Facilitating Social Emotional Learning in Rural Schools: A Systematic Review of Strategies

Tanika Lankford Mitchell, EdD, NCC, NCSC
University West Alabama, United States

Abstract

Educators no longer have the luxury of exclusively focusing on academic standards while neglecting the necessity to intertwine social and emotional competencies into to the curriculum. An examination of existing literature uncovered favorable academic outcomes associated with integrating social emotional learning (SEL) into the educational infrastructure. SEL assists children with developing skills to manage personal emotions, establish prosocial ideals, regulate relationships, build friendships, resolve conflicts and make ethical decisions. Although scholars reported an increased prevalence of social and emotional imbalance among students in rural settings when juxtaposed to urban children, the rural populace hesitate to seek and access assistance due to elevated rates of poverty, limited access to public transportation, difficulty retaining qualified personnel and the cultural stigma associated with receiving mental health support. Thus, school personnel are often tasked with identifying at risk students and dwelling on appropriate measures to assist them with social and emotional problems. Based on a systematic review of selected literature, the following strategies were found to facilitate SEL in rural schools: (1) an evidenced based SEL curriculum, (2) a methodical process to train staff, (3) an intentional partnership with parents and (4) a coalition with wrap around teams. Future research utilizing the outlined strategies to facilitate SEL in rural settings, support the necessity of exploratory research studies to assess the efficacy of the findings.

Keywords: Rural Education, Social Emotional Learning

Introduction

Educators do not naively expect students to enter the classroom with the inherent ability to consistently make sound decisions. Because previous researchers denoted that nearly 20% of students experience issues with mental health, the prevalence of social and emotional unrest with school-aged children is not a secret (Nichols, Goforth, Sacra, & Ahlers, 2017). A further examination of research exposed an unfavorable relationship between academic preparedness and emotional instability. Kress and Elias (2006) noted that the genesis of student discipline issues is often linked to an inability to

manage personal emotions or an ineptitude to appropriately interact with others. Based on the aforementioned findings, SEL instruction is needed to enhance the ability of students to appropriately co-exist with peers and adults in the academic setting. Furthermore, interventions to target social and emotional awareness can vastly assist with developing a commitment to learning, managing relationships and increasing self-awareness for students. As a result, educators are routinely tasked with fostering SEL competence during the school day. Unfortunately, additional findings in the literature revealed unique challenges related to providing mental health resources in rural communities (Zins et al., 2007).

Huscroft-D'Angelo, January and Duppong Hurley (2018) noted that nearly 9 million students receive an education in American, rural schools. The rural, student population exceeds the combined number of students in New York City, Los Angeles Unified, City of Chicago and the subsequent 85 metropolitan school districts (Hesbol, 2020). Although the collective number of rural students constitute the vast majority of the student population in the United States, rural districts often operate with less resources to recruit and retain qualified personnel, experience heightened rates of poverty among inhabitants and encounter a communal stigma regarding mental health services. Because of the distinctive challenges and greater risk for social and emotional concerns among rural students, school personnel are integral in cultivating social and emotional development. As such, schools play a vital role in identifying students at risk of battling complex issues and collaborating with specialized support personnel (SSP), such as nurses, counselors, speech language pathologists and psychologists to present a united response to this epidemic (Bright, 2018; Nichols et al, 2017).

Literature Review:

SEL can be characterized as the process of teaching students to appropriately manage relationships and make ethical decisions while simultaneously being socially cognizant, self-aware individuals. The execution of SEL competencies requires a concerted effort to enhance the awareness, attitudes, skills and behaviors to assist students with making sound decisions. When SEL interventions are implemented with fidelity, students learn to effectively manage personal emotions and problem solve interpersonal disputes during times of despair (Yoder, 2014). Based on a review of existing literature related to SEL, the following strategies: (1) an evidenced based SEL curriculum, (2) a methodical process to train staff, (3) an intentional partnership with parents and (4) a coalition with wrap around teams were found to facilitate SEL in rural schools.

Social Emotional Learning Curriculum:

Educators are encouraged to be prudent when reviewing the hodgepodge of available SEL programs on the market. Although the best intentions are often associated with beginning a new program, the process used for implementing the curriculum is equally vital as examining the content of material. Kress and Elias (2006) determined that taking shortcuts, excluding professionals and implementing decisions in isolation thwarts the desired outcome of obtaining multiple viewpoints and staff commitment. Thus, rural administrators must do their due diligence before adopting a school protocol to avoid inadequately structured SEL curricula by collaborating with a multidisciplinary team, rather than making unilateral decisions sent in a memo, to select appropriate resources and a process to train staff. Furthermore, school counselors are well versed to undertake leadership roles during the implementation process and selection of curriculum to ensure that a coordinated approach is rooted in SEL competencies (Kress & Elias, 2006).

As it relates to the content of SEL curricula, scholars suggested a concise, evidenced-based curriculum that can be implemented annually with comprehensive steps as a proactive tactic to enhance student development (Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, & Weissberg, 2000). When deconstructing social and emotional curricula, the content should include resources to identify at risk behaviors, methods to communicate with students in crisis and interventions to address the most prevalent issues. Accordingly, SEL instruction should include data driven, interventions utilized to develop the ability to identify and manage personal emotions, value the opinions of others, promote interdependent goals regarding the best interests for the group and resolve issues with ethical solutions. Genuine outcomes as a result of the implementation process and content selection should both facilitate the development of a supportive, school environment and include resources to transfer SEL competence to staff via professional development (Nichols et al, 2017; Payton et al, 2000; Zins et al, 2007).

Professional Development for Educators:

Educators should be privy of universal strategies to employ when assisting students with social and emotional needs. Because previous literature indicated that practitioners feel underprepared to provide social and emotional assistance to students, a crucial step to proactively address social and emotional needs of students entails providing professional development to all staff. Staff readiness empowers teachers, paraprofessionals, librarians, etc. to serve on the first line of defense as it relates to identifying students experiencing social and emotional concerns. Because SSP often have limited availability throughout rural districts, properly trained educators are ultimately the best advocates to create a positive, scholastic environment. Thus,

professional development should be guided by an objective curriculum that adequately addresses SEL standards. Staff benefit from resources that denounce biased stereotypes, facilitate positive relationships and educate students about mental wellness (Nichols et al, 2017; Roy, 2015).

Furthermore, Semke and Sheridan (2012) suggested additional professional development focused on building relationships with parents as a worthy effort based on a shared interest in student achievement among both parties, educators and parents. Thus, deliberate attempts to enhance the home-school relationship provide opportunities for parents to participate in prescribed and active roles. Because parents often require guidance to build the home-school partnership, educators are tasked with promoting and sharing interventions to influence parental involvement (Payton et al, 2000; Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Vahedi & Nikdel, 2011).

Parental Involvement:

Educators recognize the need to nurture the home-school relationship. A concomitant review of research related to parents and educators, together and separate, revealed that both are the foundation for student development and learning. Previous researchers depicted that children involved in a secure parent-child relationship exhibit increased academic performance and self-regulatory proficiency while synchronously demonstrating decreased discipline challenges. Thus, an intentional partnership between school personnel and parents positively benefits academic and social skill development among students (Semke & Sheridan, 2012; Sheridan et al., 2010; Roy & Giraldo-García, 2018; Vahedi & Nikdel, 2011).

A sustained partnership with parents includes having open lines of communication with the goal of strengthening the relationship between both parties. Parental involvement can be developed and advanced by educators providing clear methods for parents to communicate needs, volunteer resources and collaborate ideas. Although formal conferences are an inevitable part of the educational process, parental relationships are better built on frequent interactions (e.g. in person, web based, phone, app, written) for academic and social instances. In addition to providing academic progress reports, consistent feedback to parents regarding social and emotional development gives parents the opportunity to assist with reiterating the importance of managing personal emotions, interacting appropriately with others and making ethical decisions. Furthermore, a concerted effort to include a complex faction between family-school-community provides even more opportunities to address the academic and nonacademic needs of students. A coordinated collaboration between educators, parents and local resources reinforces the likelihood that strategies will be implemented across multiple settings and eventually breakdown communal illogical beliefs related to

mental health services (Payton et al, 2000; Roy & Giraldo-García, 2018; Semke & Sheridan, 2012).

Wrap Around Services:

An evaluation of relevant literature identified wrap around services as substantial resources in the community. The wrap around process is a team-based approach that extends beyond educators and include an assortment of services that are available to youth and families with complex needs. As such, wrap around services that address the nonacademic needs of students (e.g. medical, mental health, dental, after school programming, etc.) have been found to lessen social and emotional concerns and increase the likelihood of academic success. Since wrap around services are guided by the needs of the family without regard to the accessibility or cost of the services, educators are encouraged to seek services when nonacademic challenges have been identified. Because many residents in rural areas lack access to public food distribution, health care and after-school programs due to geographical barriers and limited access to resources, Ayers (2011) declared wrap around services as essential to address mental and physical health, adult education and after school needs for students and families. Thus, a deliberate attempt to form a coalition with a combination of local, state and federal groups and organizations requires a collaborative effort to develop procedures to readily access services is needed (Ayers, 2011; VanDenBerg et al., 2003). Based on a review of the research, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between all parties to provide information regarding the nature of services provided and the method to attain services is warranted.   The key constructs of the interconnected (e.g. school-home-community) strategies to facilitate SEL in rural schools are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1 - Key Constructs of Selected Literature

Construct	Method to Implement
Social Emotional Learning Curriculum	Facilitated by a multidisciplinary team (e.g. administrators, parents, teachers, librarians, paraprofessionals, nurses, counselors, speech language pathologists, psychologists, etc.) with the goal of selecting appropriate resources and a process to systematically implement a concise, evidenced-based curriculum with comprehensive steps to implement and review annually

Professional Development for Educators	Guided by an objective, curriculum that adequately addresses SEL standards with the goal of creating a positive, school climate to facilitate ongoing student development and influence parental involvement
Parental Involvement	Enhanced by providing frequent communication related to social and academic progress with clear methods for parents to communicate needs, volunteer resources and collaborate ideas as means to build and sustain a positive home-school relationship
Wrap Around Services	Coordinated by coalescing with wrap around teams (e.g. government, non profit, private organizations) to address nonacademic needs (e.g. mental and physical health, adult education for parents, after school programming, etc.) for youth and families with complex needs

Methodology:

For the purpose of this research, a multistep process was implemented to select appropriate literature to systematically review. A comprehensive search of three databases, Google Scholar, ERIC and ProQuest were thoroughly browsed using an amalgam of the following key words: social and emotional learning, parents, resources, rural education, professional development, implementation, multidisciplinary approach, mental health, parental involvement, wrap around services, curriculum, school administrators, educator, school counselors, support personnel, competency and standards. Additional literature was included after reviewing works cited of selected articles and searching education related websites with a preference given to peer reviewed, journal articles. Selected articles focused on a combination of the following: SEL, SEL implementation, SEL strategies, SEL curriculum, SEL competencies, rural educators or rural schools. Articles specifically related to the urban populace, failed to provide strategies to implement SEL or published prior to the year 2000 were deliberately excluded from this research. A total of 50 referred articles were identified, of which 15 articles were selected to be a part of this systematic review. Limitations utilizing this approach revealed a gap in the existing research as it relates to defining rural communities and schools. Due to the ambiguous description of the rural population in the selected research, the generalizability of the recommendations is lessened, and suburban areas maybe inadvertently included in the findings. However, the systematic review of literature was

intended to examine existing research related to this topic and provide strategies to facilitate SEL in rural schools.

Conclusion

An examination of the selected literature revealed that children benefit from deliberate interrelations between educators, SEL curricula, parents and local resources as constructs to enhance the cognitive, social and emotional development across multiple settings.

Discussion

Detailed analysis of the selected literature revealed that a lack of resources and irrational beliefs regarding mental health assistance contribute to elevated social and emotional concerns in rural communities. As such, rural educators are tasked with supporting students despite widespread barriers among the rural population. Further review of the research uncovered that it is difficult to recruit and retain an appropriate quantity of mental health personnel in rural areas, and many educators often feel unprepared to assist students with social and emotional issues due to lack of professional development. Based on the review, a collaborative process for implementing and selecting an evidence based SEL program and a methodical process to train staff is warranted. As such, authentic outcomes of program implementation create a positive, school climate conducive for students to establish prosocial goals, develop interpersonal skills and make ethical decisions. Researchers further noted that educators, parents and community members are encouraged to make a deliberate effort to encourage and foster social development in children. A summarization of the literature findings revealed complex interrelations between home-school-community as necessary for the development of a wholesome child (Payton et al, 2000; Roy & Giraldo-García, 2018; Zins et al, 2007).

Recommendations

Based on the multiple challenges in rural areas and dearth of research related to this topic, additional inquiry related to building SEL competence in rural schools is recommended. Future research utilizing the outlined strategies to facilitate SEL in rural settings, support the necessity of exploratory research studies to assess the efficacy of the findings. Since the research also revealed unique challenges in rural communities, future inquiry should also seek interventions to address barriers. Lastly, a gap in the selected research revealed an inconsistent definition of rural communities. Additional research is needed to provide a clear description of rural settings. As such, the following areas are ripe for additional study: studies to determine the efficacy of SEL

strategies and research to provide interventions to decrease the barriers to mental health access in rural settings.

References:
1. Ayers, J. (2011). Make rural schools a priority: considerations for reauthorizing the elementary and secondary education act. *Center for American Progress*.
2. Bright, D. J. (2018). The rural gap: the need for exploration and intervention. Journal of School Counseling, 16(21), n21.
3. Hesbol, K. (2020). Rural invisibility: ignoring the educational needs of nine million american students. Retrieved from https://apluscolorado.org/blog/rural-invisibility-educational-needs/
4. Huscroft-D'Angelo, J., January, S. A. A., & Duppong Hurley, K. L. (2018). Supporting parents and students with emotional and behavioral disorders in rural settings: administrator perspectives. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *37*(2), 103-112.
5. Kress, J. S., & Elias, M. J. (2006). Building learning communities through social and emotional learning: navigating the rough seas of implementation. Professional School Counseling, 10(1), 2156759X0601000105.
6. Nichols, L. M., Goforth, A. N., Sacra, M., & Ahlers, K. (2017). Collaboration to support rural student social-emotional needs. *Rural Educator*, *38*(1), 38-48.
7. Payton, J. W., Wardlaw, D. M., Graczyk, P. A., Bloodworth, M. R., Tompsett, C. J., & Weissberg, R. P. (2000). Social and emotional learning: a framework for promoting mental health and reducing risk behavior in children and youth. *Journal of school health*, *70*(5), 179-185.
8. Roy, M. (2015). Supporting students with social and emotional issues. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, 7(2), 103-111.
9. Roy, M., & Giraldo-García, R. (2018). The role of parental involvement and social/emotional skills in academic achievement: global perspectives. *School Community Journal*, *28*(2), 29-46.
10. Semke, C. A., & Sheridan, S. M. (2012). Family-school connections in rural educational settings: a systematic review of the empirical literature. *School Community Journal*, *22*(1), 21-47.
11. Sheridan, S. M., Knoche, L. L., Edwards, C. P., Bovaird, J. A., & Kupzyk, K. A. (2010). Parent engagement and school readiness: effects of the getting Ready intervention on preschool children's social–emotional competencies. *Early education and development*, *21*(1), 125-156.

12. Vahedi, M., & Nikdel, H. (2011). Emotional intelligence, parental involvement and academic achievement. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *30*, 331-335.
13. VanDenBerg, J., Bruns, E., & Burchard, J. (2003). History of the wraparound process. *Focal Point*, *17*(2), 4-7.
14. Yoder, N. (2014). Teaching the whole child: instructional practices that support social-emotional learning in three teacher evaluation frameworks. Research-to-Practice Brief. Center on Great Teachers and Leaders.
15. Zins, J. E., Bloodworth, M. R., Weissberg, R. P., & Walberg, H. J. (2007). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. *Journal of educational and psychological consultation*, *17*(2-3), 191-210.