

December 7, 2021

Theory of Action

HTH GSE

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EDU 670 Inquiry into Practice I: Developing a Theory of Action

SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) Integration

Issues and Focus of Practice & Why It Matters

Social and emotional learning has never been as needed as much as now, especially in education. As we are still dealing with the traumatic experience of COVID-19, it is important that we as educators revisit our mindset regarding the importance of social and emotional learning. According to Jennings & Greenberg (2000), teachers influence their students not only by what they teach, but also by how they relate, teach and model social and emotional constructs, and manage the classroom (as cited in Ee & Lee Cheng, 2013, p. 60).

Weissberg and Elias (1993), stated that people are not able to think clearly when dominated by powerful negative emotions as some emotions (such as sadness and anger) can block learning, while others (such as a sense of well-being, or feeling safe and valued) promote learning (as cited in Ee and Quek, 2013, p. 59). With this in mind, students are looking towards their teachers to provide them with the skills and resources that allow the opportunity to understand and regulate certain emotions. Children's social and emotional abilities are not only strongly associated with their academic skills and their ability to learn and be successful in school, but also their willingness to share their knowledge with their peers (Joseph & Strain, 2003 & Ee & Zhou, 2012, as cited in Ee & Quek, 2013, p. 68). In order to move forward with this work and believe in the importance of SEL integration in the curriculum, there needs to be buy-in from the organization and teachers. According to Ee and Quek (2013), teachers that are not fully convinced of the importance and usefulness of SEL intervention, would not fully implement SEL to make an impact on students (p.66). Based on my current ongoing interactions and conversations with teachers and students here at High Tech High, there is evidence regarding the knowledge of the importance of SEL, but clearly, there is an ask on how to integrate and implement SEL activities in the classroom.

Campus setting- High Tech High, Point Loma

High Tech High (HTH) is a group of K-12 project-based charter schools in San Diego, California, where teachers put students at the center of the learning and ask them to learn through a process of critical thinking, collaboration, ideation, creation, exhibition, and reflection. The Gary and Jerri-Ann High School in Point Loma serves 503 grade 9-12 high school students. We are a lottery-based charter school that takes students throughout the county. We have a diverse student body of lively students from all backgrounds and ability levels. Of those 503 students, 41.6% are classified as Socioeconomically Disadvantaged, 6.6% are classified as English Learners (EL), and 12.1% qualify for Special Education Services (IEP/504). Racially, the school is composed of 32% Caucasian, 5.2% African American, 46% Latinx, 0.6% Native American, Filipino 4%, Pacific Islander 0.2%, Two or More Races 8%, and 5% Asian students. We focus on inspiring projects and weave academics into them. Project-based learning brings wonderful

things out of our students while preparing them for the future. We have an outstanding model that helps all types of students thrive.

Problem Statement: There is a lack of equitable integration of social and emotional learning in the school’s curriculum.

Digging into Root Causes

As stated by Elmi (2020), an effective SEL approach improves the quality of the classroom when it comes to interaction, academic development, motivation to learn, teacher-student engagement through empirical practices, classroom activities with social and emotional competencies, and teacher-student interactions (p. 849).

Successful integration of SEL in curriculum strongly relies on the organization’s views on the exclusivity between social and emotional competencies and its academic curriculum. According to Elias (2006), the school’s vision to adopt SEL school-wide will provide the “missing piece” to the specific set of skills important for success at home, school, and life (as cited in Ee & Quek, 2013, p. 68). What are some barriers or root causes that contribute to the challenges with SEL integration in schools? The fishbone below (Figure 1) was constructed by myself and another colleague at High Tech High (HTH) and informed by research literature and empathy interviews with students, teachers, and other professionals within the organization. We found emergent factors thought to contribute to the lack of SEL effectiveness and its integration in the curriculum: lack of professional learning and workshops, lack of organizational pedagogy on social and emotional competencies, lack of scaffolds to support effective integrations of SEL in the curriculum, and lack of equitable support towards SEL.

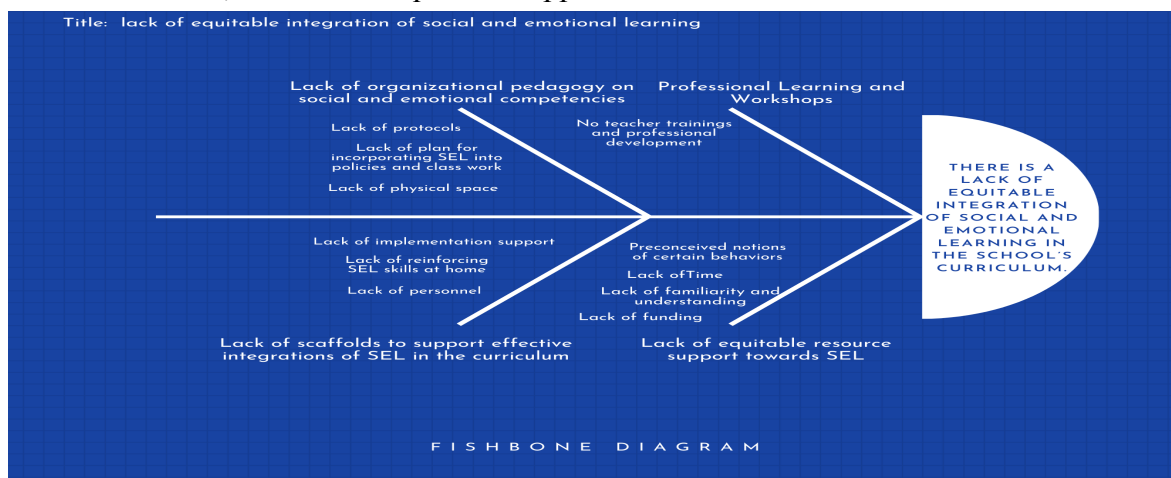


Figure 1. Root Causes contributing to lack of equitable integration of social and emotional learning

Through careful analysis of the data collected from my empathy interviews with teachers (6) and students (8), two root causes emerged as evident to the lack of equitable integration of social and emotional learning in the school's curriculum.

1. Lack of equitable resource support towards SEL
2. Lack of Professional Learning and Workshops

Lack of equitable resource support towards SEL

This area largely contributes to how our SEL is integrated or thought of based on finance investment, community, socio-economic and demographic status, ethnicity, and gender. A key factor that makes SEL integration a challenge is the organization's support of SEL and its approach. According to Mart, Weissberg, and Kendziora (2015), implementing school-wide SEL into action requires a supportive educational system that prioritizes students' social and emotional competence and allocates the necessary resources to develop the conduct and sustain high-quality SEL programming (as cited in Oberle et. al, 2016, p. 2). Currently, at High Tech High, there has been a slight improvement in this area with the hiring of mental health counselors, which in the past, used to be sourced from the outside. According to Mart et al., (2015) it is important for schools to take stock in already established activities that support the development of student SEL, as a way to assess existing needs and resources (as cited in Oberle et al., 2016, p. 12).

Professional Learning and Workshops

Professional learning was a consistent theme and need in the data collected. Some perspectives shared in the interviews were towards how they would have appreciated professional learning opportunities that would educate staff to properly integrate SEL in the curriculum. Currently, there is no serious investment in increasing teachers' knowledge and understanding the importance of the social and emotional competencies of their students. As stated by Zinsser and Dusenbury (2016), the most beneficial school-based SEL programs provide sequential and developmentally appropriate instruction for children, coordinated implementation by program directors, and ongoing relevant professional development for teachers (p.5). How do we know and attend to students' needs? Empathy interviews with students, teachers, and parent groups highlighted a lack of scaffolding as a contributor to the lack of how to integrate SEL in the curriculum. They suggested that some sort of visual aids and videos highlighting how SEL is integrated both in the classroom and in the household would be beneficial. They suggested it would allow a greater understanding of SEL integration and would also create an opportunity to see its effectiveness visually. As stated by Durlak et al. (2011), students exposed to social and

emotional learning (SEL) in school continue to do better than their peers on a number of indicators: positive social behaviors and attitudes and skills such as empathy, teamwork, and academics (as cited in Elmi, 2020, p. 856).

Preliminary Theory of Action

The aim of this project is not only to create an awareness of the critical need for implementing SEL into the academic curriculum but to also attack each barrier with suggested corrective actions or interventions to establish a systematic structure for a successful SEL implementation. With this project, I plan to engage with six teachers at HTH to conduct PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycles where they will test and refine strategies in their classrooms that address the root causes discussed above. The aim is that by the end of the 2021-2022 school year, 100% of teachers who are participating in the PDSAs will feel competent in implementing SEL into their classrooms which will lead to students' higher level of on-task behavior and an increase in positive social behaviors. As stated by Elmi (2020), we need to know what others need and want and how they are likely to respond to what others do not know how we should approach them (p.854).

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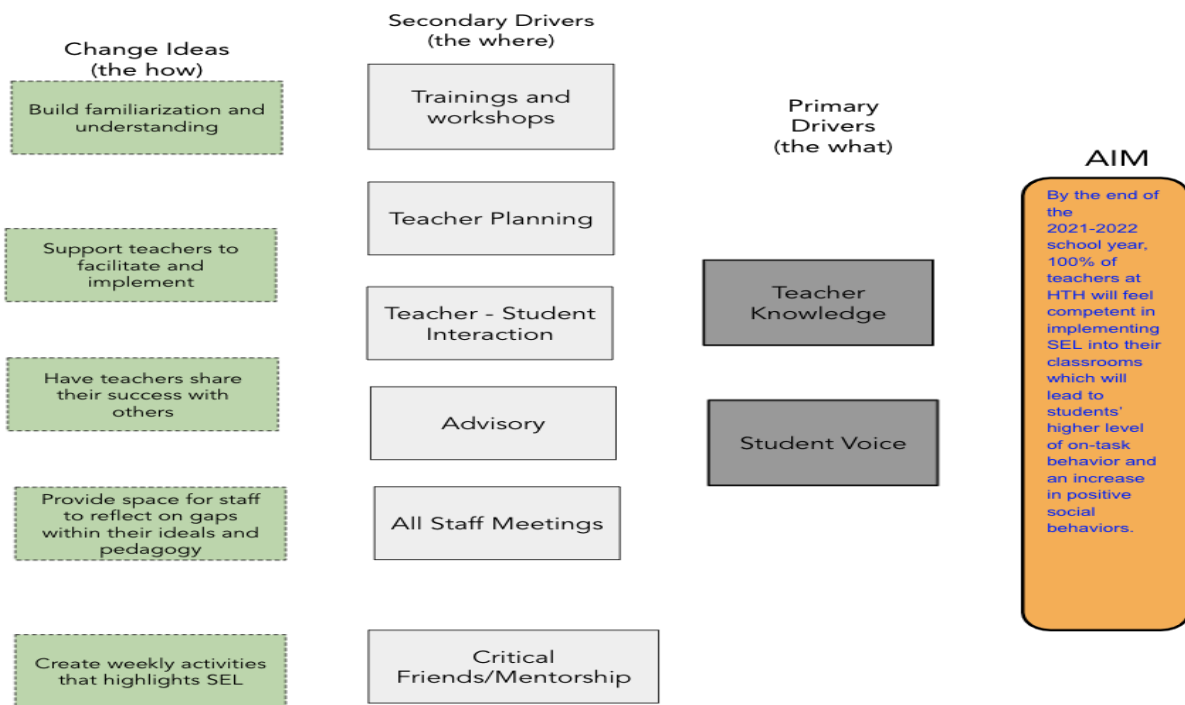


Figure 2. Theory of Action for equitable integration of social and emotional learning in the academic curriculum.

In order for the primary drivers to function and attend to the root cause mentioned in Figure 1, there needs to be buy-in from leadership and the organization. As stated by Mart, Weissberg, and Kendziora (2015), implementing a school-wide integration of SEL requires a supportive educational system that prioritizes students' social and emotional competence and allocates the necessary resources to develop the structures needed to conduct and sustain high-quality SEL programming (as cited in Oberle et. al, 2016, p. 2). The PDSA will focus on four critical drivers to aid with the integration and education of SEL. The primary drivers are:

1. **Teacher Knowledge:** Because teachers are the primary deliverers of SEL programming, their attitudes about and support for SEL can affect the adoption, sustainability, and impact of such programs (*Bowden et al., 2003, as cited in Brackett et al., 2012, p. 220*),
2. **Student Voice:** Students distracted, or even overcome, by emotions that interfere with learning may find it difficult to accomplish simple academic tasks, such as following directions (*Zins et al., 1998; as cited in Kress, 2004, p. 72*),

It is worth mentioning that in order to move forward with this work, it needs to be strategic and there needs to be involvement from all stakeholders (students, staff, teachers, parents) within HTH. Oberle et al. (2016), argues that School-wide SEL programming is most successful and effective when all major stakeholders from the school community help define what social and emotional competence means for their students, and develop a plan to achieve these outcomes based on the school's own priorities, building on their own strengths (p. 11).

In order to improve and create opportunities for not only students to attain authentic and culturally relevant teaching to their learning, but for teachers to develop social and emotional awareness. According to Donahue-Keegan et al. (2019), preservice teachers and new teachers need time and support to develop psychological and emotional resilience, as well as specific strategies to maintain health and efficacy in the face of an increasingly demanding profession (p. 152).

To monitor the progress towards our aim, each teacher will regularly monitor through the school year their students' on-task behaviors, by observing academic progress and achievements, classroom behaviors indicators (engagement, collaboration), and attendance ratio. In addition, I will conduct empathy interviews and regular check-ins with the students and teachers on their thoughts and development in order to assess the effectiveness of integrations and interventions of social and emotional competencies.

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Annotated Bibliography