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# Social Emotional Development's Effect on Academic Achievement of Children with Special Needs

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**Social Emotional Development's Effect on Academic Achievement of Children with  
Special Needs**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine how social emotional strategies could be embedded into the academic curriculum for students with special needs. In order to develop a greater understanding on how to most effectively embed the strategies, a variety of stakeholders were called upon to gather information about strategies that could be implemented. The effectiveness of the strategies would be illustrated by the students' attitudes towards learning after the implementation of embedded strategies and skills. This study focused on gathering information from a faculty at an intermediate school and the implementation of strategies was done in a collaborative classroom with a focus on ten students with special needs. A mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to gather the data consisting of surveys, focus groups and observations. Over a six to eight week data collection period, several themes arose and findings were discussed. When reviewing the study, conclusions, limitations, implications and suggestions for further research were offered. Overall, all results concluded that the development of social emotional learning was important for all learners. The strategies used, implementation process and roles within the teaching of the skills are all areas that are in need of greater development. All educational stakeholder groups must work to collaborate, communicate and coordinate so that all students can benefit from the assured experience of social emotional learning so that they not only become successful students but also as global citizens.

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

### **Introduction**

As Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is quoted saying, “intelligence plus character, that is the goal of true education” (Elias, Ferrito, & Mocerri, 2016, p. xvii). In the time of the Common Core initiative in education, it is important to address the fact that the real core of education is the relationships that are nurtured for each child. Learning is a relationship and the most successful education results from when social emotional dimensions in that learning relationship are developed and strengthened. It is at this point when a child will learn to the best of his/her ability (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015). Social emotional learning consists of teaching such skills as recognizing and managing emotions, developing empathy and concern for others, establishing effective relationships in one-to-one as well as small group situations, making responsible and ethical decisions, and handling challenging situations. These are essential skills for everything that happens in schools – in and out of classrooms. The skills and what happens in schools are grounded in interpersonal relationships (Elias et al., 2016). The goal of this study was to investigate the impact of social emotional learning strategies on students with special needs.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Social and emotional skills and values can be taught. When educators teach and model these skills and values well, children form stronger bonds which increases the motivation to learn while decreasing behavioral issues and results in higher test scores (Durlak et al., 2015). There are educators who feel that placing an emphasis on social emotional skills should not be the role of the school or its teachers. But, teaching academics and social emotional skills did not have to be mutually exclusive choices (Wilson, 2016). The importance of the social

emotional learning is an area that is gaining more attention as a need of an area of development in today's education (Durlak et al., 2015; Elias et al., 2016), but students with special needs is a subgroup that has not been a focus in recent studies.

Our school identifies itself as using the 'Responsive Classroom' approach to focusing on a link between academic success and social emotional skills. Yet, there are many faculty members who are untrained and even more who are but do not practice any of the strategies or teaching skills. Our school has lost its focus on the importance of social emotional learning and how it links to academic achievement. When teachers understand this connection, they can teach more mindfully and differentiate instruction depending on where the students are and where the teachers want the children to be (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). The ability to do this authentically and genuinely is necessary to teach any child yet it takes on a new level of criticalness when teaching students with special needs.

### **Thesis Study**

My overall goal of this research was to enrich my students' academic learning by incorporate social emotion skills that they will be able to incorporate beyond the classroom walls and beyond their formal school years. I focused on a specific group of students who have special learning needs. About 10% of American public school children receive special education services. On average, this subgroup of learners are more likely to exhibit deficits in social emotional competencies and are in need of interventions that are uniquely created to address their special learning needs (Durlak et al., 2015). In our school, many of the times that are allotted in the schedule for teachers to teach and practice social emotional skills are during morning meeting times first thing in the morning and during the afternoon. These happen to be also the times where my students with special needs are being pulled for different services such



as speech, counseling and academic supports. These students are in need just as much, perhaps more, than general education students of learning social emotional skills.

The purpose of this study was to examine what social emotional learning strategies could be implemented into the academic curriculum while also evaluating how the implementation of those strategies affect the attitudes towards learning of students with special needs. This study addressed the following questions:

1. What social emotional strategies should be implemented into the academic curriculum for children with special needs?
2. How do students' attitudes towards academic learning compare before and after the implementation of social emotional development strategies?

This action research study provided an opportunity to gather some effective strategies to incorporate in the academic settings for my students with special needs (Durlak et al., 2015; Elias, Ferrito & Mocerri, 2016; Wilson, 2016).

Action research is the process of exploring a practical problem with the goal of solving or minimizing the problem (Creswell, 2012). The decision to conduct an action research was a result of the desire to make data based decisions, monitor student progress, change instruction and to reflect on practice (Boudah, 2011). Through this study, it was my goal to find authentic and effective ways to incorporate social emotional learning into every day academics in order for students with special needs to be exposed to the skills and strategies. I used a variety of data collection methods mixing surveys, focus groups and observations to provide an assortment of evidence that will be used to triangulate the data.

### Summary

Social emotional learning is critical to our learners' success. When ignored, the chances of students becoming disengaged from learning and other options that education offers. Stakeholder groups such as parents, educators and community members desire to facilitate the development of knowledgeable, responsible, caring and socially competent learners. In order to do this, today's schools must provide more than academic instruction; there needs to be attention made to fostering children's social emotional development and character (Durlak et al., 2015). In our school, not all teachers are trained in 'Responsive Classroom' and even those staff members who are, have not been diligent in implementing the learned strategies. The time allotted to explicitly teach social emotional learning strategies is during times where the population of students with special needs is with other service providers. Those students are missing out on direct instruction of essential skills to be stronger learners and overall citizens. As a result, these important strategies and skills must be explicitly taught and practiced in the academic curriculum. When this is done, students' social emotional development will evolve as well as a stronger grasp on the academics being taught.

Chapter two will discuss recent research in the education world that describes the positive effect of social emotional initiatives across disciplines and age groups. Focusing in on the needs of subgroups within these categories of learners also was highlighted in the research. Low socio economic students, math and science learners and gifted students were two subgroups considered in the research. In order to have successful implementation of social emotional learning, it is essential to consider the perspectives of other important stakeholder groups that play roles in the process. Teachers, parents, and higher education institutions must also be considered in order for successful implementation. The findings from the studies shared

in the literature demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of social emotional learning for all learners.

Chapter three will discuss the methodology chosen to conduct this action research study. This chapter will discuss the reasoning and implications of choosing both qualitative and quantitative methods in order to gather and implement social emotional strategies into the academic setting for students with special needs. The research questions frame the intentions of this study. In order to make this study reliable and valid, three different methods were used in order to create confidence in the findings. The action research study's methodologies will be shared as well as the reasoning behind each choice will be explained to offer a clear understanding of how and why the study was developed and carried out in its specific setting.

Chapter four will discuss the results of the study gathered by conducting an action research project. The findings of the two research questions will be discussed. There were multiple themes that arose through the analysis of the two research questions. The themes will be shared and supported with the data collected through multiple modes throughout the study. A variety of surveys, focus groups and observations were used to collect data for this study. The themes and findings extracted from the literature review were included in order to compare the results from the study with what other published researchers have concluded about the overarching topic of social emotional development. The chapter is concluded with a summary of the results and discussion.

Chapter five will discuss the conclusions and implications of the conducted study. This chapter will serve to summarize what was done during the study including a review of the research questions and the results that were discussed in the previous the chapter. This chapter will also serve to share some of the limitations of the study as well as the implications for

practice. The limitations are important to know so that it is clear what they were, how they applied to the study and why was it considered to be a limitation. The implications are the lessons learned that could help others in the future. The chapter ends with some ideas of what could be used as further research in this topic. As a result of any study, there are always lingering questions or new gaps in research that arise as a result of the analysis of collected data. This chapter serves to share what were the results of this study and ideas for further research.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Social emotional learning (SEL)*: 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, and make responsible decisions.

*Responsive Classroom*: an approach, which emphasizes the social, emotional, and academic growth of elementary school students in a strong and safe learning environment by incorporating the students' social and emotional growth into their academic learning, stemming from the notion that children learn best through social interaction and when they are explicitly taught social and emotional skills along with their academic lessons.

*Technology enhanced learning (TEL)*: often used as a synonym for e-learning but can also be used to refer to technology-enhanced classrooms and learning with technology, rather than just through technology.

*Individualized Education Plan (IEP)*: is a document that is developed for each public school child who is eligible for special education. An IEP defines the individualized objectives of a child who has been found with a disability, as defined by federal regulations. The IEP is intended to help children reach educational goals more easily than they otherwise would.

## Chapter 2 – Literature Review

### Introduction

Meeting students' social emotional needs has always been a topic that I have held as a huge priority in my teaching. A core belief in which my entire teaching philosophy is based around is that if children's social emotional needs are not being met, then no learning will be able to take place. Teachers who show "warmth, caring, individual responsiveness to their students" have higher level engaged students who work harder, enjoy learning more, and interact genuinely with their peers (Rimm-Kaufman, Baroody, Larsen, Curby, & Abry, 2015, p. 182). There is a need for more attention to be made in sharing the importance of personalized education in order to provide healthy learning environments and opportunities for academic success for all of our diverse learners. "Research shows that emotional intelligence is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes among children and adolescents, including improved cognitive and social functioning, psychological well-being, and higher academic performance" (Brackett & Simmons, 2015, p. 24). This is an area with a lot of current research to support the validity of the concern.

Since the general topic of my study is social emotional needs for students, I began my search using the *Educational Research Information Center* database using the following keywords: 'social emotional needs' and 'elementary schools' and 'academics.' I got 28 hits out of this search but only checked off a few that I thought would be useful. Then, I changed some of the search keywords and entered the following: 'social emotional needs' and 'elementary' and 'academic success.' I received six hits from this search. I realize I had narrowed it too much but did gather a few more journals to read through. My third search was the following: 'social emotional' and 'elementary' and 'academic success.' This time I got 50 results and

found the bulk of my articles using those specific search terms. I reworked my search for a fourth time to gather new articles. This time I used the following search terms: 'social emotional' and 'elementary' and 'professional development.' There were 69 journal articles that came up with that search and, again, I found a plethora of potentially useful articles to read. I gathered a list of the 25 of potentially helpful journal articles to start my literature review.

After reading and reflecting on the articles I gathered, a new search was created to gather a bit more information. I used the search terms 'social emotional' and 'academic success' to receive articles that focused on some other topics that introduced some new ideas to consideration like social emotional development in higher education, in early intervention preschool programs and building relationships with parents to support social emotional development. When I was reflecting on the information that I had collected, I realized I did not have much on the age group that I teach and know best so I searched for 'social emotional' and 'intermediate.' The articles that I was came up for this search were really interesting to me as the studies were relating to the issues and behaviors that I witness every day in my fifth grade classroom. Finally, I used the terms 'social emotional,' 'teaching,' and 'learning' to see if there were any other areas that I had overlooked, which I had. A helpful article came up focusing on the importance of considering teachers when analyzing effective implementation of social emotional development. Overall, by varying search terms, it was helpful in retrieving an assortment of articles spanning many different topics that stem from the idea of social emotional development in education.

The purpose of this study was to gain more knowledge on the link between social emotional and academic development. As Aristotle was quoted saying, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all" (Elias, Ferrito, & Mocerri, 2016, p. 1). In this

literature review, an overview of research around six basic areas is explored. These areas are social emotional development in elementary school aged children, intermediate aged students, gifted learners, low socioeconomic children and adolescents, role that the teachers, as well as other stakeholder groups that contribute to the overall success of our students. Overall, the approaches used to review the literature examined and sorted the findings into several different, yet connected, themes based on how social emotional development links to academic success. The end of the literature review restates, summarizes and connects the important and relevant findings. This is an important subject to be explored and discussed. It is natural to start the discussion where the most amount of research lies, which is with elementary aged students.

### **Elementary Aged Students**

The importance of social emotional development and its links to academic success starts from a very early age and has long lasting effects. Educators, along with developmental psychologists, believe that it is essential to have a strong focus on social emotional development programming for students and it is imperative that it begins as early as kindergarten (Denham, Bassett, Zinsser & Wyatt, 2014; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Vespo et al., 2006). Students who experience early success will continue to and those students who experience difficulties continue to demonstrate those struggles throughout subsequent years (Behforooz et al., 2006). “When instruction for social-emotional development is balanced with education for cognitive and physical growth, then we truly begin to educate the whole child” (Elmore & Zenus, 1994, p. 6). There are a variety of studies spanning from preschool age to upper elementary that prove this connection to be true (Bavarian et al., 2013; Behforooz et al., 2006; Denham et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2014; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Sergott et al., 2013). Developing a strengths-based measure to assess skills, behaviors and attitudes can be used to predict school success for

preschool age students using the designed screens (Reid et al., 2014). The ability to create a method of prediction was helpful not only for that specific year of development for the child but also can be used as an indicator in later years. This shows how the effects of childhood development in the early stages should be recorded and used throughout a child's entire educational career. In another study, the researchers also used a combination of direct assessment and observation of a group of preschoolers to gain insight on self-regulation, emotion knowledge, social problem solving, and social emotional behavior (Denham et al., 2014). The information that was collected by the teachers gave information on the students in regards to classroom adjustment and academic readiness in preschool through kindergarten. Portable assessment tools can be used to keep consistent track of social and emotional aspects of children's development throughout the early elementary years (Reid et al., 2014). There is an essential need to be able to identify students at early ages that may benefit from interventions (Denham et al., 2014). Outcomes of using effective and efficient rating scales can help inform instruction and potential intervention plans at the preschool level. The earlier the informed instruction and interventions can start, the more effective they will be. By using assessment tools that can be transferred year-to-year, the information can be effectively and efficiently conveyed throughout each year's transitions to keep consistent track of each child's development (Reid et al., 2014). The idea of embedding communication into the institutionalization of a program will ease the transition process dramatically (Denham et al., 2014).

When using information to inform students' social emotional and academic development from year to year, there must be a consistent method of communication between stakeholders so that a child's adjustment between grades is a smooth one. Each year a child needs to create new



bonds to a different teacher (Murray & Greenberg, 2001). Many researchers have found that the bonds made between student and educator is key in the development of the whole child (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015; Rothwell & Thomas, 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015; Segrott et al., 2013; Vespo et al., 2006). School bonding is critical in school competence for every student (Behfooroz et al., 2006; Murray & Greenberg, 2001). Students with disabilities, who are not in the general education classroom for the majority of the day, report greater levels of dissatisfaction with teachers and poor school bonds. As a result, it can be inferred that students with disabilities are not experiencing the same social and emotional benefits (i.e., feeling connected to school as a whole and specifically with their teachers) as the students without disabilities (2001). When implementation strategies are incorporated into student learning, there is a decrease in antisocial behaviors that interfere with a multitude of areas in child development such as creating positive relationships with teachers and involvement in the overall classroom activities and learning. Intervention programs effectively can provide opportunities for students to feel connections to their classrooms, which increases their academic success. The more time students spent in supportive and nurturing classrooms, the more comfortable they felt to take intelligent academic and social risks (Vespo et al., 2006). As more research is surfacing to prove the great role that relationship building has on a child's overall development, it is critical that we are providing intervention programs in order for students to develop pro-social behaviors (Bavarian et al., 2012; Iizuka et al., 2015; Rothwell & Thomas, 2013; Schonert-Reichl, 2015; Segrott et al., 2013; van der Meulen et al., 2014; Vespo et al., 2006; Wang et al., 2012). As a result, students will be able to concentrate on learning how to collaborate, develop a sense of belonging and will be overall more engaged in classroom

activities (Vespo et al., 2006). With this said, there continues to be variables that emerge naturally as a result of the specific age group at large.

One area that continuously came up as an obstacle in the studies conducted at the elementary level focused on the fact that children develop so rapidly at these early stages. When doing studies with this young age group in a natural environment, one must always question whether observed behaviors were a result of the implementation of the curriculum or due to external factors such as the time of day, or environment (Denham et al., 2014, Reid et al., 2014, Vespo et al., 2006). There is always the risk that the effects are due to the child participants' maturing when working with young learners. In order to address this concern, researchers can compare of the effect sizes from the previous year's cohort studies to the current studies. Qualitative and quantitative feedback provided by the teachers can also be used to serve to evaluate the curriculum as a whole. The implementation of social emotional learning programs can be effective in significantly changing negative behaviors affecting social and emotional student health (Behfooroz et al., 2006). Comparing student-teacher relationships and school bonds developed by students with versus without disabilities illustrated a huge discrepancy. Students without special needs created stronger relationships and bonds with their teachers and schools. A huge limitation to this conclusion was that the information was collected solely by the students and may not have portrayed accurate depictions (Murray & Greenberg, 2001). In order to prevent this lack in reliability and validity, studies can use outside observers and correlation between the professionals to create nonbiased reports (Sergott et al., 2013). Working with young age students to study their development in a specific area is challenging. The children are at stage where their development is so rapid in a variety of areas. It is hard to separate the natural maturation of a child and external environmental factors from

successful implementation of particular strategies, as in social emotional learning. The maturation factor continues to be a major variable when focusing on social emotional development of intermediate aged students. Intermediate aged students follow similar trends in success rate when implementing social emotional development, yet they are at a different stage of development – physically and mentally (Perkins-Gough, 2015). This lends itself to take a closer look at the unique effects social emotional development has on the specific age group comprising of intermediate students.

### **Intermediate Aged Students**

There has been a lot of effort put into analyzing the brain development of early learners. “Brain science now reveals that a second period of heightened plasticity occurs during adolescence, a time when the brain is especially prone to change” (Steinberg, 2015, p. 28). The result of these findings give evidence to support the importance of educators putting forth effort into creating and implementing interventions that will serve to improve students’ lives. One effective way to do this is by implementing “school based emotional health service” programs (Sergott et al., 2013, p. 213). When these types of services are created and targeted for intermediate aged students, the children will engage with and accept help from practitioners to successfully overcome various difficulties they may encounter. In order for this to be effective, it is critical to consider the development of elements contained in therapeutic relationships (Rimm-Kaufman et al, 2014; Sergott et al., 2013; Spoth et al., 2008). Communication of the goals and indicators with the school support staff also needs to be a consideration. Finally, there is a need for accountability and assessment measures for the program (Bailey, Giles, & Rogers, 2015; Sergott et al., 2013). If effective programs are implemented, then positive impacts on absenteeism, and improvement in academic areas, such as math performance can be

demonstrated (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). Different effects can be illustrated within different subgroups of learners. For example, the implementation of the *Positive Action* program showed that girls and low-income students demonstrated greater growth in the area of math; whereas, African American boys and a cohort group of students moving from seventh to eighth grade demonstrated growth in reading (Bavarian et al., 2013). This is important, as schools need to be thoughtful when choosing the program that will work best with that specific population of learners. Overall, there is a clear illustration of the vast and varied impact that social emotional programs can have on different group of intermediate aged students (Bavarian et al., 2013; Perkins-Gough, 2015; Sergott et al., 2013). A lot of attention is given to providing supports and interventions to the younger students, it is time to pay more attention to the adolescent subgroup.

In comparison to the research done with early childhood studies (Denham et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2014; Vespo et al., 2006), adolescent groups also benefit from having access to approachable and accepting support systems. It was more apparent in the research of intermediate students that support systems consisted of using school counselors as well as the direct classroom teachers (Bailey et al., 2015; Sergott et al., 2012; Swaim Griggs, Rimm-Kaufman, Merritt, & Patton, 2013). In the early years, there was a greater emphasis on the teacher being the main catalyst between the delivery of the intervention programs and students (Denham et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2014; Vespo et al., 2006). The *Bounceback* program centered on providing one-to-one sessions for young people who were in need of discussing situations that were affecting them and causing concerns with the goal of reaching solutions (Segrott et al., 2013). The goal was to have a balance of practical help and advice, along with emotional support. The aims of this study were the following:

1. exploration the reflections of how the young people used the service,
2. potential for the service to prevent emotional and mental health issues from escalating,
3. examination of the program and the schools it is being implemented in, and
4. ability to identify the supports needed for the students it is servicing. (p. 214)

Counselors conducted the social and emotional support given to the students in this program, although teachers made the referrals. This was a big difference between implementation at the younger ages versus intermediate. Still, the interaction between student and teacher was critical (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). Teachers' level of sensitivity and supportiveness, as well as behavior management approaches, openness to conduct conversations and opportunities for higher order thinking are essential in building quality relationships. Students who are in the warm, caring and responsive classrooms that practice proactive approaches to behavior management and have clear objectives and expectations expressed higher levels of "cognitive, emotional, and social engagement" in their learning (p. 181). Whether it is a system composed of counselors or classroom teachers, students at the adolescent age need to have access to adults who are responsive to their needs and can provide the comfort and support that these students require in order to reach academic success (Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Murray & Greenberg, 2001). Specific age groups are not the only learner subgroup that requires special attention when discussing social emotional development. Different learning types require varied instructional strategies (van der Meulen, 2013). Students who are labeled as 'gifted' would fall under this category, leading to the next area of focus when sifting through the research on this topic (Elmore & Zenus, 1994).

### **Gifted Students**

Another important subgroup of students to consider when ensuring all students are receiving social emotional supports is gifted learners. Most research focuses on the benefits of integrating social emotional learning into math and science classes for the gifted (Elmore & Zenus, 1994; Solow & Razel, 1995; van der Meulen et al., 2013). Interestingly, there is a lack of information on the effects in reading and writing courses. Attention is given to different strategies that can be combined to enrich the subject area learning as well as developing the whole child. Cooperative learning skills, effective communication, personal responsibility in decision-making, as well as advanced math are some examples of what can be taught through learning strategies in effort to develop stronger social emotional development (Elmore & Zenus, 1994). Integrating a social emotional development into the typical academic curriculum has many different effects on self-esteem and academic achievement, which leads to the question of there being an impact on the integration within gifted programs. There has been attention given specifically with sixth grade students in accelerated math classes (Griggs et al., 2013). While gifted students are developing at one speed intellectually, it does not necessarily mean that their social and emotional capacities will be developing at the same speed (Solow & Razel, 1995). There are successful techniques that can be incorporated into gifted students' learning in order to increase their social and emotional and academic balance. In one scenario, specific skills were taught explicitly, such as listening effectively, and the students were then expected to use that skill while working on their math skills (Elmore & Zenus, 1994). Scores amongst all students increased although the lower of the high achieving students illustrated greater increases than the middle to high achieving gifted students. The important thing is educators need to continue to find effective strategies to implement in order to yield more positive outcomes for

the higher achieving students (van der Meulen et al., 2014). The challenge lies in the fact that gifted students' academic curriculum is typically altered to achieve greater personalization. As a result, the social emotional learning also needs to be individualized for this group of learners.

Gifted students do not learn the same as their peers (van der Meulen et al., 2014). The regular instructional strategies used for regular education students typically are not those that work best with gifted students. Therefore, it is not surprising that social emotional development techniques need to be personalized for this subgroup of students on a daily basis (Elmore & Zenus, 1994). Promoting self-esteem, methods for developing greater inner control and an increase of group learning projects were highlighted areas in need of attention when developing strategies to increase social emotional growth. One personalized technique is implementing pull out programs for gifted students (van der Meulen et al., 2014). These programs can yield positive effects, such as higher academic self-concept and improved behavior conduct, which leads to more engaged learning (Elmore & Zenus, 1994). Pull out programs that can grant the opportunity to create a 'specifically adapted' program to gifted children and their educational and social emotional needs appears to be a very beneficial one. There needs to be a balance of instruction in curriculum that is created for this specific group of students. It is essential that educators do not use the normal developmental path as a guide because of gifted students' unique development (Solow & Razel, 1995). Some components to the learning that needs to take place for this group of students are promoting self-esteem, methods to develop locus of control, and learning how to work collaboratively with their peers (Elmore & Zenus, 1994). Interestingly, the general population recognizes the fact that there is a group of learners who have exceptional cognitive capabilities yet there are fewer acceptances surrounding the fact that these learners have specific social emotional needs that have to be met. Gifted students have a

greater unevenness of development and, as a result, the typical guide to teaching regular education children, in any capacity cannot be used for this group of learners (Elmore & Zenus, 1994; Solow & Razel, 1995; van der Meulen et al., 2013). It is clear that this group of students need unique instruction in order to better their overall development; although it is vague what is actually needed to effectively meet the needs for gifted students in order to develop the whole child (Solow, 1994). Throughout this review age and academic levels have been considered when linking social emotional development to academic success. These two factors are important to consider yet the effect of socio economics also plays a contributing role.

### **Low Income Students**

There are many different components that affect a child's growth and development. Although schools only have a certain amount of control over what happens in students' lives, it is essential that educators have a wealth of strategies to use to incorporate best teaching practices for all students, including those who are living in low-income households (Bavarian et al., 2013). Students from low socio economic families are typically related to lower skill levels (Reid et al., 2014). "A growing body of research indicates that school-based social-emotional and character development (SECD) and SECD-like programs (e.g., social-emotional learning, positive youth development) can influence health behaviors and academic achievement among low-income minority youth" (Bavarian et al., 2013, p. 771). One specific program – *FRIENDS for Life* – studied the impact on social and emotional outcomes while also finding out how to better serve teachers educating students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Iizuka et al., 2015). *Positive Action*, another program, used three measures to gain information: student self-report, teacher ratings of students, and school records/data (Bavarian et al., 2015). Girls and low-income students showed greater growth in the area of math as a result of this



implementation. Both programs illustrated positive results on the low socio economic subgroup of learners and their social emotional development.

Since there is such a lack of control over students' home environment, schools need to focus on what factors they are able to control, such as the school structure itself and the faculty involved. A key component to achieve effective support for a schools' low socio economic populations is to work to facilitate the teachers who serve as the key deliverers of the instruction (Bavarian et al., 2013; Iizuka et al., 2015). In order for the delivery of the instruction to be effective there needs to be a greater focus on things, such as problem solving, self-control, emotional regulation, attention and quality lesson planning (Bavarian et al., 2013). Effective prevention programs need to include factors that are malleable in order to connect with the specific participants in each unique school and particular control factors in the environment (Iizuka et al., 2015). Such factors may include:

1. self-concept,
2. self-esteem,
3. self-efficacy,
4. self-awareness,
5. ability to express one's feelings appropriately,
6. empathy, and
7. peer socialization. (Behfooroz et al., 2006, p. 275)

When implemented with fidelity, positive results can be observed through an increase in meaningful participation in school, creation of academic-related goals and shared aspirations of the youth but also increases in test scores and decreased absentee rates. The intervention programs for high populations of students who are economically disadvantaged, from ethnic

minority backgrounds, as well as students with large proportions of below average academic ability must be done early (Denham et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2014). Kindergarten is the recommended year to begin as it serves as a huge transition year from home/child care to a school environment (Vespo et al., 2006). Another factor that needs to be considered in order for intervention programs to be successful to this group of students are flexibility with time and content (Bavarian et al., 2013; Iizuka, 2015; Vespo et al., 2006). Overall, there needs to be a greater emphasis on creating safe and welcoming environments for students within the school by developing therapeutic relationships with the school staff (Sergott et al., 2013). When serving the low socio-economic children and adolescence in our educational system, schools need to focus on the amenable factors that can be controlled within the confines of the school environment to make it a place of safety and nurture, and as a result, higher levels of academic success will occur. A thread that has been sewn throughout the research focusing on the student subgroups has been the role of the teacher (Behforooz et al., 2006; Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015; Sergott et al., 2013; Vespo et al., 2006). Spanning different age levels, academic levels and socio economic status levels, there remains one constant – the teachers are the front line supporters of all students' social emotional and academic development.

### **Role of the Teacher**

Teachers play a key role in the implementations of social emotional development programs. Although the main focus should always be the students, taking the teachers' needs into consideration is essential in providing healthy learning environments for all. When attention and care is given towards creating emotional intelligence in schools, less stress and burnout along with greater job satisfaction has been reported amongst educators (Brackett &

Simmons, 2015; Collie et al., 2012). It is essential that teachers are properly trained and prepared to support their students in their social emotional development (Collie et al., 2012). This takes time, thought and effort to carry out with fidelity. Different teachers have different degrees of experience and knowledge about child development, which could affect how the programs and strategies are carried out in the classroom (Reid et al., 2014). It is important to consider the level of teacher comfort and knowledge level when implementing social emotional development strategies (Collie et al., 2012). Programs like *FRIENDS for Life* take into consideration the importance of training teachers and responding to their needs (Iizuka et al., 2015). The *FRIENDS for Life* study focused on supporting the teachers not only in delivering the program but also how to better develop their own social and emotional competence to promote their own healthy lifestyle and work environment. Training for teachers can take on a coaching and modeling approach using specific coaching and modeling techniques for the teachers in the beginning of the roll out. When it is the sole responsibility of the staff members to refer young people, there needs to be support and training on how to do such a feat (Sergott et al., 2013). This is a big responsibility for teachers to carry and it is important for teachers to be confident in their abilities to identify students who may benefit from an extra support system (Collie et al., 2012). Higher education is also calling on the need for a greater focus on professional development for their faculty on the role that emotional intelligence plays in learning (Kruger & Seugnet, 2013; Wang et al., 2012). “As [technology enhanced learning] becomes an established mode of course delivery in [higher education], professional development programs should seek trained instructors to coach [emotional intelligence] and reflective skills in addition to teaching new technologies” (Kruger & Seugnet, 2013, p. 17). In order for the programs to be carried out with fidelity and for the results of those to be deemed

valid and reliable, teachers must be properly trained and supported throughout the entire implementation and reporting process (Collie et al., 2012). In order to do this, program implementers must take into consideration exactly what the teachers need and what areas require professional development.

It is important for teachers to be well equipped to promote social emotional development to all learners. When delivering personalized education, it is much more than following the set curriculum; it is teaching the whole child (Rechtschaffen & Rechtschaffen, 2015). Teachers who are connected to and responsive to students, who are aware of their individual differences and needs while also incorporating the students' points of view into their teaching and learning are considered to be providing emotional support to their students (Steinberg, 2015). High levels of student reported engagement is a result of strong student-teacher interaction quality (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). For example, there is a strong need for students with disabilities to have an educational program that will strengthen their bonds with teachers and the school so that they can gain greater academic success (Murray & Greenberg, 2001). It is essential that all subgroups be considered when considering the astounding affects that a quality teacher and student relationship can have on teaching and learning (Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2015). Teachers have the ability to understand the causes and consequences of their own and their students' emotions, which can provide great insight into students learning and overall development (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). With this knowledge, teachers can teach more mindfully and differentiate instruction to meet current and future hopes of emotional needs (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). It is imperative that teachers have a clear grasp of the curriculum because even with that understanding there will be other factors that may cause obstacles; the biggest challenge of all being time.

Even with the knowledge of the importance of incorporating these intervention programs, there were many struggles that the professionals faced such as delivering the set social emotional programs lessons with fidelity. If none of the teachers are able to implement the program successfully it begs to question if it was a realistic curriculum (Behfooroz et al., 2006). In today's schools there is a great emphasis on standardized testing and teacher accountability, resulting in the emotions of both the students and educators being pushed aside to the detriment of all (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). The delivery of the academic curriculum continues to be the sole driver of time and effort in public schools (Steinberg, 2015). Knowing that this is the sad reality at this time, any amount of attention paid to developing social and emotional well-being will benefit the students at large (Tomlinson, 2015). There needs to be universal training and a specific format for the teachers to follow (Behfooroz et al., 2006). There needs to be realistic expectations for delivering the lessons in the year. When teachers are in charge of rating classroom adjustment there needs to be assessments that can be used with little training and are simple to perform in order for teachers to gain great insight into how to use best practice techniques for individual students (Denham et al., 2014). Through use of the used direct assessment and a reliable observational system, a child's strengths and weakness, related to social emotional development, can be collected. Although in most cases it is believed that the higher the commitment to delivering social emotional learning, the higher the level of teacher engagement, it is not always the case (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). When proper training and support is not given to the teachers, the educators can experience a great sense of stress and pressure feeling they are lacking the appropriate skills (Collie et al., 2012). Explicit social emotional teaching and learning must be embedded into the curriculum to avoid it being an extra add on for teachers to try to find way to incorporate into authentically and diligently

(Segrott et al., 2013). It is important, and doable, to develop assessments that are simple, yet grounded in research, in order to gather information on the social emotional aspects to use to inform instruction (Reid et al., 2014). Although teachers are the front line defense when considering linking academic success with social emotional development, there are many other stakeholder groups that work as collaborators in a child's educational journey (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). K-12 education systems have only limited control over external factors, such as university education and families, yet both play a crucial role, and need to be considered, when reviewing the effects on development.

### **Stakeholder Groups**

Most of the focus on social emotional well being in education is during the elementary years. Although there is a new wave of research concentrating on adolescence and the middle school years (Bailey et al., 2015; Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Steinberg, 2015), very little is studied about social emotional well-being and academic success in the higher levels of education. It poses the question, is there a lack of connection between the two or a lack of research done? A study conducted by Wang et al. (2012) would argue that social and emotional interventions continue to have positive effects on students in higher education. In many of the K-12 studies, there was a focus on the transitional years and the benefits of social emotional learning at these stages (Bailey et al., 2015; Denham et al., 2014; Reid et al., 2014; Steinberg, 2015; Vespo et al., 2006). The jump from high school to college can be considered as another big transitional period. Students who were exposed to social emotional learning curriculum in their college experience had higher grades compared to peers who took the traditional courses that lacked a specific focus in this area (Wang et al., 2012). There were increasing demands for Technology-Enhanced Learning and the need for greater social emotional development and

stability at this age to facilitate with this intense learning (Kruger & Seugnet, 2013). It is clear that the integration of social emotional curriculum in continues to be a need for students at older ages, as well as the younger years (Steinberg, 2015). This educational continuum is an important focus and leads into considering other outside collaborators, such as families, who contribute to the growth and development of children.

It is important for schools to support students' social emotional health, but is it also essential that all stakeholders, such as families, learn the skills of emotional intelligence (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). Taking care of a child's emotions affects attention, learning, performance as well decision making, fostering good relationships and overall health and well-being (Tomlinson, 2015). The effect of taking care of children and adolescents extends way beyond the classroom walls. There is a strong correlation between a universal partnership with families/parents and academic success (Spoth et al., 2008). The idea of incorporating the parents/families role in studying the connection between social emotional and academic success is essential and all stakeholder groups must be considered (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). There has been special attention give to parents of gifted children as they observe different behavior and personality traits are different from the norm and this affects their thoughts about their child's behavior (Solow, 1995). Overall, most parents consider the differences in development of affective issues in their children are due to the unique personalities of the child versus the fact that the child is considered gifted (van der Meulen et al., 2014). When working with parents of gifted students, it is important to consider that they may not be reflecting on fact that their children could be possess specific characteristics as a result of their high intellect. These qualities affect their social emotional development. Educating the parents on skills that could be beneficial to this specific group of students in the educational setting could also have a

positive impact in their home lives (Solow, 1995). Schools and families need to work together to share insights and strategies in order to be reaching and teaching the whole child (Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Spoth et al., 2008). The combination of considering developmental stages defined by age, intelligence levels, socio economic status groups, the role of teachers along with outside collaborators is the foundation of building a strong base for social emotional development leading to greater academic success.

### **Summary**

Schools must create social emotional development as a priority in order for students to be academically successful. “It’s time to ensure that all educators and children develop the necessary emotional skills to reach their full potential in school, at home, and in their communities” (Brackett & Simmons, 2015, p. 27). Throughout all the grade levels from early childhood to higher education, students’ social emotional needs must be met. When analyzing subgroups within those age spans such as low socio economic and gifted students, research supports that children benefit from intervention strategies to facilitate emotional intelligence. When students demonstrate antisocial behavior, it interferes with their ability to make friends, have positive relationships with teachers, and become involved in classroom activities. In contrast, when children demonstrate pro-social behavior, they are able collaborate with others, develop a sense of belonging, and become engage in classroom activities (Behforooz et al., 2006). Whether the interventionists are teachers or other practitioners, it is important that they are trained, and supported throughout the implementation process of social emotional learning programs to yield the high effective delivery.

Even with the research that stands, gaps still exist in certain subgroups of learners and in some academic areas. More research should continue to be collected in the upper level grades



to explore the connection between social emotional development and academic success. In the regards to the studies on gifted students, most of the studies concentrate on math and science gifted students. Little reported research has been collected on adolescent gifted students in the writing and reading disciplines. This illustrates a gap in the research that needs to be filled. There are still relatively few published studies of the impact of social emotional development and academic success for students with special needs. Further investigation into both of these subgroups – gifted children and children with special needs – in order to gather more information on how to best meet the needs for all of our diverse learners is essential when teaching the whole child in education today.

## **Chapter 3 – Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The review of the literature illustrated a need to develop a greater understanding in how social emotional development could affect academic success for students who have special needs. Based on this gap in the research, the purpose of this thesis study was to investigate ways that incorporated social emotional development strategies within the set academic curriculum for students with special needs. This led to the following research questions:

1. What social emotional strategies should be implemented into the academic curriculum for children with special needs?
2. How do students' attitudes towards academic learning compare before and after the implementation of social emotional development strategies?

To answer these research questions, an action-research methodology was selected.

### **Methodology**

The action research methodology served this study well because there was a specific issue and the study tried to find solutions to the problem (Craig, 2009; Creswell, 2012). There were specific strategies chosen by the teacher/researcher used purposefully during the implementation. Different strategies were explicitly taught and then students were expected to implement the strategies throughout the learning of the academic curriculum (Rechtschaffen & Rechtschaffen, 2015). This was an appropriate methodology to use as the educator was the promoter of strategies (i.e. self-awareness, self-management, social skills, and responsible decision-making strategies) for the students. The teacher/researcher chose these specific strategies as a result of observing that they were areas in need of development for her students. Action research provided an opportunity for the teacher to participate in research to improve her

practice (Creswell, 2012). When teachers took an active role in gaining skills and found ways to effectively manage their classroom, engage students and apply effective instructional strategies, the results were increased efficacy (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012). Students with special needs made up a subgroup of children who were at risk of experiencing poor social emotional and academic adjustments. Therefore, it was important to further develop an understanding on how social emotional development skills could be implemented into the standard academic curriculum specifically for this group of learners (Murray & Greenberg, 2001). An action research study helped gain greater insight into this important area of development in education.

An action research approach worked well for this study because it provided a practical practice for students with special needs to gain more social emotional development strategies. Through collecting information from a variety of stakeholders (i.e., school counselor, special education teacher, special education service provider and/or a parent of a child with special needs), the researcher/teacher chose several (i.e., three to four) social emotional strategies to implement during the learning of the academic curriculum. Such strategies included active listening, perspective taking, and sharing of ideas. Social and emotional skill development was implemented within the teaching and instruction of the academic curriculum for students with special needs in the researcher/teacher's classroom.

It was the intention of the researcher/teacher to find effective ways to implement strategies in her teaching and instruction that facilitated the development of social emotional, as well as academic, skills. An action research study allowed the educator to aim to improve her practice by analyzing gathered information about the way her classroom operated, as well as the instruction and learning (Craig, 2009). Action research was done by studying the identified

issue, collecting and analyzing data and then implementing change based on the findings (Creswell, 2012). A case study would not have been appropriate, as it did not allow the researcher/teacher to implement any strategies. The focus of a case study approach would be a more in-depth exploration of a 'bounded system,' which in this situation would have been individuals. An action research approach allowed the teacher/researcher an opportunity to improve her practices by being an active participant in the research.

### **Study Setting**

The study took place in a public school located in the suburban town of Weston, Connecticut. The town's population was roughly ten thousand people. It was a tight knit community with high parent and community participation in the schools. It was a very affluent community with very little commercial development. The main draw to the town was the education that the four schools provide. All four schools were located on the same campus. The school in which the study was conducted was the intermediate school, which housed grades three through five. The school's population was comprised of 7.5 % students with disabilities; where the overall district's percentage was 9.1% of the population being students with special needs.

Participants were from a fifth grade collaborative general education classroom. The class was composed of 22 students; nine of which were identified as having special needs and had individualized education plans (IEP) or 504 plans. For three of the nine students, this was their first year being in the general education classroom. In prior years, they received direct instruction by a special education teacher outside of the general education environment. The study focused on the children who comprised the special education subgroup contained in the classroom. Within this group, there were three females and six males. The teacher/researcher

was the decision maker throughout this study. The students were in the classroom setting with the same teacher for all academic subjects with the exception of social studies. The teacher, who was also the researcher, was a twelve-year veteran teacher who was trained in ‘Responsive Classroom,’ which was a research-based approach to teaching that focused on the strong link between academic success and social-emotional skills.

### **Data Collection**

For the purpose of this action research project, the researcher collected multiple methods of qualitative data in order to implement social emotional strategies into the academic curriculum for children with special needs. In addition, students’ attitudes towards the implementation of those strategies were assessed. Table 1 below outlines the two research questions as well as the methods of data collection used in this study.

Table 1. <i>Research Question and Methods of Data Collection</i>	
Research Question	Data Collection Method
1. What social emotional strategies can be implemented into the academic curriculum for children with special needs?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus Groups</li> <li>• Surveys</li> </ul>
2. How do students' attitudes towards academic learning compare before and during the implementation of social emotional development strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys</li> <li>• Observation</li> </ul>

In order to answer the two research questions stated above, a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods were used. Each of these methods will be explained in more detail in the following subsections.

### **Focus Groups**

The purpose of a focus group, a qualitative method, was to collect multiple views from specific individuals. The group was asked a small number of general questions as the researcher gathered responses from each participant (Creswell, 2012). This method was effective, as the educator/researcher had limited time to collect a lot of information from the variety of stakeholder groups. It was important to gather responses from each member of the group for each question as they were purposefully chosen because of their unique perspective. The questions were constructed and delivered in a specific order. The participants did not have the questions beforehand; yet were allowed to interact with the other members of the groups in the discussions. The researcher/teacher had a relationship with each participant in the focus group. This pre-established connection was helpful as there was already a developed trust level that encouraged honest responses (Craig, 2009). The opportunity to collect honest responses led to the gathering of valuable information.

In this study, the focus group was comprised of a variety of stakeholders such as a special education teacher, a parent of a child with special needs, the school counselor and a general education teacher. The researcher/teacher provided several questions that gathered information about what social emotional development areas were generally lacking in the special education cohort (see Appendix A for a copy of the focus group protocol). The purpose of the information collected identified the social emotional development strategies that were incorporated into the academic curriculum. Some of the members knew each other previously

to meeting during the focus groups but not all. The group was given six thought prompts that led the group discussion. The questions were created in order to gather information about the variety of strategies that could be used in the classroom to promote social emotional learning in the academic setting. They were designed to be explicit enough to gather insightful information without being so directed that the participants felt locked into a specific answer. The responses were collected and the researcher/teacher reflected on and used the feedback to inform the strategies that were used throughout the rest of the study (Craig, 2009). The focus group was helpful to gather a greater amount of information from varied perspectives.

### **Survey**

Surveys were used to collect information from a larger group of educators in the school. The results were based on the participants and were dependent on each participant's completion and submission of the survey to the researcher. As it was a choice, the participants were not hand picked, as they were in the focus group setting (Creswell, 2012). This provided a broader perspective, although it did not yield as detailed of responses. The survey used was web-based, which will allowed for the researcher/teacher to gather the data quickly in order to use it to inform her action research study. The collection of a broader population, combined with the responses from the more controlled sample in the focus group, provided more data to work with, which in return created effective strategies for the student participants in the study.

The survey was sent out to the faculty in the school in which the study took place (see Appendix B for a copy of the survey). The intended participants in this survey were comprised of teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, cafeteria staff, custodial and security staff. One of the downfalls of doing a survey was the lack of control the researcher had on the returned responses (Creswell, 2012). There were many reminders sent out in order to collect the most

information from a varied group of stakeholders in the time frame allotted. All perspectives were important to consider and beneficial to the study. The questions were more structured than the focus group questions although the focus group questions were considered when developing the web based survey questions. There were 13 questions that comprised the survey. There were a variety of questions; some were multiple choice, linear scale and open-ended. This was done purposefully in order to gather as much information as possible while also keeping the questions to an amount that the educators could respond to in one sitting. If there were too many questions or if too many were open ended, the educators would be less likely to complete. The hope was that by putting out the survey to the whole school, the researcher would gather a lot of varied perspectives. The focus group used a more specific and deliberately chosen group of people. The purpose of connecting these two data collection methods was so that the results of both could be combined in order to best inform the action research study.

The researcher/teacher also used attitudinal measures to collect data (see Appendix C for a copy of this instrument). This form of data collection was quantitative and could be considered a type of a survey. This method was comprised of unbiased questions created by the researcher to measure feelings toward an educational topic (Creswell, 2012). The survey consisted of 11 questions that aimed to retrieve information about each student's attitudes towards a variation of behaviors and actions that illustrated the effects of social and emotional development. It was critical that the measures were created so that the participants would answer the questions truthfully. The given questionnaires measured the participants' attitudes by providing a sum of the scaled scores to the questions and served as the individuals' scores. The instrument gauged the effectiveness of the variable according to the participant group. In this study the variables considered were the implemented strategies. As the research question



stated, it was the intent of the study to compare the attitudes of the participants before versus after the strategies were implemented. Therefore, the survey needed to be given before the implementation process began, and then after, in order to analyze any discrepancies in attitudes. The information from both measures was gathered, used to draw inferences and provided data that was analyzed in order to gather responses to the designed research question (Boudah, 2011). The collected data was helpful to the researcher when she considered of the effectiveness of the implemented strategies.

It was important that the questions were developed and delivered in order to encourage honest feedback. The students were given the attitudinal survey twice, once before the implementation and then again afterwards. A drawback to this data collection method was the lack of direct evidence of the behaviors that supported the answers to the questions (Creswell, 2012). As a result, the researcher/teacher used observation as a data collection technique. The participants took the attitudinal survey online in both sessions, as this was the form they are most familiar with using. By taking the survey through a mode the students were comfortable with, this increased the probability of providing authentic feedback (Boudah, 2011). The general statement of this survey was, "How do students' attitudes towards academic learning compare before and after the implementation of social emotional development strategies?" In order to get detailed feedback, the specifics of this question were specified. Once these specifics were defined, the survey questions were created. The sequence increased the researcher's effectiveness when she gathered the necessary information. The student participants were asked structured questions that addressed the strategies that were implemented. The attitudinal measure provided an instrument to gather information that

connected directly to the research question related to the students and their feelings towards the embedded strategies.

### **Observation**

Observation was a source of qualitative inquiry where the researcher focused on the collection of valid information to answer the posed research question. One of the challenges in conducting observations was the ease in ability to get distracted by the other events going on in the classroom (Boudah, 2011). There were also a lot of decisions that needed to be made by the researcher including what observations needed to be recorded as well as defining the researcher's role (i.e., full participant observation, partial observation, or onlooker observation). The researcher needed to be conscious of recording quotes in the field notes, as well as anecdotal notes (see Appendix D for a copy of the observation recording sheet that will be used). Note taking presented its own set of challenges, such as learning how to quickly go from recording broad observations to the funneling down of more narrow ones. It was also imperative for the researcher to write down the details immediately after the observation session (Creswell, 2012). This way the study stayed authentic and true in order to observe the changes in students' attitudes as a result of implemented social emotional strategies into academic learning.

In this study, the observation focused on a group of students, which were a cohort of students with special needs in the general education classroom. Since the researcher was also the teacher in this study, she served as a full participant observer, meaning the researcher took part in the events that occurred in the study's setting. The subjects knew they were being observed as the strategy of self-reflection was a social emotional skill that was purposefully embedded in the academic curriculum. There was ample time dedicated to gather observations, as there needed to be the expectation that disruptions (e.g., absences, fire drills, and assemblies)

would occur. The foci of these observations were created based on specific characteristics or categories identified as the study developed. The focus to start the study was broad, “How are the student’s attitudes changing with the implementation of the social emotional strategies in the academic curriculum?” An observational protocol was used in order to record the information during the observations (Creswell, 2012). As noted above, an observation sheet was created in order to record the anecdotal actions and behaviors observed by the student participants.

Although there were many factors that required consideration when conducting observations, it was an important data collection method in order to gain information on how students’ attitudes were affected by the implementation of social emotional development strategies into the academic curriculum. The observation form allowed for the researcher to record the actions and behaviors on a specific date and time while it also allowed for the interpretation of the information, the examination of the deeper meaning and how that related to a change in attitude.

### **Data Analysis**

In this action research study, the researcher used both qualitative and quantitative measures to gather the research, and therefore the study needed two different methods to analyze. When analyzing the collected qualitative data, the constant comparative method was utilized. A descriptive statistic approach was used to summarize the quantitative data. The combination of these two analysis methods led to the answering of the two posed research questions that were the foundations of this study.

#### **Constant Comparative Data Analysis**

The goal of using constant comparative data analysis was to gather data, sort it into categories, all while continuing to collect additional information and compare it as categories emerged (Creswell, 2012). In this study, the constant comparative data analysis method was

used for the data collected during a focus group session and through observations of the student subjects. The goal was to develop evidence for the constructed categories by ordering them from the most specific to broad. Through the use of coding, the researcher gleaned new insights through the interactions with the participants (Ruona, 2005). The act of coding generated greater meaning from the information collected, which increased the quality of the study.

In this study there was a focus group conducted in the beginning of the study that gathered feedback from a variety of stakeholder groups. This discussion was recorded and then transcribed into a *Microsoft Word* document. The researcher looked at the outcomes of the focus group and saw what themes were evident. This facilitated the decision of what social emotional development strategies would be implemented in the academic curriculum. The researcher also incorporated constant comparative data analysis to gain insight into the themes that arose from the students' feedback on the surveys questions. These questions focused on the students' attitudes as a result of the implemented strategies.

### **Descriptive Statistics**

Descriptive statistics were used to gain greater understanding of the numerical data collected in this study. The goal in using descriptive statistics was to use raw data in a way that provided a descriptive picture of what took place in the study (Craig, 2009). After the responses were collected, they were given a number value. These numbers were then coded to provide scores for the responses, allowing the researcher to gain more insight into the data that was collected. Descriptive statistics generated landmarks such as mean, median, and standard deviation for a set of data (Boudah, 2011). This approach allowed the researcher to gather information from a large set of data in order to make sense of it in relation to the research questions.

The two different surveys were delivered and results were collected electronically using *Google Forms*. One survey was given and collected from the faculty of the intermediate school. This was given at the beginning of the study to gather information about the strategies that would be then implemented throughout the rest of the study. The other survey was given to the students to evaluate how the students' attitudes were towards the implemented strategies. *Microsoft Excel* was used to generate both of the descriptive statistics analysis (Boudah, 2011). The data was collected and examined to interpret what took place in the 'practicing environment.' The data was integrated and created a collection of "descriptive, interpretive and integrated findings" (Craig, 2009, p. 166). The findings collected were used to answer the study's research questions.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The goal of this study was to ensure the reliability and validity of the gathered data. In order to do this, there needed to be several ways to uphold the authenticity and confidence of reported results. Pilot testing, member checking and triangulation were the instruments used to check the reliability and validity of the scores. According to Creswell (2012), if the scores were not reliable, then they would not be valid; the scores needed to be stable and consistent first before they could be meaningful. Through the combination of the three instruments used, the results of this study provided beneficial information.

### **Pilot Testing**

Pilot testing was the first way to check the credibility and methods of data collection for the study. In the surveys, the researcher checked in with the students and/or teachers and had them talk out their answers. It was a good test to ensure that they understood the questions as they were asked in regards to the intention of the study. Also, it served as a check to make sure

that the participants were filling it out in a way that was predictable. It was imperative that the participants in the pilot test groups represented an accurate portrayal of the test group.

As a result of using pilot testing, the researcher was able to make changes to the instrument based on the feedback gathered from a select group of individuals who participated and evaluated the instruments (Creswell, 2012). The individuals were able to provide written feedback that the researchers used to modify before she gave it to the participants in the study. This provided clarity, especially when the researcher used the procedures that were closely defined to the original proposal. When the pilot study was conducted, the researcher used a smaller sample of participants as well as a smaller number of variables and questions (Boudah, 2011). By using this method, the researcher increased the level of credibility of the overall findings.

In this study for the pilot test, the faculty survey was given to a group of staff members from a different school within the district. The student survey was given to a group of students with special needs from a different fifth grade class within the district. Feedback from both of these surveys was collected and modifications were made as a result. The focus group questions were piloted with a different group of stakeholders who represented the actual test group. The observation-recording sheet was used by the researcher/teacher to observe a different subgroup of learners in the room in order to become comfortable with the method and recording process. It was important to test out the recording device and to practice transcribing as well. By pilot testing, the study was more authentic and the results were more credible.

### **Member Checking**

Member checking was another way used to check the qualitative information collected through the methods of the focus groups and observations. Member checking was implemented

when the researcher used other participants to ensure the results of the study were reliable and valid. In order to do this, the participants were asked to look at the findings to see if they agreed. They reviewed the descriptions to make sure they were complete and accurate as well as checked the identified themes and interpretations to see if they were true to the situation (Creswell, 2012). The participants offered suggestions as well as confirmed or denied the shared ideas. It was important that the researcher was clear on how the interpretations would be used as that could have resulted in wariness among the participants (Boudah, 2011). In order to achieve valid and authentic results, there needs to be a solid foundation of trust and understanding from all participants in the study.

In this action research study, the members of the focus group received a copy of the transcript to review to ensure it matched up with the intended meaning. Also, there was a collaborating teacher who was in the room when the researcher conducted both the focus group, and the observations. She was also present when the researcher implemented the decided strategies in the academic curriculum and served as a reliable check to add to the credibility of the study. The collaborating teacher reviewed the anecdotal observation notes to ensure that the recorded thoughts and interpretations matched up with her own thoughts and interpretations. This second educator was extremely helpful throughout the study as she was present during the times the observations were recorded. As the researcher began to generate themes she sent the information to the research participants to comment. The process of participant review was selective. The researcher only sent each of the specific subjects the information concerning the particular question that was pertinent to that individual to review. This was to ensure that the participant focused solely on his/her response. Member checking determined the accuracy of information gathered from these two methods.

**Triangulation**

Triangulation served as one more way to check the reliability and validity of the gathered information. Triangulation was used to test two or more methods of study around a topic to ensure the answers are valid (Craig, 2009). When using triangulation, the researcher was able to gain more than one perspective on a situation in order to increase the ‘truth value’ (Boudah, 2011). “Triangulation is the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research” (Creswell, 2012, p. 259). The gathering the information in multiple modes and manners increased the study’s credibility.

In this study, there were two separate survey results, the transcriptions from the focus groups and the anecdotal observation notes. The combination of results from these different methods, made the results more credible. The fact that there were multiple perspectives also added more authenticity to the study. There was a balanced collection of thoughts and ideas from a selected group of educators along with a broader sample of varied stakeholders including custodial staff and non-certified staff, parents and administrators. Student input was also a critical component. The combination of perspectives provided a greater breadth of understanding and experiences that were used to the advantage of the researcher/teacher which led to the creation of effective strategies to implement.

**Subjectivity Statement**

The researcher in this study was also the general education classroom teacher for the group of student participants. There were 22 total students in the classroom. It was a fifth grade classroom and the teacher taught all of the subject areas. There was a special education teacher in the room to support the teaching and learning for reading, writing, science and social



studies. The classroom teacher also held a degree in special education and has been a fifth grade general education teacher for the past 12 years in the same district. In the past five years, the classroom teacher has been the lead teacher in both collaborative and integrated classrooms.

In 2006, the researcher/teacher was trained in 'Responsive Classroom' and then continued training in 2012. The social emotional strategies and techniques taught in such programs such as 'Responsive Classroom' are ones that the researcher held as critical components for every child's overall development. Although the researcher/teacher taught these strategies explicitly to her students, it was often done during times when the students with special needs were out of the room receiving special services such as speech, reading or math intervention classes and/or counseling sessions. The classroom routines and expectations were formed with the 'Responsive Classroom' fundamentals in mind. The researcher's teaching philosophy placed great emphasis on teaching the whole child and personalized instruction.

As the researcher/teacher increased her own understanding and firmed up her beliefs on how to best educate the whole child, she noticed how the students with special needs were lacking the natural implementation of social emotional strategies into the academic disciplines compared to the regular education children. As she spent more time hypothesizing, the researcher/teacher realized that even when students with special needs entered into a general education classroom, they were pulled out of the classroom when they received special supports. As a result, they missed on the instruction, typically surrounding social and emotional development that the general education students received. Hence, there was a need, in the researcher/teacher's opinion for students with special needs to be exposed to more explicit instruction of social and emotional strategies.

The most effective way to do this was through the embedding of the instruction into the academic curriculum. The commitment the researcher had to educate every student, as a whole child through personalized education was the driving force throughout this study. She came into the study with a background in social emotional development. The research questions constructed were based on not only gaps in the literature, but also from the researcher's own experience. The foundation of her teaching philosophy had an influence in the study yet the focus of the study was illustrated mainly through the commitment of uncovering themes from the research. The highlighted themes were then supported with sound and credible findings resulting from an in-depth analysis of the published literature surrounding the topic of social emotional learning in education.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the changes in attitudes of special needs students towards academic learning when social and emotional strategies were embedded in to the curriculum. The setting of this study was in a suburban elementary school in a collaborative fifth grade classroom. Through focus groups, anecdotal observation notes and surveys for teachers and students, data was collected in order to gain insight into the educators' perspectives of effective strategies to implement as well as the students' attitudes as a result of the application. About 45 educators in the three to five intermediate school were invited to participate in the online surveys as well as a smaller group hand selected to participate in the focus group. There were nine students who participated in the strategy implementation process in the classroom. These same students completed the survey at the beginning and at the end of the process. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics whereas qualitative data was analyzed using constant comparative data analysis. In order to ensure that the findings

were credible pilot testing, member checking and triangulation were used to check the reliability and validity of the data collected. The pilot testing was done prior to the roll out of the study and modifications were made as a result of the feedback by the selected sample of participants. Member checking was used as the data was collected in order to certify authenticity. The different methods of the data collection: surveys, observations and focus groups guaranteed the ability for triangulation to be an effective method to implement in this study.

## **Chapter 4 – Results and Discussions**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to gather information on the different social emotional learning strategies that could be embedded into the academic curriculum for students with special needs. Once information was gathered, surrounding the suggested skills and strategies to embed within the curriculum, another focus of the study was to observe how students' attitudes changed before and after the implementation of social emotional learning strategies.

The study was guided by these two research questions:

1. What social emotional strategies should be implemented into the academic curriculum for children with special needs?
2. How do students' attitudes towards academic learning compare before and after the implementation of social emotional development strategies?

This chapter will discuss the findings from both of the above listed research questions.

The results were gathered from a variety of methods. One collection method was through surveys; there were two different types of surveys, one given to the faculty and one given to the students. The student survey was given twice, once at the beginning of the study and again at the end. The teacher survey was only given once in the beginning. There was also a focus group comprised of educators and anecdotal notes were recorded during the observations made of the students during the implementation phase of the action study. The mixture of qualitative and quantitative data combined with current research gathered in the literature review, uncovered multiple themes for each of the research questions that were further discussed throughout this chapter.

**Research Question 1: What social emotional strategies should be implemented into the academic curriculum for children with special needs?**

Social emotional strategies were varied and there were different levels of importance that educators place on the implementation of these skills and their role in the academic curriculum. It was important to gather information on different strategies that were used in order to see how they were embedded into the academic curriculum or how they could potentially be implemented in the future. A survey was given out to the staff, as well as a focus group was created, to gather information. The faculty who responded to the survey was comprised of about 72% classroom teachers, 11 % ‘other’ – meaning it was staff consisting of the school nurse, security guards, custodial staff, and cafeteria workers, 8% curriculum instructional leaders, content specialist or special service providers, and two smaller percentages were made up of administrators and paraprofessionals. When surveyed, 47% of the participated staff had worked between 16-25 years in K-12 education.

The focus group was comprised of four classroom teachers who represented third to fifth grade, an administrator, a parent of a child with special needs and a member of our school’s mental health team. The data for this first research question revealed that there were a lot of things to consider when implementation strategies were discussed as well as the topic of how best to embed social emotional skills into the academic curriculum. There were three major themes that arose when analyzing the results. First, there was an overwhelming response that this topic was one of great importance to the faculty in our school and was in need of further development. Secondly, there was a need for a greater dedication of time to learn about social emotional strategies as well as how to embed them into the academic curriculum. Along with

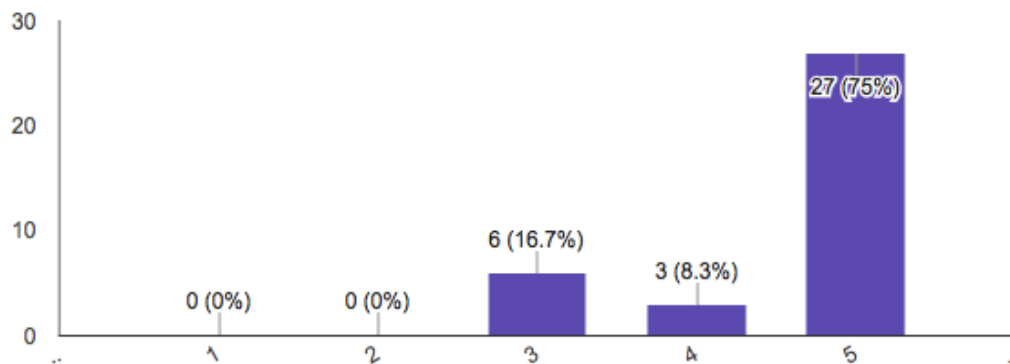
this, another theme that arose was a need and desire for a greater amount of support in this endeavor from the schools and families of the students in the schools.

### Importance

One of the major themes illustrated in all methods of the data collection was the importance of teaching social emotional strategies in the academic setting. The majority of data collected through the faculty survey expressed that the faculty felt this was an area that deserved attention and development. This can be seen in the graph below.

**To what extent do you agree or disagree with this following statement?  
Teaching social and emotional skills to students is an effective way to  
improve student achievement.**

(36 responses)



*Figure 1. Teaching Social Emotional Skills to Students is Effective in Improving Student Achievement*

The results showed that none of the surveyed faculty felt that the teaching of social emotional skills had no or little effect on students' academic achievement. That statistic represented a strong illustration on the importance that the surveyed staff placed on the learning of social emotional skills and strategies.

When conducting the focus groups, the results were more mixed. Whereas some of the members defined social emotional learning as how kids interacted with each other and their frame of mind for learning from one another and academically. Another member shared that if children were disturbed, bothered, or having social problems then they would not be able to focus on the academics. There was a consensus on the fact that under developed social emotional skills was an issue. Not all members of the focus group felt that it was their responsibility, as a teacher, to teach social emotional learning strategies. One teacher in the focus group said that she could teach into the social component, but not the emotional.

Another teacher agreed with the sentiment that teachers are not equipped to teach into the emotional piece. She stated that even if she were able to pull the student out to help with an emotional issue, she would not know if what she was teaching was the “right thing”. She shared that she would ask why the student was upset and would follow up with active listening but she would not know if that would be the right or wrong way to handle the situation. One educator in the group labeled this strategy as “debriefing and dissecting.” The idea that the strategy was reactive versus proactive brought up the point that when this type of strategy was incorporated, the rest of the class was being negatively affected. That conversation was followed by a comment by one of the teachers who said that he thought that somebody else besides the teacher should be responsible for the teaching of these skills and strategies. With that sentiment, five other members of the group verbally or silently gestured in agreement.

Again in the focus group it was mentioned that when programs such as ‘Responsive Classroom’ were used, teachers taught social skills and respect towards others in group environments as a result of those programs setting up the proper protocols. With that consideration, the teachers continued to feel that the piece of being responsible for a child’s

emotional learning was outside of their qualifications. That statement, “it is outside of my qualifications,” resulted in many head nods and looks of affirmation with the other members of the group. Although some of the educators felt there was a great level of importance to these skills, they did not necessarily believe it was the teacher’s role to deliver instruction on how to improve upon emotional development skills.

There were other educators who felt that it was their role to teach these strategies. Many of the faculty members in our school looked at it as a collaborative effort. A special education teacher commented in the survey that he worked with special needs students where the social emotional piece tended to be missing. He felt that although he worked with his colleagues and tried to teach the special education students social and emotional skills, which depended on the severity of the child's diagnosis, sometimes the child was incapable of learning those skills. With that said, they kept trying, with the help of behaviorists who constantly tweaked their programs and the paraprofessionals who recorded the data. If one plan did not work, then they tried something else. Overall, though, it was clear that this teacher believed that the teaching of these skills was a critical component to every child’s overall development.

The idea that the teaching of social emotional skills was a critical component in every child’s education was not a universally shared view amongst the staff members. When asked in the focus group about if and how educators addressed the specific teaching of social emotional skills to students with special needs, the members of the focus group universally agreed that they have not addressed it in the past and that the instruction was more geared towards the specific child and his/her individualized education plan (IEP). One example was that if there were a student who had a goal that involved him initiating with a peer – saying



hello or asking for help – then the teacher usually looked to the paraprofessional to help aid that situation but did not explicitly teach into it.

Another faculty member shared in the survey that teaching such things as problem solving skills was an essential area of growth as she found that some students did not have these skills and gave up too easily. Students who lacked these skills struggled in academics because they were unable to approach tasks that were challenging. It also affected their self-esteem and reduced the risks they took in a larger setting, such as participation in class. Another staff member commented on the need for our students to have greater abilities to reflect, which was a main component in the lessons taught throughout the study. In this teacher's mind:

students need to be more reflective about their academic work, their behavior and the world around them. Students today are not allowed to make mistakes and this is not emotionally healthy. To enable our students to be intellectual risk takers they must have the opportunity to fail in a supportive environment. Reflecting on one's challenges is important for emotional and intellectual growth. This will encourage them, as they mature, to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zones.

The act of embedding social emotional skills into the academic curriculum had long-term effects that reached far outside of the confines of an elementary school's walls. One-teacher stated:

as a teacher I have seen a rise in students, mostly male, who are impulsive, lack empathy, transfer aggressive and violent behavior from video games into real life settings, and who exhibit narcissistic attitudes. These personality traits impede students from learning to their potential both academically and socially. The emphasis on

academic learning over social learning, coupled with the lack of social-emotional resources in schools, has a pejorative effect on developing empathy, creativity, self-control, delayed gratification, and coping skills. These skills are necessary to contribute to a healthy life privately and publicly, and to build a society based on egalitarianism, ingenuity, altruism, and peace.

According to the survey, about 92% of the faculty believed that it was very important for students to learn about responsible decision-making and self-awareness skills. A greater percentage (i.e., 94%) believed it was very important for students to learn about the ability to empathize with others and 83% believe it was very important for students to learn about self-management.

Although there were some variances in percentages, the majority of the faculty members at the school in which the study took place believed the five major components of social emotional development were very important for the students to be learning. According to the survey given to the staff, 73% of the students at the school did not have strong social emotional skills. About three quarters of the children in the school did not possess the skills that the faculty deemed to be very important for the students to possess.

The research supported that there was a high level of importance placed on social emotional learning and its role in schools today (Elmore & Zenus, 1994; Murray & Greenberg, 2001; Sergott, Rothwell, & Thomas, 2013; Spoth, Randall, & Shin, 2008; Vespo, Capece, & Behforooz, 2006). In a foreword by Linda Darling-Hammond from the book, *Handbook of Social Emotional Learning*, she stated, “the survival of the human race depends at least as much on the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence as it does on the development of technical knowledge and skills” (Durlak, Gullotta, Domitrovich, & Weissberg, 2015, p. xi). The

increased interest in noncognitive skills, such as those taught during the study like self-regulation, were great influences on student learning and academic achievement. A child's ability to control his/her feelings, thoughts and behaviors were turning out to be stronger predictors of a student's classroom success. Intelligence, talent and standardized test scores took a back seat to a child's ability to exhibit self-control, which allowed them to demonstrate perseverance, determination and grit.

These characteristics were not only indicators to higher school achievement but also to success in the global community (Steinberg, 2015). When supported, social emotional development through teaching and learning strategies had a positive effect and played a crucial role in education for the whole child. When the teaching of the whole child was considered, the question of whether the child's received education was solely in preparation for the academic tests arose. There was a greater push to focus on the preparation for life's tests as well as those that were to be assessed in academic subject areas (Elias, Ferrito, & Mocerri, 2016). As one teacher commented in the survey, social emotional skills were necessary to contribute to a healthy life for the individual but also for the overall society. Social emotional skills and strategies were taught and practiced in the classroom and school setting with the intention that students would incorporate these learned skills into many different situations that occurred inside and outside the walls of the classrooms. As a result, the students became empathetic and responsible learners as well as global citizens.

### **Time**

One of the biggest themes expressed in both the surveys and focus groups was the lack of time available that was dedicated to social emotional learning in the school day. The lack of time for social emotional skills to be developed, taught and reinforced was a big obstacle.

Although collaborative learning helped, there was still not enough time devoted to specific focused lessons and/or activities. There was always pressure to cover the curriculum and social emotional development took a back seat.

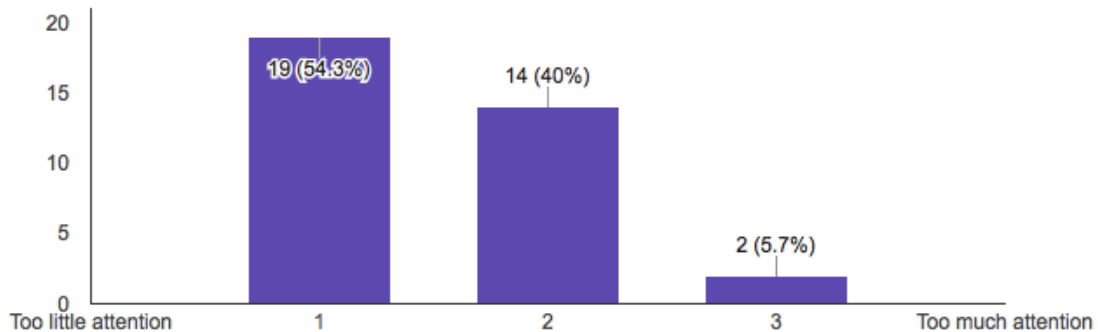
According to the survey, about 54% of the faculty felt that too little attention was given to students' social emotional learning as compared to the development of academic skills and content knowledge in the school. In the focus group, there was a consensus amongst the teachers that they took time to address issues when they arose but the teaching of the strategies was not embedded into the curriculum. The students were expected to navigate different situations, people and personalities by providing opportunities to collaborate and work together. One teacher summed up his/her thoughts about the issue of time in the survey given.

As a school, I feel that we are more reactive than proactive when it comes to addressing the social and emotional needs of our students. We are a 'Responsive Classroom' school in name only. We provide very little (in some cases no) time for teachers to be able to fully implement this program and yet we have adopted PBIS, which counters most of what 'Responsive Classroom' stands for. In addition, we don't hold the expectation that 'Responsive Classroom' will be implemented consistently across our classrooms. Finally, there is so much pressure on classroom teachers to 'cover' so much academic material, and deal with everything outside of teaching lessons that they do not have time - or feel they do not have time - to address the social and emotional issues that arise in a manner that is most effective and respectful for all involved; students and staff.

Universally, the faculty felt that the evidence and patterns of behavior that demonstrated an increased level of stress among so many of the children was a great source of concern.

**How would you describe the amount of attention given to your students' social and emotional learning at your school, as compared with the development of academic skills and content knowledge?**

(35 responses)



*Figure 2: Attention give to social emotional learning compared to academic content knowledge*

Of the surveyed faculty, no one felt that too much attention was given to social emotional learning, whereas over 50% believe that not enough attention has been given.

The increased rigor of the academic curriculum has eliminated time away from many other components that were critical to balance young children's overall development. In the focus group, the teachers shared how they expected the students to implement social emotional skills such as working with partners or responsible decision making yet the teachers never explicitly taught it or took the time to reflect on the skills used at the end of a lesson. It was “never brought back around” because the teachers were “so concerned with getting the academic piece done.” The focus needed to change in order to demonstrate how balanced learning benefitted the students in both social and academic aspects.

The discussion developed into a conversation about how the skills should be taught but not in the middle of April by dropping the lessons in sporadically. It needed to be taught from the beginning of the year. Although there was agreement amongst focus group members that

this would be helpful, it ended with a comment about how teachers are always expected to take a running start and to leap into the curriculum right away, which left no time to dedicate to teaching strategies that would be beneficial to focus on in the beginning of the year.

The idea of starting the year with a greater amount of dedicated time to social emotional learning was countered with another teacher who stated that, realistically, even if it were purposefully taught in the beginning of the year, chances were high that they would lose sight of the social piece throughout the day, as they got “wrapped up in the academics.” The rest of the group concurred. It was agreed that the social emotional piece was developed only when there was a problem and kids get involved in a conflict, which at that point they were “forced” to address it. A quote gathered from the survey shared similar sentiments.

There is a vast amount of social-emotional need within my classroom. The ones who have better social-emotional skills are always making allowances for the ones that do not and I do not feel that I am able to spend the time to help the students with weaker social-emotional skills develop stronger skills because of the academic pressures. I don't feel as though it is fair to either group.

The development of social emotional learning has grown into being a very complex problem, sadly without an easy solution. Educators throughout the country have faced an assortment of stumbling blocks on the road to developing the whole child. When the issue of time became so prevalent and such a major reason for why social emotional strategies were not being taught, it was necessary to reassess how the instructional time for students was being structured.

The struggle between time given to the academic curriculum and cultivation of social emotional intelligence was not only an issue at the school where this study took place; it was a national issue. Research showed that emotional intelligence was teachable and was able to be

developed in schools (Elias et al., 2016; Wilson, 2016), yet United States schools did not dedicate enough time to social emotional learning. Schools today were faced with a greater amount of pressure placed on increased student achievement and social emotional development with an inadequate amount of time and resources (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). As a result, educators, such as those surveyed in the study and others who participated in the focus groups, tended to look for ‘quick fixes,’ which often, ended up taking more time and resources than it would have if they had committed to a certain set of skill and strategies.

The strong emphasis on standardized testing and teacher accountability tended to take the attention away from the concern that surrounded the emotions of students and educators (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). The data collected in this study supported the major issue in United States schools where standardized tests were the primary label and the singular focus resulted in the social needs of children being ignored (Durlak et al., 2015). Research supported the need of dedicated time to the implementation of social emotional initiatives as it resulted in higher academic achievement (Reid, Diperna, Missall, & Volpe, 2014, van der Meulen et al., 2006). ‘Responsive Classroom’ was the program that the school in the study adopted, though all trained teachers were not universally vigilant in the follow through. A recent study showed that students whose teachers consistently implemented the ‘Responsive Classroom’ strategies showed greater math and reading improvement compared to the classrooms where the teacher was inconsistent (Griggs, Rimm-Kaufman, Merritt, & Patton, 2013). When social emotional approaches were used, the gains were not evident solely in the development of the student’s social skills but their academic achievement benefitted as well.

On a more general scale, researchers found schools that employed whole school mental health programs averaged 11 percentile points higher on achievement tests than schools that did

not invest time into these programs (Desrochers, 2015). The time barrier needed to be broken down, as the teachers needed to be encouraged and supported to consider social emotional learning as part of the curriculum versus something they would get in trouble for incorporating. When prevention programs fostered skill development such as problem solving, self-control, emotional regulation and attention, the students expressed a greater motivation to learn and demonstrated a higher level of achievement in academic-related assessments (Bavarian et al., 2012). Many educators feared that they would fall behind the scope and sequence of the year if they took the time to embed these strategies. One study in the literature review stated that one of the results of the implemented social emotional program was that negative behaviors such as disruptive behavior and academic immaturity decreased, as prosocial behavior increased significantly (Vespo et al., 2006). This allowed for greater classroom learning for the students involved. The fear teachers held about ‘wasting time’ was not supported by the research as it illustrated that the time dedicated to social emotional skill development resulted in more motivated and higher achieving students who were more interested in the learning, resulting in less time required to keep the students on task and interested.

### **Support**

The need for support in many different avenues was evident in the data collected. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged. Educators believed there needed to be support given by the school district itself, as well the education of families and out of school support systems.

**Schools.** As mentioned earlier in the focus group, one of the teachers shared her lack of confidence with the implementation of strategies to support the social and emotional needs of her students. She shared, “I don’t know if that’s right. I don’t know if it’s wrong...” Another teacher in the focus group stated that emotional learning was “so out of her qualifications”.



Many teachers felt very strongly that they were not qualified to support students in social and emotional development.

A colleague agreed and furthered the conversation when she stated that qualified people should explicitly teach students social emotional strategies. In order to do so, she “would need a whole separate degree to be able to do that.” When she shared this opinion other staff members piped in and agreed that they were not able to it “effectively,” “well,” or were nervous they would “mess kids up even more.” One of the teachers called teaching emotional skills “scary” and compared it to the administration of medicine and said there was no way she should be responsible to do that. The teachers in the focus group universally felt that they would need further education in order to teach emotional skills effectively and that it would take years to complete that type of training. The schooling required was compared to earning a psychology or psychiatry degree. When asked if they would be interested in investing the time to further their professional development in this way, the teacher participants shared that they would not be interested in pursuing another degree even if the district helped out financially.

The concern that the staff showed illustrated a great need for support from the administration and the mental health team. This was made clear by both survey and focus group responses. In the open-ended question part of the survey, a teacher stated that the consequences for students who continued to exhibit irresponsible decision-making must be carried through by administration. Another response from the survey matched with the sentiments shared above in the focus group as the teacher shared that he/she was:

hesitant/fearful to contact parents because I am not qualified/certified as a “social an emotional learning” teacher. Thus, the support I need from administrators and main office personnel (i.e., guidance/psychologist/social worker) and do not get, impact on

my own ability to properly address what experience and common sense tell me are poor social and emotional learning choices.

There was a shared feeling that social emotional learning strategies should be taught by qualified people. The debate came when the discussion turned to whether the qualified people should be teachers or other staff members, such as the school's mental health team. Members of the focus group made it clear that they were not comfortable with this responsibility.

“Everybody, every kid is wired differently so whatever sets one off might be different from somebody else, and how would we know how to look at it in a specific way?” There was a true fear expressed by this staff when they considered themselves as the main deliverers of social emotional strategies.

As mentioned above, the lack of time was a crucial component on why social emotional learning was not being embedded into the academic curriculum. The level of academic rigor was also mentioned, which led into the need for greater administrative support. There was a feeling of huge pressure on the teachers to spend every moment of the teaching time on the curriculum. There was a fear that if social emotional strategies were being taught then teachers would “get talked to about” being behind in the set curriculum. One teacher stated how she felt when she considered the time it would take to teach social emotional strategies. “I feel like it kind... kind of comes back to haunt us later.” Most of the teachers in the focus group agreed that there should be clear expectations set at the beginning of the year. In order to do this, there needs to be time dedicated, and allowed by administration, to set up the skills, act and reinforce.

The way it was, the teachers self-proclaimed that they were being reactive, instead of being proactive in handling situations when they arose. The strategies used were not something the teachers taught; they were reactions to students' misbehaviors. There was an overall need

for educators to be given strategies to incorporate in the academic setting to teach social emotional learning. In the survey, a teacher shared that greatest challenge was having a toolbox and skill set to handle students with a variety of social/emotional needs. He shared that luckily he had a family member who was a social worker and he usually contacted her for advice. Otherwise, he does not feel there was enough offered to help teachers. Multiple teachers commented that there was a desire to learn more about teaching social emotional skills but there was a great need for the knowledge and resources necessary to do so.

One teacher in the focus group admitted that the reason she did not explicitly teach strategies was partly, as mentioned above, because there was no time to figure out how to do it effectively, but it was also combined with the fact that she was not really sure how to do it. She later went on to share that she felt “completely unprepared” for the class that she had this year. Another colleague shared that she felt, for the students she had in her class, she needed more formal training in the correct way to deal with the students and their issues. She felt incapable of handling the diagnosed issues as a result of not having “those degrees.”

Another member, who agreed that the lack of training was a major issue, stated that although the mental health team does a good job, there are just not enough of them to help with the high amounts and levels of issues the students exhibit. The mental health team was “overtaxed, so then we’re band aiding things instead of solving problems.” According to the survey, 81% of the faculty depended on school wide initiatives to address students’ social emotional learning in their personal classrooms, which showed a lack of personalized teaching skills that the staff members utilized independently.

There was, as illustrated in both the survey and focus group results, a need for greater support for the teachers in order to provide training on social emotional learning and special

education. Most teachers took one semester of a special education class and for 61% of the faculty that was 16 plus years ago. There was a desire illustrated in both means of data collection for the educators to find ways to incorporate social emotional learning into the academics whether it was through the stories read, social studies instruction, or through the arts. In order for this to be successful, there needed to be support from administration.

Research supported the fact that teachers are crucial to a child's development and, therefore, need the proper training and tools to be able to support such a lofty responsibility (Collie, Shapka, & Perry, 2012; Griggs et al., 2013; Iizuka, Barrett, Gillies, Cook, & Marinovic, 2015; Rimm-Kaufman, Baroody, Larsen, Curby, & Abry, 2015; Sergott et al., 2013). Dr. William Dikel (2014), a child and adolescent psychiatrist stated that teachers played a pivotal role in children's mental health. He went on to comment how it was imperative that educators have the information needed to appropriately understand and service these children. He also addressed that although the teacher's role was essential, it also needed to be supported by administrators, social workers, psychologists, counselors and nurses in order to yield the greatest success for each child. Although the collaboration of stakeholders was important, research believed that it was the teacher who needed to be the one to understand the causes and consequences of their students' emotions in order to gain the insight necessary to teach each child mindfully and to be able to differentiate instruction (Brackett & Simmons, 2014; Collie et al., 2012, Desrochers, 2015). The role of the teacher was defined as an instrumental component in the effective delivery of social emotional learning.

The idea of the teacher being the major deliverer of social emotional instruction does not go along with some of the thoughts that the teachers from the study shared as they believed they were not qualified enough to deal with their students' emotional needs. Research argued,

though, that a teacher's first job was to care and to notice when fundamental needs were not being met (Brackett & Simmons, 2015; Desrochers, 2015; Durlak et al., 2016). A teacher's role was to both understand and lead a child to stay on the right course of basic trajectory of living a healthy life as well as learning in the disciplines being taught. Neither role was optional or supplementary – they were both quintessential to the art of teaching (Tomlinson, 2015). In the school where this study took place, there was an obvious need for teachers to feel more qualified and encouraged to take on the role of teaching social emotional skills to their students.

**Families.** In the focus group, one of the thoughts shared was that a huge piece of the emotional part stems from the students' experiences at home. The member continued to make her point by asking rhetorical questions. "What do they come to school with? What baggage do they have with themselves and how is that impacting their learning?" These questions represented general examples of the lack of information a teacher was provided with daily on each of his/her children.

Another point made in the focus group, along the same lines, was that if a student was dealing with something like divorce, it impacted the student's ability to focus in class, learn and thrive in the classroom. Building off of this statement, another member shared that a student of hers routinely came in really angry with his teeth and fists clenched. He blamed his brother for making him late. It really affected his day, as it would take him a long time to get settled down and then to catch up with everybody. He had those two things fighting against him right away. This feeling of distress had a huge impact on the start of his day – how he could learn and what could he focus on? It was critical that the educators were aware of what was going on at home that could affect a child.

One teacher stated that half the time she does not know the parents or if there were to be fighting or a difficult time happening at the home. A different teacher added in that even if there was a divorce, the teacher may not know how deep it was going, what was being said at home or custody issues. There was a specific example shared in the focus group that one teacher had a child in her class who was supposed to go visit his mother out of state and she was not able to get the child to do anything for three days because it had been months since the child had seen his mother. He just could not work. He could not focus. She confessed, "I can't teach into that. I can't get around it. I can't overcome it." Many of the obstacles that teachers faced were ones that were difficult to overcome. Although in this instance, the teachers could not change what happened at home, it was critical that they were aware so they could have built greater empathy for the child.

Even when issues and problems were known there tended to be a lack of parent follow through and support. Many times there were no consequence for negative and/or disrespectful child behavior at home. The lack of follow through on the home front combined with overall increased worry and stress faced by many of the parents and caregivers made parenting very difficult. It was time to look at how schools could better support the parents of the families as well as the students. One faculty member shared in the survey that:

most of what I do know about this I learned as a parent, not as a teacher. I think parents, for the most part, don't know what they don't know (I certainly didn't). Some of our energy needs to involve parents/community outreach/etc.

The education of students was not enough; an extension of teaching and learning to parents and families became just as important.

The feedback gathered from the survey illustrated that students' families played a large role in students' social and emotional behavior and learning. A student's family's views and beliefs with respect to these issues can sometimes be countered to that of the school's. This disparity in philosophy created difficult situations. Educators were responsible for students for a few hours a day and it was very difficult, in that limited time, to counter what some parents had communicated or not communicated at home (Spoth et al., 2008). Overall, there was a shared sentiment amongst the faculty that what was being done at school was not being supported at home or across all classrooms/staff. According to the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, it was important for schools to not only support the students and educators, but also to teach all stakeholders including families the skills of social and emotional health (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). In one school, there were parent education groups where the school psychologist conducted meetings. Some of the sessions were developed based on topics decided upon by the school, others were based on topics requested by the parents (Desrochers, 2015). The idea of having families involved in training to support social emotional development was a theme that also surfaced when creating the literature review around this study.

After collecting the data for this action study, the importance of social emotional learning continued to be highlighted. A study shared in the literature review focused on family intervention and its link to school success. When schools created relationships with the parents that had them generating positive student goals and encouraging prosocial behaviors and skills with their children, it supported academic learning (Spoth et al., 2008). Family and parenting skill training was an effective way to foster the consistency of school-wide effective behavioral supports that establish norms and expectations and resulted in positive behavior and greater

academic success (Desrochers, 2015; Elias et al., 2016). The involvement of the families of the students in learning about social emotional development facilitated a greater connection between school and home where the taught strategies and skills could be practiced and encouraged on a more consistent basis, which led to a higher level of effectiveness.

**Research Question 2: Students' attitudes towards academic learning before and after the implementation of social emotional development strategies?**

The second research question was more student focused. The results from the study showed plenty of positive results. The subjects were ten students in the researcher/teacher's classroom. All ten students were children with special needs who spent the majority of their learning time in a general education classroom. Throughout the day, these students were pulled for different intervention services and/or support classes.

The classroom was a 'Responsive Classroom' in which morning meetings were done regularly and social emotional strategies were explicitly taught. These ten students were not present for this time during the day as that was a time where they were pulled out of the classroom for different services dictated by their IEPs. These students were present in the classroom during all of the academic subjects. As a result, this study focused on the implementation of social emotional strategies that were embedded into the academic curriculum so that all the students – regular and special education – benefitted.

The intent of the research question was to see if the students' attitudes changed during a six week implementation process that incorporated the explicit teaching, practicing and reflecting of five different social emotional skills which were self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, responsible decision making. The hope was that the



students' attitudes would illustrate positive change during the time of the implementation of learned strategies.

As a result, there were two major themes that surfaced after analyzing the data from the action study. One of the themes was that the students illustrated an increased ownership over their learning, emotions and behaviors. Another theme centered on the students' comfort and ease during the application of the learned strategies in both academic and nonacademic situations. Overall, the students gained a lot of great skills and strategies to use in their every day life in and out of school. As result, their attitudes reflected a more positive outlook on their own self-development.

### **Increased Ownership**

The first theme that surfaced was the students' attitudes showed an increase in ownership over learning and overall personal development. The students were given a survey in the beginning the study and then again at the end. In the beginning of the study, when asked if they could do even the hardest things taught in school only 30% of the students identified with that sounding a lot like them, 50% felt that was not like them at all. At the end of the study, 60% identified with that sounding a lot like them and 40% said a "little like me". No one chose "not at all like me". Confidence in the ability to learn things taught in school increased from 70% to 90% in the "a lot like me" category.

Another increase was illustrated when the students were posed with a question that inquired about their ability to figure out difficult homework and classwork. The percentage went from 40% in the beginning of the study to 60% at the end. When asked at the start of the implementation process if the students liked learning when they felt in control of their feelings and emotions 70% described that as a lot like them and 10% said it was not at all like them.

When asked after the six-week implementation process, 90% of students identified the category that sounded a lot like them and no one identified that it didn't sound like them at all. Finally, according to the survey the percentage of students felt that when asked to do something that they were unsure of, their ability to figure it out rose from 20% to 50%. The 30% of the students who felt that would not be able to do that all in the beginning of the study fell to zero percent at the end of the study.

In the observations collected by the researcher, one of the students shared during math that he realized that when he did not write out his thinking when solving math problems, he was not being self-aware by sharing what was going on his own mind. If he were more conscience doing this in the future, he would be able to express his thought process more clearly. A lot of the students shared goals after the explicit lesson on self-awareness and expressed the desire to strive to be more independent in their work. They were going to try to use their own abilities and thoughts to figure things out before asking for someone to help them. Especially in the case of students with special needs, this was a great trait for them to develop.

The students really took to the self-instruction strategy during the self-awareness study. On the top of one student's writing piece the following was recorded:

“Plan in my mind on what I would do for the cornerstone.

*First I will noodletool my sources.*

*Then I will finish my last slide.*

*And if I have time, I will edit my notes.”* (emphasis in original)

It was important that the students know that learning these skills did not mean that they were going to be perfect. Actually, in the study conducted, it opened the students up to have a more

genuine and authentic reflection of their own selves. This was a response from one of the students from an exit slip given one day:

one way I demonstrated self-awareness last week was... with the math test last week. I got very frustrated and upset at the grade I got. I thought about not showing my parents but then I decided I had to because it wasn't fair to me and my parents and my teacher. By doing this I was not being honest with myself, I also wasn't allowing myself to learn more about that subject and how I can make sure I won't do it again.

One way I would like to be become more self-aware is to... be honest with my behavior and actions. This will actually help me learn more about myself. This will allow me to learn more about myself because I can learn more about my strength and weaknesses. I can also express my feelings to myself and be sure to understand how to control them but still being honest about my feelings and not shutting them out, only to ignore them.

Another student focused on how when one developed relationship skills, it was important to find your 'common' with someone. Students were able to open their minds to see the importance of the formation of solid relationships and keeping them even when conflicts arose.

One student commented:

I learned that the relationship is more important than the conflict you are having. And that if you are in a fight with someone that means you care about someone. If you care enough to be upset at a friend for doing something, that friend's is worth holding onto.

The children from the study grasped the concept that relationship building was a critical component in the development of strong social emotional skills.

The students demonstrated a greater ability to see past their own lives and learned how to productively overcome issues. The feeling of greater personal ownership over their own social emotional and academic development was essential, as teachers needed to prepare them not only for the classroom but also for the world itself. The students' ownership over their learning and development was critical to their academic and life success and the research supported this. "Socially competent students are happier, healthier and more engaged in learning. In many cases, social skills are critical components that enable positive development of key behaviors that facilitate students' growth socially, emotionally and academically" (Durlak et al., 2015, 315). When students were given the ability to learn to recognize, understand, label, express and regulate their emotions, their lives improved. Their ability to reach their full potential in school, home and in the world increased with the development of emotional skills (Brackett & Simmons, 2015). From the collection of data in the study and the information gathered in the literature review, the focus on social emotional learning resulted students who felt a greater sense of responsibility in taking care of their own needs as well as the needs of their peers.

There has been a commonly held view that the purpose of education was to invite students to not only become engaged with the great ideas and experiences that they are exposed to, but for them to then discover their own great ideas and purpose. Believers in this educational philosophy continued to state that education should be about children "discovering one's place in the world, then seizing it" (Durlak et al., 2015, p. xvi). Successful learning happened when the child was in control of his/her emotions and knew that his/her essential needs were being met. Students who felt cared for and valued demonstrated a higher level of intrinsic motivation throughout the learning process (Tomlinson, 2015). Once that motivation

was set, students were able to increase their ability to make the learning their own. It was important for the school in which this study took place to get on board with ensuring that the students were given opportunities to feel ownership over their social emotional development, as well as their academic learning. In order for that to happen the students must feel safe and comfortable. For the student participants in this study, they took ownership over the implementation of the learned social emotional skills into their own lives and, as a result, made goals of how to continue to increase the utilization of the strategies in the future.

### **Application in Authentic Situations**

A second theme that was highlighted from analyzing the results of this study was the students' ability to transfer what they learned in specific academic areas to other areas of academics and overall life. This illustrated the authenticity of the learning and the opportunity to apply it in a myriad of situations. When comparing the results for such things as the ability to sit still when expected, waiting their turn to talk, and being able to calm themselves down, the students showed an increased feeling of control over their own actions and behaviors over the six-week implementation period. At the beginning of the study, only 30% of the students identified as "a lot like me" when asked about their ability to sit still when they were supposed to, this increased to 80% by the end of the study. Only 20% identified with the ability to wait their turn to talk in class at the beginning and this increased to 70% at the end. Out of the students surveyed, 30% felt they had the skills to calm themselves down in the beginning the study compared to 70% at the end of the study. In all three of these categories, students recorded an increased feeling of control over their own behaviors.

Two of the skills that the study focused on were social awareness and relationship skills. The lessons surrounding both concentrated on how to work with others and being taught to

move outside of their own selves. When asked if they learned a lot from their classmates only 60% of the students identified with “a lot like me” and 10% with “not at all like me” in the beginning of the study. At the end, 90% identified with “a lot like me” and no one identified with “not at all like me.” The increased percentage illustrated growth in the students’ attitudes towards learning with, and from, others in their learning environments.

Although the goal of this study was to embed the teaching into the academic curriculum. An overarching hope was that it would foster the development of strong social emotional adolescents who implemented the strategies in all areas of life. Many of the students incorporated the skills learned in situations outside of the classroom. One of the students shared that during recess she tapped into her self-awareness skills and realized that even though she did not want a certain peer to play in a recess game, she knew her others friends did want the little girl to play. As a result, she encouraged the other girl to play.

Another boy throughout the year had trouble with sharing and getting along with his peers. One example of this was that he always wanted to be first in line. Every day – all the time! This annoyed other students in the class and quite frankly, affected the learner’s academics because if the class lined up for lunch at 12:40 p.m., this child was focused on being first in line at 12:35 p.m. During several of the lessons on relationship skills it was reiterated that, “the relationship is more important than the issue.” It was a typical situation of lining up one day where the student rushed to line up and the kids behind the boy started complaining that he was always first. He looked at his teacher, shrugged his shoulders and moved to the back of the line. When asked later why he chose that action, he said nonchalantly that it seemed that his classmate was upset and he decided it was not worth it to be first. The fact that he was able to

consider another person's perspective and used that to direct his own actions demonstrated a new area of growth for this child.

The same boy experienced trouble sharing the swing at recess every day. When his teacher was on recess duty, once a week, she would time the student and make him give up the swing after a certain amount of time. Then, there was one day when two classmates of that student came rushing up to the teacher after recess and excitedly shared that the student had given up the swing to another student from a different class without even been asked. The boy was proud of his decision but it was also telling how excited his peers were of his accomplishment as well. The developed ability of perspective taking led this child to consider his actions and the potential effects they had on others before making a decision.

Another day the class participated in a whole group activity where, at the end, there are only two people left in the game. The way the game was played, the last two remaining participants were two of the most highly emotional students – both had severe anger issues. As the music began to play to start the final round, one of the kids said to the other, “hey, friends first, right?” The other kid responded, “yes, no matter what!” The rest of the kids clapped and the two finished the game where one won and one lost. Both were gracious, the activity ended and the class moved on with the day. The skills taught do not only apply when the students worked in their science groups or on math problems, they were applied to every day situations where emotions needed to be regulated. Social, as well as self-, awareness was a prominent focus in this study.

The data collected in this study was similar to that of which was found in the current research. Findings from both concluded that the ability to apply social emotional skills in authentic situations was essential to living a successful life. “Success in school and life depends

on acquiring and making good use of the knowledge and skills associated with social and emotional competence” (Durlak et al., 2015, p. 213). It was important for teachers to shift from teaching right versus wrong to teaching students how to care. In both the research and in the study, the lack of time available and the feeling of resentment towards the teaching of these skills were apparent obstacles. Yet, the teaching of academics and social emotional skills do not and should not to be exclusive of each other. In the article, “Empathy for the ‘A’”, Emerita Nel Noddings, a Stanford professor, stated, “the goal of education is to create competent, caring citizens” (Wilson, 2016, p. 54). When social emotional learning was taught in schools, students were then able to apply their caring nature into considering critical issues like war, poverty, race, class and gender (Durlak et al., 2016; Elias et al., 2015; Wilson, 2016). Students needed to learn how to care not just for the people in their inner circle but those across the globe.

By building empathy, teachers facilitated students in the creation of making connections through the content knowledge but also with real life situations that students will be exposed to (Wilson, 2016). When students were educated on how to understand some of the behaviors and ways to enhance change in a positive way, they felt hopeful. The children needed to know that mistakes were allowed and they should be encouraged to learn from the mistakes instead of being pigeonholed to be a certain type of person. Students needed to know that they have worked to build their brains every day and the process of doing so was a powerful piece of information for our students to have (Jensen, 2015). Students needed to be told that this was, indeed a process, and with time and effort put forth, they grew and developed strong skills and better strategies. The idea of student ‘buy in’ was just as important as the teacher ‘buy in’. When the students felt ownership over the process of learning about and implementing the strategies of social emotional development, their level of self-efficacy increased (Griggs et al.,



2013). Encouragement and motivation of students to develop their social emotional skills in all areas of life, academic and beyond, was pivotal in the facilitation of a child's development.

### **Summary**

To summarize, this study was focused on the gathering and interpretation of information about the current state of social emotional learning and the strategies used in the specific school in which the study was taking place. This information was then used to implement strategies into a specific classroom focused on a sample size of students with special needs. The guiding question concentrated on observing if the students' attitudes changed during the implementation process. Participants during the first part of the study included a variety of faculty members for the survey while it was a more selective, yet still diverse, group of education stakeholders for the focus group. The student participants were a group of students in the general education classroom who were learners with special needs and were pulled out throughout the day for different services as a result of their IEPs or 504 plans. The collected data consisted of a mixture of surveys, focus groups and observations that were conducted over an eight-week period. Multiple themes were identified as a result of analysis of both research questions.

In this chapter, the results and discussions shared highlighted the perceived obstacles and potential advantages, on a school level, that surrounded the idea of social emotional learning in the academic curriculum. This was coupled with results and a discussion on how students' attitudes developed during at time period where social emotional strategies were purposefully embedded into the academic curriculum. Overall, this action study provided a mixture of results that were successful in answering the posed research questions while also introduced other elements that could be researched further.

## **Chapter 5 – Conclusions and Implications**

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this action research study was to gather and implement social emotional learning strategies into the academic curriculum. The literature review for this research indicated a need for further study on developing social emotional skills and strategies for students with special needs. The study was organized into two parts as a result of two guiding research questions. The researcher/teacher in this study first focused on gathering implementation strategies and information from the faculty at the school where the study was taken place. The researcher collected thoughts, ideas and questions and then created an implementation plan to embed social emotional learning skills and strategies into the academic curriculum for students with special needs.

The second part of the study focused on the implementation of the skills and strategies and students' attitudes towards learning. The classroom in which this study was conducted was comprised of a mixture of regular education and special education students. There were ten children with special needs who were the participants of the study. There was a survey given at the beginning and the end of the implementation process focusing on questions that provided information on students' attitudes towards learning. The researcher/teacher also recorded anecdotal notes during classroom observations. Both of these modes of data collection were combined to examine the effectiveness of the skills and strategies taught based on student attitudes.

In chapter four, results and discussions were shared as a result of analyzing the data. Multiple forms of data were reviewed for research question one - what social emotional strategies should be implemented into the academic curriculum for children with special needs?

This included a staff survey and a focus group discussion. A few themes emerged such as the importance of social emotional learning for the students, the dedication of time required for successful teaching of the skills and strategies as well as the necessity of a strong support system from both the schools and the families of the students.

There was an overwhelming feeling from the faculty of the school in which the study was conducted, as well the participants that were represented in the research collected, that the issue of social emotional learning was critical in today's education. In order to be a successful student, as well as global citizen, social emotional skills and strategies should be taught in the schools. There was a discrepancy amongst educational stakeholders represented in the study that was conducted and in the published research on who should be the deliverers of the instruction. Although there continues to be more to research on the topic of social emotional learning, it was agreed that social emotional learning was an essential component in today's world of education for all learners – regular and special education students.

The second research question was, how do students' attitudes towards academic learning compare before and after the implementation of social emotional development strategies? This question was answered through student surveys and observations. Two themes emerged from the collected data. The first theme focused on the students' feelings of increased ownership over their own actions and behaviors. The second theme was the students' increased confidence in their own ability to apply the learning of the social emotional skills in authentic situations. The students demonstrated a more positive attitude towards learning after the delivered instruction on five different social emotional skills that were embedded into the academic curriculum over a six-week span. The skills consisted of the following: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. At the end

the implementation process, students were able to reflect on the skills they used, how they were helpful to their learning and growth as a person and created goals on how they would like to greater develop the learned social emotional skills and strategies.

### **Limitations of the Study**

In reflection, there were a couple of limitations that affected the conducted study. The first limitation to this study was the self-reported data that occurred during the focus group. The researcher purposefully did not provide any information about the study and/or the questions that would be posed to the group beforehand. This was a conscious decision made by the researcher with the hopes that the responses would be authentic and genuine. The other means of data collection was a survey, which allowed the participants to take as long as they want to respond, to do it alone and to reread and consider the questions as much as they would like to. This was not the case during the focus group discussion.

During the beginning of the focus group, the participants' responses appeared to be dependent each other's responses instead of created from their own ideas. There was one participant who felt strongly that emotional skills and strategies should not be taught by teachers. Once she shared that thought, it appeared that the other members changed their thoughts to match that sentiment. The focus group took a turn where instead of brainstorming ideas of strategies that could be implemented to encourage social emotional development, the conversation turned into more of a debate on whether classroom teachers should be the institutors of the instruction. Although this was an important discussion and turned out to be helpful to this study, it did take the discussion in an unexpected direction. Perhaps if one-on-one interviews were used versus a focus group, then the researcher could have collected more suggestions on potential strategies that could have been used in the implementation process.

Another limitation to this study was the sample size. This was an action research study where the researcher was also the classroom teacher. The researcher chose her own class to implement the developed strategies as she had a mixture of general and special education students that constituted her classroom makeup. If there were an increased number of students with special needs, there would be a greater amount of authentic data collected to provide more information on the effectiveness of the practice. Also, the classroom used was a 'Responsive Classroom' and the researcher/teacher was a trained implementer. Both of these details needed to be considered when analyzing the results. By increasing the sample size and varying the classrooms where the students were pulled from, this would provide a greater depth of results. Ideally, the student participants would be representatives from several classrooms with a variety of exposure to social emotional learning. A greater sample size would have given more information about the effectiveness of changing student attitudes, as well as it would have provided greater insight into the how different levels of exposure could affect the outcome.

### **Implications for Practice**

Based on the results from this study, there are two suggestions for implications for practice to improve the social emotional learning for all students. One of the implications for practice was that social emotional learning embedded into the academic curriculum for students with special needs yielded positive results. The other implication was the need for greater teacher 'buy in'. There were many teachers who felt it was not in their job description to teach social emotional development. There was another sample of educators who were interested in learning how to implement effective strategies to encourage the development of social emotional skills yet did not feel they were qualified to do so or equipped with enough strategies. Lessons learned from these two implications could potentially save other educational

stakeholders time in the future in order to facilitate the most effective implementation of social emotional learning in the academic curriculum.

Social emotional learning and development was vastly improved once every child was given the ability to be exposed to social emotional learning skills and strategies. When conducting the literature review, it was apparent that there was a lack of information about how social emotional learning strategies affect students with special needs. Results gathered from the conducted study, illustrated that when the academic curriculum has social emotional learning embedded in it, students with special needs benefitted. Special education laws restricted students with special needs from being pulled from the least restrictive environment, which typically was during the academic subjects. Therefore, most of the special services were provided at times when the classrooms were participating in social emotional program activities such as ‘Responsive Classroom.’ This highlighted how essential it was for the learning of social emotional skills and strategies to be embedded into the academic curriculum.

A second implication from this study was the need for greater ‘buy in’ for educators involved. Although this was a newer educational initiative, the great amount of literature that was published supporting the importance of social emotional learning does not match the knowledge that the teacher participants in this study had on the subject. The researcher was very surprised at the lack of knowledge that the surveyed faculty shared when asked about strategies used to embed social emotional learning into the academic curriculum.

This surprising reaction developed even more as the researcher hosted a focus group on the topic. The intention of the focus group was to gather helpful suggestions on effective strategies incorporated when teaching social emotional skills into the academic curriculum. It was not expected that the major theme of the focus group would turn into a discussion of

whether teachers should be the main implementers of these strategies. Many of the teachers saw themselves as highly unqualified to embark upon the teaching of social emotional skills, especially the emotional part. Many of the teachers felt that social emotional development should be the responsibility of members of the mental health team.

The idea that this learning should be embedded into the academic curriculum was dependent on the fact that classroom teachers believed it should be. The results from the conducted survey showed a great discrepancy in the belief systems of education stakeholders on whether this learning should, in fact, be embedded into the academic curriculum. In order for all students to benefit from the development of social emotional learning in schools, the education stakeholders would need to show a greater commitment to the work. The study showed that faculty members from where the research took place were not fully committed to the work of embedding social emotional learning into the academic curriculum.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

After the analysis of the both the literature review and the results of the study, there was a recommendation for further research and development of social emotional learning in today's schools. There were two major suggestions that surfaced. One of the suggestions was that more research was needed on the discrepancy in effectiveness when the classroom teacher was the implementer of the social emotional learning strategies versus a different educator such as a member of the school's mental health team. The educational stakeholders that participated in the conducted study were mixed when they considered who should be the main deliverer of the social emotional skill and strategy instruction. A great percentage of the participants believed that learning the skills and strategies was critical, yet not all believed the teaching should be done by the teacher. More in-depth research on whether or not the classroom teacher should be

the main instructor and reasons to support the claim would help educators be more informed on the most effective method of delivery.

Another area that warrants further research was how to best provide authentic social emotional professional development for educators. When the results of both the surveys and the focus groups were analyzed, it was very apparent that the faculty was in need and, for the most part, was asking for greater support in professional development surrounding social emotional teaching and learning. The research collected through the literature review supported the idea that both social and emotional skills and strategies are teachable. A large number of the faculty that participated in the study felt differently. They believed that the classroom teacher could not teach emotional skills. In order to bridge the gap between the research and the reality of classroom teachers' perceptions, greater professional development must be provided for teachers. Education stakeholders need to be provided the support system where their own social emotional needs are being met so, that in return, they would be able to provide the social emotional learning instruction that our students are greatly in need of in order to be successful students and citizens.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Focus Group Questions

1. What is your definition of social and emotional learning?
  - a. Could you be more specific? What are some key terms or concepts that are essential when considering social and emotional learning?
  - b. How does this relate to the academic setting?
  - c. Can you give an example of what it would look like in a classroom?
2. Do you feel that social and emotional strategies should be explicitly embedded into the academic curriculum for children? What is your reasoning?
  - a. To what extent do you think it should be incorporated?
  - b. When considering present day education, do you think these strategies are embedded into the curriculum already?
    - i. If so, to what extent?
    - ii. If not, why not?
  - c. Are there some subjects where you think the instruction of this would be more beneficial than in others?
3. When considering students who have special needs, are there specific strategies that should be taught to facilitate their development?
  - a. Would it be helpful to hear some examples?
    - i. Active listening, taking on a peer's perspective, knowing when to try to something on their own versus when to ask for assistance.
4. When considering categories such as: self-control, mastery orientation (an approach to learning in which a child pursues learning because he or she wants to increase his or her overall competence or abilities over time until something is mastered), self-efficacy, social competence, which do you feel are the most important to incorporate into the academic curriculum for students with special needs?
  - a. Which would be most important?
  - b. Which would be least?
  - c. What is your reasoning for choosing that category to be the most important?
  - d. What is your reasoning for choosing that category to be the least important?
5. What are some strategies you could suggest in order to be able to implement in those developmental areas successfully and efficiently?
  - a. How would that look like in the classroom?
  - b. Would this need to be taught explicitly? Or, just as reminders?
6. Are there any ideas you have to incorporate social and emotional learning into the regular academic curriculum?
  - a. Are there techniques that you have had success with?
  - b. Are there techniques that you have struggled with?

**Appendix B**

Teacher's Survey

**Which of the following best describes your current professional role?**

- Teacher in a K-12 public school - general or special education
- Curriculum Instructional Leader, Content Specialist, Special Service Provider
- School based administrator
- Paraprofessional
- Other:

**How long have you worked in K-12 Education**

- Less than 1 year
- 1-5 years
- 6-15 years
- 16-25 years
- More than 25 years

**On a five-point scale (where 5 is "very familiar" and 1 is "not at all familiar"), how familiar are you with social and emotional learning in K-12 schools?**

1   2   3   4   5

Not At All Familiar	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Familiar
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**On a five-point scale (where 5 is "very important" and 1 is "not at all important"), how important do you feel it is for students to learn about responsible decision making?**

1   2   3   4   5

Not At All Important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important
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**On a five-point scale (where 5 is "very important" and 1 is "not at all important"), how important do you feel it is for students to learn about relationship skills? \***

1   2   3   4   5

Not At All Important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important
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**On a five-point scale (where 5 is "very important" and 1 is "not at all important"), how important do you feel it is for students to learn about self awareness?**

1   2   3   4   5

Not At All Important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important
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**On a five-point scale (where 5 is "very important" and 1 is "not at all important"), how important do you feel it is for students to learn about the ability to empathize with others?**

1 2 3 4 5

Not At All Important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important
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**On a five-point scale (where 5 is "very important" and 1 is "not at all important"), how important do you feel it is for students to learn about self management?**

1 2 3 4 5

Not At All Important	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Very Important
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**To what extent do you agree or disagree with this following statement? Teaching social and emotional skills to students is an effective way to improve student achievement.**

1 2 3 4 5

Strongly Disagree	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Strongly Agree
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**In your opinion, what percentage of the students at your school have strong social and emotional skills?**

- 25% or fewer
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- More than 75%

**How would you describe the amount of attention given to your students' social and emotional learning at your school, as compared with the development of academic skills and content knowledge?**

1 2 3

Too little attention	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Too much attention
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**Which, if any, of the following approaches have you used to address students' social emotional learning in your own classroom? Select all that apply.**

- Mindfulness practices (such as meditation or yoga)
- Restorative practices (such as restorative circles for conflict resolution)
- Schoolwide behavioral-management programs (such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS])
- Social and emotional initiatives (such as Responsive Classroom)
- None
- Other:

**Overall, what are the greatest challenges you face with respect to students' social and emotional learning? Please describe in the space below.**

**Appendix C**

## Student Survey

**I sit still when I am supposed to**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I can wait for my turn to talk in class.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I can easily calm down when excited.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I can do even the hardest classwork if I try.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I can learn the things taught in school.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I can figure out difficult homework and classwork.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I calm down quickly when I get upset.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I am able to wait in line patiently.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I learn a lot from listening to my classmates.**

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- A lot like me

**I like learning when I feel in control of my feelings and behaviors.**

- Not at all like me



A little like me

A lot like me

**When I am asked to do something that I am unsure of, I can figure it out on my own.**

Not at all like me

A little like me

A lot like me

