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Valerie Zelenka
Ft. Hays State University

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Introduction

Sarah Jordan teaches first-grade students in the most ethnically diverse elementary school in the district, where 97% of the children are from economically disadvantaged households. Even though minority students living in poverty are five times as likely to fail academically as their peers (Brozo et al., 2008), in Sarah's class, they are doing remarkably well. Year after year, they excel academically, scoring far above the average on state assessments.

Like Sarah, classroom teachers across the United States implement the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework to teach students to read. However, a study released by the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance (2015) raises questions about the effective implementation of RTI. Specifically, this study reveals that differences in teaching practices may be a key factor in benefits for students from RTI interventions. Would an integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) along with RTI help alleviate the negative effects of social and economic disadvantages and create an environment in which all students consistently reach their highest potential?

Creating an Effective Learning Environment

At the heart of Sarah's approach to academic excellence is social and emotional learning (SEL), which is the process of learning life skills. SEL teaches children to manage emotions and be empathic towards others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and to make responsible decisions. Much research has emerged over the

past decade on the significance of social-emotional development. Most notably, research in brain development, such as the Sousa's How the Brain Works (2011), shows conclusively that emotions affect the brain's ability to learn. Children who feel safe, are valued, and have positive social connections, for instance, are academically more successful because their brains are better able to process and retain new information. Likewise, in a recent publication, Wheeler and Richey (2014) have argued that SEL should be included in interventions for at-risk students because it increases their effectiveness.

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), five core SEL competencies are commonly found in effective classrooms:

Self-awareness. The ability to recognize one's emotions and thoughts as well as their influence on behavior. This includes assessing one's strengths and limitations and processing a sense of confidence and optimism.

Self-management. The ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors effectively in different situations. Self-management includes impulse control, self-motivation, and setting and working toward achieving goals.

Social awareness. The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports.

Relationship skills. The ability to establish and maintain healthy and rewarding relationships. Relationship skills include communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating with others, and negotiating conflict constructively.

Responsible decision making. The ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions based on ethical standards, safety concerns, and social norms. This includes realistically evaluating the consequences of one's actions and respecting the well-being of self and others.

A new expanded model, resembling a house, emerges when including these five competencies. This model supports all students at levels one through three, and provides interventions for at-risk students at level four (See Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Modified multi-tier system of supports mode. This figure shows four levels of student support.

Level 1: Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

Positive teacher-student relationships promote academic performance and development, support school adjustment and motivation, and contribute to students' well-being (Hamre & Pianta, 2005). Even though teachers cannot control all aspects of relationships with students, here is what will help to build a strong foundation:

Model confident and caring behavior. Model confident and caring behavior by displaying desirable and civil behavior that you want students to practice. Listen with empathy and acceptance, and communicate positively and respectfully with all students. Also model collaborative problem solving, enthusiasm for learning, and academic risk-taking.

Set high expectations for students. Encourage students to take ownership of their problems. Avoid punishment to get students to behave. Instead, enforce logical consequences for breaking a rule.

Know your students. Get to know your students, their backgrounds, interests, emotional strengths, and academic levels. Spend time individually with each student, especially

those who are challenging or shy. Just a minute or two a few times a day can have a positive impact.

Level 2: Create a Positive, Supportive Classroom Climate

A positive classroom climate is essential to student learning (Scarlett, Ponte, & Singh, 2009). Teaching life skills amidst academic skills is a key factor when creating a productive classroom climate. To create a positive classroom climate that fosters social-emotional learning and academic achievement:

Plan cooperative learning activities. Curriculum-based projects and learning games designed to promote cooperation support both the academic and social-emotional development of students.

Enhance relationships among students. Enhance relationships among students by not allowing bullying in any form. A classroom must be a place of acceptance and diversity. Plan activities and seating arrangements to promote a network of friendships.

Involve students in making decisions. Involve students in making decisions by scheduling regular class meetings to discuss important issues. This practice creates a predictable, respectful, and safe learning environment that increases academic engagement and decreases challenging behavior.

Level 3: Integrate High Quality Academic and Social-Emotional Instruction

Integrating social-emotional skills into the curriculum (a) increases interest, (b) fosters a positive environment, (c) offers rich academic experiences, and (d) promotes higher-level thinking skills (Dresser, 2012). These cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies should be inextricably connected and fostered simultaneously.

Teach self-assessment and self-reflection. Academic and social-emotional development occurs when students monitor their progress and collaboratively assess how they work together. Teach students how to evaluate their work against performance standards and to identify ways to improve.

Provide balanced methods of instruction. In addition to whole group and small group direct instruction, assign project-based learning activities that require students to learn information independently and solve problems collaboratively. Ask open-ended questions that require students to reflect on their own thinking and on the thinking of their peers. This practice helps students to communicate more effectively and to listen more attentively.

Give guidance and monitor progress. Students occasionally get off task, stuck on a procedure, or have difficulty working collaboratively. For this reason, check in periodically with each group to monitor progress toward their goal.

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Level 4: Intensive Individualized Interventions

When students do not respond to whole-class instruction, provide supplementary and targeted interventions in an individual or small-group setting. Begin by determining what specific interventions are needed and then develop an intervention plan.

Step 1: Identify and analyze the source of the problem. An expression of anger, defiance, or disruptive behavior is a symptom, not the source of the problem. Instead of writing the student off as angry and defiant, look for the possible cause of the behavior. For instance, you may notice that a student's disruptive behavior occurs mostly in the mornings. After asking a few questions, you learn that the student habitually skips breakfast because he is running late for school.

Step 2: Create and implement a concrete plan. Speak with the cafeteria staff to ensure that a breakfast is held for the late arriving student. During the next parent-teacher conference, discuss the importance of breakfast, suggesting that the student have breakfast at home or arrives early enough to get breakfast at school.

Step 3: Evaluate for success. After a week or two, evaluate how well the plan met the goal. If the plan has not proved successful, the problem-solving approach should begin again at Step 1. It may take multiple attempts to find the correct solution, so, stay motivated and keep a positive attitude. The most challenging situations can be very rewarding, although it may not be immediately visible.

Conclusion

The benefits of integrating social-emotional and academic instruction have been well documented (Hamre, & Pianta, 2005; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006; Sousa, 2011; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2004). Students excel academically and experience fewer behavior challenges when teachers accommodate social-emotional and academic needs simultaneously.

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