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Implementing Social and Emotional Learning in Schools: Overcoming Obstacles and Providing Support

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Introduction

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) identifies five core skills required for emotional wellbeing and positive interpersonal skills: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, social skills and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2003). While a growing body of research indicates that social and emotional competencies have significant impact upon academic achievement (Miles & Stipek, 2006; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004), there are several key factors required for the successful implementation of social and emotional programs in schools (Jennings & Greenberg, 2008; Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovich, Small, & Jacobson, 2009).

The role of the teacher and their experiences within the school environment strongly influences how successfully a Social and Emotional Learning program (SEL) can be implemented and sustained within a classroom (Elias, Bruene-Butler, Blum, & Schyler, 2000; Jennings & Greenberg, 2008). A better understanding of the factors influencing teachers' ability to implement social and emotional programs is an important step towards optimal delivery of such programs. The teacher, their commitment and belief in SEL, and their own emotional wellbeing all play a vital role in effective program implementation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

It has been found that increased levels of teacher stress and burnout have a detrimental effect teacher motivation and morale, which negatively impacts the quality of educational opportunities and instruction provided to students (Travers, 2011). In particular, it has been demonstrated that high levels of teacher burnout and stress lead to more negative attitudes towards the implementation of new programs (Evers, Brouwers & Tomic, 2002). As such, it is important to understand factors that contribute to teacher burnout and stress, and the impact that this will have on effective implementation of SEL programs.

An emerging body of research indicates that levels of teacher burnout are impacted by the implementation of high stakes testing in schools across the nation (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Hanson, 2006; Hill & Barth, 2004; Smith & Kovacs, 2011). There is substantial evidence to suggest that teacher responses to high stakes testing mandates result in increased levels of stress and anxiety (Boaler, 2003; Crocco & Costigan, 2007; Jones et al., 1999). The implementation of high stakes testing also contributes to lowered morale and motivation amongst teachers (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Hill & Barth; 2004).

It is important to consider possible causes of stress for teachers, and the association that such stressors will bring to bear upon beliefs towards SEL programs. It is evident that such experiences may negatively impact teachers' emotional experiences, and in turn their commitment towards implementing SEL programs within schools.

Method

The current study examines the relationship between teacher stress due to high stakes testing, administrative support for SEL programs, and teacher comfort and commitment towards Social and Emotional learning.

Procedure and Measures

Participants are 116 elementary school teachers from the state of Montana. Teachers were recruited to participate in the study through an email sent to superintendents, which was forwarded to teachers. Teachers opted to participate in an online survey, consisting of three questionnaires. The Teacher High Stakes Testing Scale (Pearson, Nichols & Lombardo, 2006) is a 28 item Likert scale questionnaire measuring the impact of high stakes testing on teacher motivation and morale. Reported internal consistency reliability is $\alpha = .90$. The SEL Beliefs Scale (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012) is a 25 item scale measuring teacher perceptions of how well their school culture supports the implementation of SEL programs, and teacher commitment towards delivering social and emotional learning programs in schools. Reported internal consistency reliability is $\alpha = .93$. The Teacher Attitudes towards Social and Emotional Learning (TASEL) (Schultz, Ambike, Stapleton, Domitrovich, Schaeffer & Bartels, 2010) was administered in order to assess teachers' perceived implementation supports and attitudes towards Social and Emotional Learning.

Discussion and Possible Implications

This oral presentation will benefit other students working within human services, due to the focus on program implementation and collaboration with service providers. For those interested in providing care within a multi-disciplinary framework, the presentation will provide valuable insight into current and future trends within school psychology, and service delivery models used within this field. It also outlines trends within public education in the U.S., which will likely be beneficial to any students who may wish to work within public education settings in the future.