores (e.g., state tests, curriculum-based tests), and grade point averages. Although oftentimes these programs are conducted to look at social-emotional skills, particularly the skills explicitly taught in school, and their possible impact on emotional well-being, social skills, school climate, and behavior, there is not always a focus on how they could possibly impact academics. This connection to academics is important as schools have intense pressure to show positive results on academic accountability measures (Jackson, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wood & Brownhill, 2018). This study was structured by individual social-emotional learning programs where applicable, and general programs or skill levels where not applicable.

## **Research Questions**

The purpose of this paper was to examine the current literature to answer the following questions:

1. What is the relationship between social-emotional learning programs and academic outcomes, such as grades, test scores, or grade point averages?
2. What is the relationship between social-emotional skills and academic outcomes, such as grades, test scores, or grade point averages?

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Literature Review**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) establishes the theoretical framework for social-emotional learning and is widely accepted (Ross & Tolan, 2017). CASEL describes social-emotional learning as vital to a person's development and "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions" (CASEL Organization, 2021). CASEL designates five areas of instruction for social-emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL Organization, 2021).

#### **Economic Benefit to Society**

Social-emotional learning programs can benefit individuals during their school years, but could also lead to benefits throughout their adult years (Greenberg et al., 2017). Belfield et al. (2015) explored a benefit-cost analysis of social-emotional learning programs in schools in an effort to identify potential economic returns of such programs to the taxpaying community. This study was done with the encouragement of the CASEL Organization, according to the authors. They specifically focused on a Swedish program called Social and Emotional Training (SET), which they explained is similar to another

program in the U.S., Providing Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS). They concluded that the SET program cost of \$540 per student, but resulted in a benefit of \$7,510 per student, suggesting that it is highly cost-effective and likely decreases future substance abuse, illnesses, sick days, health care costs, judicial services, and more.

Even when the cost benefits of social-emotional learning programs may not always be observed easily for each individual, the overall cumulative advantage can be significantly large for the overall society, especially over a greater period of time (Greenberg et al., 2017). Such future economic benefits to society cannot be taken lightly. Showing such high returns on social-emotional learning investments highlights the value of teaching these necessary skills and the need to do so in easily accessible environments, like the school system. Encouraging findings on the cost-benefit ratios of such programs can truly serve as a motivator to schools, as well as the greater community, to invest both monetary resources, as well as valuable time, in social-emotional learning programs (Top et al., 2017).

### **Development of Positive Members of Society**

Beyond the future monetary savings that are possible with the implementation of social-emotional learning programs in schools (Belfield et al., 2015), there is the possibility of the growth of a more productive member of society (Greenberg et al., 2017). A study by Jones et al. (2015) looked to see if there is a relationship between the social-emotional skills of students in kindergarten, and future success as an adolescent and adult. They looked specifically at studies in low socioeconomic neighborhoods and

found that there was a statistical significance between high social-emotional skills and later positive outcomes, such as employment, following laws, obtaining more education, and better mental health. The authors underscored the importance of social-emotional learning for all children, but also suggested that possible early screenings take place to ensure that those who show the greatest vulnerability, children with the lowest repertoire of important social-emotional skills, are taught the skills they need to be successful earlier rather than later.

Another study by Klapp et al. (2017) looked specifically at how social-emotional learning programs in schools could impact future substance use. Describing substance abuse as an immense contributor to a variety of life problems, the authors emphasized the importance of identifying ways to reduce the use and abuse of substances. They randomly assigned students into control and treatment groups, with the treatment group participating in a social-emotional learning program within the school system. The authors found that not only did these students show an improvement in the assessment of social-emotional skills, they also exhibited less substance use and abuse in the five-year follow-up. They encouraged additional future studies, possibly encompassing an even greater number of years for follow-up.

### **Student Behavior**

Teaching social-emotional skills may have a positive impact on student behavior (Bakosh et al., 2016; Cipriano et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2021). Where there has been the implementation of social-emotional learning, it is sometimes assigned solely to students

with the greatest of behavioral problems and generally not accessed in the general classroom by the general population of students (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Davies et al., 2021). The need for the implementation of social-emotional learning programs, both for universal settings, such as the greater school, as well as for more targeted settings and populations, is highlighted by many researchers (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Davies et al., 2021; Reicher et al., 2017; Schultz et al., 2011; Urbina et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2019).

Schultz et al. (2011) conducted a pilot social-emotional learning program for preschoolers in a low socioeconomic income school. They utilized the Behavior Assessment System for Children, Second Edition (BASC-2) as a pre-test and post-test measure to identify behavioral problems in these students. They found that there were significant improvements shown from pre-test to post-test on the BASC-2 on the behaviorally related subscales of Hyperactivity, Aggression, Conduct Problems, Atypicality, and Adaptability. Hyperactivity, specifically, was also found to be significantly impacted by social-emotional learning programs by other authors (Low et al., 2019). Schultz et al. (2011) concluded that implementing social-emotional learning at the very beginning of the schooling process could help develop healthy behaviors and possibly prevent the escalation of problematic behaviors in youth.

Duncan et al. (2017) explored the Positive Action program, implemented in the general education classroom, and its potential impact on student misconduct. They looked at 1,130 students in third through eighth grades in 14 low-income schools, who were randomly assigned to control or treatment groups. The two groups did not

significantly differ at the start of the program in misconduct or social-emotional skill levels. The authors utilized self-report measures, identifying aggression, bullying, delinquency, and disruption for behavior outcomes. They also assessed the social-emotional learning outcomes of both groups, looking at traits such as self-control and respect for others. They found that the students who participated in the Positive Action social-emotional program showed significantly lower rates of misconduct and significantly higher scores on measures of social-emotional skills.

Smith et al. (2016) studied 54 Florida schools that were randomly assigned, after matching schools based on the percentages of students who met eligibility for the free or reduced lunch program, to either the control group or the experimental group. The experimental group utilized the Tools For Getting Along (TFGA) social-emotional learning curriculum (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021). The study consisted of 70% African American students and 30% Caucasian students. They utilized teacher rating measures to assess behavior problems and aggression. They implemented self-report measures for anger levels.

On the aggression outcomes, the authors found that the students in the TFGA group who had higher baseline rates of aggression showed significant decreases in their aggression compared to those with higher baseline rates of aggression in the control group. This was also the case for students in the TFGA group who had higher baseline rates of behavioral problems compared to their control counterparts. Thus, students who rated higher on pretest measures on misconduct showed significantly lower rates at

posttest compared to those with high pretest scores in the control group. On the self-reported anger measure, again, the treatment students with the highest baseline measures showed significant decreases in anger compared to their control group counterparts. The authors noted, however, that the reliance of self-reported measures for anger may have had an impact on the outcomes, noting perhaps teacher ratings may have given another possible picture or additional support for the findings.

Tur-Porcar et al. (2021) examined the impact of social-emotional learning in six public schools in Spain. The study included 555 students that were between seven and 12 years of age, and were randomly placed in experimental or control groups. The experimental group received instruction on emotional awareness and self-control. The authors did not match the groups for pretest aggression levels, noting that the experimental group exhibited significantly higher rates of aggression and emotional instability compared to the control group. They found, however, that the experimental group, the group which received social-emotional instruction, showed a significant decrease in aggression, both verbal and physical, as well as a significant decrease in emotional instability, compared to the control group. Interestingly, the authors noted there was actually an increase in aggression and emotional instability in the control group. The authors expressed their research is very promising in giving encouragement for the implementation of social-emotional programs, noting that some of the biggest struggles that educators express is effectively dealing with students who show highly

aggressive behaviors and emotional volatility. The authors described emotional instability and aggression as being two very closely linked variables.

Davies et al. (2021) looked at an Australian school that was labelled as disadvantaged due to a high number of students from a low socioeconomic population. Furthermore, approximately half of the students in their study had special needs, such as developmental delays and speech and language difficulties. The authors utilized the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) for both assessment tools, such as the SSIS Performance Screening Guide, and intervention curriculum, the SSIS Class-wide Intervention Program. The study included children in preparatory class, which they explained is similar to kindergarten, through third grade. They found that there was a significant difference in disciplinary problems, those that would typically require an office referral, noting a 41% decrease from pretest to posttest. It was noted that school administrators, as well as teachers who were the ones implementing the social-emotional learning curriculum, gave credit to the program for the significant decrease in the students' behavioral issues. One noted weakness of the study, however, was that there was not a control implemented, as the authors relied solely on the pretest and posttest measures of students receiving the intervention.

### **Improvement of Social Skills**

The teaching of social skills in social-emotional learning must be conducted with sufficient intensity, directly, and using evidence-based practices in order to make appropriate improvements in a child's social skills skillset and appropriately reduce

skillset deficits (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011; Deli et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2019). Davies et al. (2021) found that social skills did indeed significantly improve in their study, after preparatory to third grade students participated in the social-emotional learning program. They utilized teacher-based observation reports, as well as scores on the SSIS, and discovered the greatest effect findings were in the earlier grades. The significant findings were revealed for all their students, including students with specialized needs, such as speech and language difficulties. They noted that effect sizes were even larger for the special-needs students in their study.

In their pilot study of preschoolers, Schultz et al. (2011) utilized the BASC-2 as a pre-test and post-test measure to identify social skills in the preschoolers. Using the subscale of Social Skills of the BASC-2, completed by the teachers, the authors found significant improvements in students' social skills. They also utilized a second measure for pre-test and post-test purposes, the Connecting with Others Rating Scale (CORS). This measure also found significant improvements on the subscales of Socialization, Communication, Sharing, Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution, and Concept of Self and Others. The authors cited this study as exhibiting promising findings for the effectiveness of social-emotional learning programs in enhancing social skills, but noted that their sample size was indeed small and from one specific area of the United States, Northeast Nebraska. Furthermore, there wasn't the utilization of a control group. They also suggested future research look into possibly interviewing parents in an effort to ascertain

whether these findings were generalizable, noting it is important to utilize these skills outside the school setting, as well as within the school setting.

Social-emotional learning has extended into rural school systems as well, and Zolkoski et al. (2021) explored the impact these programs can have on social skills in students from fourth to twelfth grade. They utilized schools which implemented a social-emotional curriculum and control schools which did not. The program was implemented by either school counselors or teachers. Parents were requested to fill out a questionnaire which assessed areas of strength and areas of difficulty, and the questionnaire was completed both prior to the intervention and after. They discovered that students who attended the schools with social-emotional learning instruction, had parents assess a significantly larger increase in prosocial behaviors compared to ratings of students in the control group, the schools not implementing such a curriculum. Furthermore, they also discovered that parents of the students in the schools where social-emotional learning was provided also reported greater actual observations of prosocial behaviors compared to students in the control schools. Although the findings do shed some positive light on these programs, the authors highlighted that their sample size was small, as they had to rely on parental compliance with filling out the questionnaire, thus excluding many students. Furthermore, data from parents who did not return surveys may have significantly varied from those who showed consistent follow-through.

## **Student Mental Health**

Social-emotional learning programs can ameliorate students' mental health difficulties and can ultimately improve how students function in the school, home, and community settings (Duncan et al., 2017; Hennessey & Humphrey, 2019; Webb et al., 2019; Zolkoski et al., 2021). Furthermore, social-emotional programs can allow a preventative factor in the area of mental health, helping to avert mental health problems from developing or worsening (Greenberg et al., 2017). Social-emotional learning can also promote mental health with the teaching of specific emotional self-regulation, which can help students better manage their emotions and find healthy outlets (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Jackman et al., 2019; Lowe et al., 2019).

There have been a growing number of social-emotional programs being implemented in schools around the world with the intention of targeting mental health and promoting the wellbeing of students (Reicher et al., 2017). Korinek (2021) asserted that mental health needs of students, particularly those with internalizing problems, such as anxiety and depression, are regularly encountered by educators. The author suggested that teaching skills that promote healthier outcomes, particularly social-emotional skills, will allow educators to more appropriately meet the needs of these students. She noted that many students will not have treatment for such problems unless the school provides the treatment, citing parents' financial challenges, time restraints, etc., but that unfortunately the number of students who truly need such services surpasses those who will be served. She explained that such services are often reserved for students in special

education. Students who are eligible for special education, she elaborated, can receive services, such as counseling and other supports, which are often unavailable to students in the general education setting. Thus, programs such as social-emotional learning provided to the entire school, can reach a majority of students who may otherwise get missed.

The author explained that educators first have to be trained to understand mental health issues, which is especially true for internalizing behaviors which are more covert. She described how the school system will often look at externalizing behaviors, such as hitting, kicking, throwing things, yelling, etc., but that experiences, such as nervousness, fear, trauma, and intense sadness, may be completely missed or misinterpreted. She explained that one of the ways to work on targeting such difficulties, is for Tier One types of supports, such as social-emotional learning programs for the entire student population. Social-emotional learning, she emphasized, would help students better deal with emotional distress and promote well-being. Furthermore, she asserted, educators could apply, highlight, and encourage these skills the students learn during the instructional phase of the social-emotional learning process, as well as during the teachable moments that naturally come up in the classroom and greater school setting. The importance of implementing social-emotional learning in the greater school, as well as the individual classroom, and integrating these approaches where they work coherently, has been clearly stressed by others (Bierman & Sanders, 2021; Greenberg et al., 2017). Korinek (2021) concluded that this could truly result in a reduction of mental

health issues, especially the internalizing symptoms which often go unnoticed. Such difficult recognition of internalizing symptoms, such as depression, has been commonplace and problematic in the school system (Reicher et al., 2017).

In their Australian study, Davies et al. (2021) wanted to examine the impact of social-emotional learning on participating students' mental health, hypothesizing that there would be an improvement in emotional wellbeing. They were particularly interested to see if the students with special needs, such as those with developmental delays or speech and language difficulties, would show an improvement. One way they assessed the students' mental health was by measuring differences in attendance from pretest to posttest, noting actual school attendance could indicate lack of somatic complaints, as somatic complaints are sometimes closely aligned with mental health. They also used School Opinion Surveys, a tool Australian schools regularly utilize, questioning students on whether they liked being at school and if they felt accepted while at school. The authors found a significant decrease in absences, as well as a significant increase in feelings of acceptance and liking school.

Deli et al. (2021) examined social-emotional learning instruction, as well as social-emotional learning instruction alongside Teacher Autonomy Support (TAS), a system within self-determination theory. They explained the theory looks at motivation. The authors assessed the impact of this instruction, as well as the instruction alongside TAS, on students' academic anxiety and plans to drop-out. They utilized the Strong Kids curriculum, explaining it is evidence-based and not costly. The authors conducted the

study in a city in China with very high poverty rates and utilized 209 eighth grade students. Four classes were randomly placed in the treatment category, while three classes were randomly assigned to the control category, which was the business-as-usual modality.

The study utilized the Learning Anxiety Index (LA) to measure anxiety related to academics in students, as well as the Social-emotional Learning Knowledge Questionnaire, a self-report assessing technical familiarity with social-emotional skills. They found that the students participating in the social-emotional program learned significantly greater social-emotional skills and showed significantly lower levels of anxiety. When looking at specific experimental groups, they found that the simple social-emotional learning program resulted in a greater reduction in learning anxiety, while the combination social-emotional learning and TAS group, which had the self-determination theory component, resulted in a greater social-emotional skill knowledge. The authors concluded that social-emotional curriculum can be useful in targeting anxiety associated with school, as well as teaching necessary social tools, while adding that the TAS component may help with the facilitation of social skill level. They pointed out this study included a very specific population of China, and also encouraged future studies to be at the longitudinal level to give additional clarity on the matter.

In their study, Schultz et al. (2011) looked at mental health subscales on the BASC-2 in order to assess the possible impact of the social-emotional learning program implemented for 3 to 5-year-old preschoolers. The program consisted of 30 lessons which

targeted a variety of areas, including promoting understanding of one's strengths and self-worth. Using BASC-2 scores on tests prior and after the execution of the social-emotional learning program, they found that symptoms of anxiety, such as nervousness and fearfulness, and depression symptoms, such as intense sadness, significantly decreased after participation in the school-based social-emotional learning program. The authors found these results promising in showing the use of social-emotional programs in effectively targeting mental health issues.

Kramer et al. (2014) also examined the possible impact of a social-emotional curriculum, Strong Kids. They implemented the program in a treatment school, consisting of grades kindergarten through sixth, and implemented the program in every classroom. Each classroom teacher was responsible for the implementation of the program in the treatment school. The control school also consisted of the same grade levels, but did not contain any specialized program. The schools were from the same region of the United States and had similar demographics, including a primarily Latino population (61% and 53%), followed by a second-largest Caucasian population (37% and 43%). Both schools were also Title One schools and had similar socioeconomic makeups. A total of 614 students were participants in the study.

The authors obtained pretest and posttest teacher ratings of students on the internalizing subscale of the SSRS. They found students in the social-emotional learning program to have significant decreases in internalizing behaviors compared to the control group students, who actually obtained higher posttest scores on internalizing behaviors.

The authors further found that the students who were most at risk for emotional and behavioral problems at school showed the most significant reduction in posttest scores in the experimental group. The authors noted that implementation of the program was closely supervised to enhance fidelity and they also assessed that staff expressed mostly favorable views of the social-emotional learning program utilized. They hypothesized that the scripted nature of the program gave the teacher very direct information as to the necessary steps to implement it easily and with integrity. They did note, however, where there was some difficulty noted with implementation, it was generally with the younger students, grades kindergarten through second, where the teachers reported some attention span issues. Suggestions were made for possibly shortening the lessons for that age group.

### **Staff Wellbeing**

Staff members are integral parts of the school system. Davies et al. (2021) wanted to get a measurement of staff wellbeing in their study. They utilized a staff questionnaire designed to measure staff morale and staff feelings on whether they felt they had reliable access to supportive trainings. The authors found that there was a significant increase in staff reports of morale and support measures over the three-year period of the study for these teachers who had social-emotional learning implemented in their schools. Furthermore, they described that almost all staff members at the end of their study rated their school as above average compared to other area schools, and reported they would endorse a recommendation of the school. Teachers who feel better, are able to function

better, and have uncovered the benefits of social-emotional learning programs in schools, could truly serve as ambassadors of sorts for these programs for other schools within their districts, as well as nearby districts (Greenberg et al., 2017; Zolkoski et al., 2021).

Furthermore, greater teacher wellbeing may play an important role in the enhancement of the overall school climate (Top et al., 2017; Urbina et al., 2017).

Greenberg et al. (2017) discussed how educators themselves can improve their own social-emotional skillsets, which they could use in their own lives both inside and outside of the school workplace, through the implementation of these social-emotional learning programs in schools. This, they explained, could improve their mental health, communication skills, social interactions, and general overall wellbeing. They asserted that although these programs are not necessarily developed to target the skills of staff members, there are indeed secondary benefits that do just that. These programs, they added, can promote healthier interactions that teachers have with other teachers, administrators, parents, and students, and can help with overall job satisfaction, especially since they could facilitate a more positive work environment. It is important to keep in mind, however, that appropriate training, with substantial support from administrators and mental health professionals, must take place to ensure that educators who are conducting these programs have developed a greater understanding of social-emotional skills, prior to implementing them with their students and benefiting from them as well (Bierman & Sanders, 2021).

This more positive work environment and overall healthier school climate, was also discovered in a study by Charlton et al. (2021). The authors looked at specific types of school intervention programs, 65% of which were in U.S. schools and the remainder of which were in schools in Australia, Cyprus, Greece, India, Finland, and Uganda. They found that programs which target social-emotional learning had the biggest impact on teacher perception of a positive school climate, compared to other programs such as School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). The authors found these results promising, but encouraged additional studies.

### **Schools' Vital Instructional Time**

Unfortunately, a large number of schools do not provide direct instruction in social-emotional skills due to the school administrators' beliefs that there is not even sufficient time for general academic instruction (Davies et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2020), especially with the accountability measures enforced through standardized state testing (Jackson, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wood & Brownhill, 2018). However, there are findings that social-emotional learning programs in schools are associated with increased academics, such as increased math and reading skills (Bowers et al., 2018; Davies et al., 2021; McCormick et al., 2015), and increased writing skills (Schonfeld et al., 2015). Sometimes larger improvements for students who are most vulnerable for academic difficulties, such as students in special education programs, are found (Davies et al., 2021). Schools which have shown the academic success of social-emotional learning programs often have administrators who extend the programs for additional years and to

cover additional grade levels, encompassing a larger percentage of the student population for a longer period of time (Davies et al., 2021; Hart et al., 2020).

Schools, however, as stated earlier, must so intensely focus on the academic instruction in order to meet their accountability criteria. Thus, looking at how social-emotional programs, which work on targeting important life skills, such as is presented in the framework by CASEL, may impact academic outcomes specifically, may be a beneficial way to promote this teaching of necessary skills. Connecting social-emotional learning to the school system's main accountability measures, identifying how it impacts academic measures which are set forth by stringent governmental guidelines, can ameliorate the implementation of these programs and bring forth a multitude of benefits.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Method**

A total of five databases were utilized for the search in this study: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, PsychARTICLES, PsycINFO, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. The search terms employed were “social-emotional learning” AND “academic achievement” OR “academic performance” OR “academic success.” Limiters were that the articles had to be full text, scholarly peer-reviewed journals, and had to have been published between May 2011 and May 2021. A ten-year period was employed so that the most current research was examined. Expanders included “apply equivalent subjects.” In order for articles to have met inclusionary criteria, they had to be actual studies of social-emotional learning and academic outcomes. They also had to be available in English. Articles that were literature reviews, essays, reports, or editorials were excluded.

A database search was conducted in May of 2021. A total of 340 articles were found. Three articles were written in another language (Bosnian, Portuguese, and Spanish) and were thus excluded. A total of 337 articles were found in English, but exact duplicates were automatically removed, having left a total of 228 articles. Another two articles were found to be exact duplicates that were not automatically removed, which resulted in a total of 226 articles. Having utilized the inclusionary and exclusionary criteria explained, a total of 36 articles were identified to be relevant to the study.

### **Procedural Integrity and Inter-Scorer Agreement**

An independent review rater was utilized to assess the procedural integrity of 27% of the articles by applying the precise search criteria (Poling et al., 1995). This independent review rater was a third-year Stephen F. Austin State University graduate student in the Master of Arts school psychology program. The calculation of inter-scorer agreement followed the formula of dividing the number of articles in agreement (both raters) by the total number of studied articles, and then multiplying the product by 100. Thus, the agreement rate between the two raters was 92%. The findings of this analysis have been explicated in the results and discussion sections.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Results**

The 36 articles that met the criteria previously outlined were reviewed and arranged in a systematic way, all examining academic outcomes, such as grades, grade point average, test scores, etc. Initially, the articles were categorized by specific social-emotional learning programs that were studied and examined for their possible impact on academics. Next, general social-emotional learning programs were reviewed in connection to academics. Lastly, studies were explored where social-emotional programs were not utilized, but there was an examination of social-emotional skills possessed and possible relationships with academics.

#### **Student Success Skills**

The Student Success Skills program is an evidence-based social-emotional learning curriculum, which is humanistic in its roots and targets areas such as self-regulation, social skills, and attitudes (Villares et al., 2011). Furthermore, there is evidence that it may have a positive impact not only on school behaviors, but on academic success as well (Lemberger et al., 2011).

Bowers et al. (2018) examined the Student Success Skills program executed by school counselors specifically with students served under special education. The authors explained that such students are often thought of as simply their disability labels and that

there should great resolve to implement humanistic and holistic programs, such as Student Success Skills, for these exceptional students.

Baseline data was collected prior to the intervention. Additional data was gathered both during and after the five-week intervention program, which took place once a week for five uninterrupted weeks. They found that there was indeed an improvement and large effect on the students' social skills and a decrease with a moderate effect for problematic behaviors. On academic measures, there was an improvement with a moderate effect size for academic performance for the students. The academic performance was measured by report card grade differences in math, reading, and writing. Reading scores were especially impacted, with an average increase of 21.8 points.

Webb et al. (2019) conducted a study with 4,305 fifth grade students of various races and cultures, as well as various academic backgrounds, including students in special education and English language learners. The treatment group contained students randomly assigned for participation in the Student Social Skills program to see what impact it may have on student performance, including scores on standardized tests. The control group contained randomly assigned students who received the general school counseling instruction that had been previously utilized.

The Student Social Skills program was led by trained school counselors with reinforcement of skills given in the classroom by trained teachers. The authors found there were significant advances made in students' social skills, improved school behavior, and decreased test anxiety for the treatment group compared to the control

group. They did not, however, discover a significant difference between the two groups in terms of reading and math standardized test scores. The authors noted that this was contrary to previous studies utilizing the program and identified some limitations that may have impacted their results, including that the state's standardized test was revised during the study and they were also unable to examine grades.

Urbina et al. (2017) looked at the culturally translated Student Success Skills program in working with Latino freshmen and sophomore high school students. There were 166 Latino students in one Florida school that received the program and was the treatment group, and 186 Latino students in another Florida school served as the control group. The researchers chose the schools based on their large Latino population and similar makeup, such as a parallel number of English language learners. The program was led by a school counselor who was certified as Spanish-speaking bilingual and consisted of weekly lessons for five consecutive weeks, in addition to monthly booster lessons for three months. The authors found that students in the treatment group did indeed have significantly higher scores on Florida's standardized tests of math and reading compared to their counterparts in the control group. The findings held true for English language learners in the intervention group compared to the control group.

The authors encouraged schools to implement programs that have shown success in culturally appropriate ways for other groups, such as Latino students. They also attempted to inspire schools to play a larger role in helping students with social-

emotional skills by showing them that there could truly be academic benefits in addition to improved school climate and student conduct.

### **Second Step**

Second Step is a program developed by a nonprofit organization to teach students how to regulate their emotions, establish empathy, build social skills, prevent aggressive behavior, and support necessary learning skills (Committee for Children, 2021). Second Step is a widely utilized social-emotional program with some solid evidence for improving social skills and emotional regulation, decreasing behavioral issues, and having a collateral impact on academics (Low et al., 2015; Low et al., 2019; Top et al., 2017). It is one of the most common social-emotional learning curriculums encountered in the school setting (Committee for Children, 2021).

Cook et al. (2018) specifically wanted to uncover any academic outcomes that may be found with the implementation of Second Step. They looked at students in kindergarten to second grade in 61 rural and urban schools across the states of Arizona and Washington in a matched, randomized-controlled study. The participating schools were matched on the number of students receiving reduced/free lunch and nonwhite student populations. There was a total of 7,914 students randomly assigned to either the treatment group, which started the program at that point, or the control group, which was set to start the program at a later date, after the termination of the study. The authors found that there was indeed a small, yet significant difference in the treatment group in terms of reading scores, when a moderating analysis took place to look at fidelity of

implementation. It was concluded that when the program was implemented with substantial fidelity, looking at ensuring that students were actively participating and the program was closely followed (did not leave out lesson components, skip sessions, etc.), there was indeed an improvement in reading scores.

Low et al. (2019) conducted a two-year study to explore the possible impact of Second Step over time, including student behavior and academic achievement. Behavior was measured by teacher observation, and academic achievement was measured applying curriculum-based assessments in reading and math. Participating schools were randomly designated either treatment or control status.

The authors found that students in the Second Step program had significant results yielding better learning skills, superior emotional regulation/symptomology, and less hyperactivity. The authors found, however, that the differences would mostly occur during program time, and would often lapse during the summer break, questioning the long-term impact of the program without continued implementation. Furthermore, they did not find academic differences between control and Second Step groups. The authors hypothesized that a possibility for this is that such interventions on social-emotional learning may take additional time to uncover academic benefits and that such may show over additional time. They ascertained the need for a long-term study.

Second Step could also be implemented after the elementary years, during the middle school grades. Top et al. (2016) conducted a longitudinal study with 35 schools and 5,189 students in fifth to eighth grades participating. They noted the need for studies

that focused on this age group for the Second Step program and social-emotional learning in general. The researchers measured problematic as well as positive behaviors via teachers' responses on the Discipline Point System and the Prosocial Behavior Rating System. They also examined academic performance by studying students' grade point averages. Considering differences that would exist in schools prior to the start of any program, they specifically looked at growth in measuring success.

At the end of two school years, the authors found there was a significant decrease in problematic behaviors and a significant increase in grade point averages in the intervention schools compared to the control schools. The authors reasoned that Second Step has secondary gains, such as in academics, because it aids in improving the overall climate of the school. The authors identified investing time and money in such programs as a sensible endeavor for schools and explained that schools will more than recover the costs.

Top et al. (2017) looked at the Second Step program and parental monitoring of their students in 22 schools. There were eight control schools and 14 treatment schools in the study. Their study concluded that in schools with the Second Step program, parental monitoring did not play as large of a role in their students' academic success as it did in the control schools without such a program. They reasoned that this could be because this social-emotional learning program contributed to the creation of a more positive school environment, which made parental supervision less necessary or lack of parental involvement less detrimental to academic performance. They also highlighted that such

programs may be even more important in schools where parental monitoring of students is very low, as it may offer a good way to support students and academics.

Second Step was also studied with middle school students with disabilities in a study by Espelage et al. (2016). They looked at 123 students in 12 Midwestern U.S. schools, 47 randomly assigned to the intervention group, which received the Second Step curriculum, and 76 randomly assigned to the control group, which received a traditional anti-bullying program. The authors found that the students in the intervention group showed a significant increase in their inclination to render aid for the victims of bullying. Furthermore, they showed an improvement of half a letter grade on average for their report card grades. The authors supported that social-emotional programs, such as Second Step, help students with the thought-feeling-behavior connection, better preparing them to tackle academic challenges.

### **Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program**

Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program is a social-emotional program employed in elementary schools with some positive benefits and is accepted by CASEL (DiPerna et al., 2015). Although it is being implemented in many U.S. elementary schools, it is only in the early stages of study as far as effectiveness (DiPerna et al., 2017). It includes units which target the following skills: Active listening, turn-taking, following directions and rules, managing emotions, paying attention, kindness, making good choices, and ways to ask for assistance (Peak Project Organization, 2021).

DiPerna et al. (2017) examined this social-emotional learning program in six elementary schools in the Mid-Atlantic area of the U.S. over a period of 12 weeks. Students were randomly assigned to either the intervention group or what the authors called “business-as-usual” group (control). The business-as-usual group had 85% of its teachers who reported using some sort of informal positive behavior plan in their daily classroom, like praise, rewards, or token systems. They collected teacher ratings and data from direct observations to assess social skills and behavior of the participating first grade students. They gathered STAR reading and STAR math data, which are computerized tests used in the school system. They found non-significant differences in problematic behaviors and academic skills between the two groups. They did, however, find some differences in social skills, as well as academic motivation and engagement, with higher scores in the intervention group.

Hart et al. (2020) wanted to specifically look at the impact of a social-emotional learning on state test scores, noting that there was little research in such. They noted that since such testing is at the forefront of educational administrators’ focus, examining the possible impact social-emotional programming has on scores is logical. The researchers implemented the program working with second grade students who were randomly designated into either intervention groups, using the Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program, or a control condition which did not have a formal intervention. Although the program ended while students were still in the second grade, the authors followed the students, collecting more data in the third and fifth grades. The

authors found that the resulting test scores for treatment conditions were indeed higher than control conditions, but the differences were generally not significant. The authors, however, saw the data as promising, in that they noted that often school administrators lament about the loss of instruction time to execute such programs. Thus, students could participate in such programs to build their social-emotional skills without hurting their test scores due to a decrease in instruction time.

## **INSIGHTS**

INSIGHTS is a social-emotional learning program for children from kindergarten to second grade, which consists of curriculum for students, teachers, and parents (CASEL, 2021). There is research supporting INSIGHTS as increasing student engagement and decreasing their off-task behavior, in addition to improving teacher emotional support and organization (Cappella et al., 2015). The parent and teacher components encourage looking at the child's specific temperament, understanding that each temperament has situationally based positives and negatives, and knowing how to respond based on the specific temperament type (Cappella et al., 2015; McCormick et al., 2018). The children also learn about temperaments and responses, utilizing colorful puppets, videos, and interactions with classmates to strengthen the skills they learn in 10 weekly, 45-minute lessons (Cappella et al., 2015).

McCormick et al. (2018) randomly assigned large urban, low-income schools to either the INSIGHTS curriculum group or to the control, which was an afterschool reading program for teachers, parents, and students. They enrolled participants in

kindergarten and followed them for a two-year period, through the first grade. A total of 435 students participated in the study, with 72% from an African American background, 19% from a Latino background, and 9% from a biracial background. Parent and teachers had separate weekly two-hour sessions for 10 weeks, where teacher sessions were during the workday and parent sessions were afterschool. They were presented with the four temperaments the curriculum addresses: the industrious/hard-working child, the more demanding/high maintenance child, the social and ready to try things child, and the careful/shy child. Adult participants were taught how to recognize and respond to the different temperaments, and students were taught to comprehend the puppets' perspectives, strengths, and needs.

The authors were specifically interested to see if classrooms which had a high mean of shyness scores responded to the INSIGHTS program, including in academic measures for math and reading. They explained that shy students were at risk for negative academic outcomes if instruction did not match their needs. They closely monitored fidelity, requiring the strict following of scripts, checklists, and documentation. Academic skills were assessed utilizing the Woodcock-Johnson Letter Word and Applied Problems assessments and shyness levels measured by the School-Aged Temperament Inventory. Furthermore, behavioral problems, attention, and engagement were also measured. They found that in classrooms with high average shyness scores, the INSIGHTS program had a significantly larger impact on students' math skills. They suggested that although social-emotional learning programs, such as the INSIGHTS program, which specifically

encompasses temperament differences, may be beneficial to students in general, utilizing it for those most at risk may prove beneficial when resources are scarce. Those with a shy temperament, who may not engage in the instructional process in the same way as others, were specifically shown to have larger academic increases in math. The authors suggested that studies examining the program and other temperaments take place. They also cautioned that the generalization may be limited due to the sample's lower socioeconomic status, urban setting, and racial/ethnic makeup.

McCormick et al. (2016) desired to look whether parental participation would mediate student success in academic, behavioral, and social-emotional results. They randomly implemented the intervention program or a control group in 22 low-income public schools, where there were high percentage of racial/ethnic minorities. All three components of the INSIGHTS curriculum were implemented (parent, teacher, and student). The program was implemented for 10 weeks during students' kindergarten year and 10 weeks of their first-grade year. Results indicated that where the INSIGHTS program had the largest positive impact on academic achievement, behavior, and sustaining attention was in the group of students whose parents participated the least in the program. The authors suggested that students whose parents generally have greater involvement in their lives, participated at higher rates in the INSIGHTS program, and although they benefited, the impact was not as great as it was for those who are at a greater risk, children whose parents generally have little parental involvement. Although these children's parents did not participate, the children still benefited from their own

sessions and their teachers' sessions. The authors pointed out that the parents who participated more consistently in the program tended to have more years of education, a spouse, and full-time employment. They also tended to be older parents. These parents also had children with higher levels of behavioral compliance, sustained attention, and academic achievement prior to starting the study compared to the children whose parents showed low rates of participation.

McCormick et al. (2019) looked beyond INSIGHTS outcomes on academics and behavioral outcomes, to see if the social-emotional program had an impact on student retention rates and special education eligibility. The authors looked at 1,634 students in 22 schools in New York City with random assignment to either a control or INSIGHTS program. The control and INSIGHTS program was implemented for students starting in kindergarten and ending at the end of their first-grade year. Grade retention and special education referral rates were examined in fifth grade to assess the possible longer-term impact of INSIGHTS. Their findings did not suggest any differences in student grade retention rates but did indeed suggest significant difference in special education eligibility, a five percent difference. When the authors more closely examined this difference in special education rates, they found that it was specifically because of lower referral rates for students from the lower socioeconomic group, as indicated by free/reduced lunch criteria. They found that the INSIGHTS lower socioeconomic group students had a six percent lower chance of being referred to special education compared to their control group lower socioeconomic counterparts. The authors were cautiously

optimistic that programs such as INSIGHTS could work to lessen special education referrals that do not reflect a true eligibility and student need, and ultimately decrease errors in students' educational tracks and financial costs to schools.

McCormick et al. (2015) examined whether increased math and reading scores were mediated by factors related to emotionally supportive teachers, as well as teacher organization, since INSIGHTS also targets these areas (Cappella et al., 2015). They utilized the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a tool they explained can be utilized to measure teacher organization and emotional support, as well as instructional support. They found that gains in math and reading were at least partly due to the emotional support given by the teachers, as well as the organization of their classroom. The impact was on math and reading, although the authors found that the effect for reading was found with only the inverse probability of treatment weighing (IPTW) method and not the other two implemented. They suggested, however, that there may have been a lessened impact found due to the control group utilizing an afterschool supplemental reading program.

### **Ruler**

Ruler is an evidence-based social-emotional learning program for students in pre-kindergarten to high school, created by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (CASEL, 2021). RULER teaches social-emotional skills and incorporates them into the classroom and school structure (Brackett et al., 2019). Ruler encompasses recognizing/labelling emotions, what contributes to them, and appropriate expression and

regulation, while working on ways to improve the educational environment (Brackett et al., 2019). It teaches educators to better understand their students' emotional responses and to thus respond to them in a more productive manner (CASEL, 2021).

Cipriano et al. (2019) examined 318 fifth-grade students who were categorized as academically at-risk by their school, based on earning scores lower than 80 in at least three academic classes. They randomly assigned 140 students to the Ruler group and 178 to a control group. They specifically wanted to identify the relationship between the social-emotional program, RULER, and student engagement, behavior, and academic performance. Their results suggested that the RULER participants showed greater school engagement and behavior but did not exhibit differences in academic achievement two years after implantation. The authors were optimistic that the improvements in school engagement and behavior in students who struggled academically could prevent a path of future failure. They explained that perhaps the two-year period was not sufficient time for identifying academic improvements, but the behavioral and engagement improvements identified may indeed signal later academic improvements.

### **You Can Do It: Early Childhood Education Program**

The You Can Do It: Early Childhood Education Program (YCDI) is a direct instruction social-emotional program that addresses persistence, confidence, organization, and emotional resilience, utilizing four amusing characters, each depicting one of these identified qualities (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011; Bernard & Walton, 2008). The program

employs hand puppets, songs, and posters, as well as supportive classroom practices for staff (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011; Bernard & Walton, 2008).

Ashdown and Bernard (2011) examined whether the YCDI program impacted social-emotional skills, behavior, and academics of Australian students enrolled in a Catholic school in the city of Melbourne. The school population was of a lower socioeconomic status and approximately 66% of the students spoke English as a second language. The treatment group consisted of one preparatory and one first grade class randomly assigned to receive the curriculum three days a week, for a period of 10 weeks, by their regular teacher. This teacher had received appropriate training in the program. The control group, which also consisted of one preparatory and one first grade class, consisted of randomly assigned students who did not receive any program until after the completion of the study. The ACER Well-being Survey and the Social Skills Rating System were utilized to measure social skills and behavior, and the Independent Text Reading Level was used to assess academics.

The authors found that students who received the YCDI program rated higher in social-emotional skills, which included positive self-orientation, other-orientation, and work-orientation, in addition to cooperation, assertiveness, and self-control. Thus, these students were found to be able to manage their emotions, get along with others, and engage in academic lessons significantly better than their peers in the control group. The authors found these differences to hold true when controlling for gender and whether the students spoke English as a second language. Problematic behaviors were found to

significantly decrease in the first-grade students, but this difference was not found in the preparatory class.

When the authors looked at academic achievement via reading, they at first did not note significant differences between the groups. Upon a more in-depth exploration, however, they discovered that for first grade students with the lowest baseline reading scores, there were significant improvements in reading after the implementation of the YCDI program. The authors suggested that such a program may be extremely beneficial to students who struggle with academics, specifically reading. They cautioned, however, that this study looked at one Australian school, so additional research is needed to generalize results, as well as look at possible longer-term impacts.

### **OpenMind Program and Mindful-Based Social-Emotional Learning**

OpenMind is a program which utilizes mindfulness in social-emotional learning and encompasses CASEL's levels of competencies: cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Jackman, 2019). Mindfulness embraces the focus on the present, with attention practices, while working to enhance stress management and self-regulation (Bakosh et al., 2016). OpenMind is a specific program which utilizes mindfulness, but there some schools which implement mindfulness skills in their general social-emotional learning.

Jackman et al. (2019) examined the OpenMind program in Head Start preschools with children aged three to five. They randomly assigned these Head Start classes to either the OpenMind program or to a comparison group, which focused on building

relationships and bonding with students. There were 283 students, 281 parents, and 27 teachers who participated in this study.

The OpenMind teachers utilized seven components of mindfulness each school day, such as meditation, yoga, gratitude, and identification of feelings, and the teachers themselves were required to participate in an initial five-day training and were also required to participate in 20 minutes of meditation each school day. The parents of the students in this group participated in a three-day training which also encouraged them to continue the practice of daily meditation.

The comparison group teachers also participated in a five-day training on building trust in relationships and activities that build bonds with students. They were required to provide a total of 20 minutes of bonding activities each school day. Parents participated in trainings that targeted how they can build more positive relationships with their children.

The authors examined a specific social-emotional program that focuses on mindfulness. In addition to this mindfulness group, the authors included a comparison group which also provided instruction on social-emotional skills. The results for both groups indicated positive overall findings, with greater findings for the OpenMind program in self-control, regulation of emotions, and changing necessary focus. The OpenMind program was assessed by the teachers, via questionnaires, to be easily followed and to not pose any negatives consequences to the students. They also expressed that it aided students with self-regulation, identification of emotions, empathy, and self-

calming. Furthermore, the teachers reported they would recommend the program to others.

The academic related outcomes the authors looked at were cognitive measures, utilizing the Head Toes Knees Shoulders (HTKS) test, which they explained includes working memory, and the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function, Preschool Version (BRIEF-P), which they showed includes flexibility of thinking and emergent metacognition. With HTKS, there were significant differences found for both groups between initial and later tests, with ending results significantly greater for the OpenMind versus comparison group. On the BRIEF-P, students in both groups showed improved metacognition and no significant differences were found between the two groups. On flexibility of thinking, however, students in the OpenMind programs were found to have significantly lower scores than the comparison group. There were no differences discovered, however, in overall cognitive functioning in the two groups on the BRIEF-P.

The authors noted several limitations of OpenMind. For one, they reported that teachers in the OpenMind group assessed difficulty in spending 20 minutes per school day meditating, and found seven to ten minutes being the amount of time they generally implemented this technique. Furthermore, where teacher participation was more easily controlled, they reported difficulty having adequate parent involvement. They explained this is often the issue with school research when parental participation is needed.

Bakosh et al. (2016) looked at 93 third grade students in two elementary schools in a Chicago suburb. The students in the intervention group received a 10-minute daily

audio mindfulness program that was prerecorded for a total of eight weeks. There were 35 variations of the recording, with self-awareness, self-control, kindness, gratitude, and social awareness implemented within the different audio tracks. The authors explained that the main purpose was to aid the students in the consistent exploration and identification of what is occurring within them. The last two minutes of the recordings required the students to write or draw about their inner experiences in personal journals. The control group did not utilize any program for mindfulness or social-emotional learning. There was random assignment to the two groups.

The authors were easily able to measure academic outcomes, as teachers regularly put in grades for students. They discovered that in reading and science, students in the mindfulness group showed significantly higher increases in their grades, compared to the control group. Furthermore, they also discovered significantly improved behavior for the mindfulness group, assessed using data collection by classroom teachers.

Zeilhofer (2020) looked at mindfulness implemented in foreign language classrooms in a Japanese university and the potential impact for students' grades via a quasi-experimental design. She implemented a guided meditation and the count to 10 method of meditation, which utilized exhaling and inhaling at different counts, two times a week at the start of class. The author chose the start of class, as she explained it is an invaluable time to tap student attention and readily bring the focus to learning. The interventions were in place for two semesters. The control classes were run in the same way as the intervention classes, other than they did not have the interventions, and there

was random assignment to each group. She found that the mindfulness group had significantly higher scores on their foreign language tests compared to the control group.

Lemberger et al. (2021) conducted a study in a Southwestern U.S. school district, examining the academic achievement of sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. The schools were Title One schools and the racial composition of the 116 participants were 19.8% African American, 62.9% Latino, 12.9% Caucasian, 2.6% Asian, and 1.7% Multiracial. They specifically looked at scores of district exams, based on earlier state tests, given four times a school year in English, social studies, math, and science. The intervention group consisted of randomly assigned students receiving social-emotional learning skills and mindfulness-based practices.

The authors found that students in the intervention program exhibited significant growth in science, social studies, and English tests compared to their control peers, with the greatest growth in social studies. The average growth for intervention students was 4.73 points compared to 1.21 points for the control students. The authors relayed such growth was especially promising, as the study included a high percentage of students from a lower socioeconomic level, who are traditionally students who experience greater challenges, as well as a larger percentage of minority students, who encounter systemic obstacles within schools. Furthermore, the authors found significantly greater increases in stress-tolerance and curiosity for the intervention group, as well as higher teacher reports of executive functioning, such as being able to inhibit distracting stimuli. Such can be related to the academic growth shown.

## **PATHS**

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is a program that works to promote social-emotional learning so that there can be a reduction of aggressive and disruptive behaviors in students, by focusing on self-control, identification of emotions, positive relationships, and social skills (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). PATHS is designed for pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students, both in special and general education programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Although PATHS is not indicated to specifically increase academics, it is possible that it could indirectly have a positive impact.

Schonfeld et al. (2015) looked at 24 large urban schools a district in the Northeast section of the U.S. The schools were considered high risk economically and had enrollment of students from mostly minority groups. The intervention group received the PATHS program, while the control group received little or no instruction in social-emotional learning. There was random assignment to each group. The control group instruction was assessed by the authors, via staff interviews, to be very limited, made up mostly of lessons that were available publicly and had been what was used prior to the study. Thus, there wasn't a specific program used and implementation varied tremendously. The study took place over a four-year period, and it was assessed that control students received between 3.5-15.9 SEL lessons per school year, and PATHS student received between 25.3-31.0 lessons per school year. The participants were followed from third to sixth grade.

Utilizing state testing in various subjects to identify the potential impact, they found that in reading, the intervention group was 1.72 times more likely to reach proficiency than the control group in fourth and fifth grades. A 1.52 greater likelihood to reach proficiency in writing was discovered in the fourth grade, and similar findings were found for fifth and sixth grade intervention students. In math, fourth grade results were 1.63 times higher for intervention students, but no differences were discovered for other grades.

The authors were sure to point out that since the program did not address any of these academic skills, showing academic gains on state tests was a valuable after-effect of the program. The authors did note, however, that a limitation of the study was that there was indeed a loss of participants, almost half, during the four-year study. However, they did not find significant differences between the students who left intervention groups versus control groups, so they believed the results were likely not heavily impacted. Furthermore, since the study looked at a specific area of the U.S., with both a high minority and economically disadvantaged population, they cautioned the results may not be readily generalized. However, showing such improvements for traditionally disadvantaged groups is also valuable. It may have been more beneficial to include other regions of the U.S., however. Finally, the authors also noted that the control group received some social-emotional instruction, which could have affected the results. This, however, may have resulted in not showing the full potential of PATHS on academics.

Hennessey and Humphrey (2019) noted that there is significant research supporting PATHS for improving social-emotional learning and mental health outcomes, and wanted to find out if academic gains could also be substantiated. The authors looked at 23 schools where PATHS was implemented and 22 schools where a structured program was not utilized, for students in the fifth and sixth grades. Looking at math and English scores, utilizing pretests and posttests via computerized programs, no significant differences were found between the intervention and control groups. The authors noted that perhaps additional time was needed to show gains. They also suggested that the business as usual control groups had enough social-emotional instruction where they could not truly function as true control groups. They further noted that implementation fidelity may have also been cause for concern, as the teachers reportedly implemented the program at half the recommended frequency during the second year.

### **Positive Action**

Flay and Phil (2014) explained Positive Action as a two to four sessions per week curriculum that encompasses school climate change. The curriculum, they elaborated, is for kindergarten through eighth grade students and includes music, posters, games, and journals, mainly addressing the thought-feeling-action connection, positivity, and negativity. They constructed a study looking at rural and suburban schools in Hawaii, of a mostly Hawaiian, Asian, and multi-ethnic populations, and urban schools in Chicago, primarily of African American and Latino backgrounds. Schools were matched for demographic data, behavioral information, test scores, and there was random assignment

to intervention and control groups. Control groups were simply schools who would get the intervention at a later date. The authors discovered strong and significant effects in the Hawaii schools for improved state test scores for students in the intervention group. They did not find significant effects for this in the Chicago schools. They did elaborate, however, that there were small significant effects for math in the Chicago students of the intervention groups, as well as marginal effects in reading for boys in the Chicago schools. Furthermore, there were significant positive changes made in school climate in both states' schools and fewer behavioral problems reported.

### **I Can Succeed-Elementary School**

Kopelman-Rubin et al. (2020) examined the I Can Succeed-Elementary School (ICS-ES) social-emotional program. They described it as being grounded in interpersonal therapy for adolescents. They looked at 419 fourth grade Israeli students that were randomly placed to either the ICS-ES program or to the control group, which did not include any social-emotional learning, and were followed through sixth grade. There were no significant differences found between the two groups prior to the start of the program. The intervention staff participated in 30 hours of initial training, and had bimonthly meetings and supervision. The authors explained that fidelity was closely accounted for with supervision and checklists. The program included 15 to 18 45-minute sessions each school year.

Academic outcomes were measured by using school grades. The authors specifically looked at student grades in Hebrew, the students' first language, and English,

the second language they were learning. They found that grades for Hebrew in the intervention group, which included reading and writing, were significantly higher than in the control group. While grades in English did not improve for the ICS-ES group, grades in the control group actually decreased. Furthermore, the authors found improvements in the ICS-ES group for assertiveness and emotional functioning, but no differences in responsibility, working with others, hyperactivity, self-control, communication skills, and development of empathy. The authors reasoned since ICS-ES is mostly utilized for working with teens on internalizing issues, like anxiety or depression, it is not surprising there are improvements in emotional problems.

The authors expressed that the study focused on higher socioeconomic students, prompting possible generalizability issues, but reasoned that most other studies on social-emotional learning are on lower socioeconomic students and so this study looked at a different population. They also articulated that while most studies are conducted in the U.S., this study specifically looked at the Israeli population. Finally, they expressed that many studies do not look at academics when looking at such programs, suggesting the need for additional research in this area, and encouraged authors to look beyond two years for possible long-term effects.

## **MOSAIC**

MacDonnell et al. (2021) looked at the Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character (MOSAIC) program, which they described as encompassing virtues, such as helpful generosity, optimistic future-mindedness, and responsible diligence. The authors

explained that each month, the students work on a particular virtue of the program, working together to facilitate this learning. Participants were students in the sixth through eighth grades at two New Jersey schools that were considered lower socioeconomic schools based on 70% of the students' eligibility for free/reduced-priced lunch.

The authors implemented the MOSAIC program for one full school year and later looked to see if students' reflection and/or recollection of the program's virtue lessons was positively associated with better grades in social studies, science, math, reading, and writing. They cited wanting to see why or why not such programs may work, thus attempting to identify the possible inner mechanisms at play. They found that reflection was predictive of higher grades, but not recollection, noting that perhaps what was most tied to the better grades was not simple memorization of the program's lessons, but the allowance to reflect upon them and feel some sort of way.

### **General Social-Emotional Learning Curricula**

Babalís et al. (2013) did not look at a specific social-emotional curriculum, but rather a collection of curricula that was not differentiated, nor identified. The authors did not evaluate the programs used, but rather examined the programs' impacts on the academics of 306 fifth and sixth grade students in Greece. They looked at intervention classrooms, which utilized a variety of programs, as well as control classrooms, where no social-emotional curriculum was implemented. They found that students who received social-emotional instruction had higher scores, as measured by report card grades, in language arts, math, history, and religion. The only area where higher grades were not

improved in the intervention group was political science. The authors concluded that social-emotional instruction can be associated with higher academic achievement, especially in some subjects. They encouraged research to look more closely at specific subjects. They noted the limitation of their study in that it did not differentiate between the different curricula used, and how that could impact the results.

Another study, by Shechtman and Yaman (2012), looked at social-emotional learning as a component of existing classes, instead of a separate lesson on its own. They specifically looked at literature classes, explaining that the utilization of stories offers an easy way to address components of social-emotional learning. They described that students take what the story has told them and relate it to their social-emotional experiences, thus assigning personal meaning to what they just read. The authors studied 1,137 fifth and sixth grade Arab students being taught by Israeli teachers in Israel. The students in the control group received the same literature lessons, but without the final component where they related the experiences of the story to themselves on a social-emotional level, such as identifying how what the character experiences may feel and sharing personal stories of similar experiences. The authors found that the students who experienced the social-emotional component of class showed improvement in the quality of relationships formed and school behavior, which in turn was found to increase subject knowledge and motivation to learn. The authors noted that the Arab population in Israel was very unique, in that it is a very rural population, generally collectivistic, and has historically received little, if any, social-emotional instruction. Thus, results may not be

as generalizable to other populations, but may show promise as to the potential power of such lessons for individuals with minimal previous exposure in the social-emotional curriculum.

Wang et al. (2012) examined a general curriculum that was utilized for social-emotional learning in a college freshman seminar. They described that Widener University, in Chester, Pennsylvania, implemented a variety of freshman seminars for students to choose from. One of the seminars targeted social-emotional learning, and they compared participants of this seminar with others who participated in seminars that were geared to specific academic subjects. They then followed these students for four semesters and recorded the grades earned in each of their classes. They found higher grades for those in the social-emotional group, even when statistically controlling for factors that may have made this group different to begin with, such as high school grades and SAT scores. They also measured social-emotional skills, via the Widener Emotional Learning Scales, and found significantly greater growth in the social-emotional seminar group compared to controls.

The authors noted that students were allowed to choose participation in the seminars, and thus suggested it is possible students already interested in such skills may possibly impact results. They suggested future studies randomly assign students to such groups. The authors emphasized, however, that colleges should explore the possibility of utilizing such programs and illuminated their potential benefits in aiding in academic success.

## **Studies Measuring Social-Emotional Competency Related to Academic Achievement**

Some studies did not look at programs to note the impact on academics. These studies took a different approach, where the social-emotional skills were simply measured to identify possible associations to academic achievement. There were a number of studies that took this approach.

Wang et al. (2019) looked at students in Western China to identify any associations between social-emotional competence and grades. Utilizing the Chinese version of the Delaware Social-Emotional Competency Scale (DSECS-SCV), as well as achievement tests in reading, mathematics, and science, the authors found a relationship. They shared that higher scores in social-emotional competency, as identified by the DSECS-SCV, were positively related to higher scores on the achievement tests. The authors communicated that the study took place in a rural portion of China where many families are migrant workers, so generalizability of the findings may be limited.

Davis et al. (2014) studied social-emotional skills in relation to academics. The authors looked at 4,797 students from a large urban school district and measured six components of social-emotional skills at the end of students' eighth grade year. They discovered significant correlations for social-emotional skills and academic performance for the highest 25% performing students, as measured by grade point averages, and the lowest 25% performing students. The trends were in the expected directions, with the highest performing students having the highest social-emotional skills and the lowest

performing students having the lowest social-emotional skills. The authors noted that this study was only in one school district, and so additional studies were needed, but also suggested that schools assess social-emotional skills early on and implement interventions appropriately.

Looking specifically at emotional regulation and academic functioning, Kwon et al. (2017) utilized a five-point rating scale teachers were given to assess how well their students self-regulate a variety of emotions. The 417 fourth and fifth grade students were mostly African American (60%), and 26% were Caucasian and 14% were classified as “other.” The authors utilized standardized test scores in math and reading to measure academic achievement. They learned that higher emotional regulation was associated with greater academic engagement, which was indirectly related to higher academic achievement. The authors urged school to implement programs that could build such skills that are associated with positive academic outcomes.

The social-emotional competence of Native American and Native Alaskan students was studied by Chain et al. (2017). The authors explained that there are significant adversities that students in these groups face, and wanted to examine whether strong social-emotional skills in these students would be associated with academic success. They included two other groups in the study, Caucasian students and other students of color, in order to see if associations were different for Native American and Native Alaskan students. They utilized the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA) to measure social-emotional competency, which they explained includes self-

awareness, relationship skills, decision making, social awareness, optimistic thinking, goal-directed behaviors, and personal responsibility. Academic achievement was measured utilizing the state's assessment, the Alaska Standards-Based Assessment (SBA). They found that there was a significant positive relationship with social-emotional skills measured by the DESSA and state scores for all groups. They also uncovered that two areas, personal responsibility and decision-making, had a more powerful association to academic success for Native American and Native Alaskan students compared to other groups. The authors suggested that these areas could be more greatly associated with Native American and Native Alaskan cultures. Furthermore, the authors found that having higher social-emotional competence scores decreased the negative relationship between poverty and academic success for all groups of students. They cautioned that some limitations of the study were the small sample size, 350 students, and thus encouraged future larger studies. They also pointed out that DESSA scores are only determined by educators, noting student and family member input may have yielded a more complete picture.

Turki et al. (2018) examined social-emotional skills in 240 undergraduate students in a Saudi Arabian college to see if there was a significant correlation between such skills and academic achievement motivation. Although they did not utilize grades or test scores to measure achievement per se, they did study a student's motivation level to acquire high scores, utilizing the Achievement Motivation Scale. They found a significant positive correlation between motivation scores and social-emotional skills, as

measured by the Social-Emotional Scale. The authors noted that this was one Saudi Arabian college study that was not longitudinal in nature and relied on self-report. They suggested future studies, especially longitudinal studies and studies with a more concrete measurement of academic outcomes, such as grades. Furthermore, they advised that studies look at specific discipline majors, noting there may indeed be great variations among academic disciplines.

Social-emotional competency has been examined in the younger school years to set the path to positive academic outcomes. Aleksic et al. (2019) studied early social-emotional skills and the connection to literacy and mathematical skills, as well as behavior, in 159 Serbian children ages five to eight years old. Social-emotional skills were assessed utilizing the Personal, Social, and Emotional Development Scale (PSED) and academic skills were assessed utilizing the Performance Indicators in Primary Schools (PIPS). The authors found that higher literacy skills were positively associated with higher social-emotional skills but did not find a significant relationship for math skills and social-emotional skills. This study was conducted in Serbia, and so result generalizability may be limited to other populations.

Denham et al. (2014) assessed 101 preschoolers, most of which were Caucasian or African American. Social-emotional competence was rated for each of the students by trained research assistants utilizing the Affect Knowledge Test (AKT), the Preschool Self-Regulation Assessment (PSRA), and the Minnesota Preschool Affect Checklist-Revised (MPAC-R/S). Their teachers rated the students on adjustment to school, utilizing

the Preschool Learning Behaviors Scale (PLBS) and the Teacher Rating Scale of School Adjustment (TRSSA). Academic readiness was later evaluated by kindergarten teachers using the ECLS-K Academic Rating Scale. The authors discovered that scores on social-emotional assessments positively correlated with teachers' ratings of adjustment to school, which included behavior and attitude, and with academic readiness. This was similar to other findings of kindergarten-readiness, where social-emotional components, such as approaches to learning, were associated with achievement in reading (Smith-Adcock et al., 2019) and in math (Vi-Nhuan et al., 2019). Denham et al. (2014) encouraged educators to consider the early screenings of students so that appropriate interventions could be implemented, and student progress could be monitored to help ensure their greater academic success.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Discussion**

Social-emotional instruction works to help students with the formation of healthy interpersonal relationships, empathy, emotional regulation, positive identities, personal/collective goal orientation, and responsible decision-making (CASEL Organization, 2021). The educational system, however, has the obligation of ensuring that strict academic goals are reached, while having to deal with stringent accountability requirements, and thus there is intense focus on this area. Demonstrating the link between social-emotional skills and the educational system's primary objective, academic outcomes, is important in gaining acceptance and momentum for social-emotional instruction in schools. This systematic literature review explored the relationship between social-emotional learning programs in school settings and academic measures, such as grades, test scores, or grade point averages. It also examined the relationship between students' identified social-emotional skills and academic outcomes.

Where authors studied the relationship between students' social-emotional competence, the skills and level of skills students possess, and academic success, all the studies found positive associations. Thus, each study was able to show a significant finding between better developed social-emotional skills and academic outcomes. Only one study, Aleksic et al. (2019), showed this relationship for one of the academic areas examined but not the other. The authors found a significant correlation with reading

skills, but not for math skills. Other studies, however, showed significant academic differences in multiple areas of study, such as reading, math, writing, and science (Bowers et al., 2013; Espelage et al., 2016; Lemberger et al., 2021; Urbina et al., 2017; Wan et al., 2019).

The vast majority of the social-emotional learning studies examined involving social-emotional instruction, both in the form of identified programs or general instruction, showed positive and significant results for academic outcomes. There was one program that that showed positive results that were non-significant (Hart et al., 2020), and others that did not find direct significant academic results, but still found significant differences in social skills (DiPerna et al., 2017; Webb et al., 2019), and emotional and behavioral outcomes (Cipriano et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2019). Furthermore, where there were instances where a significant increase in academic measures were not discovered, there were often academic related behaviors, such as engagement, motivation, and attention that were identified to have significantly increased (Cipriano et al., 2019; DiPerna et al., 2015; DiPerna et al., 2017).

### **Time Needed for Academic Impact**

There were times when social-emotional learning programs were not found to have a significant and direct academic impact on academics, such as grades and test scores. However, it is reasonable to ascertain that developing social-emotional skills may translate into academic outcomes, such as increased test scores and grades, after the passage of additional time (Cipriano et al., 2019; DiPerna et al., 2015; Hennessey &

Humphrey, 2019; Low et al., 2019). Additionally, as stated earlier, studies which did not show an immediate improvement of grades and test scores, did demonstrate improvements in academic engagement and motivation, which are often precursors to improvements in direct academic measures (Cipriano et al., 2019; DiPerna et al., 2015; DiPerna et al., 2017).

### **No Loss of Instructional Time**

Although there have been a few studies which have indicated that a direct improvement in test scores or grades did not exist, there was no instance in which a decrease in academic outcomes was discovered. Thus, although there may not have been a direct improvement noted, it is considered beneficial to have taught such necessary life skills in schools, social-emotional skills, while not hurting academic outcomes with the loss of instruction time (Hart et al., 2020). This could be considered a great selling point for such programs to administrators who are having to so heavily focus on academic outcomes (Hart et al., 2020), especially since mandated state testing of the No Child Left Behind Act has created such a feverous focus of such measures (Jackson, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2014; Wood & Brownhill, 2018).

### **Limitations**

A possible limitation of the studies included in this literature review is that many utilized controls that were receiving some sort of intervention, although it was not the program studied. Some studies utilized a control group which consisted of an afterschool reading program (McCormick et al., 2015; McCormick et al., 2018). Again, utilizing such

a control group could skew results, as not only the interaction and instructions that take place during an afterschool program impact social skills and academics, those who participate may also not be representative of the whole population (McCormick et al., 2018).

Some studies utilized the actual teaching of social-emotional skills in the comparison group. Jackman et al. 2019, for instance, implemented a control group that had teachers, parents, and students work on building relationships, explaining some social-emotional learning was indeed taking place in this control group as well. They found that there were positive academic impacts in both groups, but noted better outcomes in the OpenMind group, which is a formalized program. Although the authors were looking to note the impact of this specific program, having a control group without similar instruction may be more beneficial. Other control groups, such as Webb et al. (2019) used general counseling instruction that had been previously utilized. Perhaps a simpler way to assess its effectiveness is to utilize a comparison group that is truly more controlled and does not implement any overlapping skills.

This was also seen in Schonfeld et al. (2015). The authors examined a social-emotional program, PATHS, but utilized a control group which varied from no social-emotional learning to what they determined was slight social-emotional learning. They interviewed teachers in the control group and concluded when the teachers were implementing instruction in social-emotional skills, they were not providing systematic instruction and were utilizing things they found themselves, mostly online and free of

charge. Although the authors determined such instruction was mostly minute, there were no actual measures to control what instruction in social-emotional learning was taking place in each control class, and it is possible that some classes received more than the minimal instruction the authors believed. The authors did indeed recognize that this was a possible limitation of the study but did not express extensive concern that it greatly impacted the results.

It may be difficult for researchers to exclude students from important social-emotional curriculum. This, however, is a necessary component in the formation of a true control. Perhaps a solution to this is to have a control group that does not receive any sort of intervention until the completion of the studied intervention (Ashdown & Bernard, 2011; Cook et al., 2018; Flay & Phil, 2014). However, the control group could still be impacted by differences existing between teachers, such as very different styles and teaching methods. DiPerna et al. (2017), for instance, examined the Social Skills Improvement-Classwide Intervention Program versus “business-as-usual” schools. This business-as-usual model included 15% of teachers who did not indicate practicing any sort of behavioral system. The other 85%, however, indicated some techniques (i.e., token systems, praise, rewards). There could have been significant variations in the methods that each teacher used, which could have considerably impacted results.

Hennessey and Humphrey (2019) also utilized the “business-as-usual” control group and did not find significant differences in academic outcomes. The authors noted that perhaps the instruction in the control schools had adequate social-emotional lessons

that would thus not truly make it a control. These authors also assessed another possible limitation to their study, which unfortunately can be a concern in many studies. They noted that the implementation of the social-emotional learning program they studied, PATHS, was not done with adequate fidelity. They concluded that the teachers implemented the program at the appropriate frequency in the first year, but implemented only at half the recommended frequency during the program's second year. Fidelity problems were also identified in Jackman et al. (2019), where the required 20 minutes of daily meditation was found to only be seven to 10 minutes. When a program is not implemented with suitable fidelity, the way it is intended, which includes the frequency of program lessons, the true potential impact of the program cannot be assessed. It is important to put in adequate measures to ensure proper fidelity for the duration of the program, such as close supervision and carefully constructed checklists (Cook et al., 2018; Kopelman-Rubin et al., 2020).

Another limitation is that at times the studies do not assess academics in ways that may fully-encompass performance. For instance, Ashdown and Bernard (2011) measured academic success in terms of reading levels. Although a student's reading ability is an important predictor of overall school success (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997), math skills have been found to also be a great indicator of school success (Jordan et al., 2009). Thus, including additional measures, such as a measure for math, for instance, would be beneficial and possibly paint a more accurate picture.

## **Future Studies**

It is evident that many of the studies were short in duration and there is a need for additional research that looks at academic outcomes many years later (Babalis et al., 2013). It may take additional years for social-emotional instruction to translate to an improvement in academics and immediate effects may not be as prominent (Cipriano et al., 2019; DiPerna et al., 2015; Hennessey & Humphrey, 2019; Low et al., 2019). The appropriate passage of time may thus be necessary for an academic impact to surface.

Also important to consider is the early implementation of social-emotional learning programs so that prompt intervention could possibly ameliorate potential poor trajectories, including academics (Davis et al., 2014; Denham et al., 2014). Additionally, it may be beneficial to examine whether programs that start in the early learning years need to continue to be extended throughout schooling. At the very least, future research should address a schedule of delivery that may be adequate throughout the school years. For instance, is it enough to have this instruction take place in the early years, and then subsequently at the start of middle school and high school? This can be especially important during times of transition when developmental and academic changes are more evident, such as during the entrance into middle school and high school. Carefully examining delivery schedules can help schools develop appropriate plans.

It is also important to continue to conduct research looking at different groups of students in order to determine how we can best deliver specific social-emotional instruction to each. It is important to consider factors among various cultural, racial,

socioeconomic, religious, and geographical groups. We must also further study social-emotional learning needs for LGBTQ students, English language learners, and students in special education.

## **Conclusion**

Clearly demonstrating a link between social-emotional skills and academics could enhance backing from school administrators, teachers, and support staff, who are pertinent to the implementation and success of such programs, as well as help obtain vital support from parents and the community (Durlak et al., 2011). Strong social-emotional skills promote prosocial behaviors at school, reducing the amount of student and teacher attention directed at misbehavior, and allowing for greater focus on instruction (Bakosh et al., 2016; Cipriano et al., 2019). Such skills contribute to a better social climate, where students feel safe and accepted, factors which are conducive to the learning process (Charlton et al., 2021; Top et al., 2016) and promote student engagement (DiPerna et al. 2002). Additionally, strategies taught in social-emotional learning programs can be utilized in cognitive tasks required in learning, such as critical thinking skills (Arslan & Demirtas, 2016). Furthermore, the enhancement of social-emotional skills is associated with decreased levels of internalizing symptomology, such as anxiety and depression, which can present obstacles to the learning process, such as missed school days and attention difficulties (Duncan et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2017; Hennessey & Humphrey, 2019; Webb et al., 2019; Zolkoski et al., 2021).

This systematic literature review finds solid evidence for a significant and positive relationship between social-emotional instruction in schools and academic benefits, as well as substantial support for a positive significant relationship between social-emotional skills and academics. This is shown through measures which include test scores, grades, and grade point averages. Furthermore, there are additional findings illuminated for improvements in other areas, such as emotional and behavioral issues, and academic motivation and engagement.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1**

*Social-Emotional Learning and Academics Articles and Program Type*

<b>Author/Year</b>	<b>Program Type</b>
Aleksie et al. (2019)	(Skills)
Ashdown and Bernard (2011)	You Can Do It
Babalis et al. (2013)	(General)
Bakosh et al. (2016)	Mindfulness
Bowers et al. (2018)	Student Success Skills
Chain et al. (2017)	(Skills)
Cipriano et al. (2019)	Ruler
Cook et al. (2018)	Second Step
Davis et al. (2014)	(Skills)
Denham et al. (2014)	(Skills)
DiPerna et al. (2017)	Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program
Espelage et al. (2016)	Second Step
Flay and Phil (2014)	Positive Action
Hart et al. (2020)	Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program
Hennessey and Hennessey (2019)	PATHS
Jackman et al. (2019)	OpenMind
Kopelman-Rubin et al. (2020)	ICS-ES
Kwon et al. (2017)	(Skills)
Low et al. (2019)	Second Step
MacDonnell et al. (2021)	MOSAIC
McCormick et al. (2015)	INSIGHTS
McCormick et al. (2016)	INSIGHTS
McCormick et al. (2018)	INSIGHTS
McCormick et al. (2019)	INSIGHTS
Schonfeld et al. (2015)	PATHS

Shechtman and Yaman (2012)	(General)
Smith-Adcock et al. (2019)	(Skills)
Top et al. (2016)	Second Step
Top et al. (2017)	Second Step
Turki et al. (2018)	(Skills)
Urbina et al. (2017)	Student Success Skills
Vi-Nhuan et al. (2019)	(Skills)
Wang et al. (2012)	(General)
Wang et al. (2019)	(Skills)
Webb et al. (2019)	Student Success Skills
Zeilhofer (2020)	Mindfulness

## **Vita**

Stella M. Westhoven is a resident of Village Mills, Texas. In 1992, she graduated from East Brunswick High School in East Brunswick, New Jersey. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and Sociology from Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey in 1996. While attending Rutgers, she worked as a teaching assistant with the kindergarten program at Johnson & Johnson Child Development Center and volunteered at the Behavioral Health Clinic, both in New Brunswick, New Jersey. In 1998, Stella went on to earn a Master of Science degree in Counseling Psychology and Industrial/Organizational Psychology from Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. While attending Lamar, she was a graduate assistant in the psychology department. After earning her M.S., Stella began her career working as a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in both clinical and public school settings. Additionally, she taught Child/Adolescent Psychology and General Psychology at Angelina College in Lufkin, Texas. She has also volunteered with the Southeast Texas Critical Incident Stress Management Team. Stella began the school psychology graduate program at Stephen F. Austin State University in 2019. She will receive a Master of Arts degree in School Psychology in May of 2022, which will allow her to seek licensure as a Licensed Specialist in School Psychology (LSSP) and certification as a Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP).

Permanent Address: P.O. Box 387  
Village Mills, Texas 77663

American Psychological Association (Seventh Edition) – modified in order to meet  
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This thesis was typed by Stella M. Westhoven