

Social and Emotional learning of students with Learning Difficulties

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Abstract

The social and emotional needs of students seem to less attended. Due to a greater number of students facing difficulties in learning the school environment gets affected. In order to improve the well-being of such frustrated students' activities enhancing social and emotional skills were administered for a month on 7th and 8th std students (N=100). The resource developed by Youth Research Centre (2014); University of Melbourne was used for the purpose. The learning material comprised of activities enhancing emotional literacy, personal strengths, positive coping, problem solving, stress management and help seeking. A follow-up was taken after two months period which indicated that introducing programs at an early stage may help these students to face positively the frustrations posed by learning difficulties. However, to derive long-term results implementing standardized program and monitoring progress is essential.

Keywords: Social and Emotional Learning, Learning Difficulties, early adolescence

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1. Introduction

Schools nowadays are facing challenges in educating children belonging to diverse cultural background and varied abilities or motivation level (Learning First Alliance, 2001). The students also seem to lack social-emotional competencies and thus are less connected to school. This in turn negatively affects their academic performance, behavior, and health (Blum & Libbey, 2004). A study including 148,189 sixth to twelfth graders indicated that 29% to 45% students reported to be empathetic, better at decision making, and resolving conflicts. In addition, 29% students reported that their school provided a caring, encouraging environment (Benson, 2006). These social and emotional skills can be taught, modeled, and practiced so that students use them often (Ladd & Mize, 1983; Weissberg, Caplan, & Sivo, 1989).⁽⁴⁾

The students entering middle school face several challenges like pubertal changes along-with social and behavioral changes. Adolescents during this phase are self-aware and, at times, self-critical. They are expected to think abstractly and view things from others perspective. Therefore, they may become sensitive towards societal norms and tend to judge their own abilities based on others' reactions.

Students facing difficulties in learning particularly do plan and work on long- and short-term goals, however, it may be difficult for them to modify actions based on others feedback. Learning difficulty is a risk factor and can be personal, familial, or environmental in nature. A child with learning difficulty may face difficulty in listening, speaking, reading, writing, spelling or mathematical calculations (Bauer et al., 2001). He or she will be familiar with failure and struggle in academic areas.

Interventions focusing on social emotional competencies during middle school are essential. The students seem to be disengaged from school especially as they move to higher grades. According to Klem & Connell (2004) 40-60% of high school students are chronically disengaged from school during adolescence.⁽¹⁾ The routine activities can also lead to frustration, differing opinions, and set-backs during this period. In addition to this, Goleman (1995) also emphasized that students facing difficulty in identifying and managing emotions are vulnerable to emotional hijackings (unable to think clearly due to being emotionally overwhelmed).⁽¹²⁾ Hence, social and emotional learning programs help in adopting healthy responses rather than reactions and accomplish goals by overcoming challenges.⁽⁶⁾

The social and emotional learning programs are designed focusing on all the students (universal interventions) as well as those focusing on students at risk or already experiencing social, emotional and behavioral difficulties (targeted/indicated interventions). Evidence suggests better outcomes in case of students participating in targeted / indicated interventions rather than universal programs (Wilson and Lipsey, 2007).⁽⁷⁾

Research suggests that if social and emotional skills-based interventions are implemented effectively, then it results into long-term benefits (Barry et al., 2013; Weare & Nind, 2011; Durlak et al., 2011; Payton et al., 2008; Jane-Llopis et al., 2005; Wells et al., 2003; Greenberg et al., 2001). The children who received social and emotional skills programs are also better earners in adulthood (Heckman, 2006).

Wilson and Lipsey (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 249 studies examining impact of school-based SEL programs along-with the programs focusing on reducing aggressive behavior. The results indicated universal and targeted programs to be effective. Many universal programs were based on cognitive approaches and those using a behavioral approach were also effective. There was statistically significant reduction in aggressive or disruptive behaviors. The effects were greatest for at-risk students as well as for those belonging to economically disadvantaged background. The analysis results also indicated comprehensive programs for entire schools were less effective. This may be the result of programs getting diluted over time and thus, program selection considering the needs of school staff members and ease of implementation is crucial.

In addition, Payton, J., Weissberg, R. P., Durlak, J. A., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., Schellinger, K. B., & Pachan, M. (2008) examined effect of social and emotional learning for 3,24,303 kindergarten to eighth-grade students. The reviews included 317 studies pointing towards multiple benefits of SEL programs which were effective in both school and after-school settings for students with and without behavioral or emotional problems. The program had positive impact across grades and race or diverse backgrounds. These programs improved students' attitude about self and others, belongingness to school, social behavior, and most importantly academic performance. SEL programs are the most successful youth-development program known to reduce conduct problems or emotional distress.⁽¹⁰⁾

Durlak et al. (2011) also conducted a meta-analysis of 213 studies to evaluate SEL efforts and its benefits across grades and urban, suburban, rural schools in the U.S. Forty-seven percent

of the reviewed interventions were based on randomizing students or classrooms to receiving the program or functioning as a control group. The primary outcomes were improvement in students' social and emotional skills, pro-social attitudes and behavior, better mental health, and improved academic performance. There was 11-percentile-point gain in achievement measured using report card grades and test scores. ⁽⁴⁾

Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, (2012) carried out a meta-analysis of 75 studies to examine the effects of universal SEL programs. Some programs did not have a manual, proper teaching sequence, training, and monitoring. The universal programs using experimental or quasi-experimental design had positive impact on social-emotional skills, attitudes toward self, and prosocial behavior. Thus, researchers suggested that schools need to select standardized programs focusing on enhancement of social-emotional skills rather than general positive development. The programs focusing on specific target population, and characteristics of individuals implementing it can also make the implementation effective (Olds, 2003). ⁽¹⁰⁾

The studies addressing social and emotional needs of students facing difficulties in learning were not found. Hence, the present study was undertaken.

2. Method

The students with learning difficulties were chosen specifically as there are large number of such students with unmet needs. As mentioned in the academic and educational problem category of Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V); academic underachievement or failure affects 10 – 20 percent of youth. Therefore, students facing difficulties in learning were included in the study.

As also discussed in the introduction and literature review section the student's belongingness to school, sensitivity of teachers and peers towards the nature of difficulties is hugely affected through SEL programs. These programs primarily focus on enhancing emotional literacy, strengthening positive qualities, helping students face challenges optimistically and improving problem solving as well as stress management skills.

The objective of the study was to explicitly focus on social and emotional skill development of students facing difficulties in learning. Thus, it was hypothesized that the social and emotional learning program will benefit the students in handling the frustrations posed by learning difficulties.

The social and emotional learning program activities were administered for an hour twice a week. These students in their non-academic activity periods attended 15 sessions in small groups (two to four). The data was collected from schools in Pune city. The 7th and 8th grade students (N=100, 74 boys and 26 girls) were selected, however six students dropped out mid program due to unavoidable reasons (school change, absenteeism due to family problems or financial issues). Thus, ninety-three students who consented to participate were involved in the study. The schools that allowed to conduct study were Sardar Dastur Co-ed school; Sardar Dastur Girls school; St. Clare's Girls school; Saraswati Vidyalay Union school; Epiphany school and Children's Academy High school. The data was collected in the academic year 2016-17.

2.1 Materials:

To determine the extent of difficulties faced in learning by these students Learning Difficulties Inventory was designed by research scholar along-with guide. While designing the inventory the Learning Disabilities Checklist of National Center for Learning Disabilities was referred. The 25-item inventory has questions related to the difficulties faced by student in reading, comprehension, writing, math and organization or planning. Along with screening the inventory filled by the class teachers as well as parents, marks / grades achieved by students in previous two exams were also taken into consideration. Those who had scored C – D grade consecutively were chosen for the study.

The social and emotional learning (SEL) program incorporated in the study was created for Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) by Youth Research Centre (2014), University of Melbourne. The resource was written by Helen Cahill, Ruth Foster, Anne Farrelly, Kylie Smith and Sally Beadle from Youth Research Centre, Melbourne Graduate school of education, University of Melbourne. It provides an evidence-based approach to developing personal and social capabilities, including self – awareness, self- management, social awareness and social management. The SEL learning materials for building resilience include activities for emotional literacy, personal strengths, positive coping, problem solving, stress management and help seeking. These activities can be delivered in small groups by teacher, trainer, tutor, etc.

Follow-up form was also designed by researcher along-with guide. The form comprises of twelve statements to assess the impact of social and emotional learning program activities. Five-point Likert scale was used ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

3. Results

Social and emotional skills at early adolescence mainly comprise of developing opposite sex friendships, maintaining relationships and analysis of own emotions. Adolescents do tend to seek independence from adult authority, follow behavioral norms set by peers, and focus on self-development (Manning, 1993).⁽¹²⁾

Elbertson et al., (2010) emphasized that academic achievement is enhanced in case of students having a sense of belonging along-with caring relationships with peers and school staff members. Elias and Weissberg also believed that social and emotional learning framework helps in setting of broader school prevention goals. The social–emotional competence comprises of five core areas of self- awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (Elias, O’Brien, & Weissberg, 2006).⁽¹⁰⁾

A social and emotional learning class during middle or high school focuses on building students’ emotional vocabulary to help in describing their feelings. The activities carried out in present research included six modules along-with handouts, case studies or role play in order to facilitate students social and emotional skills. They learnt how different emotions experienced can lead to similar physical sensations and how multiple emotions can be experienced simultaneously. Group discussion on different people can experience different feelings in a similar situation also helped them to understand each other. Games involving situational examples for understanding body language and what might happen if the cues are misinterpreted were also included.

Focusing on strengths may result in students being more willing to work on areas of weakness or learning difficulty. Thus, identifying students’ strengths and providing opportunities to use those strengths is essential.⁽⁵⁾ The activities covered in the SEL program focused on identifying positive qualities and strengthening as well as using those in day to day life. The activities enhancing such skills usually focus on personal competence. For example, students facing difficulty in learning may be asked to set a goal such as improving grade in math and monitor progress. As a result of this students may learn strategies to reinforce themselves and maintain motivation level.

The students at follow-up reported that being social and spending some time with friends helped in stress reduction and getting back to studies. The positive qualities like being good at sports or other such activities helped them to be more confident while facing challenging situations. The importance of positive self-talk was discussed through case studies. The students reported that they could handle their stress during exams by engaging into positive self-talk.

To improve problem solving ability a picture of tree was used to discuss and solve problems faced in day to day life. The roots of tree served as causes of a problem (e.g., being late to school), branches as strategies that can be used to solve it and leaves as the solutions reached. The importance of choosing effective problem strategies and being assertive was also discussed through role plays.

The activities of social and emotional learning program for adolescents often comprise of practical strategies to manage stress (e.g., deep breathing, mental rehearsal, muscle relaxation, or visualization). In order to reduce stress level of students, open ended questions on what is stress and how the sources of stress differ from person to person were used. Relaxation techniques were also used to help students understand that rather than adopting ineffective avoidance strategies (drug or alcohol abuse) they can manage their own stress levels through mindfulness-based practices.

The last module emphasized on the importance of help-seeking. The students were probed on when do they seek or offer help. The students realized that at times to solve problems seeking help feeling less embarrassed was essential. The examples about supporting or using kind words while offering help were also shared by students.

Follow-up was conducted after two months of program completion. As per the results, 92 percent students agreed that the program activities were a fun learning experience for them. The activities of program helped 83 percent students to think more positively. In addition, 85 percent students reported that they could understand their own feelings and 76 percent could understand their friends' feelings as well. Moreover, 86 percent students reported to be aware of their strengths and could face challenging situations along-with solving problems confidently. The students shared that they could manage stress levels on own especially during exams (78 percent) and 81 percent sought help openly. The students also reported that they could handle conflicts assertively (75 percent). Finally, 90 percent students reported that they could apply the strategies learnt in the program.

4. Discussion

The social and emotional learning improves capacity for learning. Focusing on these skills helps one achieve mastery in a subject material, improve motivation, commitment and dedication towards learning. It also improves attendance rate and reduces suspensions or grade retention (Hawkins et al., 1999; Malecki & Elliott, 2002). ⁽²⁾

Ben-Avie and colleagues (2003) studied correlation between social and emotional skill and achievement in science or math. The authors reported that in both math and social interactions, the ability to succeed is determined by being aware of the challenge and chalking out a strategy to solve it. The willingness to re-choose a strategy in case of failure and try harder until desired results reached is also part of social-emotional class which helps one accomplish goals. ⁽⁸⁾

The socio-emotional competencies and academic achievement are interrelated in the sense that the student's potential to succeed gets maximized due to practicing social and emotional skills. The National Center for Education Statistics (2002), survey suggested following reasons for dropping out of school: not getting along with teachers or peers (35% and 20.1%), feeling left out (23.2%), and not feeling safe (12.1%). Hence, providing explicit instruction for improving social-emotional skills promises better outcomes. ⁽¹⁴⁾

The current study was carried out in schools of Pune city and more boys were referred as facing difficulties in learning. Hence findings cannot be generalized to diverse groups. Also, implementing standardized program and monitoring progress using standardized assessments may help in inculcating the values and getting lasting results.

5. Conclusion

The students with learning difficulties particularly experience varied emotions during a typical school day. For instance, if a student has difficulty in solving a math problem and asked how he or she feels about it, then the student may explain it globally like being mad or sad. However, when probed the feelings may be that of frustration, inadequacy, disappointment, anxiety, etc. Helping the student learn to be open to experiences may help in deriving a constructive response and take it up as a challenge.

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