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Social-Emotional Skills for Early Learning With Preschool Students: A Program Evaluation

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Social-Emotional Skills for Early Learning With Preschool Students:
A Program Evaluation

by
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Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
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Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Tory D. Hagains under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Nova Southeastern University.

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Statement of Original Work

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Tory D. Hagains
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April 30, 2018
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Abstract

Social-Emotional Skills for Early Learning With Preschool Students: A Program Evaluation. Tory D. Hagains, 2018: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: early childhood education, social development, emotional development, preschool children, program implementation

The purpose of this applied dissertation study was to evaluate the implementation of a program entitled Second Step for Early Learning to determine if the program would significantly improve social-emotional competence in young children. The participants included six teachers from a preschool program located in an urban school district in Pennsylvania. Data-collection sources included surveys, interviews, and a review of lesson plans. Data analysis employed both quantitative and qualitative procedures.

Findings from three data sources in combination with training indicated that implementation of the program increased social competence in young children. Research suggests that the overall result of the effectiveness of the implementation of the program was successful. Even at a low level of implementation, the program increased social-emotional competence in the children exposed to the lessons. Positive interactions between students and others, including adults, increased. Teacher knowledge and response to student behavior was positively impacted by program implementation.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

In recent years, early childhood education has become a major concern for policy makers and stakeholders. Zigler, Gilliam, and Barnett (2011) stated, "Since the 1960s, preschool education has grown from an experimental idea from researchers and scholars into one that is widely accepted by leaders in the worlds of policy, economics, and business" (p. 1). Policy makers are now beginning to understand what early childhood professionals have known for a long time. Early childhood education is the foundation for future school success. Zigler et al. reported, "It is widely viewed as perhaps the best means for improving the educational and later-life outcomes of young children, addressing the racial and class gaps in educational achievement, and protecting our societal investment in education" (p. 1). Closing the achievement gap does not begin in second grade it starts before students enter school. Without careful attention to the quality of the emotional and social exchanges a child experiences during the first 2 years of life, any school readiness or achievement gap intervention will be starting in the wrong place (Zigler et al., 2011).

The research problem. Preschool teachers in a high-quality early childhood program of a school located in southeastern Pennsylvania lacked the knowledge or skills to effectively manage challenging behaviors in the classroom. Challenging behavior can be very disruptive to the classroom and cause teachers to lose valuable instructional time. Carter and Pool (2012) stated, "Young children's challenging behavior can impact all aspects of the classroom environment, including relationships (peer-peer, student-teacher), learning, and safety" (p. 315).

In this age of school reform and accountability, educators have lost sight of the

purpose of preschool education. Preschool education is becoming more academic and less focused on social and emotional development. Epstein (2009) stated, "Pressure to perform academically at ever-younger ages adds stress at the very time when experiences that could help children develop coping skills are cut from the curriculum" (p. 3). Social-emotional development is essential to the healthy growth and development of preschool children. Young children need a combination of social-emotional skills and intellectual skills to be successful in preschool. Heckman (2011) stated, "Cognitive and noncognitive ability are important determinants of schooling and socioeconomic success"(p. 4).

The purpose of early childhood education is to provide the foundation for future learning or to ensure all children are ready to learn when they begin formal education. Gilliam (2005) stated, "A high-quality school readiness experience is essential to children starting kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed in school" (p. 13). This foundation is often referred to as school readiness. The Office of Head Start defines school readiness as children possessing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for success in school and for later learning in life. School readiness is more than knowing academic skills. Children need to have the knowledge and skills to help them interact with peers and adults. Children need to understand social cues and be able to regulate their own behaviors to be successful in school. The National Institute for Early Education Research (2005) reported the following:

> To be prepared for school, children also must be excited and curious about learning and confident that they can succeed. They must be able to understand the feelings of others, control their own feelings and behaviors, and get along with their peers and teachers. (p. 1)

Children who are not able to control their emotions and get along with others can

become disruptive and difficult to manage. Teachers spend more time trying to manage challenging behavior than they spend teaching academic skills. Teachers report that teaching young children who exhibit defiant and challenging behavior is the most difficult component of their work (Keat, 2008). Children who display challenging behaviors are often expelled from early childhood programs. According to a study conducted by Gilliam (2005), preschool students are expelled at a rate three times greater than students in kindergarten through Grade 12. The U.S. Department of Civil Rights (2016) released a report detailing alarming statistics related to the race and gender of the students being expelled from early care and education programs. African American children represent 18% of preschool enrollment but 48% of children receiving more than one out-of-school suspensions. Boys represent 54% of enrollment but 79% of children suspended.

Early childhood educational opportunities increase the potential for expulsion increases. The study district receives additional funding each year to expand services to include more children and families eligible for preschool. The expulsion rates for the study district are not as high as the national average due to state and federal policies enforced by district personnel. Providing support to students at risk for expulsion is a problem for the study district. Teachers are struggling with how to accommodate students with behavior issues. Addressing the challenging behavior takes valuable time away from instructional practice. Teaching students the skills they need to self regulate and cope with their emotions is essential to helping teachers maximize instructional time. During administrative team meetings, early childhood field administrators discuss the number of parent complaints regarding suspensions and expulsion they receive. One administrator discussed how behavior problems are overwhelming the teachers and the lack of support

for students and teachers.

Background. The school district in which this study took place is composed of 218 schools: 149 elementary schools, 16 middle schools, and 53 high schools. The total enrollment of students in the district is 134,538. Of the 134,538 students, 14% are students with disabilities, and 9.8 % are English-language learners. In addition to providing services for students in kindergarten through Grade 12, the district provides services to over 9,500 preschool students. The district provides services to children through several early childhood programs (School District of Philadelphia, 2015).

The study site provides services to children through a partnership with the school district. Over the years, the study site has seen an increase in the numbers of children with social-emotional issues not related to developmental delays. The service provider who provides early intervention services to young children focuses primarily on developmental delays and not behavior. The services include special instruction, occupational therapy, speech therapy, physical therapy and nursing or any combination of the services listed (Elwyn, 2016). The director at the study site chose the Second Step for Early Learning (SSEL) program as a resource to help the teachers support students with social-emotional development. The director found that even experienced teachers were becoming overwhelmed with behavior problems. She was concerned that the teachers were feeling defeated and unable to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms.

Audience and stakeholders. The stakeholders included early childhood professionals, parents, school district personnel, and community partners. The stakeholders make decisions that impact early childhood funding, policy and programming and policies related to social-emotional learning which could have an effect on the social-emotional learning programs. As a result of this study, the stakeholders will

see how implementation of the SSEL program affects student outcomes and how it might be utilized to ensure students are receiving the full benefits of the program.

Program. The SSEL model is a social-emotional program designed to teach young children strategies to manage their emotions and help them deal with every day situations. It is a universal classroom-based program designed to increase children's school readiness and social success by building social-emotional competence and self-regulation skills (Committee for Children, 2011a, 2011b). The program was used in six classrooms within the study population. The director at the study site purchased the program to provide teachers with a tool to help students manage student behaviors.

Professional evaluation standards. The evaluation standards defined by the Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation (2014) include the following: (a) utility standards, (b) feasibility standards, (c) propriety standards, (d) accuracy standards and (e) evaluation accountability standards. These standards provide a succinct guideline for ethical program evaluation. The utility standards are designed to meet the needs of the program stakeholders by increasing the value of the evaluation process and products. It is composed of eight components: (a) evaluator credibility, in which the evaluator must be qualified and maintain credibility; (b) attention to stakeholders, in which the program evaluation must include all stakeholders who will be affected by the outcome of the evaluation; (c) negotiated purposes, which encourages consistent negotiations to meet the needs of the stakeholders; (d) explicit values, which requires that evaluations clarify and identify the underlying processes, purposes, and judgments of individual and cultural values; (e) relevant information, which encompasses the identified and evolving needs of the stakeholders; (f) meaningful processes and products, which encourages rediscovering, revising, and reinterpreting of activities, descriptions and

judgments to allow participants to increase their understanding and behaviors; (g) timely and appropriate communicating and reporting, in which evaluations must evolve to meet the demands of multiple audiences; and (h) concern for consequences and influence require evaluations to encourage responsible use while avoiding negative consequences and misuse (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2014).

The feasibility standards are designed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of an evaluation. They are composed of (a) project management, involving the use of effective project management strategies; (b) practical procedures, incorporating procedures that adhere to the way a program operates; (c) contextual viability, which requires that evaluations recognize, monitor, and maintain a balance of cultural and political needs and interests of individuals and groups; and (d) resource use, effective and efficient use of resources (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2014).

The propriety standards encompass the proper and legal aspect of evaluations. The standards consist of (a) responsive and inclusive orientation, which requires evaluations to be responsive to stakeholders and communities; (b) formal agreements, in which evaluations must consider the needs, expectations, and cultural backgrounds of clients and stakeholders; (c) human rights and respect, in which evaluations should be conducted to respect the legal rights and dignity of its stakeholders; (d) clarity and fairness, which necessitate that evaluations are clear and fair; (e) transparency and disclosure, which entail complete descriptions of findings, limitations, and conclusions to all stakeholders; (f) conflicts of interest, which requires evaluations to openly display real or perceived conflicts that may affect the evaluation; (g) fiscal responsibility, which involves an account for expenditures and compliance with fiscal procedures and

processes (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2014).

The accuracy standards are designed to increase the authenticity of evaluation representations, propositions, and findings. Accuracy standards involve the following: (a) justified conclusions and decisions, in which evaluations must justified in the cultures for which they have consequences; (b) valid information, in which evaluations should be valid and serve their intended purpose; (c) reliable information, in which evaluations must provide consistent and reliable information; (d) explicit program and context descriptions, which require that evaluations are well documented and provide adequate detail and scope for evaluation purposes; (e) information management, which is the implementation of a system of collection, review, verification, and storage methods; (f) sound designs and analyses, which call for evaluations to execute sound designs and analysis that are conducive to evaluation process; (g) explicit evaluation reasoning, involving the succinct documentation of evaluation reasoning used from findings, interpretations, conclusions, and judgments; and (h) communication and reporting, which requires that evaluations should implement safeguards to avoid misconceptions, biases, distortions, and errors (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation, 2014).

The evaluation accountability standards support the use of suitable documentation and accountability for the evaluation process. They are composed of (a) evaluation documentation, which requires the evaluator to be responsible for accurate documentation of designs, procedures, data, and results; (b) internal metaevaluation, which necessitates the evaluator to analyze the evaluation design, procedures, information and outcome to ensure accountability; (c) external metaevaluation, which encourages the program evaluation stakeholders, sponsors, clients, and evaluators to support the conduct of external metaevaluation standards (Joint Committee on Standards

for Educational Evaluation, 2014).

Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the use of the SSEL program by early childhood educators to determine if it significantly improves social-emotional competence in young children. Research on the use of social and emotional programs has shown that teaching children social-emotional skills leads to improved social-emotional competence and academic achievement. Social-emotional learning in the classroom is fostered through intentional instruction using an evidence-based program that is integrated into the academic curriculum (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012).

A logic model (see Appendix A) was used to provide a clear understanding of the evaluation of the implementation of the SSEL program. A logic model is a graphic organizer that presents the shared relationships among the resources, activities, outputs and outcomes of a program evaluation. The components of the logic model include information about resources, activities, outputs, and outcomes (Wholey, Hatry, & Newcomer, 2010). In an effort to develop a thorough understanding of the SSEL program, the researcher created a logic model that includes activities, participation, and outcomes.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this applied dissertation, the following terms are defined.

Challenging behavior. This term refers to any behavior interferes with children's learning, development and social interactions. Challenging behavior is harmful to the child and others.

Common core state standards. This term refers to a set of high-quality academic

standards in mathematics and English-language arts or literacy. These learning goals outline what a student should know and be able to do at the end of each grade (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2017).

Developmentally appropriate practice. This term refers to an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education. Its framework is designed to promote young children's optimal learning and development.

Executive function and self-regulation. This term refers to a set of skills that rely on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control.

Head Start early learning outcomes framework. This term refers to a comprehensive the continuum of learning for children from birth through age 5. The framework outlines what children should know and be able to do at each developmental stage.

Head Start performance standards. This term refers to the requirements that all grantees must adhere to in order to fulfill the mission of Head Start. The mission of Head Start is to provide comprehensive high-quality services for children and families. Comprehensive services include school readiness, health, mental health, nutrition, and parent engagement.

High-quality early childhood program. This term refers to refers to a program that has a developmentally appropriate curriculum, knowledgeable and well-trained program staff, comprehensive services that support children's health, nutrition, and social well-being, in an safe environment that respects and supports diversity.

School readiness. This term describes children possessing the skills, knowledge,

and attitudes necessary for success in school and for later learning and life.

Second step for early learning (SSEL). This term refers to a universal, classroom-based program designed to increase children's school readiness and social success (Committee for Children, 2011a, 2011b; Upshur, Heyman, & Wenz-Gross, 2017).

Social-emotional learning. This term refers to the process through which children and adults acquire and apply the knowledge and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions and maintain positive relationships (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012; Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012).

Stakeholders. This term refers to individuals, groups, or organizations that can affect or are affected by the process of an evaluation (Wholey et al., 2010).

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There is an extensive body of research to support the impact of social-emotional learning on student achievement and overall success. The research examined in the literature review focuses on social-emotional development in the early years in relation to school readiness and success beyond preschool. School readiness is more than acquiring literacy and math skills. It includes developing social-emotional skills essential for establishing and sustaining relationships with others (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004).

Best practices in early childhood education are based on theory and practice. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) stated in the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice that developmentally appropriate practice is informed by theory and literature about child development. The theories that influence developmentally appropriate practice are based on child development theories that address all areas of child growth and development. Understanding theories of child development is essential to understanding how to respond to and teach children appropriate behavior.

Theoretical Framework

Erik Erikson's work helps early childhood educators understand how children develop the foundation for social-emotional development and mental health (Mooney, 2000). Erikson's psychosocial theory suggests that children's personalities and social skills develop as a result of their response to their social environment (Herr, 2016). According to Erikson's theory of child development, there are eight stages of development that a human goes through from birth through adulthood. Stages 1 through 3 take place during the early childhood years. According to this theory of child

development, educators play an important role by providing opportunities and environments that enable children to flourish as they move through each stage. Erikson believed that, in the early years of life, patterns develop that influence people's interactions for the rest of their lives (Mooney, 2000).

The first stage of Erikson's psychosocial development is trust versus mistrust, which takes place during the first year of life. During this stage, babies learn to trust themselves and the adults in their lives. This stage is the stage in which babies develop an attachment to familiar adults and look to them for comfort, stability, and continuity of care (Mooney, 2000). Erikson believed that each developmental stage set the foundation for the next stage. The second stage of Erikson's psychosocial development takes place during the second and third year of life and is autonomy versus shame and doubt. During this stage, a child begins to develop a sense of independence without suffering from shame or doubt.

Successful adaptation during this stage fosters a strong sense of self. Children in this stage can temporarily detach from caregivers for short periods of time. Children in this stage will demand to do things independently whenever possible (Mooney, 2000). The final stage of Erikson's psychosocial stages that addresses the early childhood years is initiative versus guilt. Children in this stage are between the ages of 4 and 5. Successful adaptation of this stage is a confident and competent child. Children will be focused and able to complete tasks independently without adult assistance (Mooney, 2000). Encouraging children to complete tasks independently and not focus on mistakes fosters confidence.

Relationship Between Social-Emotional Development and Academic Success

According to research in early childhood, there is a link between social-emotional

development and future academic success. Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, and Greenberg (2011) examined how early emotional skills and cognitive skills interact to influence early academic achievement. Previous studies focused on the broad relationship between social-emotional competence and academic success. The researchers narrowed their focus to study two specific factors that impact early academic success: early emotional knowledge and early attention skills (Rhoades et al., 2011). The researchers included measures from three points to strengthen the study. Data were collected at the preschool, kindergarten, and first-grade level. The researchers found that the results of the study were consistent with the growing body of evidence that suggests social-emotional skills play a key role in academic success. Attention skills were a significant mediator of the association between preschool emotional knowledge and first-grade academic competence, with over half of the effect of emotional knowledge and academic competence explained by attention skills (Rhoades et al., 2011).

Ziv (2013) conducted a study to examine how social information-processing patterns relate to social skills and school readiness in preschool. To date, there have been studies that examined social information-processing and social skills; however, none of the studies included the relationship between social information processing, social skills, and school readiness during the preschool years. Previous social information-processing research had focused almost exclusively on socioemotional developmental outcomes, and this study aimed to examine whether these outcomes also include aspects of school readiness (Ziv, 2013). The researcher collected data at the beginning and end of the preschool year. Several measures were used to collect data over the course of the year. Ziv found that social-cognitive processes are likely to contribute not only to social aspects of school readiness, but also to the academic aspects of this construct. He also

concluded from his research that social information-processing patterns persist in their contribution to children's social behavior in school, thereby impacting later school readiness and academic success.

Arnold, Kupersmidt, Voegler-Lee, and Marshall (2012) examined the relationship between social functioning and academic development in preschool children. The study aimed to add to theory by providing more differentiated assessments of social functioning and academic development. The researchers used a larger sample than what was used in previous studies in order to examine moderating variables. The study's focus on academic development was not limited to preliteracy; it included language and mathematics development. This was a cross-sectional study, and all measures were collected concurrently in the fall. Arnold et al. found a number of significant relationships between social functioning and academic development, providing support for the idea that these relationships begin prior to formal schooling. The researchers found consistencies with previous research regarding the correlation between attention difficulties and academic development. The results provided evidence to support previous studies that suggest that there is a connection between social and academic development that begins before children enter school.

In another study, Torres, Domitrovich, and Bierman (2015) examined the relationship between positive relationships and emotion knowledge as a potential mediator of enhanced achievement in kindergarten. At the time of the study, there were only two studies that used mediation models to describe the developmental processes linking positive interpersonal relationships, emotion knowledge, and academic achievement in early childhood. One of the previous studies experienced limitations due to the cross-sectional design. Torres et al. used a longitudinal design to provide a rigorous

test to determine if preschool gains in emotion knowledge mediate the association between preschool interpersonal relationships and kindergarten achievement.

The researchers used two different measures to assess children's emotion knowledge. Teacher ratings were used to assess positive interpersonal relationships. Findings from this study were consistent with theoretical models that suggest positive relationships with teachers and peers in preschool impact and support emotion knowledge skills. The study also revealed a direct connection between emotion knowledge and academic achievement during the preschool year and through kindergarten. These findings were consistent with the previous cross-sectional research demonstrating the relationship between emotion knowledge, interpersonal relationships and academic achievement (Torres et al., 2015).

Hilferty, Redmond, and Katz (2010) conducted a study on the association between behavior problems, school readiness, and kindergarten achievement among at-risk children living in an urban setting. Poverty, gender, and language were three factors considered in this study. Poverty can have a negative affect on children's cognitive, socioemotional, and physical development. The authors stated, "Children from low-income families often do not experience the supportive conditions that foster their readiness to learn and are disproportionately exposed to harsh physical and social environments" (Hilferty et al., 2010, p. 63). Early behavior problems are often associated with males. Language and gender can also have an impact on school readiness.

Many studies suggest boys exhibit more behavior problems during the early years than girls. Hilferty et al. (2010) found significant differences in skills and outcomes in relation to gender. Boys had lower cognitive skills and more frequent behavior concerns than girls. The population used for the study included children of Latino descent. Child

language status can impact behavior and school readiness. The researchers examined the relationship between language, behavior, and kindergarten performance. The research revealed differences in Spanish-dominant Latino children and English-dominant Latino children. Behavior problems with Spanish-dominant Latino children were unrelated to later school readiness. Higher behavior concerns and lower school readiness were associated with English-dominant Latino children.

Brain Research and Social-Emotional Development

More than 40 years ago, research on brain development suggested that brain growth was most dramatic in the years before children started formal schooling (Gallagher, 2005). Research in neuroscience suggests early experiences help the brain develop and set the foundation for social and emotional development. Children who are socially and emotionally secure are more successful in school and life. The early developing structures of the brain are emotional, and it is upon these emotional foundations that intellectual and language structures grow (Zigler et al., 2011). Understanding how the brain develops has major implications for the field of early childhood education. Educators can use this information to guide them as they strive to provide valuable experiences for children that lead to increased student outcomes.

During the preschool years, the brain's cerebral cortex and the functions that ultimately regulate children's attention and memory are not fully developed, which accounts for some of the limitations in their capacity to reason and solve problems (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Preschool experiences are designed to provide many opportunities in which students will be able to practice the skills necessary to build their capacity for learning. Quality early childhood programs are grounded in research based on developmentally appropriate practice grounded in best practice as it relates to early

childhood. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) stated developmentally appropriate practice is grounded in both research on child development and learning in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness in early care and education.

Gallagher (2005) examined how brain development impacts early childhood. The author summarized key findings from brain research and provided information regarding the impact on the early childhood profession. The author also identified three areas of brain research that support developmentally appropriate practice. The first area of brain development discussed is neural development. Gallagher provided detailed information regarding the growth and development of the brain in the early years of life. Optimal growth and development during the preschool years can be sustained by providing a stimulating environment that engages learners in a variety of meaningful activities (Gallagher, 2005). The author provided suggested practices that support neural development in young children. Preschool teachers must provide activities that engage the senses and provide opportunities for children to actively engage in learning experiences.

The second area of brain research is the study of stress hormones. Understanding how stress hormones affect children is essential to providing quality care to children. Children deal with stress in many different ways. Cortisol is a hormone that increases or decreases when a person is experiencing stress. Hunger, frustration, and separation anxiety are common examples of stress that can increase cortisol levels in young children. Increased cortisol production over a long period is not good and can cause problems with memory and self-regulation (Gallagher, 2005). Early childhood professionals should provide support to children and families to help them cope with common stressors.

Creating a positive classroom climate helps both children and families feel safe. The child feels safe when he or she sees the same caregiver each day. Parents feel good knowing that their child is happy and content while they are away. Gallagher (2005) stated, "Positive emotions should dominate an early childhood classroom climate, and interactions should be characteristically calm and positive" (p. 16). Teachers can support children with higher cortisol levels in the classroom by teaching them how to express their emotions in developmentally appropriate ways and providing alternative solutions for problem solving.

The third area of brain research was brain specialization. Gallagher (2005) explained that, during the first 3 years of life, the right side of the brain grows more rapidly than the left. In fact, the right side of the brain experiences a growth spurt during this stage of development. The author stated, "The right brain is responsible for processing and helping regulate negative emotions and develops rapidly during the first three years of life, learning to regulate emotion plays an extremely important role in early childhood development" (p. 17). Early childhood educators can help children by providing caring environments that support healthy social and emotional development. Early childhood educators provide comfort when children are in distress and use modeling to teach children appropriate behaviors.

Pawlina and Stanford (2011) discussed the importance of helping preschool children develop resiliency and problem-solving skills. Copple and Bredekamp (2009) stated, "Teachers should provide many opportunities for children to learn to collaborate with others and work through ideas and solutions, as well as develop social skills such as cooperating, helping, negotiating, and talking with other people to solve problems" (p. 155). Children face challenges and encounter problems regularly in preschool. Teachers

are responsible for creating environments in which children can learn the skills necessary to cope with everyday challenges. Promoting resilience and problem solving in children as they face challenges helps to build confidence and self-esteem. Building resilience means fostering children's sense of agency and self-efficacy and developing a framework for approaching problems (Pawlina & Stanford, 2011). The authors used information from a book about how adults behave when faced with challenges to guide them as they taught children how to problem solve and build resilience.

Class meetings were used to introduce the concepts in child friendly language. The students analyzed real problems that occurred in the classroom. When children are constantly seeking support from adults or indicating that they are not capable of completing a task, they need guidance. To help children understand resilience, the authors compared it to bouncing like a ball instead of flopping like a beanbag. The terminology helped children understand what it means to be resilient. Putting a positive spin on problem solving helped to create an environment in which the children felt empowered. Pawlina and Stanford (2011) stated, "When children have episodes of successful learning and of overcoming challenges, they gather evidence that they have the power to influence the outcome of a situation" (p. 31). It is important to guide students when they are faced with challenges and provide the tools necessary for healthy social-emotional development as it relates to brain development.

Executive Function and Social-Emotional Development

In this age of distraction, as adults able to remain focused and exhibit self-control during challenging times. The skills that enable one to multitask and maintain self-control are known as executive function. Executive function and self-regulation are a set of skills that rely on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility,

and self-control (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011). These skills begin to develop during the early years and continue to progress through adolescence. Acquiring these skills is one of the most important and challenging tasks of the early years, and the opportunity to build further on these capacities is essential to healthy development through adolescence (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011).

Executive function skills develop over time. By the age of 3, children are able to follow two rules: maintain focus and manipulate information in their heads for short periods of time. As the child grows, it is through experience that he or she develops the skills that enable him or her to solve complex problems and shift attention in more complex ways. Once the foundational capacities for directing attention, keeping rules in mind, controlling impulses, and enacting plans are in place, the subsequent developmental tasks of refining them and learning to deploy them more efficiently can proceed into the adolescent and early adult years as tasks grow increasingly complicate and challenging (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011). Executive function and social-emotional skills are directly related. Children who exhibit behavior problems typically struggle with executive-function skills. Young children who have trouble with impulse control and focus generally display aggressive and confrontational behavior with others (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2011).

Galinsky (2010) described the seven essential life skills every child needs in her book titled *Mind in the Making*. Executive functions develop in the prefrontal cortex of the brain beginning in the preschool years and mature in young adulthood. The executive functions of the brain help one mange attention, emotions, and behaviors to reach goals (Galinsky, 2010). These skills are often referred to as life skills. Each chapter is dedicated

to one of the seven skills. Within each chapter, the author carefully defines the skill in detail and provides suggested strategies to teach the skills to children. Parents as well as other caregivers can use the suggestions to support children as they develop. Although the book is written with children in mind, the strategies can be used for adults as well.

Skill 1. Focus and self-control involve paying attention, remembering rules, and inhibiting one's initial response to achieve a goal (Galinsky, 2010). According to Diamond (as cited in Galinsky, 2010), executive functions require one to use information that is already known to reason and problem solve. These skills are just as important if not more important than IQ as related to children's success. The development of focus and self-control begins in the preschool years. Providing opportunities for children to practice these skills is essential to future success. For young children, focus is being able to position their attention to achieve what they want to achieve (Galinsky, 2010). The ability to pay attention and follow rules are examples of focus and self control for preschool children.

Skill 2. Perspective taking requires inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and reflection (Galinsky, 2010). The ability to understand what someone else feels and thinks helps one engage in relationships with others. One of our main jobs is to teach children to understand the perspectives of others as an essential aspect of learning to live with others (Galinsky, 2010).

Skill 3. Communicating is the skill that extends learning by providing the tools not only to learn but also to share what is learned with others (Galinsky, 2010). Communication is closely related to literacy in that it involves understanding language, speaking, reading, and writing.

Skill 4. Making connections involves sorting, categorizing, and understanding

that one thing can represent another (Galinsky, 2010). This skill begins to develop during the preschool year and continues to improve as the brain matures.

Skill 5. Critical thinking is the ongoing search for legitimate knowledge to guide one's beliefs and actions (Galinsky, 2010). Critical thinking draws on all of the previous skills. Thinking critically requires reflection, reasoning, and communication to analyze the information. The process of critical thinking is very similar to the processes involved in the scientific method. Critical thinking is a higher order skill among the executive functions of the brain (Galinsky, 2010).

Skill 6. The sixth skill involves taking on challenges. The challenges discussed in this chapter refer to the everyday stresses of life. Teaching children to cope with stress helps them to lead more productive successful lives.

Skill 7. Self-directed, engaged learning investigates the idea that children are born to learn. Galinsky (2010) stated, "It is through learning that our minds become attuned, ready to meet whatever life brings" (p. 22).
All seven of the essential life skills draw on the executive functions of the brain and create the foundation for lifelong success.

Ferrier, Bassett, and Denham (2014) explored the relationship between executive function and emotionality. Emotional expression and experience is referred to as emotionality in this study. The study suggested that there is extensive research on executive function and emotional regulation and little research on emotionality and executive function. The goal of the study was to explore the relationship between executive function and emotionality and use an observational rating to assess executive function. The researchers hypothesized that there is an interconnection between executive function and emotionality. Ferrier et al. concluded, "There is significant relation between

preschoolers' emotionality and executive function" (p. 1). The results of the study were consistent with a growing body of literature stressing the importance of nurturing emotional expression and experience during the early years. It was also evidenced that observational measures and rating scales are effective means to assess executive function skills in early childhood.

Social-Emotional Programs

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2012) is the leading organization dedicated to promoting integrated academic, social, and emotional learning for all children preschool through high school. The organization defined social-emotional learning as follows:

> The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, an make responsible decisions (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012, p. 6)

According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2012), social and emotional learning centers on five interrelated competencies. The five competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making are essential to healthy social-emotional development. The five sets of social-emotional learning competencies are important from very early in life but are especially relevant as children begin to spend time with adults outside the home and to socialize with peers (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012). Effective social-emotional programs are evidenced based, well designed, and classroom based, and they address all five of the core competencies for

social-emotional learning (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012).

Hamre, Pianta, Mashburn, and Downer (2012) conducted a study evaluating the impact of the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) curriculum for preschoolers and My-Teaching-Partner professional-development resources on children's social competence. The preschool PATHS program is a comprehensive social-emotional curriculum that teaches students skills to increase social competence. The My-Teaching-Partner professional-development model focuses on teacher-child interactions (Hamre et al., 2012). The model utilizes web-based video exemplars, individualized consultation and video, and detailed feedback to assess student-child interactions and provide focused support to teachers. The researchers used three treatment conditions for the study. The PATHS-High teachers received all of the supports associated with the My-Teaching-Partner model. The PATHS-Low teachers received preschool PATHS and access to the Web-based videos. Teachers in the control group did not receive any supports (Hamre et al., 2012).

Hamre et al. (2012) found a positive correlation between the implementation of the preschool PATHS curriculum and increased levels of social competence. However, there was no significant change in behavior problems. Preschool PATHS is a universal prevention program that focuses on developing social competence, it does not target children with severe behavior problems (Hamre et al., 2012). The researchers collected valuable information regarding the association between implementation fidelity and child outcomes. Teachers who used preschool PATHS with fidelity reported greater gains in children's social confidence (Hamre et al., 2012). The study was not without limitation; there were no direct assessments or observations of children used in this study. All of the

outcome measures were based on teacher report (Hamre et al., 2012). Future studies should include direct assessment and observations of children's social competence.

Whitcomb and Merrell (2012) examined the implementation and effectiveness of the Strong Start K-2 social-emotional curriculum on first-grade students. The Strong Start K-2 curriculum aids to support children that have been exposed to various forms of trauma. Strong Start K-2 lessons teach students to identify various facial, body, and situational cues to identify their emotions and read those of others. Prior to this study, there were two studies that examined the effectiveness of Strong Start on students in kindergarten and Grade 2. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of the Strong Start K-2 on first-grade students' emotion knowledge and management of behavior and emotions (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012).

Strong Start K-2 was implemented in four first-grade classrooms in a large urban school district. One of the goals of the study was to better understand how to best implement the curriculum. It was decided that it would be best to implement the curriculum during the 30-minute block of time the school counselors visited their classrooms. The researchers found that having this dedicated time was with implementation fidelity (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012). Based on the pretest and posttest, Strong Start K-2 had a positive impact on students' social-emotional knowledge and behavior. The authors stated, "Exposure to Strong Start K-2contributed to increased knowledge and accurately labeling of emotions in various situations" (Whitcomb & Merrell, 2012, p. 63). The researchers acknowledged the limitations of the study and made suggestions for future research.

The SSEL program is a product of the Committee for Children (2011a) designed for students in preschool through Grade 8. The program is aligned with high-quality

academic and social-emotional standards that outline what students should know and be able to do at the end of each grade. The SSEL program is aligned with the Head Start performance standards and the Head Start early learning outcomes framework. The SSEL program for kindergarten through Grade 8 is aligned with the common core state standards. Teachers use the SSEL program to implement lessons in an engaging way to teach social-emotional skills and concepts. The SSEL program is designed to help children succeed in school and in life beyond school (Committee for Children, 2011a, 2011b).

In 2000, a study of the SSEL program involving 56 preschool and 53 kindergarten children residing in public housing developments of Chicago showed significant social-emotional knowledge and significant decreases in problem behaviors. The teachers implemented the program once or twice a week over the course of 28 weeks. The study used child interviews, teacher ratings, and behavioral observation to assess the impact of the Second Step program had on children. All three measures were administered pretest and posttest. Analysis of posttest results indicated that students gained knowledge in identifying facial cues and feelings. Kindergarten children scored higher on the interview than preschool children. The teacher ratings analysis indicated a decrease in problem behavior in preschool children and an increase in kindergarten children. The behavior observation analysis was the reverse of the teacher rating analysis (McMahon, Washburn, Felix, Yakin, & Childrey, 2000). A study conducted in 2012 examined the implementation of an adapted SSEL program in two preschool centers over the course of 3 years. The 25 lessons of 15 minutes each were delivered a minimum of 4 days a week over the course of each year. Measures used included baseline classroom characteristics, lesson fidelity, and completion and teacher satisfaction. The results indicated that, in

Year 1 and 2, teachers completed 88% of the lessons with an increase to 95% in Year 3. Teachers were satisfied with the improvement in children's social competence and embraced continued use.

Evaluation Framework

Program evaluations in education became popular in the 1960s as the United States sought to reform curriculum and instruction. Early evaluations compared student learning with new curricula to that of students using the traditional curricula. The process of determining what and how to evaluate most effectively led to the development of evaluation models in the 1970s and 1980s. The new evaluation models were aimed at projects designed to reform teacher education and how students learned mathematics. Kirkpatrick's training-evaluation model was first introduced in 1959 and later revised in 1975. The model focuses on training and has taken on several revisions over time. Kirkpatrick's model is composed of four levels. The early levels can work alone or help to support the higher levels.

The goal of the first level is to assess the reactions to the learning experience. The goal of the second level is to determine what was learned and how it has impacted the learner as a result of the training program. The goal of the third level is to determine if there is a transfer of training. The evaluator seeks to determine if the learners are now using this training on the job to improve their skills and work performance. The goal of the fourth level is to determine if the training produces final results. Levels 3 and 4 are the most challenging to conduct. If there is not a transfer of training in Level 3, there are no results for Level 4.

Peter Rossi along with his colleagues developed Rossi's five-domain evaluation model in the late 1970s. Rossi's models uses five evaluation domains that can stand alone

or work together in an evaluation. This evaluation model is designed in such a way that it can be tailored to meet the needs of a program. The stakeholder and evaluator determine the needs by examining the type of program, resources, and any local concerns. The first domain examines if there is a need for the program by conducting a needs assessment. The second domain is described as a theory assessment, which examines whether or not the program is based on sound theory and practice related to educational practices and to determine if it will work in for the stakeholders. The third domain seeks to examine implementation of the program. The fourth domain examines the impact of the program on the intended targets. The fifth domain is an efficiency assessment to determine if the program was cost effective.

The evaluation model used for this program evaluation was the context-input-process-product (CIPP) model based on research by Daniel Stufflebeam. The CIPP evaluation model was originally developed by Stufflebeam (1971) as a means to systematically provide timely evaluative information for use in decision making. Thus, use of the CIPP model is intended to facilitate educational improvement through a proactive approach to evaluation (Stufflebeam, 1971). The CIPP evaluation model was an appropriate evaluation model for this study due to how the CIPP components take into account the complex nature of educational programs.

The CIPP model focuses on program improvement as well as the complex and sometimes dynamic nature of educational programs (Frye & Hemmer, 2012). The study site receives funding from various resources and provides services to children from diverse backgrounds, making it a dynamic program. Stufflebeam (1971) based the CIPP model on the definition of evaluation as a systematic, continuing process. Based on this definition, he identified the three basic steps of the evaluation process: delineating,

obtaining, and providing. From those three steps, Stufflebeam developed four kinds of evaluation: context, input, process, and product.

The CIPP approach to evaluation is composed of four corresponding sets of evaluation studies. The CIPP model of evaluation is well suited for the complex, ever-changing nature of education programs. It can address the planning, implementation, and assessment phases of an education program (Frye & Hemmer, 2012). A CIPP context evaluation study is often used in the planning stages of a new program. An assessment of strengths and weaknesses may be used to identify program goals and priorities. A CIPP input evaluation study identifies and assesses potential approaches to an educational need. A CIPP process evaluation study is used to assess the implementation of a program. A CIPP product evaluation study is used to identify and assess the program outcomes. The outcomes can be intended or unintended, positive or negative (Frye & Hemmer, 2012). For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the process and product components of the CIPP model. The evaluation of the SSEL program can provide information to families, early childhood programs, and states looking for strategies to help students struggling with behavior problems related to social-emotional issues.

Summary

Research indicates that effective implementation of social-emotional programs has a significant impact on student social competence and academic achievement. A meta-analysis of 213 school-based social-emotional programs indicated participants demonstrated significantly improved social-emotional skills, attitudes, and behavior, as well as an 11-percentile-point gain in academic performance (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011). The purpose of this study was to evaluate the use of the SSEL program by early childhood educators to determine if it significantly improved

social-emotional competence in young children.

Research Questions

The following research questions were established to guide this applied dissertation:

1. How do teachers implement the SSEL program with fidelity?

2. How does implementation of the SSEL program improve teacher knowledge and skills related to managing challenging behavior?

3. How does the implementation of the SSEL program result in increased knowledge of social-emotional skills in preschool students?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Program

The SSEL program is a social-emotional curriculum developed by the Committee for Children (2011a). The program for preschool through Grade 8 is a universal, classroom, and research-based program designed to provide students with essential skills to be successful in school and life by promoting social-emotional competence and self-regulation (Committee for Children, 2011a, 2011b). The SSEL program promotes the development of self-regulation skills and improved participation in learning through its focus on skills for learning. The SSEL social-emotional program is divided into three kits. The early learning kit is designed for use in preschool classrooms. The elementary kit is designed for students in kindergarten through Grade 5. The newly developed middle school program is designed to be used with students in Grades 6 through 8 (Committee for Children, 2011b). All program kits include lesson plans and activities designed to engage students in interactive lessons that promote social-emotional competence and self-regulation. For the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on the early learning kit.

The SSEL program supports the development of four crucial areas of social-emotional competence: empathy and compassion, emotion management, friendship skills, and problem solving. These skills provide the foundation for future success in school and life (Committee for Children, 2011a). The SSEL is aligned with the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (2012) core social-emotional competencies. The program is composed of five units designed to teach self-regulation and social-competence through brief, intentional, developmentally appropriate activities and games (Committee for Children, 2011a).

Teachers use the five units to guide children as they learn to practice and apply

social-emotional competence and self-regulation skills to everyday situations over the course of 28 weeks. The first unit focuses on four skills: listening, focusing attention, self-talk, and being assertive. In the second unit, students learn how to identify and label emotions. Emotional management is the third unit. Students learn to cope with control their emotions in stressful situations. The fourth unit, friendship skills and problem solving, teaches students how to solve interpersonal problems with others and how to sustain social relationships. The final unit is a review of the first four units with lessons that support the transition from preschool to kindergarten (Committee for Children, 2011a).

The program is composed of four core program components: weekly theme activities, brain-builder games, reinforcing concepts and skills, and engaging families (Committee for Children, 2011a). The weekly theme lessons are introduced each week with a unit card. Unit cards are weekly lesson plans used to implement the program. The SSEL program's early learning kit contains weekly theme cards, a teaching materials notebook, a compact disc, posters, feeling and rules cards, puppets, and take-home activities and letters. Each unit contains curriculum connections to integrate the skills and concepts within the other content areas. In addition to the kit, there are online resources for teachers to use to help them implement the program with fidelity (Committee for Children, 2011a, 2011b).

Participants

Participants in this study consisted of teachers from a federally funded preschool program in the district implementing the SSEL program for early learning. For the purpose of this study, all data collected and participating teacher information were deidentified. Participants for the study were selected through convenience sampling. In

convenience sampling, the researcher selects participants who are available or can be recruited to participate in the study (Huck, 2008). Creswell (2008) stated, "In convenience sampling, there may be limitations; however, the sample can provide valuable information to answer research questions and hypotheses" (p. 233).

The teacher participants in this study were highly qualified, as outlined in the Head Start Act of 2007, which states that at least 50% of Head Start teachers have a baccalaureate or advanced degree in early childhood education or a baccalaureate or advanced degree and course work equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education, with experience teaching preschool-age children. The highly qualified teachers of the study had many years of experience. There were six classrooms that provided preschool services to children between the ages of 3 and 5 in the study center. The teacher participants for the study were selected from these classrooms. One of the classrooms provided services to 3-year-olds only. All of the other classrooms had a combination of children ranging from 3 to 5 years of age. Of the six preschool teachers selected for the study, 16.67% held a master's degree, 66.67% held a bachelor's degree, and 16% held an associate's degree and would complete a bachelor's degree program in May 2018. One of the teachers had been teaching for over 30 years. The other teachers had between 4 and 25 years of teaching experience. All six teacher participants selected for the study were African American females.

Evaluation Model

The CIPP model of evaluation is a "comprehensive framework for guiding formative and summative evaluations of programs, projects, products, and institutions, and systems" (Stufflebeam, 2011, p. 2). The model is composed of four components: context, input, process, and product. For the purpose of this study, the researcher used the

process and product components to answer the research questions. In formative

evaluations, the question that is asked in a process evaluation is as follows: Is it being

done? Process evaluations assess implementation and performance as well as explain

outcomes. Product evaluations identify outcomes to gauge success. Product evaluations

seek to answer the following question: Is it succeeding?

Instruments

Research Question 1 addressed the process component of the CIPP evaluation

model. The question was answered using a teacher-implementation survey and a lesson-

plan checklist (see Appendix B). Research Questions 2 and 3 addressed the product

component of the CIPP evaluation model, and the research questions were answered with

teacher interviews.

Teacher-implementation survey. In order to answer Research Question 1 (How

do teachers implement the SSEL program with fidelity?), the researcher employed a

teacher-implementation survey developed by the Committee for Children for the SSEL

program. The survey collected information about program implementation as experienced

by those teaching the skills and concepts outlined in the curriculum (Committee for

Children, 2011a). The survey is consistent with content and face validity as it measures

implementation of the SSEL program. Face validity identifies whether the instrument

appears to measure what it claims to (McLeod, 2014). Creswell (2008) defined content

validity as "the extent to which the questions on the instrument are representative of the

possible questions that a researcher could ask about the content or skills" (p. 172).

The researcher converted the survey into an online format for ease of use for

teachers. The survey was utilized at the beginning of the study to examine

implementation experiences during the implementation term. The survey contained 20

survey items divided into three categories. The first category of Items 1 to 12 included items relating to preparing to implement the program. The second category of Items 13 to 19 included items relating to implementation supports. The last category involved Item 20, which was related to monitoring student outcomes. Participants answered each item using a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*).

In order to ensure the validity of the implementation survey, the researcher incorporated the use of two techniques: triangulation and member checking. Merriam (1998) referred to internal validity as matching the research findings with reality. Are the findings consistent with what really is? Triangulation and member checks are two strategies used in qualitative research to increase the validity of findings (Merriam, 1998). Triangulation uses multiple sources of data as evidence to support themes. This process ensures accuracy as the information is obtained from multiple sources and individuals (Creswell, 2008). The process used by researchers to check their findings with participants in a study to determine accuracy is known as member checking. Taking the preliminary analysis back to some of the participants and asking them if the interpretation presented in the study is accurate is member checking (Merriam, 1998).

Lesson-plan checklist. To answer the first research question, the researcher also performed an analysis of teachers' lesson plans using a lesson-plan checklist to determine if teachers incorporated the SSEL program. The researcher collected and reviewed teachers' lesson plans weekly over the course of the study. The lesson plans were analyzed to determine if SSEL weekly theme activities were incorporated into weekly lesson plans. Each thematic unit included seven activities to be taught over the course of the week.

Teacher interviews. To answer Research Question 2 (How does implementation

of the SSEL program improve teacher knowledge and skills related to managing challenging behavior?) and Research Question 3 (How does the implementation of the SSEL program result in increased knowledge of social-emotional skills in preschool students?), the researcher conducted teacher interviews (see Appendix C) to evaluate teacher knowledge and skills related to managing challenging behavior and to determine if implementation of the SSEL program resulted in increased knowledge of social-emotional competence in preschool students. The researcher selected interviews to gain a better understanding of teacher experiences as they related to implementation of the SSEL program. Creswell (2008) stated, "One-on-one interviews are ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably" (p. 226). The researcher contacted the center director to schedule the interview time and date.

The interviews were approximately 20 to 30 minutes and were audio recorded to increase data reliability. The researcher contacted the teachers via email to confirm the scheduled date. Deidentifying teacher names ensured teacher confidentiality was be maintained. In addition, to ensure reliability and validity, a team of prekindergarten instructional specialists reviewed the teacher interview questions to determine if the questions met the criteria for establishing if teachers were implementing the SSEL program with fidelity. A prekindergarten instructional specialist is an expert former teacher who provides instructional support to teachers to improve all aspects of the early childhood program. The researcher asked questions related to implementation of the program. Participants were asked to discuss professional development they received to support implementation. In another question, participants were asked to describe the process of implementation.

Procedures

Design. This program evaluation reviewed the process and product of the SSEL

program and employed a triangulation mixed-methods design. Creswell (2008) stated,

"The triangulation design includes the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data

simultaneously, with the purpose of converging and integrating data" (p. 573). For the

purpose of this study, a mixed-methods design was used to answer the research questions

utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative data included an analysis

of the implementation survey and lesson plan checklist. The qualitative data consisted of

an analysis of the teacher interviews. Mixed methods may be used as a way to triangulate

interviews and survey (Creswell, 2008).

Data collection. The researcher collected both quantitative and qualitative data to

answer the research questions**.** The quantitative data were gathered through the teacher-

implementation survey and lesson-plan checklist. The qualitative data were gathered

through teacher interviews.

Teacher-implementation survey. Data collection for this study occurred during

the 2017-2018 school year. The preliminary step in data collection involved the

electronic distribution of the implementation survey via email to teachers. A link to

Google forms survey was sent to participants via personal email during the 2017-2018

school year. As required by the Institutional Review Board, the researcher provided each

teacher with a participation letter prior to completing the survey. Teachers who did not

complete the survey received an email reminder after 2 weeks and again 3 days prior to

the close of the survey. For the purpose of this study, survey results were deidentified.

Lesson-plan checklist. The researcher conducted a content analysis of teacher

lesson plans using a lesson-plan checklist. Lesson plans were analyzed for curriculum

implementation, concepts and objectives, weekly theme activities, songs, practice opportunities, curriculum connections, and recommended books. The researcher contacted teachers via personal email to schedule a weekly time to review their lesson plans over the course of the study, collecting one lesson plan per week.

Teacher interviews. The researcher conducted interviews to evaluate teachers' implementation of the SSEL program. As required by the Institutional Review Board, the researcher provided each teacher with the adult consent form prior to the teacher interview. The researcher contacted the center director to schedule interviews. Teacher interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participating center. The interviews were 20 to 30 minutes in length. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to increase the reliability of data. Interview responses were deidentified.

Data analysis. Data collected from the implementation survey were analyzed using quantitative research methods. The implementation survey provided descriptive statistics on teacher implementation of the SSEL program using a Likert-type scale. The researcher determined the average scores by determining median, mode, and frequencies of the survey items. The researcher analyzed the data from the lesson-plan checklist using descriptive statistics to determine the extent to which teachers were implementing the program with fidelity. The researcher interpreted the data from the interviews using qualitative methods for analyzing and interpreting data. Following the steps outlined in the qualitative process of data analysis, the researcher utilized notes and recordings from the interviews. The researcher transcribed and read through the data to get a sense of the material. Creswell (2008) stated that qualitative researchers first collect data and then prepare the information for analysis. The analysis consists of developing a sense of the data and using coding to develop themes about a central phenomenon.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this evaluation was to determine if implementation of the SSEL program would significantly improve social-emotional competence in young children. This program evaluation used the CIPP evaluation model. The process and product components of the model were used to answer the research questions of this study. The process component of the CIPP model was the basis for Research Question 1 (How do teachers implement the SSEL program with fidelity?). The product component of the CIPP model was used to answer Research Question 2 (How does implementation of the SSEL program improve teacher knowledge and skills related to managing challenging behavior?) and Research Question 3 (How does the implementation of the SSEL program result in increased knowledge of social-emotional skills in preschool students?

Participant Demographics

Six female teachers participated in the study. Interview Question 1 collected demographic information. The demographic information collected from Interview Question 1 revealed that the six teachers had a range of 4 to over 30 years of teaching experience (see Table 1). Teacher A and Teacher E have been teaching less than 5 years. Teacher C has been teaching for 8 years; however, this is her first year as a preschool teacher. Prior to teaching preschool, Teacher C taught school-age children in the after-school program. Teacher A has a master of science degree in early childhood education. Teachers B, C, D, and F have bachelor's degrees in early childhood education or a related field. Teacher E has an associates of arts degree in early childhood education and will have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education by the end of the current school year. All six teachers were classified as early childhood teachers and met the requirements to teach preschool students (see Table 2).

Table 1

Teaching Experience of Sample

Teaching experience	Frequency
1 to 8 years	3
15 years	1
25 years	1
38 years	1

Table 2

Educational Experience of Sample

Highest degree earned	Frequency
Associate's degree	1
Bachelor's degree	4
Master's degree	1

Findings for Research Question 1

To answer Research Question 1, the researcher used two instruments, an implementation survey and a review of teachers' lesson plans. Findings represent the analysis from reading and coding participants' responses to the various data collection instruments.

Teacher-implementation survey. Participant responses to the survey items are summarized in Table 3. The survey items were grouped into three categories. Survey Items 1 to 12 were designed to address preparation-related program implementation. Survey Items 13 to 19 were designed to address support received related to program implementation. Survey Item 20 addressed monitoring how implementation impacted

students. The Committee for Children for the SSEL program developed all of the items.

Participants were asked to respond to each item using a Likert-rating scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Table 3

Results for Survey Items 1 to 12

Survey item	Teacher					
	A	B	C	D	E	F
1. I understand the goals and objectives of the program.	5	5	3	5	5	4
2. I am committed to helping my children achieve the goals of the program.	5	5	4	5	4	5
3. I am aware of the overall implementation plan for my setting.	5	5	4	5	4	4
4. I understand my role in the implementation process.	5	5	4	5	4	4
5. I know which implementation tasks I am responsible for and how to carry them out.	5	5	4	5	5	4
6. I have or know how to get the materials I need to teach or reinforce program skills and concepts.	5	5	4	5	5	3
7. I have access to all the equipment I need to implement the program.	5	5	5	4	4	4
8. I have adequate time to prepare to teach the weekly theme activities.	5	4	5	4	4	5
9. I have scheduled the weekly theme activities into my weekly plan.	5	5	5	4	5	4
10. I believe it is important to implement the program fully.	5	5	5	4	4	3
11. I understand how I can help monitor the implementation process.	5	4	4	4	2	3
12. I feel adequately trained to deliver the program's weekly theme activities.	5	5	5	4	4	3

Preparation. Survey Items 1 to 12 were designed to address how well teachers were prepared to implement the SSEL program. Items 1 and 2 assess teacher

understanding of the goals and objectives of the program as well as their commitment to helping students achieve the intended goals. Five of the six teachers indicated that they understood the goals and objectives of the program and were committed to helping children achieve those goals. Teacher C indicated a 3 on the Likert scale for understanding the goals and objectives of the SSEL program. The same teacher indicated that she was committed to helping students achieve the goals of the program.

Survey Items 3 to 11 assessed teacher understanding related to the implementation process and how the activities and materials support effective implementation. All six teachers indicated understood the implementation plan and their responsibilities related to implementing the program. Five of the six teachers indicated that they knew how to get the materials or already had the resources necessary to implement the program. Teacher F indicated that she was not sure how to get the materials. The next item addressed access to the equipment needed to implement the program and all six teachers indicated that they had access to a compact-disc player and program related books needed to implement the program.

When asked if teachers had adequate time to implement the program, all six teachers indicated that time was not an issue. Each teacher indicated having sufficient time to plan the activities and incorporate them into their weekly lesson plans. Teacher F was uncertain about the importance of full implementation. Item 11 asked teachers if they understood how to monitor the implementation process and it received a range of answers. Four teachers indicated they did understand how to use the tools to monitor implementation. Teacher F was uncertain, and Teacher E indicated that she did not understand. Item 12 asked teachers if they feel adequately trained to implement the SSEL program. Again, Teacher F indicated the she did not feel adequately trained to deliver the

weekly theme activities by rating the item a 3 on the Likert scale.

     Support. Survey Items 13 to 20 (see Table 4) address the supports necessary to implement the program effectively. All six teachers indicated that they felt confident in their abilities to reinforce the weekly themes using the Using Skills Every Day section of theme guide. The teachers also indicated that they knew how to access resources and contact support staff to improve teaching practice. The responses varied slightly when addressing implementation of specific activities. Four of six teachers indicated that they do the skill practice activities and reinforce using skills every day with their students. Teacher E stated that she does not do skill practice with her students, and Teacher F rated the item with a 3 on the Likert-scale.

Table 4

Results for Survey Items 13 to 20

	Teacher					
Survey item	A	B	C	D	E	F
13. I feel confident in my ability to reinforce weekly theme content as explained in the using skills everyday sections.	4	5	5	4	4	4
14. I know where and how to get resources to help improve my teaching.	5	4	5	5	5	5
15. I have adequate implementation support from individuals or from online resources.	5	4	5	5	5	5
16. I teach the weekly themes in order.	5	4	4	5	4	5
17. I do the skill-practice activities with my children.	5	5	4	5	2	3
18. I reinforce the content as explained in the using skills every day sections.	5	5	4	5	3	3
19. I send home links to my children's families.	5	4	4	5	1	5
20. I believe my students are benefiting from the program.	5	5	5	5	4	5

Teachers E and F also stated that they may or may not do the section on using skills every day with their students by rating the item with a 3 on the Likert scale. Item 19 asked teachers if they send the home-links letter home with children and families. Teacher E was the only teacher of the six teachers who did not send the home-links letters home with children and families. The last item asked teachers if they believe their students are benefiting from the program, and all six teachers agreed that the children are indeed benefiting from the program. Teacher F answered six of the 20 questions with a 3 on the Likert-scale. Her answers varied the most of all six teachers. Teacher E rated four items with a 3 or below on the Likert scale.

Lesson-plan checklist. Lesson plan analysis of all six teachers reflected teacher documentation of the SSEL program on the lesson plans. However, the teachers did not identify details related to the songs, games, and other items used to enforce the activities for each day. Each weekly theme is divided into 5 days. Each day, the teachers do a different activity. On Day 1, the teacher introduces the puppet script, song, and brain builder. The song and brain builder are to be incorporated throughout the week. On Day 2, story and discussion, the teacher uses a color photo and a brief story to engage students in a discussion related to the weekly theme. Days 3 and 4 involve skill-practice activities; these activities give children a chance to practice the skills they have been learning all week. Finally, Day 5 is a read-aloud activity related to the weekly theme.

An analysis of the lesson plans reflected that five of the six teachers documented the day and the activity that corresponded with that day on their lesson plans weekly. Teacher B listed the activities and songs for 2 of the 4 weeks she submitted lesson plans. Teacher C listed the title of the weekly theme each day for 5 days on her lesson plans. Teacher A and Teacher D were the only two teachers who completed the weekly themes

in order as intended. Teacher C completed the weekly themes in order; however, she spent 2 weeks on each theme. Instead of covering six weekly themes, Teacher C completed three weekly themes. Teacher E did not complete the weeks in order or do all of the required activities daily as indicated on the weekly theme card. Over the course of 6 weeks, Teacher E completed five themes. Teacher F submitted lesson plans for 5 of the 6 weeks and only covered two themes for 5 weeks.

Findings for Research Questions 2 and 3

To answer Research Questions 2 and 3, the researcher conducted teacher interviews. Interview Question 2 asked the teachers to rate their comfort level related to teaching social-emotional skills on a scale of 1 (*extremely uncomfortable*) to 5 (*extremely comfortable*). Teachers A, D, and E rated themselves a 5. Teachers B and C rated themselves a 4. Teacher F, who has been teaching the longest and rated herself a 3.5, indicated that she was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable.

Professional development. Interview Questions 3 to 6 asked teachers to reflect on the professional development they received to support implementation of the SSEL program. Teachers B, D, E, and F received group training prior to implementation along with their teaching assistant. Teachers A and C received one-on-one support from the instructional specialist as they were not available for the group training. All of the teachers felt as though the professional development was well delivered and comprehensive. The strengths of the professional development were the hands-on experiences, the demonstration of how to use the materials, the overview of the entire program, and identification of additional resources. When asked to identify weaknesses of the professional development, all of the teachers responded that there were no weaknesses. One suggestion for improvement was made by Teacher B, as she would

have liked to seen the join-in-and-sing compact disc incorporated into the training.

Program-related questions. Interview Questions 7 to 9 were program-specific questions. Interview Question 7 asked teachers to reflect on how use of the program has expanded their knowledge of social-emotional development. Teachers feel as though they are able to understand children better, and as a result, their response to student behavior is different than before. The answer the researcher heard from teachers was that the program increased student knowledge by giving them the vocabulary to express and label their emotions. Interview Questions 6 and 7 focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the program. One of the most significant strengths of the program, as described by all six teachers, is the ease of use. Having a script made it easy, as it was their first time using a social-emotional learning program. The puppets and story cards kept students engaged. The posters of feelings and fair ways to play were excellent visuals to aid children, as they learned to new skills to address their social-emotional needs.

Teacher B stated that using the puppets and role-playing made common classroom problems more objective and took the focus off of the children. The children liked solving problems of other fictional characters. There were only two identified weaknesses. Teachers C and E found that finding the right time to incorporate the program into their day was a challenge. The activities do not take more than 15 minutes, so the challenge became finding a time in the schedule in which students would not be sitting for too long. For example, right after circle time would not work because circle time is 15 minutes, and children would have to sit for a total of 30 minutes. Interview Question 8 asked teachers to explain how they implement the program. The teachers told the researcher they implement the program daily at the same time every day, and they follow the days as outlined on the weekly theme cards.

Interview Question 9 asked teachers to reflect on program effectiveness. Teachers A, B, and C answered that the program was effective. They noticed the children were a lot less physical with one another. Teacher A said that her students take more responsibility for solving problems on their own. The final interview question asked teachers if the resources helped them to implement the program effectively. The teachers all agreed that program resources made implementation very easy, as the kit includes weekly theme cards, visuals, puppets, posters, and books. The one resource that was not used consistently by half of the teachers involved the home-links activities. Teacher A and Teacher D were the only teachers to give home links to parents weekly. Teacher C sends the home-links letter home occasionally.

Summary

Research Question 1. The first research question addressed the process component of the CIPP program evaluation model and, more specifically, how teachers implement the SSEL program with fidelity. The teacher-implementation survey and lesson-plan checklist were used to answer this question. Implementation with fidelity requires an understanding of how to use the materials to meet the goals and objectives of the program. The survey results indicated that Teachers A, B, and D were confident about their ability to implement the program with fidelity. These teachers were committed to helping students achieve the goals and understood how to use the materials to teach the weekly theme activities. Teacher C indicated that she was committed to implementation, even though she was somewhat uncertain of the goals and objectives of the program.

Survey results for Teachers E and F suggested a lower level of commitment to implementation than the other teachers. Both teachers stated that they did not understand how to use the suggested resources to monitor the implementation process. Teacher E

stated that she does not do the skill and practice activities with her students. Teacher F rated the same statement with a 3 on the Likert scale. Both teachers answered with a 3 on the Likert scale for reinforcing content as explained in the section on using skills every day. Each teacher received a full unopened kit; however, Teacher F indicated that she was unsure of how to get the required materials to reinforce skills and concepts. Teacher F also indicated that she was not certain if the training she received prepared her to sufficiently deliver the weekly theme activities.

Both of those answers are interesting to the researcher because Survey Item 14 asked if teachers know how to utilize resources to improve their teaching either from support personnel or with the SSEL online resource. The answer was *strongly agree*. Both of the suggested resources could support Teacher F with acquiring materials or additional training. Teacher F's low level of commitment to implementation was evident in her answer to Survey Item 10 (I believe it is important to implement the SSEL program fully). She answered the item with a 3 on the Likert scale, suggesting that she neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement.

The lesson-plan analysis was consistent with the survey results for Teachers A and D. Their lesson plans indicated implementation of the program every day for the duration of the study. Teacher B completed a total of 4 weeks of lesson plans. She explained that, due to snow days and holidays, the lesson plans were extended to cover two weeks at a time. During the 6 weeks of the study, two themes were documented on the lesson plans. Week 16, managing disappointment, was represented on 3 weeks of lesson plans and Week 19, fair ways to play, was represented on the fourth week. According to her explanation, three weekly themes should have been implemented during that time period.

Teacher C followed a similar course of implementation, as did Teacher B. There was no explanation as to why Teacher C taught only three themes over the course of 6 weeks. Teacher C taught Week 14, strong feelings, for 2 weeks, Week 15, naming feelings, for 3 weeks, and Week17, managing anger, for 1 week. Teacher C did not write any details on her lesson plan. Each day, instead of writing the activity, she wrote the title of the weekly theme. The lesson plans were vague and did not provide any details pertaining to the weekly activities taught daily. The lesson-plan analyses for Teachers B and C are inconsistent with the survey results. The survey results indicated that the teachers know and understand their responsibilities as they related to program implementation. Teachers B and C rated all but one item related to understanding implementation and resources with a 4 or 5 on the Likert scale. When asked if she understood the goals and objectives of the program, Teacher C answered with a rating of 3 on the Likert scale. The survey results would suggest the teachers were ready to implement the program fully. The lesson-plan analysis clearly demonstrates partial implementation.

Teacher E completed 5 weeks of lesson plans. The weekly themes were not completed in order. Teacher E jumped around from Week 17 to Week 20. She spent 2 weeks on Week 19. The content of the lesson plans was not consistent with the information on the weekly theme cards. Various components were missing weekly for 3 of the 6 weeks of the study. Teacher E struggled with finding the right time to implement the program. The survey results and lesson-plan analysis are consistent as related to reinforcing the skills with children. Teacher E rated four items on the survey with a 3 or below on the Likert scale, which were all related to reinforcing skills with children. The lesson-plan analysis shows inconsistencies with implementation of weekly themes and

activities. Both the survey and lesson-plan analysis demonstrate deficiencies in implementation of the program.

Teacher F completed 5 weeks of lesson plans. There was no plan for the first week of the study. Teacher F only covered two weekly themes over 5 weeks. Week 19, fair ways to play, was implemented for 4 weeks, and Week 15, naming feelings, was implemented for 1 week. Teacher F rated six of the 20 survey items with a 3 on the Likert scale. The items were not limited to one section of the survey. The item that the researcher feels best reflects the results of both the survey and lesson-plan analysis is related to the importance of full implementation. The survey results and the lesson-plan analysis suggest that Teacher F was not committed to full program implementation.

Research Questions 2 and 3. Research Question 2 (How does implementation improve teacher knowledge and skills?) and Research Question 3 (How does the implementation of the SSEL program result in increased knowledge of social-emotional skills in preschool students?) addressed the product component of the CIPP program-evaluation model. Implementation of the SSEL program improves teacher knowledge and skills related to social-emotional development. Teachers learned strategies to support positive interactions in the classroom and vocabulary words to describe feelings and emotions. The program script and materials were easy to use, allowing teachers to focus on learning and teaching new skills.

Students increased their social-emotional skills by learning new vocabulary to describe their feelings and emotions. Teachers introduced and defined new words. Picture cards and posters were used to help children visualize the meanings of the new vocabulary words. The story cards and puppets used real-life situations to engage students in problem-solving lessons. Students learned to resolve conflict on their own and

developed feelings of empathy toward one another. Student social-emotional competence increased as a result of implementation of the program.

Teacher interviews were used to answer these research questions. Teachers A and D were the teachers who seemed to understand the importance of implementing the program with fidelity than most of the six teachers. During the teacher interviews, both teachers spoke highly of their experience with the program and did not have any weaknesses to report. Teachers A and D indicated on the implementation survey and during the interview that they sent the home links home with children weekly. However, they did not receive any feedback from parents. Teachers A and D implemented the program fully, as evidenced by the data analysis. Their commitment to implementation was evidenced by the results of the survey, lesson-plan analysis, and response to the interview questions.

Teacher B reported that she felt the program was effective and gave children the skills necessary to get along with others. During the interview, Teacher C stated that the program helped to expand children's social-emotional vocabulary and to communicate their emotions. Teacher C agreed with Teacher B that the program is effective and easy to implement. However, a review of lesson plans suggested neither teacher used the program materials with intention for full implementation. At the rate that the weekly themes were delivered, the students would not complete the entire program by the end of the school year. The rate of delivery for Teacher B and Teacher C was inconsistent with the results of the survey and responses to the interview questions. Both teachers indicated on the survey and interview that they send home links home with children.

Teacher E believed that the program was beneficial for the students, as it provided techniques to help students manage anger and aggression. Teacher F completed 5 weeks

of lesson plans. There was no plan for the first week of the study. Teacher F only covered two weekly themes over 5 weeks. Week 19, fair ways to play, was implemented for 4 weeks, and Week 15, naming feelings, was implemented for 1 week. The method of delivery was consistent with Teacher F's level of commitment provided by the results from the survey. Teacher F really liked the charts and picture cards. She stated that the children use the listening rules without guidance to regulate behaviors and focus during group time. Although she was reluctant to use the program because her children are 3 years old, she does see a difference in their behavior. Neither Teacher E nor F sent the home-link letter home with children to engage families in the learning process.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine if implementation of the SSEL

program would significantly improve social-emotional competence in young children.

The study was conducted in a federally funded preschool program in Pennsylvania. The

study site provides preschool services to children ages 3 to 5 through a partnership with

the local school district. In order to effectively implement the SSEL program, the study

site followed the recommendation of school district personnel responsible for overseeing

programing related to the partnership. Teachers were then responsible for implementing

the program as outlined during the professional development they attended. This chapter

provides a summary of the findings as they relate to the research questions, relevant

research, practical implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

The following research questions were established to guide this applied dissertation:

1. How do teachers implement the SSEL program with fidelity?

2. How does implementation of the SSEL program improve teacher knowledge

and skills related to managing challenging behavior?

3. How does the implementation of the SSEL program result in increased

knowledge of social-emotional skills in preschool students?

Summary of Findings for Research Question 1

The teacher-implementation survey and lesson-plan checklist were used to collect

quantitative data to answer the first research question: How do teachers implement the

SSEL program with fidelity? The six teacher participants had several similarities and

differences, as indicated on the implementation survey. Overall, the participants strongly

agreed or agreed with 12 of the 20 survey statements, indicating that the teachers were

aware of the tasks and responsibilities related to successful implementation of the program. Another similarity among the participants was that five of six participants strongly agreed and one participant neither disagreed nor agreed with Survey Items 1, 6, 10, and 12. The focus of the four items was preparation.

Item 1 (I understand the goals and objectives of the SSEL program) was essential to implementation fidelity. Teacher C neither agreed nor disagreed. Item 6 (I have or know how to get the materials I need to teach and or reinforce SSEL skills and concepts), Item 10 (I believe it is important to implement the SSEL program fully), and Item 12 (I feel adequately trained to deliver the SSEL program's weekly theme activities) were all significant to implementation fidelity. Teacher F neither agreed nor disagreed with all three statements. This response to these two statements indicates that the participants were not implementing the program with fidelity.

Full implementation requires teachers to use all of the components as outlined on each weekly theme card. Student success is based on full implementation by which students learn skills and have opportunities to apply and practice skills (Committee for Children, 2011a). Understanding the importance of the goals and objectives and training can impact the desired outcomes of the program. Jones and Bouffard (2012) stated, "Effective teaching of social and emotional learning must begin with a clear definition and scope of the skills students need to learn" (p. 30).

The last similarity, Item 19 (I send home links to my children's families), varied the most of the similar items. Five of six participants either strongly agreed or agreed and Teacher E disagreed. Home links give children a chance to practice skills in the home environment with their families. Home links help parents understand the skills children are learning at school. The SSEL program has created several tools to involve parents in

the program. Family letters, home links, and access to the section on family of the SSEL program are the tools used to engage families. The SSEL program is more effective if families know about it and can help children use the skills at home (Committee for Children, 2011a). Research suggests that parent engagement is essential to social-emotional competence in young children. Children develop social-emotional competence through interactions with others. Epstein (2009) explained social-emotional learning develops indirectly through guided experiences and not through direct instruction on how to behave. It is important for parents to support children's learning by supporting at-home activities. The ability to sustain learning is supported through at-home activities.

In contrast, participants showed a difference in opinion on three of the 20 statements. Teachers A, B, C, and D responded to Item 11 (I understand how I can help monitor the implementation process) with strong agreement or agreement. Teacher F neither agreed nor disagreed, and Teacher E disagreed. Item 17 (I do the skill-practice activities with my children) and Item 18 (I reinforce the content as explained in the Using Skills Every Day section) are related to instructional practice and student outcomes. Teachers A, B, C, and D responded to Item 17 with strong agreement and agreement. Teacher E neither agreed nor disagreed, and Teacher F disagreed.

The skill-practice activities are part of the core components of the program and usually occur on Days 3 and 4. Skill-practice activities are designed to engage children in practice activities related to the weekly objectives. All four core components must be used to implement the program with fidelity. Participant responses to Item 18 were very similar. Teachers A, B, C, and D strongly agreed or agreed, and Teacher E and F neither agreed nor disagreed. Full implementation requires teachers to use all of the components as outlined on each weekly theme card. Student success is based on full implementation

in which students learn skills and have opportunities to apply and practice skills (Committee for Children, 2011a).

The findings from the lesson-plan checklist varied more than those of the implementation survey and were not consistent with the survey results for all participants. The lesson-plan checklist consisted of seven items obtained from the weekly theme teaching card. The weekly theme card outlines all of the activities for the week. The layout includes the concepts, vocabulary, objectives, and rationale. The weekly theme card also includes a detailed script of the activity for Days 1 to 5, in which teachers can obtain supporting materials to support each activity.

Teacher A completed 6 weeks of lesson plans beginning with Week 15 and ending with Week 20. Teacher A used the weekly theme card as a guide to indicate the activity and day on the lesson plan. The lesson-plan analysis revealed that Teacher A completed two of the four core components weekly for 5 of the 6 weeks. The four core components include the following: weekly theme activities, brain-builder games, reinforcing skills and concepts, and engaging families. Week 18 was the only week in which the brain-builder game was written on the lesson plan as one of the activities to support student learning. Teacher A's lesson-plan checklist results were the most consistent with the lesson-plan checklist of the six teachers. However, the results were not consistent with Teacher A's survey results, in which she rated every item related to implementation with strong agreement. Week 18 was the only week with three of the four components evidenced on the lesson plan.

Teacher D completed 6 weeks of lesson plans beginning with Week 16 and ending on Week 21. An analysis of the lesson plans indicates that Teacher D completed three of the core components daily. Teacher D did not indicate the use of brain-builder

games or home-links activities on her lesson plan for the duration of the study. Teacher D responded to 13 of the 20 statements strong agreement and to the other seven statements with agreement. These results would suggest that the teacher has a clear understanding of the importance of implementing with fidelity, even though it was not evidenced on the lesson plans.

Teacher B completed 3 weeks of lesson plans over a period of 6 weeks, which consisted of Week 16 and Week 19 of the weekly theme cards. Analysis of the lesson plans suggests Teacher B did not incorporate the brain-builder games or home links into the delivery of the program as outlined in the resources. Documentation of the brain-builder games or home links was not evidenced in the lesson plans. The survey results from Teacher B are not consistent with the level of implementation demonstrated on the lesson plans. Teacher B responded with agreement regarding teaching weekly themes in order; however, strong agreement was given in response to understanding the importance of implementing the program fully.

A review of lesson plans indicated that Teacher C completed three weekly themes over the course of 6 weeks. Teacher C did not list the activities on the lesson plan daily; however, the title of the weekly theme was listed daily. Based on the information provided on the lesson, the researcher could not determine what activities, or if any activities, were implemented. The lesson-plan checklist results for Teacher C were the least informative, as they did not provide any information to support the implementation process. The lesson-plan analysis suggests Teacher C had a low level of commitment to program implementation, which is inconsistent with the survey results. The survey results would indicate that Teacher C may need clarity regarding the program objectives and goals, as she answered Item 1 (I understand the goals and objective of the SSEL program)

with neither agreement nor disagreement. However, Teacher C responded to 50% of the items with agreement and the other 45% with strong agreement. These results would suggest that Teacher C understands the importance of full implementation and how to use the materials to implement the program as intended. The lesson-plan analysis is inconclusive due to the lack of information.

A review of Teacher's E's lesson plans indicated that, over the course of 6 weeks, five weekly themes were completed. Teacher E started with Week 17, managing anger, and went back to Week 16, managing disappointment, and continued on with Weeks 18 to 20. Week 18, managing waiting, and Week 20, having fun with friends, were taught for 1 week each. Week 19 was implemented for 2 weeks. The lesson-plan analysis revealed that Teacher E did not incorporate brain-builder games or home-link activities in her lesson plans during the 6-week period. Informal observations of Teacher E's survey results are somewhat consistent with the results of the lesson-plan analysis. Teacher E responded with a 3 or below on the Likert scale to items related to teaching and reinforcing skills. The survey responses and the lesson-plan analysis suggest a lack of understanding regarding the importance of full program implementation.

Teacher F completed only two weekly themes over the course of 6 weeks. Teacher F did not have a lesson plan for Week 1. When asked, Teacher F stated that, due to the holiday and inclement weather, she did not feel the need to do a lesson plan for Week 1. Teacher F completed Week 19, fair ways to play, for Weeks 2 to 5, and she completed Week 15, naming feelings, for the final week of the study. Brain-builder activities or home links were not documented on the lesson plan. The other two core components were documented on the lesson plan. The survey results are consistent with the lesson-plan analysis, as Teacher F indicated a level of uncertainty regarding the

program on six of 20 items.

Based on the data collected from the teacher-implementation survey and lesson-plan checklist, the program was not implemented with fidelity. The survey results suggest four of the six teachers in the study understood the goals and objectives and implemented the program as intended. In contrast, the lesson-plan checklist results indicate that none of the teachers implemented all four core components daily. Although none of the teachers implemented the program fully, two of the six teachers documented three of the four components daily. The documentation of the other four teachers indicates a low level of implementation. The contrast between the survey results and the lesson-plan checklist results could indicate that more support was needed to ensure the fidelity of program implementation. Teachers who perceive low levels of support are most vulnerable to poor implementation (Ransford, Greenberg, Domitrovick, Small, & Jacobson, 2009).

Summary of Findings for Research Questions 2 and 3

Research Question 2 asked the following: How does implementation of the SSEL program improve teacher knowledge and skills related to managing challenging behavior? The participating teachers' overall attitude about the SSEL program was favorable. The teachers indicated ease of use and access to materials as strengths of the program. The script made it easy for teachers to implement and understand the skills they were to teach. All six teachers stated that their knowledge of social-emotional skills increased as a result of implementing the program. Two of the six teachers stated that their response to challenging behavior changed as a result of the program. One teacher said that she was relearning patience when dealing with challenging behavior based on the concepts taught through the program. The other teacher stated that the vocabulary helped her to help students identify and communicate their feelings during challenging

situations. The vocabulary used to describe emotions seemed to be most effective for all of the teachers.

Research Question 3 asked the following: How does the implementation of the SSEL program result in increased knowledge of social-emotional skills in preschool students? The teachers agreed that the children demonstrated a higher level of social-emotional competence as a result of the lessons. Teacher A reported that the class was calmer and the children were less physical than they were prior to implementing the program. During the interviews, every teacher spoke about how the children use the vocabulary words to resolve conflict and provide support to other children. The responses to both questions suggest that program implementation had an impact on teacher knowledge and student social-emotional competence.

Teacher knowledge increased as they used the materials to teach the lessons. Student social-emotional knowledge increased as a result of the skill focused lessons, as demonstrated through their actions with one another. These results supported literature findings that effective implementation of social-emotional programs is a critical component of instructional practice to support social-emotional competence in young children. The use of a comprehensive social-emotional program model results in increased teacher knowledge and practice to support social-emotional competence and increased positive social skills. Increased positive social skills resulted in a decrease of challenging behavior in young children (Hemmeter, Fox, Snyder, & Algina, 2014).

Implications of Findings

The results of the study provided insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of the SSEL program. Implementation fidelity is more likely to occur when teachers receive high-quality training and technical assistance (Collaborative for

Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2012). The researcher will use the information acquired from this study to share with stakeholders for changes and improvements to how social-emotional development is addressed. The information acquired in this study can provide data to support program wide implementation of a social-emotional program for preschool children. Raver and Okada (2011) found that "classroom-based interventions led to improved classroom quality and decreased internalizing and externalizing behaviors in preschool students" (p. 11). Using a social-emotional program for young children supports self-regulation and social-emotional competence, which can result in decreased behavior problems.

Limitations of Study

One of the primary limitations of this study was that the research was based entirely on self-report measures. The researcher's measures of implementation were collected by self-report. Each teacher completed the implementation survey and lesson plans. Teachers must complete lesson plans as proof of instruction. Monitoring of implementation of lesson plans rarely occurs at the study site. The researcher feels that observation of program implementation may have been a more effective method to assess program implementation. Observational methods used to assess program fidelity are more effective as they are less prone to the bias associated with self-reporting (Ransford et al. 2009).

Another limitation is there was limited data to support improved student social-emotional competence. The study focused primarily on teachers as the guiding force in the implementation process. Collected information pertaining to student behaviors at the beginning and the end of the study would have been beneficial. The information would have led to the analysis of behavioral data such as referrals and other behavioral

consequences. Analysis of such data would have provided more data to support the

programs impact on student behavior. The data from the teacher interviews was subject to

bias, as it was self-reported. Another limitation in the study was that the organizational

setting of the study was one preschool program located in an urban school district in a

northeastern state. Other limitations included the small sample size. Findings based on

such a small sample are not generalizable to other situations and circumstance.

Future Research Directions

This study provided the perception of a limited number of teachers and

classrooms in an urban school district in Pennsylvania. Because there are over 10,000

children being served in preschool programs throughout the city either in district, city, or

partnerships, a broader study focusing on the factors that influence the implementation of

the SSEL program would be beneficial. In addition, analyzing data to determine the

impact on student social-emotional and academic outcomes would be valuable to

facilities that implement the program.

Finally, although the use of the survey, lesson-plan checklist, and interview

questions provided a large amount of data to the researcher in a short amount of time,

conducting classroom observations would have given the researcher a deeper insight into

the obstacles associated with implementation fidelity. Therefore, the researcher

recommends further research from a wider range of participants across various preschool

programs. For example, future research should include a larger population of teachers,

representations from different preschool programs in the city, and comparative data from

the different programs. Further research could assess the effect of coaching to support

implementation fidelity. Coaching could be used to support teachers with implementation

of the program components. O'Conner, De Feyter, Carr, Luo, and Romm (2017)

explained that a plan for social-emotional learning must include a provision for teachers in order to support them with program implementation. Finally, the researcher recommends presenting a program overview to parents at the beginning of the program in order to enhance parent understanding of the home-links activities.

Conclusions

This study was designed to examine program implementation to improve social-emotional competence in young children. The data have demonstrated, that even at a low level of implementation, teaching social-emotional skills to young children has a positive impact on social-emotional competence. With additional training and ongoing support through coaching, this researcher believes that program fidelity can be improved. The SSEL model is a social-emotional program that, when implemented with fidelity, gives children the skills they need for future success in school and in life.

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Appendix A

Logic Model

Logic Model

Inputs:
    Rationale: Improve students' social-emotional skills
    Teachers: Implementation of Second Step Early Learning program

Outputs/Activities:
    Implement SSEL curriculum components:
        1. Teach the four components of each weekly theme
        2. Incorporate weekly theme activities in lesson plan

Outputs/Participants:
    1. Teacher implementation survey
    2. Teacher interviews
    3. Lesson plan review

Outcomes/Short-Term
    1. Improved teacher skills related to SEL
    2. Increased student social-emotional competence
    3. Improved classroom behavior

Outcomes/Long-Term
    1. Increased school readiness
    2. Increased school success

Appendix B

Lesson-Plan Checklist

Lesson-Plan Checklist

Date: _____

Classroom: _____

Weekly Theme: _____

1. Brain Builder ☐ yes ☐ no

2. Puppet Script ☐ yes ☐ no

3. Story and Discussion ☐ yes ☐ no

4. Skill Practice #1 ☐ yes ☐ no

5. Skill Practice #2 ☐ yes ☐ no

6. Song ☐ yes ☐ no

7. Book ☐ yes ☐ no

Appendix C

Teacher-Interview Questions

Teacher-Interview Questions

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this interview is to evaluate the implementation of the Second Step for Early Learning program and to discover the successes and challenges the teachers encountered with the implementation of the program. I appreciate your voluntary participation in this study and want to remind you that the interview is being recorded for purposes of transcribing the interview, but your answers will remain confidential.

Warm-up Questions:

1. How long have you been teaching?

2. How would you describe your comfort with teaching Social-emotional skills on a scale of 1 (*extremely uncomfortable*) to 5 (*extremely comfortable*)?

Interview Questions:

1. What type of professional development have you received?
2. What are strengths of the professional development you've received regarding the Second Step for Early Learning program?
3. What are weaknesses of the professional development you've received on the Second Step for Early Learning program?
4. What are some improvements that could be made for future Second Step professional development?
5. Describe ways that you have expanded your knowledge in the area of Social-emotional Learning.
6. What are the strengths of the Second Step for Early Learning program?
7. What are the weaknesses of the Second Step for Early Learning program?
8. How are you implementing the Second Step for Early Learning program? Please describe the process.
9. Do you feel the Second Step for Early Learning program is effective? Why or why not?
10. Do you feel that the resources you received are will help you to implement the program effectively?