

Students with Social/Emotional Issues:
A Needs Assessment

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November 30, 2016

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Introduction

Within this report I will be investigating the need for program development to assist teachers on how to successfully deal with students with social/emotional issues. Students that experience social/emotional issues do not only affect their own educational experience but also other students within the classroom because these students tend to be disruptive during class.

A large number of students are unhappy and emotionally upset; only a small percent are clinically depressed. A large number of youngsters have trouble behaving in classrooms; only a small percent have attention deficit or a conduct disorder. Large numbers of students have problems learning; only a few have learning disabilities (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2015, pg. 1).

Yet, the students that are struggling with social/emotional issues that do not fall within the small percent with diagnosable disorders are often not addressed and are tolerated until they can be advanced onto the next grade.

Throughout this paper you will read about the past research revolving around students that have social/emotional issues and their behavior issues while in school. The next section within this paper is about the data collection and research method and design with an explanation on how the information was obtained and which method was used to collect the data. Following that section is the result aspect of the paper. Within this section of the report you will read about the findings collected by the researcher's survey. Then the researcher will discuss the results and lastly, the researcher included a solution to aid the school in solving their needs.

Literature review/past research

According to Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, most teachers focus on the content that the students need to learn and skills that need to be acquired during that time in class. In

addition, teachers often only focus a mild amount of attention on engaging the student into the class. This works fine in some schools where students come each day ready and able to deal with what the teacher is ready to teach. However that is not the case for all schools or all students, especially for middle school aged children (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2015).

According to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, “several studies have demonstrated a positive correlation between behavioral engagement (positive conduct, involvement in learning, participation in school related activities) and achievement-related outcomes (e.g. grades) for elementary, middle, and high school students. Discipline problems also have been associated with lower school performance across grade levels” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris, 2004, pg. 70). Yet, how is behavioral engagement achieved for students with social/emotional issues?

Social emotional learning (SEL) centers on mind and body. According to "5 Keys to Successful Social and Emotional Learning" academic outcomes will increase if students are nurtured, loved, and cared for. This can be done within the class with teachers simply showing interest in the student's well-being and teaching them life skills. Teaching topics such as math and history are important; however teaching social emotional skills (self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) are essential for future success in school, work and life. Also, if a student has high social emotional skills, it reduces their emotional tension so they can be open to new content and material (5 Keys to Successful Social and Emotional Learning, 2013).

As a school social worker, understanding the five keys of social emotional learning is critical. If a student has the ability to identify their emotions (self awareness), self regulate (self management), embrace diversity (social awareness), work together (relationship skills), and

evaluate consequences for various behaviors (responsible decision making) then there is a good chance they will be more willing to learn and be more successful in future endeavors. Social emotional learning promotes self-regulation and having the ability to manage thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. It has been found by numerous studies that the ability to self-regulate is correlated to positive school behavior and academic achievement (Vega, 2012).

Implementing this idea in schools that have been using different techniques for years would be very difficult, but it is possible. I believe that as the school social worker it is your duty to inform the teachers that this technique of education starts with them and to be successful they must be flexible and be able to make personal connections in the classroom. Even though change is difficult, "If we continue to do what we have always done, we are always going to get what we always got. Is that good enough?"

Vanessa Vega conducted a study on 213 programs, primarily covering three decades of research that focused on social emotional learning. Vega found that social and emotional learning interventions increased students' academic performance by 11 percentile points, as compared to students who did not participate in such social emotional learning programs. In addition, Vega states that social and emotional learning programs also reduce aggression and emotional distress among students, increased helping behaviors in school, and improved positive attitudes toward self and others (Vega, 2012).

In addition to social emotional learning interventions another intervention that could be beneficial to teachers in helping students with social emotional issues is called Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS. PBIS is a proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture for students within school. For all students in a school to achieve social, emotional and academic success it is important to focus on creating interventions

that improve school-wide (tier 1), classroom (tier 2), and individual (tier 3) achievement and behavior while in school (Positive Behavior Interventions & Supports (PBIS) What is PBIS?, 2016).

According to PBISworld, tier one interventions for disruptive behavior include: acknowledging positive behavior, avoiding power struggles, ignoring behaviors, and talking to parents. Tier two interventions for disruptive behavior include: Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP), counselor referral, daily behavior form, and Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA). Tier three interventions for disruptive behavior are similar to the tier two interventions; however they are more focused on a particular individual or small group of individuals (PBISworld, 2016).

Data collection

This data was collected by using a survey with the eighth grade teachers at Suffield Middle School. This survey was conducted to collect information on what school wide program would best serve students with social/emotional issues, such as SEL or PBIS. This survey was supplied to eight eighth grade teachers that teach different subjects and have a wide range of years of experience.

Research method and design

A cross-sectional pre-experimental design was used in this report to be able to conduct an appropriate school need evaluation. This means that the researcher does not have a random sample nor does the research have a control group. However, that is not necessary because the research was simply collecting data to better understand the need of the school.

Yet, it would be beneficial for the researcher to have a control group and an experimental group when the program around social/emotional issues is implemented. Having a control group and experimental group will allow the researcher to easily compare the two groups and see if the program was successful. In addition, having a pre and post test would further the validity and

reliability of the program presented to the teachers around social/emotional issues. These pre and post test surveys would be different than the one that was created to simply collect data on the needs of the school.

On the survey used to collect data on the needs of the school, the researcher used both qualitative and quantitative designs, also known as mixed-method design to collect the necessary data. Within the survey the first three questions are quantitatively designed questions based around demographic information. The next six questions are qualitative and focus on gathering information.

*A copy of the survey used can be found in Appendix A.

Results

The researcher has broken the results of this needs assessment into two sections. The first section is the basic demographic information of the eighth grade teachers at Suffield Middle School. The survey was completed by eight eighth grade teachers, which consisted of two Math teachers, two Science teachers, and four English Language Arts (ELA) teachers. The experience of these eight teachers cover a wide range with two teaching for less than five years, five have been teaching for more than fifteen years, and one has been teaching for thirty-five plus years. In addition to the experience of the teachers the researcher thought it would be important to know the educational level of these teachers; one teacher has a master's degree plus sixty credits, four teachers have their master's degree plus forty-five credits, two have just their master's degree, and one is currently enrolled in a master's degree program.

The second section of the survey focuses on gathering information to better understand the needs of students with social/emotional issues and the teachers that have to support these students. The researcher included six separate questions that measure this need. The first question that was asked was, "How many students do you have that display social/emotional

issues?” The answers ranged from three to eighteen, and the reason why some teachers fewer than others is because ELA is broken down into double blocks throughout the day while science and math are taught in single blocks. The second question that was included in the survey was to gather further information about how students with social/emotional issues behave while in class. Each response of the teachers followed a similar pattern and some of the common answers were as follows: distracting, loud, disruptive, having trouble staying on task, constantly being negative, being physical with other students, and experiencing mood changes and/or depression. The following question on the survey asked if they (the teachers) have professional training on supporting these students with social/emotional needs; all eight of the teachers responded with the same answer and that answer was “No.” The fourth question on the survey asked what programs are in place at Suffield Middle School to support students with social/emotional issues within the classroom. Again each teacher responded with similar answers. They responded that there is no specific program in place and with recent changes to the structure of the special education department there is even less support within the classrooms, because paraprofessionals and special education teachers are no longer required to provide services within the classroom. In addition, the teachers stated that while there are counseling services available for students, there is only one school psychologist for the school and one school social worker for the entire district, making it nearly impossible to schedule a time to meet with these students in need. The next question on the survey asked about what interventions have you or other teachers tried to support students with social/emotional issues. All of the answers followed a similar pattern, some of the common answers were: assignment modification, lots of positive feedback and attention, patience, repetition, communication, small groups, silent signals, behavior/rewards systems, warning system, breaks throughout class time, parent meetings, parent emails, student check-ins,

office referrals and detentions. However, many of the teachers stated that even if these interventions work, they are only short term solutions. The last question asked was, “What is the social worker/administration doing to solve these issues?” The teachers answered with, “nothing” or “they are unsure at this time.”

Discussion of results

Even though the sample size was only eight eighth grade teachers the data collected by the researcher was extensive enough for him to confidently state that Suffield Middle School has a need for more support around students that experience social/emotional issues and the teachers that work with these students on a daily basis. Not only do students with social/emotional issues negatively affect their own educational experience, but they also negatively affect the education experience of students around them. The teachers that completed the survey stated that students with social/emotional issues are often disruptive while in class which distracts the other students from learning the material being presented and in addition it takes time away from the teacher because they have to discipline/re-teach the student/students that were distracted during the lesson.

The researcher also found it very concerning that administration seems to be as ineffective in dealing with these students as the teachers are. In speaking with one of the teachers surveyed, she stated that this has been a concern in the school for awhile and not just in the eighth grade. These are students that have had issues since elementary school that continue exhibiting the same behaviors year after year. When high up administration was questioned about what the district is doing about this problem the faculty was told that administration did not want to be the directive on what should be done but rather the teachers are the experts in their classrooms and should work together to solve the problems. Yet, how are these teachers supposed to know how to handle these issues when none of them have received professional

training on supporting students with social/emotional issues. Also, one teacher stated that budgetary constraints are also part of the problem. Due to budget cuts, there is less support in the classrooms and a therapeutic program that was developed a few years back to deal with this issue was cut for budget reasons. In addition, the researcher finds it concerning that there is only one social worker for the entire district of Suffield Public Schools and believes that it will be very difficult to implement any new program with the lack of direction from the administration, limited contact with the school social worker as well as budgetary issues.

Solution/conclusion

It is clear that changes are needed in order to support students with social/emotional issues at Suffield Middle School. If the researcher was the social worker of the school he would begin to implement social emotional learning (SEL). He would implement this program because even though teaching topics such as math and history are important, teaching social emotional skills (self awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) are essential for future success in school, work and life. He understands that the United States is moving away from this way of teaching and focusing more and more solely on the academic aspect of education; however United States schools were at their best in the past when there was less focus on academic standards and achievement. In order to implement this program into Suffield Middle School it may be difficult because the administration is leaving it up to the teachers to solve this problem and the teachers are not equipped to do so. It is the social worker's duty to inform/educate the teachers that this technique of education starts with them and to be successful they must be flexible and be able to make personal connections in the classroom. The social worker can do this by creating professional development around these skills. Even though change is difficult, "If we continue to do what we have always done, we are always going to get what we always got. Is that good enough?" At Suffield Middle School the researcher and

teachers do not believe that it is.

If the social worker implemented SEL into Suffield Middle School it would be important to conduct both a pre and post test, similar to the survey created for this needs assessment for the teachers. This will allow the social worker be able to measure the success of the program and to see if it is effective. In addition, I believe that it is important to survey the social and emotional well-being of each student at the start and end of the school year to see if there was a positive or negative change. These results may be affected by outside factors; however, the overall data will be useful for evaluating the SEL program.

Appendix A

Social/emotional Student Issues Survey

Years teaching: _____

Subject taught: _____

Education level: _____

How many students do you have that display social/emotional issues?

How do the behaviors of the students that display social/emotional issues affect the environment around them?

Do you have professional training on dealing with the needs of social/emotional issues? If so, what type of training?

What programs are in place for students that display social/emotional issues?

What interventions have you or other teachers tried to support students that struggle with social/emotional issues?

What is the social worker/administration doing to solve these issues?

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