

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING: DEVELOPING THE ADOLESCENT

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Abstract

During the latter part of the 21st century, social emotional learning (SEL) started being incorporated into the classroom in a meaningful way. While SEL has garnered enough attention to be included in school curricula throughout the United States as well as several other countries worldwide, research about the import and effect of SEL is relatively new (America Succeeds, 2019). The worldwide COVID pandemic has brought about challenges beyond the obvious serious health concerns. Byproducts of the pandemic include the increased need for coping mechanisms and problem solving, interpersonal interaction skills, as well as an understanding of identity development to help children handle emotional distress resulting from the numerous significant changes in their daily lives. However, many current SEL programs do not address these key areas of concern. It is the authors' contention that an SEL curriculum which focuses on resilience as well as key indicators of identity development, coping mechanisms, and personal de-escalation techniques are necessary to effectively aid adolescents with navigating their current lives and building a positive future.

This research proposes a new SEL program that fits the needs of adolescents and preteens as administered in the school system. Building on a previous program shown to significantly improve self-esteem and school cohesion and trust (Cipra & Hall, 2019), Gr²IT focuses on several key principles to help children develop social and emotional skills and resiliency in the classroom and beyond. A unique component of the program is the principle of identity. Because identity formation is a significant developmental task, understanding the reinforcing and bidirectional relation between behavior and identity is beneficial to adolescents. Gr²IT incorporates principles of identity development throughout the curriculum. In conjunction with emotional regulatory practices, problem-solving strategies, and a social equity perspective, Gr²IT introduces a holistic approach to social and emotional learning to support the positive development of youth. While Gr²IT is currently being developed for American schools, many of the principles are universal to child development and may be adapted cross culturally.

Keywords: *Adolescent development, resilience, identity, curriculum.*

1. Introduction

Schools throughout much of the world, including the United States, have realized the usefulness of social emotional learning (SEL). While not a traditional academic subject, SEL is crucial for student well-being, and SEL curriculum taught within the confines of the school is associated with improved academic performance (Panayiotou et al., 2019), decreased aggression (Smith & Low, 2013), positive peer relationships and school cohesion (Cipra & Hall, 2019), and reduced depression (Corrieri et al., 2014; Taylor et al., 2017). The authors contend that the need for effective SEL in a school-based system has significantly increased since the start of the COVID-19 global pandemic. Although youth have been less susceptible to the severe physical health problems of the pandemic, they are at greater risk of the negative psychosocial impacts (Holmes et al., 2020), including depression and anxiety due to their developmental phases (Samji et al., 2021). Therefore, a social and emotional learning curriculum that fully integrates an understanding of developmental stages and identity development should better support youth. Recent research in the area of SEL has begun to focus on social emotional and behavior learning curriculum. This slight pivot includes behavior models within a traditional SEL program. The Gr²IT curriculum has been developed to address all of these needs in a 10-principle model.

2. Objectives

The curriculum adheres to research guidelines about the efficacy of short lessons. Each lesson focuses on one of ten principles to teach and reinforce the goals of SEL/SEBL and general well-being in accordance with CASEL, ASCA, and Restorative Practices competencies. *Gratitude* centers on promoting a realistic view of personal lives, finding and appreciating the positive aspects as well as recognizing the lessons to be learned from the negative circumstances. *Resilience* helps youth learn about grit, overcoming obstacles, and practice resiliency skills. The *Identity* principle helps youth understand the developmental steps of identity formation as understood from a developmental psychology perspective while imparting the importance of building a positive and healthy identity. This is achieved through a bidirectional relationship between habit and identity. *Teamwork* emphasizes the importance of cooperation in daily life beyond school. *Personal Regulation* teaches children and youth strategies to physically calm down when faced with difficult situations that could lead to anger, aggression, or anxiety. The principle of *Responsibility* helps children learn about personal responsibility in various aspects of daily life, including taking ownership of one's actions and consequences. *Critical Thinking* emphasizes the necessity of learning critical thinking skills and reasoning, particularly in the current digital age. *Coping Mechanisms* teaches youth the difference between emotion-centered and problem-centered coping as well as decision-making strategies. *Perspective Taking & Empathy* focus on demonstrating the importance of listening to and learning from the perspectives of others and developing empathy toward others. Lastly the *Social Justice* principle helps youth reflect on their role in promoting well-being in various context with the underlying core of equity for and of all persons.

While the Gr²IT program's primary focus is SEL, this program takes a unique approach by incorporating physical exercise. This addition is based on research about the brain-body (sometimes referred to as mind-body) connection. "Brain breaks" and physical activity are associated with improved academic performance (Raspberry et al., 2011) and student behavior (Carlson et al., 2015). Connections between physical activity and academic achievement and cognitive tasks has been established in several studies (see Bass et al., 2013; Wassenaar et al., 2019). A recent study on the impact of COVID-19 on youth observed that was also linked to better mental health outcomes (Samji et al., 2021). Gr²IT includes three physical activity options. The Classic Sport option utilizes traditional exercises such as push-ups, sit-ups, squats, lunges, and more to promote movement, increase attention, and mindfulness. The Yoga option emphasizes strength and breathing as energy management through a slow progression of standard yoga poses. The Tae Kwon Do option highlights attention and focus in a nonaggressive series of movements and power stances.

Another distinctive option of the Gr²IT program is called *Community*. This option is presented for school systems that wish to incorporate their school resource officers (SRO) into the curriculum and instruction. Research demonstrates that integrating SROs in school programming can increase school cohesion and trust as well as improve school climate (Cipra & Hall, 2019).

3. Discussion

Although mental health of youth is a commonly studied area, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated mental health concerns. For students already struggling with mental health issues, the closures of schools and uncertainty of instructional modality in addition to social isolation or distancing creates more obstacles because school routines may serve as an anchor for coping mechanisms (Lee, 2020). School closures, while necessary, hinder student access to a host of mental health and coping resources. As schools have begun to reopen over the last year, more resources are needed to address the increase of mental health issues, particularly depressive and anxiety symptoms. An effective SEL program can help mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on youth mental health and provide lasting skills and resilience to address anxiety, depression, and a host of other concerns for developing youth. While this research focuses on school-based programs, Gr²IT contends that social and emotional learning extends beyond the school, beyond the student, and into the community to create and foster a better environment for all.

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