

Social Emotional Development: Teacher Perceptions of Assessment and Instruction

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Background/Context

The importance of social emotional development and learning has taken hold in all levels of the educational sector over the last two decades (e.g., Kagan, Moore, & Bredekamp, 1995). Social and emotional development is considered critical for school readiness, as evidenced by its representation in all 50 states Pre-K standards (CASEL, 2017), its inclusion as an essential element of national early learning programs, and its presence in many state kindergarten entry assessments (Weisenfeld, 2017a; Weisenfeld, 2017b). It also been gaining traction in the K-12 realm, with 15 states having adopted K-12 standards including social emotional development and learning, and an additional 6 states including it in PreK-K or K-3 standards (CASEL, 2018).

It is not difficult to understand why social emotional development and learning (herein referenced as social emotional development) is considered critical to school success; the evidence that social-emotional learning programs can significantly improve social and emotional skills as well as academic outcomes in children and youth is both extensive and compelling in their effects on positive attitudes, academic performance, and reduction in conduct problems and emotional distress (e.g., Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017).

Purpose/Objective/Research Question

Despite the growing attention to social-emotional development, teacher preparedness to teach and assess social and emotional skills is largely unknown, though there are some efforts underway to better understand its presence in teacher preparation programs (i.e., CASEL's SEL T-ED project). What *is* known is that teachers generally believe in the importance of social and emotional skills for learning, but beliefs do not necessarily translate into changed practices in the classroom (Bassok, Latham & Rorem, 2016), nor do they speak to teacher's beliefs about their role in developing these skills in their classrooms.

As part of development of a comprehensive, formative Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA), we examined kindergarten through third grade teachers' reactions to social emotional content and experience assessing children in this domain. We obtained feedback on the manageability and usability of information from the assessment. It was expected that teachers would have general buy-in for the social emotional content, but would experience difficulty understanding, assessing, and incorporating the information learned from the assessment into their daily instructional routines.

The domain reported on here is the social-emotional development domain, which includes three constructs: emotion regulation, emotion expression, and emotional literacy. There are 15 additional constructs across four more domains (i.e., approaches to learning, cognitive development, language development and communication, and physical/motor development).

Setting & Population/Participants/Subjects

One-hundred forty-one kindergarten through third grade teachers and subset of their students (N=1,312) in four states were trained to assess children using the observation-based, formative assessment in their classrooms. Teachers were trained over a two-day, in-person training.

Follow-up support for implementing the assessment was provided by researchers via webinars, online modules, email and phone, and written materials.

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

Teachers were asked to observe children across two, 60-day windows (fall and spring) and place them on a progression of skills that best described their ability at the end of each window. Teachers provided evidence (i.e., notes, audio, and video clips) to substantiate their placement. Teachers completed surveys in the fall and spring and participated in interviews after the final data collection window. Teachers’ evidence was reviewed and coded for specificity, relevance, and agreement by the research team.

Findings/Results:

Survey data indicate teachers found the content difficult to understand and assess. Interview data concurred; teachers reported difficulty in observing the constructs, distinguishing between constructs, and a lack of understanding about the relevance of the constructs to classroom instruction. Yet, teachers simultaneously expressed excitement and interest in learning about social-emotional development. Survey data also indicate teachers believed the construct progressions captured the children’s skills well, were confident in their placements, and more than half of the teachers found the information to be useful for instruction. Review of the evidence teachers collected found less than 40 percent agreement with researchers’ ratings on all three constructs, compared to some constructs with more than 70 percent. The findings collectively support the notion that teachers have general buy-in for social emotional development but suggest they may not have sufficient background knowledge to engage in formative assessment and instruction in this domain.

Table 1. Percentage of Teachers Reporting Across Select Survey Items

	Emotion Regulation	Emotion Expression	Emotional Literacy	Range of across constructs
Progression captured information “very well” or “somewhat well” (N=125)	84%	84%	85%	84-97%
Construct was “very easy” or “easy” to assess (N=29-40)	22%	24%	31%	22-98%
Difficulty of construct to assess (N=99-33):				
Construct was too hard to understand	33%	28%	37%	16-100%
Construct progression was too long	14%	16%	24%	8-100%
Construct was not applicable to students	7%	8%	7%	5-100%
Not enough time in the day to assess skills	28%	30%	26%	26-67%
Teacher was “very” or “somewhat” confident in accurate placement on progression (N=126)	71%	74%	75%	71-99%
Teacher was unable to assess as part of everyday instruction (N=129)	24%	22%	23%	1-54%
Information from social-emotional constructs was “very” or “somewhat” helpful to instruction (N=126)	65%	64%	64%	51-81%

Conclusions

Despite the increasing attention to instruction and assessment in social emotional development, teachers do not appear to be ready to meet the expectations at national, state, and local standards and assessments. A review of teachers' evidence in this study suggests that this is not something that can easily be taught over a two-day training, which begs the question of its utility in this format for teachers with little to no training. In order for teachers to be ready to instruct and assess in social emotional skills, it is critical that pre-service training at all levels (e.g., k-12, elementary, early childhood) includes training in social emotional development, both in observing and understanding what it looks like in children at various ages, and how to model and instruct to promote social emotional skills as well. More information is needed about the extent and quality of teacher training, and investigation into assessment of social and emotional skills.

References

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