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# Social and Emotional Learning and Student Achievement in a Culture of Care

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Social and Emotional Learning and Student Achievement in a Culture of Care

by

Odalys G. Pritchard

A graduate project report submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Education Specialist  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Section One: Introduction.....	1
School District Context.....	3
Turnaround Schools.....	5
Middle School Context.....	7
Section Two: Perspectives from Selected Literature.....	9
Defining Social Emotional Learning.....	10
Growing Need for Social Emotional Learning.....	10
Social Emotional Learning and Student Achievement.....	11
Discussion.....	12
Implication.....	14
Section Three: Project Report.....	15
Project Purpose.....	15
SELActivities in District Middle Schools.....	16
Impact on Teaching and Learning.....	18
Insights Gained.....	21
References.....	24

## **ABSTRACT**

This capstone project was part of a group project completed by five school and district administrators in Hillsborough County, Florida. The project began because of our passion for teachers who are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

My focus in this group project looked at social emotional learning, student behavior, and student achievement in high needs schools. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and its related activities and lessons were once a foundational piece of the middle school program. Over the years, increased accountability and legislative mandates have made it very challenging to include dedicated time in a student's daily schedule for SEL lessons and activities. In Hillsborough County Public Schools, a summer program for retained sixth graders served as a launching ground for the re-introduction of SEL activities. The positive impact of the SEL activities were immediate and the SEL lessons, delivered through daily Community Building Sessions (CBS), were received well by teachers and students. How can the overwhelmingly positive results of the use of SEL activities with students in a summer program be replicated during the regular school year?

Literature supported the growing need for social emotional learning, positive impacts of SEL on student behavior and academic learning, the importance of positive classroom climates as a school-wide strategy, and the importance of leadership support.

## SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

This final project report was completed as part of a group project examining the concept of a ‘culture of care’. Turnaround schools are plagued by cycles of poor academic achievement and high referral and discipline rates. Barriers to success can include high levels of poverty, teacher apathy, low teacher retention, poor student achievement, and weak leadership. These barriers can be overcome and must be overcome if we are to truly turn schools around.

Our group believes that students at turnaround schools need the best teachers - teachers who care about them, believe in them, and will not give up on them. They need teachers who will understand where they are coming from and differentiate their learning experiences to meet their needs. They need teachers who understand that the culture and climate in their classrooms is just as important as the academic lessons being taught. We believe these “superstar” teachers exist—teachers who have high levels of student achievement and whose classrooms are warm, inviting communities for learning.

We believe these teachers are able to establish a culture of care in their classrooms that support students academically but transform their learning through experiences that enable them to be more highly engaged and productive students, regardless of students’ ethnicity, socioeconomic status, perceived academic abilities, and backgrounds.

**Personal focus.** I am a middle school educator through and through. My teaching career began in the height of the middle school era in Hillsborough County Schools. It was an exciting and magical time. As educators, we were encouraged to practice all the core tenants of the middle school philosophy, including interdisciplinary teaching and thematic units, small learning

communities/teams, and facilitating students' social and emotional growth. It was also okay to have fun and spend class time building relationships with and among students. It was okay to spend 20 minutes reading and sharing "All about Me" poems. It was okay to do a community building activity with students working together to build a tower out of popsicle sticks and learning about teamwork along the way. With time, 20 minutes of community building time became ten. As accountability in the form of state mandates and tests increased, the foundational pieces of middle schools as we knew them became weaker. Eventually, ten minutes of community building time became none. We kept the title 'middle school', but if you looked underneath the surface, you would see what looked an awful lot like a junior high school.

Just to be clear, I am not anti-testing or accountability. My leadership story tells a strong narrative about my sense of responsibility. It is my job as an educator to ensure every child learns and grows academically, and it is a job I take very seriously. I believe in student data. When I was a site-based principal, I expected teachers to progress monitor students through data and focus on quality instruction. I poured over their data and shared it with teachers in data chats and meetings. I also finally gave up trying to build a master schedule that included teaming and dedicated time for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) activities. It simply became impossible to do.

Of course, I still infused activities that served to build students' social emotional development. We did school wide activities, had assemblies on middle school friendly topics, and piloted the Olweus anti-bullying program for two years. But, nothing was permanent. The routine time built into the schedule for daily SEL activities was a thing of the past.

Now, fast forward to the present. In my current role, I was asked to work with a team to bring back social emotional learning to the middle school. It was a joyful day! Together, we

brainstormed what SEL might look like in the current middle school structure. We secured an educational partner—Frameworks of Tampa Bay—and went to work. What followed is almost unbelievable. In summer 2014 we launched SEL activities through STEP (Student Trajectory Enhancement Program) with our overage, retained sixth graders; it became an instant success. Within the first week, I was hearing from teachers about the positive impact of the activities at the weekly meetings I facilitated. Teachers were smiling and positive as they shared stories about their students. We laughed at some stories and got goosebumps with others. We all quickly realized that the success of the students and their continued motivation to complete the intense six-week summer program was highly attributed to the SEL community building sessions they were engaged in daily.

As a leader, my middle school heart sang. As the program continued, the success stories continued. Having the ability to work directly with the implementation of SEL in STEP rejuvenated my middle school spirit and led me to want to continue the work into the regular school year and not just in the summer STEP program.

My focus in this group project looked at social emotional learning, student achievement, and a culture of care in high needs middle schools. I asked, how can the overwhelmingly positive results of the use of SEL activities with students in a summer program be replicated during the regular school year?

### **School District Context**

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) currently serves over 210,000 students, with over 15,000 certified teachers and 25,000 full-time staff. HCPS is the eighth-largest school district in the country with over 250 schools. The enrollment by race/ethnicity is approximately 40% white, 29% Hispanic, 21% Black, and 3% Asian. Fifty-seven percent of all students are on free

and reduced-priced lunch. Roughly 12% of all students are English Language Learners (ELL), and the district graduation rate for 2015 was 76% with over 14,000 students graduating.

**Social service in the community.** Hillsborough County, Florida has comprehensive social services. The Social Services Department provides comprehensive case management programs as well as stabilization services to low-income residents of Hillsborough County. Staff promote and support the educational process by meeting the individual needs of students and families within the community (see <http://www.sdhc.k12.fl.us/departments/63/social-work-services/about/>).

To better guide parents of HCPS students to community support services, Hillsborough County Schools have an entire Student Services Department which includes: Attendance, Exceptional Student Education (Special Education), Guidance Services, Health Services, Multi-Tiered System of Supports, Non-Traditional Programs K-12, Professional Development, Psychological Services, and Social Work Services.

**School choice.** HCPS School Choice provides parents and legal guardians with options such as Magnet schools, Career & Technical Education programs, School Choice (parents may choose from a list of schools with space available), Out of County options, and options for military families. School Choice has become increasingly popular in HCPS with several options available:

- *Charter schools* – independent public schools operated by a non-profit organization. According to a report printed February 29, 2016 by the HCPS Charter Office, 16,620 students are currently enrolled in Charter schools.
- *Home education* – defined by Florida Statute 1003.01 as "sequentially progressive instruction of a student directed by his or her parent in order to satisfy the attendance requirements of SS.1002.41, 1003.01 (4), and 1003.21 (1)."



- *John M. McKay Scholarship* – additional Choice options to students with an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan.
- *Partnership schools* – schools that have developed an innovative partnership between the public and private sector. Proof of employment in the partnership area is a requirement.
- *Hillsborough Virtual School (HVS)* – a school choice option for students entering grades K-12. HVS students are served by Highly Qualified Hillsborough County teachers for each class online.

### **Turnaround Schools**

Our group’s sense of the need for a *culture of care* in our schools and classrooms came from our observations of a historical and prevailing misconception in our society that many of our most poverty stricken and underperforming students cannot learn. This mentality of inability pervades our educational world and includes a subversive belief which asserts that it is okay to allow students of color and low socio-economic status to fail. It was our group’s profound sense of purpose that drove our discussion to delve deeper into the context of how care, compassion, and commitment to our students might truly thwart the ills that society has constructed and allow *all* students, in *all* schools to succeed.

We derived this concept of a *culture of care* from a variety of combined resources. Utilizing the newly formulated “HCPS Octagon” that represents the eight essential tenets of a culturally positive organization, as well as embracing the Key Performance Indicators (KPI’s) that our district leaders outlined as priorities, our team formulated the notion that care pervaded and necessitated all these initiatives. Furthermore, our perspective was informed by an extensive exposure to a variety of educational reform literature that discussed the “ethic of care” and “building relationships,” along with “culturally relevant pedagogy” (Gorski, 2013; Guajardo &

Guajardo with Casaperalta, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). In addition, “appreciative organizing in education” (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) helped us to conceptualize the need for defining, understating, and realizing that a *culture of care* in our schools and with our teachers, administrators, and most importantly students, is necessary.

The notion of “culturally appropriate” (Au & Jordan, 1981, p. 139) pedagogy began over 35 years ago and suggested that teachers in a Hawaiian school incorporate aspects of students’ cultural backgrounds into their reading instruction (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). However, today’s context magnifies the importance of providing culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995) instruction and curriculum for our students of other backgrounds, creating a sense of purpose for our black and brown children and allowing them to be reflected in the body of work that is read and studied in schools. By truly allowing our traditionally underrepresented ethnic groups the opportunity to study literature and engage in resources that mirror their population in schools, we can emphasize just how untrue the idea is that Black people don’t value education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Moreover, as HCPS administrators and researchers, we are committed to overcoming the institutional limitations that disproportionately affect our low income students. Despite the literature that suggests schools cannot overcome the societal barriers that students bring with them every day (Berliner & Glass, 2014), we were convinced that there are teachers who are capable of excellent teaching for all struggling students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

With our already defined understanding of the importance of “organizational culture” through both the literature and HCPS Octagon model, focusing on the shared “beliefs, values, artifacts, and underlying assumptions of groups of people” (Schein, 1999), the logical extension

was to examine connections between a strong climate and culture in the classrooms and the positive impact on students' performance.

### **Middle School Context**

Hillsborough County Public Schools (HCPS) is located in Tampa, Florida and is the eighth largest school district in the nation, serving over 210,000 students. In 2014-2015, over 46,000 students were enrolled in grades six through eight in the district's 43 middle schools and three K-8 schools. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and its related curricula, once a foundational piece of middle school education, had all but disappeared. HCPS had fallen victim to the same ills as many middle schools nationwide; increased pressure to raise test scores and state mandates requiring students to take additional remedial courses left little time in a child's day for dedicated SEL programs, activities, or curriculum. In his book, *Best Schools*, Thomas Armstrong (2006) asserted,

The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act certainly is part of the reason for the abandonment of the middle school philosophy in recent years. "The big issue is NCLB doesn't take into account the unique needs of middle schools," noted Steven van Zandt, principal of Aviara Oaks Middle School in Carlsbad, California. "NCLB doesn't address any sort of developmental needs of middle school students at all" (Association of California School Administrators, 2003). NCLB is essentially non-developmental for *all* levels of education. It requires uniformly high test scores throughout the K-12 curriculum without regard to developmental changes at different stages of childhood and adolescence." (Chapter 5, para. 4, retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/106044/chapters/Middle-Schools@-Social,-Emotional,-and-Metacognitive-Growth.aspx>).

The lack of SEL programs and curricula in HCPS middle schools was not always the case. HCPS transitioned from the junior high model of housing students in grades seven through nine to the middle school model with students in grades six through eight in the early nineties. With the transition a specific amount of time was dedicated to a child's daily schedule for SEL activities, typically during homeroom for about 20-30 minutes. During this time, teachers were expected to utilize provided curriculum and/or activities that centered on community and relationship building, decision making, and character education. This, coupled with interdisciplinary teaming, served to "provide students in early adolescence with an environment that can help them negotiate the impact of puberty on their intellectual, social, and emotional lives" (Armstrong, 2006, Chapter 5, para. 5, retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/106044/chapters/Middle-Schools@-Social,-Emotional,-and-Metacognitive-Growth.aspx>).

High suspension rates, large numbers of retained students, drops in middle school enrollment (as compared to elementary and high school), and low response rates by middle school students about school enjoyment on the annual student perception survey have all led to a renewed interest in analyzing the district's current middle school structure and finding ways to re-engage young adolescents in their schooling. The common denominator in almost all discussions was the critical importance of relationship building between and among students and teachers and helping students feel connected to school. Past experience and research both indicated that social emotional learning (SEL) activities and curriculum served both of those needs. Thus, the decision was made to re-introduce SEL into the middle school setting.

## SECTION 2. PERSPECTIVES FROM SELECTED LITERATURE

For this review of selected literature, I examined journal articles and studies focusing on the link between social emotional learning and its impact on student achievement. My assumption was that teachers whose classrooms reflect high levels of warmth and caring are utilizing social emotional learning in their classrooms which fosters higher levels of student achievement.

My review of the literature indicates that schools and teachers who focus on fostering positive emotional connections with students, display sensitivity to adolescent needs, and integrate efforts to promote social emotional learning have higher levels of student achievement (Allen et al., 2013; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004).

I begin my literature review with a definition of social emotional learning. Next, I establish the growing need for social emotional learning to be integrated into the school setting. I continue with a discussion of the findings related to social emotional learning and student achievement. Lastly, I discuss implications for future inquiry in Hillsborough County Public Schools.

**Methods used to conduct the review.** To prepare this literature review, the University of South Florida Libraries general keyword, title, and abstract searches were used to search a variety of databases including: Academic Search Premier, EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, JSTOR, SAGE, and Web of Science. Searches included the following keywords: social emotional learning (SEL), middle school, building relationships, community building sessions. Sources within selected texts were cross-referenced, resulting in additional searches by author or source. Sources

were limited to the last 10 years, and the primary focus was on studies conducted in the United States.

### **Defining Social Emotional Learning**

Like many terms in education, social emotional learning (SEL) is a broad term that encompasses a variety of ideas. Social Emotional Learning, when defined using the specific acronym of SEL, was linked to a process in which students are taught to manage their emotions, care about others, set goals, develop positive relationships and make good decisions, thus avoiding negative behaviors (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013; Zins et al., 2004.). Not all literature specifically used the term SEL, but referred instead to the importance of Classroom Emotional Climate or CEC (Reyes et al., 2012) while others simply spoke of providing emotional support to students (Curby, Brock, & Hamre, 2013) or a supportive environment (Sparks, 2013).

Unlike SEL, these other terms were not defined as a process, but as indicators that could be observed in a classroom. For example, classrooms with high CEC had teachers who were sensitive to the needs of their students, were “warm, nurturing, and caring,” listened to their students’ perspectives, and were not harsh and sarcastic when disciplining students (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 701). Consequently, CEC and SEL can be linked in that classrooms that have high CEC provide an opportunity for effective SEL processes to take place. Zins et al. (2004) stated that “effective SEL interventions are provided within supportive environments” (p. 8).

Supportive environments have a positive climate and teachers who are sensitive to student needs and perspectives (Allen et al., 2013). Similarly, Sparks (2013) noted that a supportive environment was characterized by a program incorporating instruction that included social, emotional, and cognitive understanding and regulation. Thus, the literature supports the idea that

SEL processes best take place in environments that are warm and caring although by definition Social Emotional Learning is a process, not a state of being such as a positive classroom climate.

### **Growing Need for Social Emotional Learning in the School Setting**

The literature reviewed indicates the need for social emotional learning components in our schools. Often students have social emotional challenges that influence their performance in school. One article noted that schools that only focus on academic instruction and management to help students reach academic success will not meet their goals (Zins et al., 2004). This builds on the premise that if a child is not ‘head-ready’ for class, the instruction in the classroom will fall short (Levin-Epstein, 2015). Likewise, it is often recommended that teachers establish a positive class climate and emotionally supportive classrooms early in the year, which contributes to better instructional quality later in the year (Curby et al., 2013). This can be particularly important in secondary education in order to maximize student motivation and provide an opportunity for students to receive emotional support from adults other than their parents (Allen et al., 2013). The literature also makes a case for schools to promote social emotional learning as a way to build skills and knowledge that lead to competencies in students that will help them with careers and post-secondary life (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013).

### **Social Emotional Learning and Student Achievement**

The literature reviewed supports the claim that social emotional learning processes and environmental conditions, such as positive classroom climate, have an impact on student achievement. Students in emotionally supported classrooms have better grades and perform better on standardized tests (Reyes et al., 2012). Weissberg and Cascarino (2013) conducted a review of over 200 experimental-control group studies of K-12 students who were a part of SEL programs. They found that students’ grades averaged 11 percentile points higher than students who did not

receive SEL programming. Specifically, two studies used the CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) to code CEC (Classroom Emotional Climate) which includes the dimensions of Positive Climate (warmth and connectedness), Negative Climate (expressed negativity in the classroom), Teacher Sensitivity (responding to students' needs) and Regard for Adolescent Perspectives (teacher's ability to recognize and incorporate student interests and needs) (Allen et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2012). Classrooms with high CEC were characterized by a "a sense of connectedness and belongingness, enjoyment and enthusiasm, and respect" (Reyes et al. , 2012, p. 707). This finding was then linked to prior research that showed students in classrooms with these characteristics were more engaged in learning, more connected to the teacher and the lesson, and received higher grades than students who are disengaged.

A second study showed that the domain of the CEC with the highest prediction for success on standardized tests was indeed the Emotional Support domain. This study concluded that a student who entered with average prior year test scores in the 50th percentile range in a class that was one standard deviation below the mean in Emotional Support would score in the 41st percentile on standardized tests while similar students in a class that was one standard deviation above the mean in Emotional Support would on average score in the 59th percentile on the standardized tests. Thus, the emotional supports a student received from his or her teacher made a significant difference in how the student would perform on end of the year tests (Allen et al., 2013). In a similar way, when a district in Arizona combined a model that focused on SEL with a literacy program, students showed some improvement in standardized math and reading tests as compared to their peers who were not in the program (Sparks, 2013).

Social Emotional Learning may also impact graduation rates. One principal whose school embarked on a collaboration with CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional



Learning) attributed his dramatic decline in dropout rates (from 20% in 2008 to 4% in 2015) to the school wide infusion of SEL processes at his site (Levin-Epstein, 2015).

## **Discussion**

The selected literature reviewed did not isolate the impact of Social Emotional Learning in high needs schools. It was also difficult to find literature that addressed SEL and its related components (such as classroom climate) specifically for secondary schools. Lastly, the literature confirmed that teachers with high CEC have conditions that support SEL, but the two are not identical. In other words, do teachers who have high CEC use identified SEL processes? If so, what are they? And, do these processes line up with the accepted definition of SEL?

Overall, the review of the selected literature supports the notion that social emotional learning processes alongside with positive classroom climates prove successful for students, not only for their emotional well-being but for their academic success. However, while teachers may support the idea that SEL matters, they need support from school and district leadership to effectively implement SEL. Often SEL processes are introduced to schools as separate programs that often come and go depending on budgets and legislation. In 2004 Zins et al. reported that schools nationally were implementing a median of 14 practices as SEL prevention programs. These programs are often introduced to schools as “pre-packaged” curriculum and can be seen as isolated ways to address specific areas (such as anti-bullying programs) versus establishing a coordinated approach to social emotional learning processes.

In Hillsborough County Public Schools, for example, we currently have a variety of programs in play that could be called SEL Programs, such as Olweus Anti-bullying Program, Mendez Too Good For Drugs, LST (Life Skills Training), Community Building sessions, and other individual site based programs. Yet, placing the program in a school is not enough. As the

literature affirms, the climate in the individual classroom has to be one that supports SEL. Teachers need appropriate training if they are the ones delivering the content, and time has to be built into the schedule for the SEL activities to take place with regularity and fidelity.

SEL should be embedded into the school's curriculum and teacher's daily lessons, so that SEL is not seen as an add-on but as a way of building strong school and classroom cultures that can lead to improved student outcomes. I believe our best teachers do this regularly without consciously labeling their practices as SEL. That is, they help students set goals, make good decisions, practice empathy, and feel safe and cared for, and they create environments in which students learn at higher levels in their classrooms.

### SECTION 3. PROJECT REPORT

Appreciative Inquiry and Organizing (AOE) is a theoretical approach (Barrett & Fry, 2008; Burrello, Beitz, & Mann, 2015; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008) that allows individuals to reject the deficit model and harness “students’ cultural strengths” into the learning environment and organizational design (Azano, 2014, p. 62).

Instead of teaching the “decontextualized stuff” (Theobald, 1997), education might instead attend to context and offer “place conscious instruction” (Azano, 2014, p. 62), given the “power of place” (Guajardo & Guajardo, 2015) to provide students with an opportunity to take ownership in their own learning. In addition to context is the concept of culture in teaching and learning, from *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 2009) to *culturally responsive teaching* (Gay, 2010) or *funds of knowledge* (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). All set the stage to identify assets and resources within our marginalized students, families, and communities, providing them hope, instead of assuming our struggling students are a burden and liability (Guajardo et al., 2008; Trueba, 1999; Wyatt, 2014) as in the traditional problem-solving, deficit model.

Appreciative Inquiry, then, is based on the assumption that finding what works right in an organization helps it focus on what is important, effective, and successful. Focusing on this positive core helps an organization think about ways to sharpen its vision, leverage its energy, and take action for change. It is strengths-based rather than deficit thinking.

#### **Project Purpose**

Our purpose in the group project was not to replicate the successes of other districts or schools, but rather to uncover aspects and behaviors of a culture of care that support systems that

overcome performance and equity gaps. We did not expect to have a cure-all that would immediately address gaps in achievement. Rather, by combining the approach of focusing on teacher-driven, practitioner-based successes, along with theoretical researched-based knowledge, we felt we might gain insight into the “complex nature of education[al] limits” that Berliner and Glass (2015) refer to in “Trust But Verify” -- limits which often leave individuals dumbfounded by complexities that at times seem inherently counter-intuitive.

**Individual Focus.** My project component looked at social emotional learning, student behavior, and student achievement in high needs schools. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and its related activities and lessons were once a foundational piece of the middle school program in our school district. Over the years, increased accountability and legislative mandates have made it very challenging to include dedicated time in a student’s daily schedule for SEL lessons and activities. In Hillsborough County Public Schools, a summer program for retained sixth graders served as a launching ground for the re-introduction of SEL activities. The positive impact of the SEL activities were immediate and the SEL lessons, delivered through daily Community Building Sessions (CBS), were received well by teachers and students. How can the overwhelmingly positive results of the use of SEL activities with students in a summer program be replicated during the regular school year?

### **SEL Activities in District Middle Schools**

Only four middle school sites actually had any type of consistent social emotional learning activities and/or courses at their schools. HCPS partnered with the SEL provider from those sites, Frameworks of Tampa Bay, to expand its reach into middle school during the launch of a grade acceleration summer program called STEP (Student Trajectory Enhancement Program) for retained sixth graders in June of 2014.

STEP targeted over-age, potentially under-achieving students completing the sixth grade. The program was designed to provide academic rigor in a small class setting with an emphasis on literacy and mathematics. STEP provided an intensive learning environment designed to equip students with the critical skills necessary to be successful in eighth grade. Upon successful completion of this intensive summer program, students were promoted to the eighth grade in Hillsborough County Public Schools for the following school year, thus bringing these middle level learners closer toward their age-appropriate grade level.

A major component of the STEP program included providing social emotional support through the use of the Frameworks curriculum. As stated on the Frameworks of Tampa Bay website (2015):

Through social and emotional learning, we teach a core set of social and emotional attitudes, values, and skills that help children, teens and adults more effectively handle life challenges to succeed in academic, social and professional environments. In short, we teach youth and adults to manage their emotions, so that those emotions do not manage them. (Vision and Mission section, para. 1, retrieved from <http://myframeworks.org/mission-vision>).

The social emotional activities used in STEP soon became a transformative piece of the program. Students participated in daily community building sessions, usually for about 20-25 minutes. Seated in a large circle to increase the sense of community, they participated in the following activities daily:

- “Focus” Breathing - Guided by the teacher, students take a series of deep, cleansing breaths and exhale. Teachers can add a question for students to contemplate during breathing or a positive thought or mantra to consider.

- Greeting - Students greet each other in a fun, interactive way. Activities include introducing your neighbor using alliteration (“This is Awesome Andrew”, “This is Magnificent Maria”), introducing yourself and adding an answer to a personal question (“What is your favorite food?”; “ What was the last movie you watched?”), or even doing a “silent” greeting (greet each other with handshakes, waves, fist bumps, smiles, etc.).
- Sharing compliments - Students use a compliments poster to help them in giving each other compliments.
- Community Building Activity - There are a wide variety of activities students do in order to get know each other and build relationships. Activities are interactive and fun, usually allowing students to move around the room.
- News/Announcements - During news and announcements, teachers share important class news. It is also a time to celebrate accomplishments (e.g., “Our class average on the last assignment was a 95%!”)
- Closing “Focus” Breathing - Students repeat the breathing activity to bring closure to the Community Building Session and transition to the next part of class.

Prior to implementing the daily community building sessions, teachers received professional development in all of the SEL activities and practiced mock community building sessions with their peers as part of the training.

### **Impact on Teaching and Learning**

Shortly after holding their first community building sessions (CBS), teachers began to share the positive impact the lessons were having on the students. During weekly meetings, teachers shared numerous stories, examples, and anecdotes that reflected the power of including social emotional lessons into their students’ day. The weekly meeting became a celebration of

individual students and how SEL activities had changed them. There was never a shortage of success stories. Many teachers reported that students came ‘out of their shell’. For example, one student was quiet and withdrawn. She did not appear to have many friends. In a CBS, she shared that she spoke five languages. Students were then drawn to her, and she was able to build friendships with her peers. Several teachers shared that students would advocate for themselves and tell the teacher if he/she forgot to do the deep breathing activity. With a chuckle, one teacher shared that a student stated she *needed* the breathing to get the day started and to be successful. While discussion of the academic curriculum of the STEP program was an agenda item at the weekly meetings, it rarely generated the enthusiasm and eagerness to share student success stories like the SEL community building sessions. Teachers were witnessing the students become a community quickly and enjoy the activities, and they wanted to tell their peers all about it.

In addition, teachers reported the following successes and/or benefits from the implementation of social emotional learning through the community building sessions:

- Some students became leaders and were given the responsibility to lead the breathing exercises.
- Students began to treat each other with respect.
- There was more open communication among students.
- Students were more likely to follow directions and be more compliant, less defiant.
- Students created compliment posters for teachers.
- Teachers and students began to put their own personalities and creativity into the sessions.
- Teachers found ways to connect the SEL Community Building concepts to academic subjects.
- Collaboration among lead STEP teachers was phenomenal!

To gauge teacher satisfaction with the SEL community building sessions quantitatively, Frameworks of Tampa Bay asked teachers to complete a six question survey and include a challenge and a success from implementation. The goal was to determine the overall satisfaction of the program and how students responded to the various components of the SEL community building sessions. The results from the teacher survey showed that

- 81% of teachers reported that most students enjoyed participating in the community building sessions;
- 71% agreed that the breathing exercises were helpful for students;
- 81% of teachers reported that students responded positively to giving and receiving compliments from students and teachers;
- 88% of teachers reported that students responded positively to greetings and activities during the community building sessions;
- 88% of teacher reported that students were engaged in the community building sessions.

In order to also measure students' perceptions of their own learning from the Community Building Sessions, Frameworks of Tampa Bay asked students to respond in writing to the question, what did you learn from the Community Building Sessions? Example responses included:

- "I learned that we have to work together as a team in the future."
- "...that sometimes you should be thankful and glad for what you have and I should be nicer."
- "...to step out of your comfort zone and talk to new people."
- "I learned my whole day is started in the morning. Good morning, good day. 😊"
- "I learned how to work well with others you don't know well."



- “...that you should be caring and nice and not disrespectful.”
- “...a lot of new ways to solve problems...I also learned that [focus]breathing calms me down.”
- “I learned how to relax and think about what I need to have a good day.”
- “I learned how to give compliments to other kids and how to greet teachers and students I don’t know.”

In summary, the teacher and student responses to the use of the SEL activities that comprised the Community Building Sessions were overwhelmingly positive and affirmed their value in the middle school classroom.

### **Insights Gained**

Some secondary schools in HCPS are described as “high needs,” defined as schools that have high percentages of students receiving free and reduced lunch (FRL), historically low student achievement levels as measured by standardized state test scores and state letter grades, high student referral rates, and low attendance rates as compared to the district average. There is literature that indicates that schools and teachers who focus on fostering positive emotional connections with students and who display sensitivity to adolescent needs have higher levels of student achievement (Allen et al., 2013; Reyes et al., 2012; Zins et al., 2004).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is often referred to as the “soft skills” students need to know in order to get along with others, understand themselves, and become more socially aware and well-adjusted young adults and learners. Students, especially middle school students, can truly benefit from social emotional curricula and activities. In his book, *Best School*, Thomas Armstrong (2006) stated:

Educators need to understand the developmental needs of young adolescents and in particular their neurological, social, emotional, and metacognitive growth. Some of these developmental needs are ignored or subverted by inappropriate educational practices such as fragmented curricula, large impersonal schools, and lesson plans that lack vitality. Practices at the best schools honor the developmental uniqueness of young adolescents, including the provision of a safe school environment, student-initiated learning, student roles in decision making, and strong adult role models (Chapter 5, para. 5, retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/106044/chapters/Middle-Schools@-Social,-Emotional,-and-Metacognitive-Growth.aspx>).

Additionally, there is research that links SEL to positive outcomes for students. A group of university researchers including Joseph A. Durlak and Roger Weissberg presented their findings from a study of 213 school-based SEL programs. As stated by the researchers, “The findings add to the growing empirical evidence regarding the positive impact of SEL programs. Policymakers, educators, and the public can contribute to healthy development of children by supporting the incorporation of evidence-based SEL programming into standard educational practice” (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011, p. 1).

There is also evidence to suggest parents feel SEL in school is important. A 2013 PDK/Gallup poll found that, “Most Americans agree that public schools should teach students a full range of social, emotional, and cognitive competencies including how to set meaningful goals (89%), communication skills (94%), how to collaborate on projects (84%), and character (76%)” (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013, p. 11).

Unfortunately, despite evidence that makes a slam dunk case for Social Emotional Learning (SEL) in schools, the increase in accountability and pressure on educators to produce

higher test scores has led to a dearth of consistent SEL programs nationwide. While SEL is once again becoming a widespread topic of interest among educators, it is still not a fundamental part of most middle school programs as it once was. Armstrong (2006) refers to many of our middle schools as “emotionally flat”:

Individuals going through early adolescence are particularly sensitive to the presence or absence of *emotion* in their classroom learning experiences. If they are required to learn in classrooms that largely emphasize lecture, textbooks, written assignments, and tests, their own motivation is likely to wane. And yet, as noted above, NCLB and other pressures to conform to Academic Achievement Discourse are making these kinds of environments far more common in middle schools.” (Chapter 5, para.21, retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/106044/chapters/Middle-Schools@-Social,-Emotional,-and-Metacognitive-Growth.aspx>).

Dymnicki, Sambolt, and Kidron (2011) as cited in (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013, p. 12) argued that “districts need to treat SEL as a priority on a par with academic achievement, high school completion, and college and career readiness.” As we begin to reassess the amount of accountability and standardized testing going on in our public schools, it is a good time to also reassess critically important programs like SEL that many schools—especially middle schools—lost along the way.

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