



A Pilot Evaluation of the bettertogether³ Social Emotional Learning Curriculum: A path to creating wholehearted learners in a time of exceptional disruption

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INTRODUCTION

The remarkable disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic stressed the educational system unlike ever before placing even greater emphasis on the need to cultivate and reinforce social and emotional well-being. Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is an integral part to child development in education. Acquiring skills, knowledge, and attitudes to manage emotions leads to the development of healthy identities enabling children and later adults to achieve personal goals, elicit empathy for others, cultivate and sustain healthy relationships, and make caring and responsible decisions (Damon E. Jones PhD, 2015; Durlak JA, 2011). The integration of programs with an SEL focus in PK-12th grade classrooms show improved positive outcomes including better test scores, higher graduation rates and improved social behavior (Durlak J. W., 2011; Damon E. Jones PhD, 2015; Karin S. Freya, 2005; Dana Edwards, 2005).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) details five core competencies of SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, "What is SEL?", 2017; Children, n.d.). While career-readiness skills may fall under SEL evaluation, the aforementioned are appropriately specific to education settings. SEL skills are primarily learned in the home, preschool, and school (Durlak J. A., 2011; Palmer, 2019). A state-based review of the impact of SEL curriculum found the best adoption occurs in preschool age children (Palmer, 2019). This finding resulted in state standard implementation in all but three states and territories. A handful of states have carried SEL standards into later grades with evidence to support effectiveness in research (National Commission on Social, 2018; Eccles, 1993; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018).

Social and emotional learning indicators are becoming increasingly important as states develop new accountability systems under the Every Student Succeeds Act (Education, 2015). Metrics may include school climate or engagement, which schools find valuable in a time of educational disruption as experienced in 2020-2021. The rise of SEL indicators is leading to the creation of new curricula available for preschool through 12, whether public or charter, or other learning environment (CASEL, Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs: CASEL Criteria Updates and Rationale, n.d.).

The objectives of CASEL approved curricula including the following measured outcomes:

- Improvement in student social and emotional skills, attitudes, relationships, academic performance, and perceptions of classroom and school climate;
- Long-term improvements in student skills, attitudes, prosocial behavior, and academic performance;
- Decline in student anxiety, behavior problems, and substance abuse

In this pilot study, we sought to identify promising outcomes using self-identified behavior change, skills and attitudes as an indication of the bettertogether³ promise in meeting these long-term goals. Though administered during a pandemic school year, program findings were encouraging and support the impact of the bettertogether³. Lessons were utilized throughout each school day during the study period and many were appropriate for asynchronous learning. The pilot study population was diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, language learning, familial income, and location. Multiple grades completed the curriculum as it is grade banded. In addition to student assessments, teacher pre and post assessments were conducted with the largest school site. It was not possible to remove the influence of pandemic stress, social instability from racial injustice challenges, or movement between learning modalities. However, participants of the study were able to weave the bettertogether³ curriculum into their day in an effort to provide tools for students to cope, manage, and self-regulate emotions. Future studies will likely center on connection to changes in school culture, student test scores, and sustained, improved social behavior.

Program Description - bettertogether³

Bettertogether³ is a K-12 responsive SEL program consisting of 80 teacher friendly lessons that support the emerging SEL needs. Each lesson is aligned to the CASEL competencies and newest priorities. It is a fully integrative program that allows for teacher autonomy in meeting the needs of their students, who they know best. A set of classroom journals is included to capture individual emotions, thoughts, and progression throughout the program. To meet the newest priority announced by CASEL of creating SEL opportunities for adults as supported in literature, bettertogether³ also includes an Educator Self Care Toolbox and an online repository of the newest resources in Self Care, Self-Awareness, and Self-Regulation (CASEL, Evidence-Based Social and Emotional Learning Programs: CASEL Criteria Updates and Rationale, n.d.; Stringer, 2019). The program includes a Pre and Post student and educator assessment, providing data trends for each classroom to guide teachers in the most pressing need areas. Lessons can be integrated into the day, within any schedule and do not require “SEL Class”. Each lesson includes the payoff, how to personalize, and what to consider through the lens of classroom culture. The lesson is formatted in a simple step by step facilitation guide for the teacher.

Developed by educators for educators and students, this grade-banded curriculum offers critical skills and strategies for improved SEL function. The curriculum is designed to integrate into the school day with educators using it in 15–30-minute segments at various points. Each lesson allows for transition, resetting, and ongoing strategy development. Consistency is encouraged, as was with this pilot study, to encourage authentic, engaged participation.

Purpose of the Study

The pilot evaluation of the bettertogether³ SEL curriculum is intended to demonstrate progress of program implementation in the areas of student self-awareness and social awareness after one semester of inclusion. The pilot study captured student-perceived change over time before and after curriculum completion. The study design and analysis was intended to show alignment with CASEL competencies, including statistically significant change within the intervention group and compared to a control group. In addition, teacher evaluations were designed to capture impressions of change pre and post administration of the curriculum at a descriptive and fundamental statistical level.

METHODS

Research Design

This pilot study evaluates the efficacy of the *bettertogether*³ program used with 3-8th grade students at a public and charter schools in three states. Diversity in participating school population was intentional as rural and urban, mid-sized, multi-grade, racially and ethnically diverse, and public and charter selections were included. While the extent of diversity in the study potentially generates bias, it reflects the target population for future use of the *bettertogether*³ curriculum. The study leveraged matched pre and posttest assessments, self-scored using a Likert scale. Student grade levels and instructors were identified in the survey, but were coded to protect student identify. Due to the sample size of each individual classroom participating, all student responses were aggregated into an intervention group. Students lacking pre or post responses were excluded from the analysis.

All except one school administered the curriculum virtually; all also conducted school using synchronous learning and asynchronous learning. While originally designed for in-person instruction, the primary researcher assisted with minor modifications to ensure success. Components of the curriculum are best completed in an asynchronous format, which aligned well with instruction modality of intervention sites.

A mixed multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to determine differences between groups as well as within groups. The first null hypothesis was the expectation of no change before and after completion of the *bettertogether*³ curriculum within the study group. The second null hypothesis was no evidence of change between group scores before and after administration of the *bettertogether*³ curriculum. Paired samples T-tests were also used to assess the significance of change within the intervention group as it pertains to categories of SEL measured by the study. A set of 10 dependent variables were used to determine change in Self Awareness, Self-Regulation, Social Awareness, Relationships, and Responsible Decision-Making. Control group size was determined to be a minimum need of 50, which was exceeded for this study.

A paired samples T-test was again used to measure before and after sentiment of teachers who administered the *bettertogether*³ curriculum. A control group was not used for teacher sentiment evaluation. There were 11 dependent variables assessed for teachers.

Context: School-based intervention of *bettertogether*³

The pilot study occurred over the course of the 2020-2021 school year with 423 students in two schools located in three states. Three control schools with 63 student participants were included in the study (Table 1).

Table 1

School	Participating Classrooms (n)	Students (n)	Status	Case/Control	Grades
School A	3	45	Pre only	Control	3,4,5
School B	1	18	Pre, Post	Control	12
School C	1	36	Pre, Post	Case	6
School D	8	109	Pre, Post	Case	3-8
School E	3	66	Pre, Post	Case	3
School F	1	16	Pre, Post	Case	3

School A is a K-5 school in Metropolitan St. Paul, MN serving approximately 500 students. Diverse populations comprise 60% of students, with 56% receiving free or reduced lunch, and many students with language learning challenges.

School B is a K-12 school serving approximately 400 students in urban Minnesota.

School C is a K-5 school serving approximately 500 students in urban Minnesota. Only 24% of students are non-white, with 16.5% black and 7.3% two or more races.

School D is a K-12 charter school in Chicago, IL serving approximately 500 students. At the time of publication, the population was 90.5 % Latino, 5.1% White, 2% Black, 2% Other, .4% Asian. Of all attendees, 79.3% of the students come from low-income families, 19.4% are diverse learners, and 51.2% are language learners.

School E is a pre-k through grade 5 school located in a rural district in Minnesota serving approximately 400 students. Minority enrollment is 6% of the student body (majority Hispanic and Black).

School F is a K-5 school located in Eastern Florida serving approximately 600 students. The population is 87.5% white, 6.8% Hispanic, and 2% Asian and 22.9 % receive free and reduced lunch.

Implementing the Curriculum

Teachers all received materials, including the Educator Self Care Toolkit. They received 4 days of virtual direction and support. Each session included SEL strategies for their wellbeing as well as experiences that allowed for them to get to know/understand the student lessons. Each session included time for creating an action plan of lessons they were equipped to try. They received a sequencing guide as support when specific areas of need were noticed which provided suggested lessons to meet the need.

Classrooms piloting bettertogether³ used the activities on a regular basis. They began the year focusing on building psychological safety and a classroom culture of belonging. They then moved to a focus on gratitude and kindness. As the year went on, each teacher chose five activities at the beginning of the week to integrate into the five days.

Instruments

Pre and post surveys were administered to students using Google Forms. The surveys were accessed using school-issued computers with access facilitated by teachers. The form data were accessible only to the principal researcher who provided the data to the statistician.

Pre and post surveys were also administered to teachers for School D only.

Statistical analyses were performed using MS Excel for data cleaning and management, and IBM SPSS 27 for statistical analyses.

RESULTS

Student Pre and Post Assessments

Descriptive statistics for the dependent variables are presented first. Multivariate analyses were conducted to determine effects between intervention and control groups and pre and posttests. An additional analysis of the intervention group seeking significance on precisely which variables significantly improved was performed last. Results are presented with the intervention group representing all participant students from all study sites, and the control group representing students from all control sites.

Ten dependent variables were measured before and after the administration of the Better³ curriculum via google survey. The survey was provided to teachers facilitating curriculum instruction and only to students who completed the curriculum. Control surveys were administered at two times throughout the study period spaced similarly to the intervention group.

Dependent pretest variables are a single letter (A), whereas the posttest variables are letter + 1 (e.g., A1). There were 227 students in the intervention group and 63 in the control group. Each question represents one or two categories of SEL as defined by (Table 2).

Table 2

Code Pre/ Post	Intervention	Control	Label
A/A1	227	63	I am able to describe my feelings to others. (Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation)
B/B1	227	63	I have and use strategies to recover from upsetting emotions quickly. (Self-Regulation)
C/C1	227	63	I get along with students who are different from me. (Social Awareness and Relationships)
D/D1	227	63	I can recognize how others are feeling and can respond with appropriate reactions to others when they are upset. (Social Awareness and Relationships)
E/E1	227	63	I work well with others. (Social Awareness and Relationships)
F/F1	227	63	I am able to disagree with others without starting an argument. (Social Awareness and Relationships)
G/G1	227	63	I am able to get along with people who are different from me. (Social Awareness and Relationships)
H/H1	227	63	I have am able to calm myself when I am worried, lonely or overwhelmed. (Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation)
I/I1	227	63	When things are difficult, I have and use strategies to problem solve. (Responsible Decision Making)
J/J1	227	63	When I have a problem or a conflict, I ask others for their perspectives on the issue. (Responsible Decision Making)

A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to assess if there was a difference between participants in the intervention group and control group in the amount of change in their scores before and after

curriculum measures. Statistically significant multivariate effects were found for the main effects of group, $F(10,279) = 2.3, p = .013$ and group and time, $F(10,279) = 2.81, p = .002$, but not time alone, $F(10,279) = 1.42, p = .173$. This interaction effect indicates that the difference between the intervention and control group on the linear combination of 10 dependent variables is different at pretest than posttest.

Examination of the means shows why the interaction is statistically significant; the intervention group increases from pretest to posttest in all but one dependent variable (F) whereas the control group decreases from pretest to posttest in all but one variable canceling out a joint effect for time (Table 3). However, when change is dissected by group and time, the effect is apparent.

Table 3

Pretest				Posttest					
Question ID/ Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Question ID/Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	N		
A	1	2.56	0.93	227	A1	1	2.83	0.76	227
	2	3.11	0.90	63		2	2.83	0.87	63
B	1	2.72	0.95	227	B1	1	2.90	0.75	227
	2	2.88	1.06	63		2	2.95	0.98	63
C	1	3.28	0.83	227	C1	1	3.33	0.69	227
	2	3.60	0.77	63		2	3.34	0.69	63
D	1	3.16	0.78	227	D1	1	3.21	0.71	227
	2	3.38	0.81	63		2	3.18	0.72	63
E	1	3.79	1.09	227	E1	1	4.08	0.77	227
	2	4.36	0.82	63		2	3.96	1.06	63
F	1	2.95	0.82	227	F1	1	2.93	0.72	227
	2	3.25	0.89	63		2	3.21	0.85	63
G	1	3.33	0.80	227	G1	1	3.42	0.67	227
	2	3.55	0.71	63		2	3.43	0.79	63
H	1	2.76	0.97	227	H1	1	3.04	0.82	227
	2	2.92	0.99	63		2	2.89	0.97	63
I	1	2.80	0.91	227	I1	1	2.96	0.71	227
	2	3.12	0.92	63		2	2.84	0.92	63
J	1	2.65	0.98	227	J1	1	2.73	0.80	227
	2	3.15	0.91	63		2	2.74	1.03	63

Figure 1 clearly shows progress of pre and posttest among the intervention group with the exception of variable F, “I am able to disagree with others without starting an argument.”

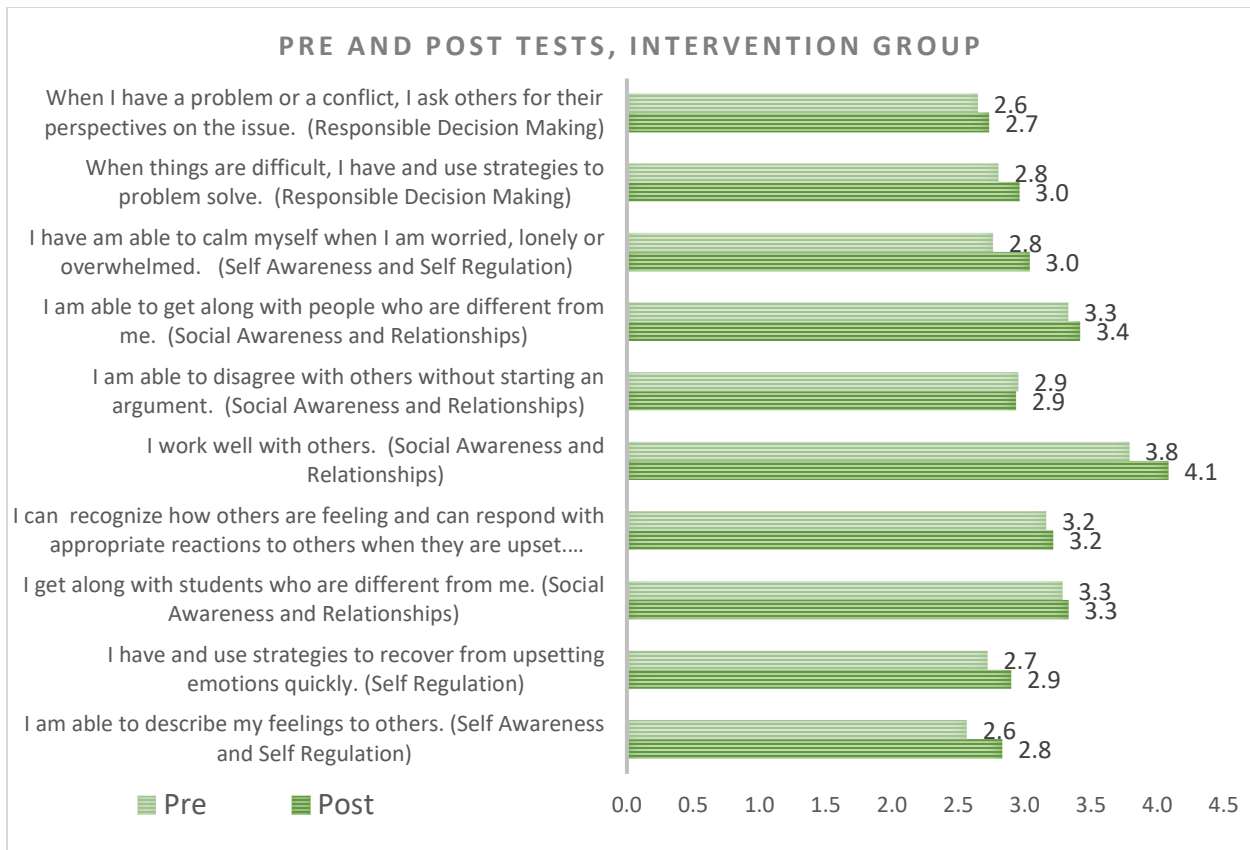


Figure 1

Follow-up ANOVAs reveal that the outcome variables associated with *time* were not statistically significant. However, when *group* and *time* were considered the outcome variables were statistically significant for question IDs A, C, E, G, H, I, and J as presented in Table 4.

Table 4

ID*	df	F	Sig.	eta ²	SEL Category	Variable Question
A	1, 288	11.032	0.001	0.037	Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation	I am able to describe my feelings to others.
B	1, 288	0.357	0.551	0.001	Self-Regulation	I have and use strategies to recover from upsetting emotions quickly.
C	1, 288	4.186	0.042	0.014	Social Awareness and Relationships	I get along with students who are different from me.
D	1, 288	3.117	0.079	0.011	Social Awareness and Relationships	I can recognize how others are feeling and can respond with appropriate reactions to others when they are upset.
E	1, 288	13.799	0.000	0.046	Social Awareness and Relationships	I work well with others.
F	1, 288	0.015	0.901	0.000	Social Awareness and Relationships	I am able to disagree with others without starting an argument.
G	1, 288	1.983	0.160	0.007	Social Awareness and Relationships	I am able to get along with people who are different from me.
H	1, 288	2.497	0.115	0.009	Self-Awareness and	I have am able to calm myself when I am

					Self-Regulation	worried, lonely or overwhelmed.
I	1, 288	6.507	0.011	0.022	Responsible Decision Making	When things are difficult, I have and use strategies to problem solve.
J	1, 288	7.520	0.006	0.025	Responsible Decision Making	When I have a problem or a conflict, I ask others for their perspectives on the issue.

*Sphericity assumed

While the MANOVA demonstrated statistically significant progress from pre and post tests between groups and within, further examination was performed to confirm which SEL characteristics were specifically improved following administration of bettertogether³.

A paired samples t-test was used to compare the means between pre and post tests for all 10 dependent variables. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 5. When examining results by variable, statistically significant improvements were identified in five of 10 ($p < 0.05$). The variables included in significant change were A, B, E, H, and I as referenced in Table 2.

Table 5

	Pair	Mean of Paired Diff	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower 95% CI	Upper 95% CI	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	A - A1	-0.27	1.16	0.08	-0.42	-0.11	-3.46	226	0.001
Pair 2	B - B1	-0.18	1.19	0.08	-0.33	-0.02	-2.26	226	0.025
Pair 3	C - C1	-0.05	1.08	0.07	-0.19	0.10	-0.64	226	0.520
Pair 4	D - D1	-0.05	1.01	0.07	-0.19	0.08	-0.79	226	0.427
Pair 5	E - E1	-0.30	1.37	0.09	-0.48	-0.12	-3.24	226	0.001
Pair 6	F - F1	0.02	1.09	0.07	-0.12	0.16	0.24	226	0.810
Pair 7	G - G1	-0.09	1.01	0.07	-0.22	0.04	-1.34	226	0.180
Pair 8	H - H1	-0.28	1.37	0.09	-0.46	-0.10	-3.06	226	0.002
Pair 9	I - I1	-0.16	1.17	0.08	-0.31	0.00	-2.03	226	0.043
Pair 10	J - J1	-0.08	1.22	0.08	-0.24	0.08	-1.04	226	0.299

Teacher Pre and Post Assessments

Within School D, 33 teachers from various roles completed the pre assessment and 29 teachers completed the post assessment (Table 6). Scores from the pre assessment were averaged by Role in the School to create matches for the pre and post assessments.

Table 6

Role in the School	Pre	Post
Intermediate Teacher	3	3
Leadership	1	2
Middle School Teacher	4	4
Other	12	7
Primary Teacher	8	8
Special Education Teacher	5	5
Grand Total	33	29

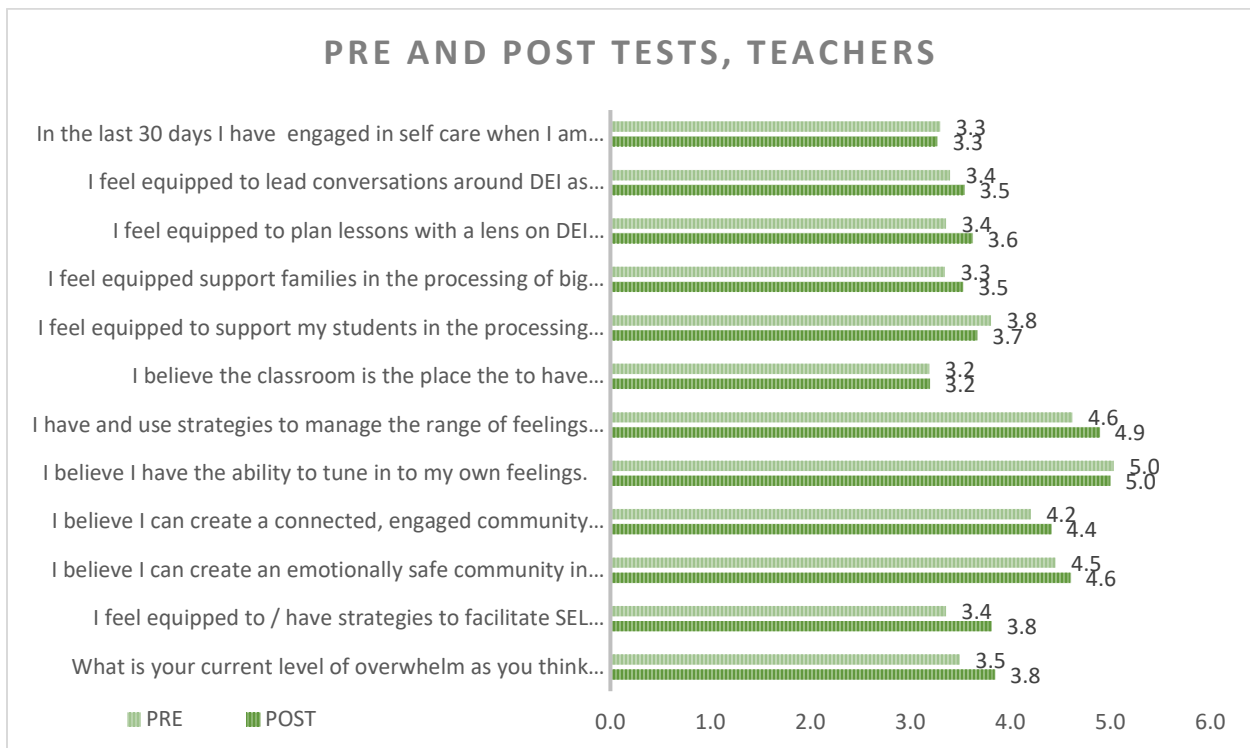


Figure 2

A paired samples t-test was used to compared the means between pre and post tests for all 11 dependent variables. Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 7. While the mean paired differences showed improvement from pre to post for all but four questions, none of the response differences were statistically significant (Figure 2, Table 7).

Table 7

	Question	Mean Paired Differences	Std. Dev (Sparks, 2021)	Std. Error Mean	Lower CI 95%	Upper CI 95%	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
Pair 1	I feel equipped to / have strategies to facilitate SEL strategies in the classroom that allow for students to process the uncertainty of their lives.	-0.45	0.56	0.23	-1.04	0.14	-1.96	5.00	0.11
Pair 2	I believe I can create an emotionally safe community in my virtual classroom during a pandemic.	-0.15	1.15	0.47	-1.35	1.06	-0.31	5.00	0.77
Pair 3	I believe I can create a connected, engaged community w/in the physical constraints (in person) and/or virtual facilitation of COVID-19.	-0.20	0.96	0.39	-1.21	0.81	-0.52	5.00	0.63
Pair 4	I believe I have the ability to tune in to my own feelings.	0.04	0.70	0.29	-0.70	0.78	0.14	5.00	0.90
Pair 5	I have and use strategies to manage the range of feelings I experience.	-0.27	0.45	0.19	-0.74	0.21	-1.44	5.00	0.21

Pair 6	I believe the classroom is the place the to have conversations surrounding big emotions / collective grief / trauma / anxiousness due to the pandemic and racial tensions.	0.00	0.55	0.22	-0.58	0.57	-0.01	5.00	0.99
Pair 7	I feel equipped to support my students in the processing of big emotions as a result of the collective trauma experienced as a result of the pandemic.	0.14	1.16	0.47	-1.07	1.36	0.30	5.00	0.77
Pair 8	I feel equipped support families in the processing of big emotions as a result of the collective trauma and grief experienced as a result of the pandemic.	-0.18	1.40	0.57	-1.65	1.29	-0.31	5.00	0.77
Pair 9	I feel equipped to plan lessons with a lens on DEI ensuring diversity of thought and opportunities for all so that each student has a sense of inclusion.	-0.26	0.94	0.38	-1.25	0.73	-0.68	5.00	0.53
Pair 10	I feel equipped to lead conversations around DEI as students share their lived experiences, reveal biases, and explore the current racial tension in our nation.	-0.14	0.66	0.27	-0.83	0.55	-0.51	5.00	0.63
Pair 11	In the last 30 days I have engaged in self-care when I am feeling out of balance.	0.03	0.60	0.24	-0.60	0.66	0.13	5.00	0.91

DISCUSSION

The most important finding of this pilot study was statistically significant progress in SEL across diverse school populations and amid a pandemic. Findings were significant between intervention and control groups, as well as for nearly all areas of SEL in the examination of pre and posttests. While pandemic distress may not disrupt future school years, the improvements seen in this study translate to likely success in a multitude of learning environments. The success of this pilot program emphasizes its applicability in multiple learning modalities, with diverse student populations and school settings. The study also highlights the importance of instituting an SEL curriculum while in pandemic recovery.

This pilot study clearly indicated student progress in all of the following major CASEL areas of SEL (CASEL, "What is SEL?", 2017):

- Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation
- Social Awareness and Relationships
- Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation
- Responsible Decision Making

Disagreement and student feel recognition were the two areas of no change found in pre and post assessments among intervention students. Given the virtual administration of the program, these findings are not surprising. By and large, students did not have the ability to engage in direct disagreement or in situations where peer feelings were displayed. Future studies may demonstrate the bettertogether³ curriculum facilitates improvement in these skill areas with exposure.

Statistically significant gains in self-awareness, regulation, and social awareness are likely the result of facilitated curriculum components aimed at equipping students with skills to assist with daily emotional challenges. Despite the presence of significant disruption in a pandemic, the administration of this curriculum had clear benefits. When compared to control schools, change was significant from pre to post test, and then within the intervention group. The asynchronous nature of many activities within bettertogether³ were appropriate and successful as evidenced in the data.

Preliminary literature indicates mental health challenges were widely experienced by students this school year and support for mental health as part of reopening is essential (Wallace, 2018). Demonstration of improvement in SEL amid the pandemic is even more significant. While teacher responses were not statistically significant, changes before and after administering the curriculum were detected in seven of 11 assessment questions.

Teacher surveys indicate challenges tuning into individual feelings, a lack of self-care, and difficulty helping students process the big emotions associated with a pandemic. Teachers did not indicate confidence in the classroom being the place to have conversation around feelings with the pandemic and racial injustice. These results are not surprising given the intensity and magnitude of the pandemic and its effect on the education sector (Sparks, 2021).

Challenges

Due to small sample sizes at individual schools, the intervention group was combined to include all participants from all schools. This may have resulted in dampened effects experienced by schools with disproportionate challenges, such as a higher percentage of language learners, diversity, or poverty. Future studies within these subgroups would be valuable in assessing impact in these learning environments. Grade-level specificity analyses would also be helpful in evaluating where the curriculum is most successful, despite evidence that bettertogether³ likely works well with all grades as it is a grade-banded intervention. Volunteer bias is a possibility as teachers willing to administer this curriculum may already be those with success metrics higher than the norm.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

Future studies will include a review of the impact on school culture as well as student performance metrics for those completing bettertogether³. Grade-specific evaluations may be completed as well.

In conclusion, the impact of a new SEL program evaluated in the midst of a pandemic year with statistical significance in its success is a strong indicator of future positive impact.

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