

Efficacy of a Social-Emotional Learning Curriculum for Kindergarten and First Grade Students to Improve Social Adjustment within the School Culture

Authors : Ann P. Daunic, Nancy Corbett

Abstract : Background and Significance: Researchers emphasize the role that motivation, self-esteem, and self-regulation play in children's early adjustment to the school culture, including skills such as identifying their own feelings and understanding the feelings of others. As social-emotional growth, academic learning, and successful integration within culture and society are inextricably connected, the Social-Emotional Learning Foundations (SELF) curriculum was designed to integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) instruction within early literacy instruction (specifically, reading) for Kindergarten and first-grade students at risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties. Storybook reading is a typically occurring activity in the primary grades; thus SELF provides an intervention that is both theoretically and practically sound. Methodology: The researchers will report on findings from the first two years of a three-year study funded by the US Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences to evaluate the effects of the SELF curriculum versus "business as usual" (BAU). SELF promotes the development of self-regulation by incorporating instructional strategies that support children's use of SEL related vocabulary, self-talk, and critical thinking. The curriculum consists of a carefully coordinated set of materials and pedagogy designed specifically for primary grade children at early risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties. SELF lessons (approximately 50 at each grade level) are organized around 17 SEL topics within five critical competencies. SELF combines whole-group (the first in each topic) and small-group lessons (the 2nd and 3rd in each topic) to maximize opportunities for teacher modeling and language interactions. The researchers hypothesize that SELF offers a feasible and substantial opportunity within the classroom setting to provide a small-group social-emotional learning intervention integrated with K-1 literacy-related instruction. Participating target students (N = 876) were identified by their teachers as potentially at risk for emotional or behavioral issues. These students were selected from 122 Kindergarten and 100 first grade classrooms across diverse school districts in a southern state in the US. To measure the effectiveness of the SELF intervention, the researchers asked teachers to complete assessments related to social-emotional learning and adjustment to the school culture. A social-emotional learning related vocabulary assessment was administered directly to target students receiving small-group instruction. Data were analyzed using a 3-level MANOVA model with full information maximum likelihood to estimate coefficients and test hypotheses. Major Findings: SELF had significant positive effects on vocabulary, knowledge, and skills associated with social-emotional competencies, as evidenced by results from the measures administered. Effect sizes ranged from 0.41 for group (SELF vs. BAU) differences in vocabulary development to 0.68 for group differences in SEL related knowledge. Conclusion: Findings from two years of data collection indicate that SELF improved outcomes related to social-emotional learning and adjustment to the school culture. This study thus supports the integration of SEL with literacy instruction as a feasible and effective strategy to improve outcomes for K-1 students at risk for emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Keywords : Socio-cultural context for learning, social-emotional learning, social skills, vocabulary development

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