Research in Social-Emotional Learning at UF

Studies have shown that children’s academic learning is inextricably tied to their social-emotional growth (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Riggs, Greenberg, Kusche´, & Pentz, 2006). Moreover, grades K and 1 are a critical period for fostering school adjustment (Downer & Pianta, 2006). Given the demands for academic accountability, however, educators are often pressured to maximize academic instruction at the expense of social-emotional learning—even in the primary grades and even for children at risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties.

***The SELF intervention***

To address this issue, we developed and evaluated a theoretically based social-emotional learning intervention calledSocial-Emotional Learning Foundations (SELF). Our aim was to provide intentional opportunities for kindergarten and first grade children to learn to regulate their emotions and behavior, especially children who show signs of difficulty. In addition to its focus on social-emotional learning, SELF lessons are embedded in literacy instruction so that teachers can devote time to social-emotional and academic learning simultaneously.

SELF lessons incorporate instructional strategies that promote children’s understanding and use of vocabulary related to emotions and behavior. In addition, specific instructional strategies tap underlying executive functions (EFs) such as emotion control, inhibition of impulsive behavior, and attentional flexibility. The SELF curriculum incorporates both whole and small group lessons structured around storybooks selected specifically for the social-emotional learning concepts they contain. The classroom teacher uses a particular storybook for each topic taught, reading the book to the whole class in the first lesson and in two subsequent lessons, following up with explicit prompts and activities with a small group of students selected by teachers as potentially at risk. These small group lessons maximize opportunities for teacher modeling and language interactions that incorporate vocabulary critical to social-emotional development. Children are encouraged to think about their choices in situations that involve emotions and behaviors and the consequences that result, helping them make responsible decisions and form successful social relationships. Thus, SELF offers a feasible and substantial approach through which classroom teachers can provide a tiered social-emotional learning intervention integrated with K-1 literacy related instruction for all students in the class plus those at risk for emotional or behavioral issues.

The connections between intervention components and outcomes are illustrated below.



***Findings from a randomized control trial to evaluate SELF’s effectiveness***

To study the effects of the SELF curriculum on children’s social-emotional learning and behavioral adjustment, we recruited 302 teachers from 52 schools across 11 school districts in North Central Florida. The group of students selected for small-group instruction by their classroom teacher consisted of 627 kindergarteners and 527 first graders. We randomly assigned the schools that agreed to participate in the study to either a treatment condition in which each participating teacher at that school taught the SELF curriculum, or to a “business as usual” comparison condition in which teachers continued their typical instructional programming. In the fall before SELF teachers began instruction and again in the spring following the intervention, we collected data from teachers and the selected students in both groups using assessments related to self-regulation, social-emotional learning, social-emotional vocabulary, and general behavioral functioning.

We found that children who had been taught the SELF curriculum scored better on the spring assessments compared to children in the comparison group on all but one measure. That is, children taught SELF were rated by their teachers as knowing more about basic competencies of social-emotional learning, such as engaging in self-management, use of social-emotional vocabulary, demonstrating social awareness and empathy, and being able to solve social problems.

Moreover, children in the SELF group were also rated by teachers as better able to regulate their emotions and behavior and as evidencing more positive adjustment to school. Findings from teacher-rated outcomes were supported by direct assessments of social-emotional vocabulary. This finding is important, because children who are able to express their feelings accurately are better able to develop emotional literacy, a key component of emotional competence (Joseph & Strain, 2003).

***Implications and future research***

As an essential part of a tiered intervention, the small group lessons in SELF were designed to increase opportunities to engage in interactive conversations and role-plays. These lessons constitute the mechanism that intensifies social-emotional learning instruction for students at-risk. Because some of the SELF teachers expressed a preference to teach all of the lessons to their whole class, determining how SELF is being implemented by teachers who continue to teach the lessons would be an important next step. It will also be important to determine whether treatment effects are sustained over time, that is, whether continued and/or more intensive instruction is needed to improve the social-emotional functioning of at-risk students. We’re hopeful that SELF and other interventions that combine social-emotional and academic instruction will continue to be the focus of rigorous investigations designed for students who need support beyond what is typically provided.