

Mechanisms Supporting Students' Social and Emotional Learning Development: Qualitative Findings from a Teacher-Led Intervention



Highlights

- The intervention is an adapted social-emotional learning (SEL) resource which includes 80 daily SEL practices across six core skill categories.
- SEL is the process through which youth and adults acquire and apply core competencies to set and achieve positive goals, recognize emotions, establish positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.
- Key mechanisms for effective school-based SEL interventions:
 1. Adopting a whole-class approach
 2. Providing a vocabulary and shared language
 3. Implementing short, easy, reliable practices
 4. Using SEL strategies in other contexts
 5. Improving teachers' SEL knowledge, confidence, and behaviour

What is this research about?

Students spend considerable time with their peers and educators. As such, teachers have the potential to positively influence students' behaviour to meet academic goals and develop social-emotional competencies. Adopting a whole-class approach and modelling healthy social-emotional learning (SEL) behaviours is one of the ways teachers can create safe environments conducive to students' development. While the positive outcomes of SEL are well documented in existing research, few studies examine the mechanisms supporting students' SEL skills in the classroom.

This study examines the perspectives of teachers involved in a school-based social-emotional learning (SEL) intervention and identifies potential mechanisms teachers can use to support students' SEL development.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers drew from a more extensive evaluation project that used a randomized waitlist control trial design to evaluate the adapted SEL resource in English Catholic schools across Ontario, Canada. Teachers in the implementation group were asked to implement the intervention containing an online repository of evidence-informed and easy-to-learn practices intended to enhance SEL and mental health among elementary-aged school students for a period of three months. Teachers could select from the resource's 80 daily SEL practices across six core skill categories, including:

- Stress management and coping
- Identification and management of emotions
- Positive motivation and perseverance
- Healthy relationship skills
- Self-awareness and sense of identity
- Critical and creative thinking

After the implementation period, researchers invited teachers from a randomized list to participate in one of two audio-recorded semi-structured focus groups. Five participants were part of the first focus group, while the second focus group only had one participant. An additional participant had a scheduling conflict but provided written feedback to the same focus group questions.

Main findings

Overall, school-based SEL interventions have positive outcomes for students and teachers. Teachers commented on the ease of implementing the intervention. They also reported that personal changes such as increased confidence and awareness led to more frequent SEL practice implementation. Although these outcomes are important, in this study, researchers shifted the focus to understanding the mechanisms that support SEL in the classroom.

Results from this study revealed five mechanisms that support the implementation of SEL interventions in schools: (1) adopting a whole-class approach; (2) providing students with a shared language around SEL; (3) implementing short, easy, and reliable practices; (4) providing opportunities to apply SEL skills in different contexts; and (5) improving teachers' SEL knowledge, confidence and behaviour.

Through a greater understanding of effective SEL mechanisms, teachers can continue to work toward enhancing students' SEL capacity and overall mental health and wellbeing. Ensuring teachers are well equipped to implement easily accessible practices can improve their confidence and awareness of the importance of SEL for their students. Given the importance of teachers' confidence as a mechanism for students' SEL, it may be worth considering ways to further support teachers' SEL.

Implications for practice

The results from this study can be used to inform the design and implementation of teacher-led SEL interventions. The key mechanisms that support students' SEL suggest that practices should be designed and delivered with the school setting in mind. This means that practices should be brief, easy to implement frequently, and provide students with skills they can practice and use in other contexts.

Limitations

Since this study was conducted in public Catholic elementary schools, the findings cannot necessarily be generalized to other non-Catholic or private elementary schools. Another limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants (n=7).

COVID-19 pandemic impact

COVID-19-related school closures occurred at the end of the 3-month implementation period. Given the disruptions caused by a national lockdown, many teachers who previously agreed to participate in the focus groups opted not to.

About this snapshot

Original research article

For a complete description of the research and findings, see the full research article:

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