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Social-Emotional Learning Icebreakers

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Author Note

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Abstract

Youth Alliance is a non-profit organization located in Hollister, California. GUIAS is a program that encompasses youth leadership, supports, and guides students to become socially responsible and emotionally stable to confront challenges. San Benito High School (SBHS) is one of the many schools that GUIAS focuses on student social-emotional learning through case management. It is important for students to be aware of their social, emotional, and cognitive development challenges and coping mechanisms. The problem addressed is that students ages 8-18 do not understand the importance of Social-Emotional Learning. Some contributing factors to this are that students' culture leads to discrimination and isolation, students are socially disadvantaged, psychological trauma, and lack of parent involvement. Without addressing these contributing factors later in life, it can lead to severe consequences such as being less likely to get support for mental health, low achieving academic performance, and low-self esteem. For this same reason, the development of the Social-Emotional Learning Ice Breakers (SELIB) was created to address the issue of case management establishing a relationship with clients. The SELIB is intended to be used when case managers are working with clients and have a deep and meaningful conversation. The project's findings concluded that 85% of the students that were served in case management at SBHS showed an improvement in finding coping mechanisms in regards to anxiety and depression. There needs to be a larger scope of students to identify how the SELIB has impacted them in the long term.

Keywords: Social-emotional learning, case management, cognitive development

Agency & Communities Served

Youth Alliance is a non-profit organization located in Hollister, CA. The organization was founded in 1995, and it strives to create thriving communities through comprehensive and culturally relevant services to become advocates for themselves and their community. Youth Alliance believes that to develop young, solid leaders, they must create safe environments and a supportive network. The organization's mission is "to provide innovative and culturally relevant services that strengthen and enrich youth, families and the community" (Youth Alliance, 2014). The organization's programs are located in targeted schools in San Benito County.

The agency serves over 6,500 students and families throughout the year. Various programs within the organization like Caminos, Avenida, GUIAS, CASA, FAMiLiA, GANAS, and other after-school programs. These programs focus on different aspects of youth challenges. These programs provide students with support services, summer programs, late-night prevention counseling, case management, intervention programs for at-risk youth, teen parents, and parent engagement sessions. Youth Alliance programs strive to create culturally responsive individuals and families.

The program GUIAS stands for Guiding and Understanding Individuals in Achieving Success. GUIAS is a "strength-based group" approach program that strives to promote students with developing positive characteristics. It supports and guides young students based on the philosophy that youth need adult role models to prepare them for adulthood successfully. Within the program, students learn about the understanding of "PALABRA," which culturally embraces the characteristics of love, dignity, respect, and trust. Other activities include "Circulo de Palabra," which supports and reinforces ongoing healing, growth, and development. The

curriculum used in these 6-week courses is “El Joven Noble” (Nobel Youth) and Xinachtli (female). They are comprehensive youth leadership development programs that help students focus on positive behavior choices and school success.

Many of the students who are referred to the program are students from middle school and high school. They are referred by teachers, counselors, or social emotionalists that have concerns involving social-emotional learning. About 6,500 children, youth, and families are served every year (Youth Alliance, 2021). Serving low-income families is a significant part of the services and resources of the program. Youth Alliance (2021) reports that 81% of the clients served are economically disadvantaged. The agency makes it possible for many families to access fresh produce, rental assistance, and money. Many of the children, youth, and families served are intertwined with services provided by the agency like parent workshops, after-school assistance, and youth involvement.

Problem Description

Young teenagers are at a vulnerable stage, there is a lot of change happening in their lives and the challenges that they are facing. By understanding the importance of social-emotional learning, one can better understand their emotions and learn about coping mechanisms. Students ages 8-18 do not understand the importance of social-emotional learning. The research article published by the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education *Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning in High School* both Hamedani and Darling-Hammond (SCOPE, 2015) state that SEL is a need in schools and it should be effectively implemented to meet students’ social and emotional needs and provide them with the opportunity to learn adaptive skills to succeed in school and in the outside environment. The California Department of Education (2021) states

that social-emotional “reflects the critical role of positive relationships and emotional connections in the learning process and helps students develop a range of skills they need for school and life.” There is a need for young adolescents to learn about the importance of understanding, expressing, experiencing, and managing their emotions to develop meaningful relationships with others. Students’ social-emotional learning has long-term effects on their behavioral development and their capacity to make correct decisions. Students spend most of their time on school grounds; it is the parents’ and educators’ responsibility to make good leaders for generations to come.

GUIAS’ targeted population has been referred to by school counselors based on social-emotional and self-advocacy challenges. Many of these students are referred from middle and high schools. These challenges are family issues, depression, anxiety, involvement with gangs, self-image, etc. Students who accept joining the program have successful outcomes and learn about the importance of character development, self-acceptance, and motivation to become great leaders.

Contributing Factors

Marginalized students/communities experience discrimination based on one's culture that leads to isolation. Hispanic and African Americans are overrepresented among high school dropouts. Many factors contribute to why students are subjected to this stigma, with discrimination (Bonnie, Stroud, Breiner, 2015). They state that growing up in the 21st century is challenging for young adults to discover their identity because their culture and society constantly mark them. Discrimination can significantly affect an individual’s well-being, especially young adults beginning to develop their psychological functioning. It has been proven

by multiple researchers that when individuals experience racial discrimination at the interpersonal and structural level limits their ability to succeed in higher education and employment.

Socially disadvantaged students who have experienced debt, lack of resources in the community, and low-income families have faced challenges. According to the American Psychology Association (APA) (2017), socioeconomic “affects overall human functioning, including our physical and mental health.” Low socioeconomic status correlates to lower educational achievement, poor health, poverty and will ultimately impact society. There will also be inequality in wealth distribution, health, resources, and quality of life. The APA indicates that children from low-income households and communities are more likely to develop academic skills than children from higher socioeconomic status. Under-represented communities are under-resourced and can harm students’ academic performance and outcomes.

Psychological trauma is when someone is exposed to and experiences being involved in one or more traumatic events that can limit their ability to develop social-emotional skills. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Developmental Needs suggests that children whose physical needs are not met, such as the need for safety, struggle to achieve their full potential until they are met (Maslow, 1943. p.45). Children must satisfy basic psychological, safety, belongingness/love, esteem, and self-actualization to achieve their potential fully. If these basic needs are not met, children are more likely to begin making poor decisions. Trauma can negatively impact children’s development and, therefore, have long-term consequences on their social life.

A lack of parent/guardian involvement can lead to students dropping out of school and not attending higher education. Parent involvement is a key component for child academic

success and child development. An article suggests that parents involved in their children's education as early as elementary school can prevent misconduct, drop-out, and low academics (Naremm. El Nokali, Heather J. Bachman, and Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal 2011). Families that live in under-resourced communities tend to have higher populations of Hispanic and African American students.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) encourages parents to be involved in their children's education and have effective communication skills to understand what they are going through and how they can help (Chen, 2020). Many organizations and programs help families understand the importance of parent involvement and target specific students to guide them through difficult times and prevent negative long-term consequences.

Consequences

Students who do not learn the importance of social-emotional learning are less likely to support their mental health. The World Health Organization has defined mental health as the state of well-being in which individuals realize their ability to cope with life stressors. Parents and students sometimes do not understand or believe the importance of mental health directly linked to social-emotional development. Children who lack emotional or social competence enter school are at a higher risk of facing challenges such as low peer status, aggression, and early-onset conduct disorder (Denham, 2003). External and Internal behavior can cause parents and students to experience many difficulties within the household and school. The NCLB act encourages educators, school counselors, and school-based mental health programs to target students who have difficulty focusing in class to learn about their well-being and the various supports that the school provides.

Disadvantaged students who have low-achieving performance in school experience a lack of social-emotional development. The achievement gap is the disparity that measures students' educational performance by their socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and gender.

Low-achieving students who live in under-resourced communities are linked to the achievement gap in the United States. Many factors contribute to a child's lack of social-emotional learning, and by understanding their mesosystem and macrosystem, we can assess their social structure and community relationships (Becker & Luthar, 2012). Parents and educators have the responsibility to teach students about the importance of receiving a higher education. In low-income communities, many students feel pressured to finish high school by society without understanding its importance due to others' oppression and fall into the cracks of the achievement gap.

Students who do not learn about the importance of social-emotional learning experience low self-esteem through their adolescent years. A study conducted by pediatricians to identify characteristics associated with low self-esteem among adolescents concluded that Hispanic females are more likely to experience low self-esteem ((McClure, Tanski, Kingsbury, Gerrard, & Sargent, 2010). Characteristics associated with low-self esteem include anxiety, depression, difficulty following the rules, and feeling inadequate. Adolescents who experience low self-esteem face emotional and behavioral problems that can lead to unsafe sex, teen pregnancy, aggression, criminal behavior, and alcohol and drug abuse.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Students culture can lead to discrimination and isolation	Students ages 8-18 do not understand the importance of	Students are less likely to get support for mental health

	Social-Emotional Learning	disorders
Socially disadvantaged students who have experienced debt, lack of resources in the community, and low-income families have faced challenges		Low achieving academic performance
Psychological trauma		Low self-esteem
There's a lack of parent/guardian involvement.		

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project & Project Purpose

The idea of the project is to bring awareness to students about socio-emotional learning (SEL). Students that are in the GUIAS program have weekly meetings with the case managers who facilitate weekly meetings. The case managers can have difficulty establishing a real connection with students, especially during distant learning. The sessions consist of ice breakers initially; the students and the case managers begin to learn from each other. Ice breakers are intended to demonstrate self-reflection based on their attitudes and behaviors. The ultimate goal is for the flashcards to be passed to other programs to address social-emotional learning on a larger scale to different ages of students.

The proposed project aims to gain awareness of socio-emotional learning and self-reflection for teenagers whose culture leads to discrimination and isolation. This will happen by creating and developing a social-emotional learning ice breakers curriculum for facilitators/case managers. Program Facilitators -- case managers, will decide on one of the five core SEL competencies, which include -- self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,

relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Within these five competencies, there are guided questions that pertain to the respected competency.

The two sets of ice breaker flashcards are for middle school and high school students. The flashcards will consist of easy, moderate, to challenging questions for students to reflect on. But ultimately, the facilitator/case manager will decide what question to ask regarding how severe the case is. Many cultures believe that social-emotional development is a myth. Due to social beliefs, the development of emotions is not addressed as much in students' households or schools. Talking about social emotions as early as possible will prompt students to acquire effective and positive relationships through their life experiences.

The social-emotional icebreakers that are going to be developed and implemented will serve one sole purpose: social-emotional development. Most of these students are living under the same circumstances and have had the same living experiences. The need for self-reflection is crucial for young individuals to begin to develop self-resilience and self-adaptation. The objective of this is for students to feel that they have a support system where they can freely express themselves and be open to talking about their challenges and their positive experiences.

The icebreakers will encourage students to learn more about themselves, social relationships, and their environment. It will help students understand why they have underdeveloped skills like developing positive relationships, expressing themselves vocally, and correcting their behavior. Case managers are busy all the time, and when it comes to asking icebreakers to their clients, it becomes challenging to address emotions. Due to this, the case manager and their clients will not receive thoughtful or deep conversations. And a bond will not be established, losing trust from their clients. Teenagers who lack social-emotional development

are discriminated against or feel isolated by society, leading to mental health disorders in the future. This is why ice breakers are an opportunity for students to recognize what they are feeling and talk to someone about what is happening to strengthen their mental capacity. Interventions about self-awareness are crucial to learning about during their young adulthood to create barriers for themselves and establish resilience for the future.

Project Justification

The Center for Teaching Innovation at Cornell University states that using ice breakers helps students create a safe environment to share their thoughts with other students. Students begin to develop ownership of their ideas and creativity. Students are more likely to encourage productive learning experiences (Cornell University, 2021). Some students do not feel comfortable talking about their personal experiences aloud. Therefore, these workshops and icebreakers may prompt students to journal as a great way to express themselves. Journaling has become a powerful metric for individuals who are experiencing any social-emotional and mental health challenges. It reduces stress, anxiety, depression, and improves emotions (Northwest Medicine, 2020). Once students take the initiative to express what they are feeling without judgment, they will begin to trust others. It takes courage for students to begin to develop social-emotional behaviors to talk about their personal lives to others. But for those that are not comfortable talking to people, writing is a great resource. In many situations, students get to know each other more, have more positive relationships, have bonds, and are more likely to follow the curriculum and learn about their capabilities.

Child development stages are crucial for children to develop during their first ten years of life. This project will create the opportunity for children to develop positively. Piaget's Theory of

cognitive development is a comprehensive theory about the nature and development of human intelligence. The four stages of development consist of sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages. The concrete operational stage focuses on organizational and rational thinking and categorizes the development of a child's cognitive abilities (Piaget, 1976). Cognitive abilities like using logic, analyzing situations, and using operational thought for children to think abstractly and hypothetically are necessary for making life choices. Many students have difficulty making correct decisions because they haven't yet learned to make their own decisions independently.

Project Implementation

There was a significant amount of time dedicated to researching social-emotional learning during the adolescent stage. The research consists of readings from certified government, state, and non-profit organizations regarding social-emotional learning about past and present challenges that adolescents are facing. During the adolescent stage, there are many physical, social, and emotional challenges that teenagers face.

The ice breakers will target teenage students who face these challenges, and specific measures will help them overcome them. The ice breakers are a variety of questions that will be asked based on one of the five core SEL competencies. The questions are going to address vulnerabilities, strengths, and challenges. It is intended that as the sessions progress, the level of ice breakers will increase for students to engage in meaningful discussions. The SEL Ice Breakers have been reviewed by the program coordinator and field mentor, modifications have been made. Facilitator introductory remarks, objectives, and guiding questions have been implemented in the SELIB.

The project would have been implemented during summer school at the San Benito High School located in San Benito County. The idea was for the ice breakers to be used for six weeks during summer school at the beginning of every class. But the program GUIAS had its own summer curriculum that they had to go by. There was no room for the SEL ice breakers project to be implemented. The SEL Ice breaker project was implemented during the Fall 2021 academic year when conducting case management. The Wellness counselor at San Benito High School referred low-risk students to a Bachelor level intern. When the Intern met with the students for case management, the SEL Ice breaker was used depending on the student's issues. The intern conducted weekly meetings on a four to six-week basis with the same students to see how the students evolved.

A Google Drive will be created specifically for the ice breaker questions, and all of the Youth Alliance staff will be added to the Drive for them to be used. Many programs in Youth Alliance include elementary, middle, high school students, and adults. The ice breakers can be used across adolescent ages regarding mental development. The SEL Ice breakers can be modified by facilitators and case managers to suit the student's SEL needs.

A detailed implementation plan and timeline can be seen in the Scope of Work in Appendix A.

Assessment Plan

The facilitators and case managers will use the ice breakers at the beginning of every workshop or meeting. The student will be given a pre-survey in the initial workshop or meeting. In the last workshop or meeting, the students will be given a post-survey. The surveys will be the same one, and they will be about the student's social-emotional and behavioral health. It will ask

the students to rate themselves on a scale of 1 (less often) to 4 (most often). The questions will consist of topics when students feel depressed, frustrated, anxious, or self-control. The purpose is to understand where the students are scoring fours and target them. Provide them with services to improve their lives and minimize feelings of depression, frustration, anxiety, or self-control. The ice breakers will be a starting point for facilitators and case managers to start a conversation with the students. Therefore discuss more in-depth student issues.

Case managers will also have a survey at the end of the workshop or case management addressing the impact they think the ice breaker had on the students' collaboration, opening up to them, and its effectiveness. At the end of quarter 1 of the student's academic school year, the case managers will provide feedback about their thoughts on the ice breakers. The case managers will also provide input on what the other programs thought of the effectiveness of ice breakers within their respective students. The feedback will serve as a means for modifying the ice breakers to be more effective in the future.

Expected Outcomes

The goal is for students to be comfortable opening up and having open conversations with the case managers about challenges that they are facing. Students between the ages of 8-18 are experiencing different emotions and societal challenges. This will provide students to begin to analyze what their issues are and set goals for themselves to address the need. It aims to let students express themselves in times when teenagers need guidance and encouragement from others. It is an opportunity for students to make sense of what boundaries need to be met. The adolescent stage is when teenagers begin to become adults from experiences learned through this stage. The ice breakers are a valuable method for teenage students to express and learn more

about themselves. Their brain development strengthens more once they acknowledge their past experiences and learn from all domains: physical, cognitive, social, spiritual, and emotional - showing positive reliance and growth.


The pre-and post-surveys were conducted at the beginning of the first meeting and the last meeting to measure the level of engagement. Case management notes will be conducted on every one-on-one and group session. They will demonstrate how the conflicting issues surrounding the theme have improved or not —being open to talking about their feelings or complex issues surrounding their emotions and family environment. The evaluations and feedback of the facilitators and case managers will express the level of growth they believe each student had through group workshops or case management. The facilitators and case managers will observe their case management groups to see who is opening up and showing personal growth and who still need to have one-on-one meetings to target specific issues. The expected feedback will be that facilitators and case managers see an improvement in their students when asked to express their feelings and open up about difficult situations that they are facing that surround them.

Project Results

After reviewing the student pre and post-surveys on social-emotional behavior, the results proved the project's purpose was a success. Students acquired more in-depth knowledge about how their upbringing and childhood experiences have shaped their present individuality. Once students were asked questions that required an amount of thought, they began to understand what areas of their upbringing were not developing as much as they should have. Some areas that represent specific child development include self-management, self-awareness, relationships

skills, and responsible decision-making. During the meetings, these areas were discussed, and students learned more about how to begin developing adaptive skills. Students engaged in meaningful discussion with the case manager as well as identifying issues that need to be addressed by creating short-term goals. Learning about positive reinforcement and coping mechanisms is important for students. The ice breaker is the foundation for case managers to begin to understand more about their students' issues and what their needs are.

The individual's social-emotional growth will demonstrate that the ice breakers are having a positive impact on the student's development. The post-surveys concluded that 85% of the students experience a sense of mental growth when asked to talk or journal about their hardships or positive experiences. During the case management meeting, the students had a more profound acknowledgment of expressing themselves because they felt supported and understood by the case manager. Due to this, students will be able to confront situations more effectively and cultivate positive relationships in their lives.



**San Benito County Behavioral Health
Youth Alliance
GAD-7**

Baseline
 Discharge

GUIAS Youth and Parent Leadership CAMINOS Brief Therapy

Participant Name: _____

Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you been bothered by the following problems?	Not at all	Several days	Over half the days	Nearly every day	
1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge	0	1	2	3	Total Score
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying	0	1	2	3	
3. Worrying too much about different things	0	1	2	3	
4. Trouble relaxing	0	1	2	3	
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still	0	1	2	3	
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable	0	1	2	3	
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen	0	1	2	3	
<i>Add the score for each column</i>	+	+	+	=	

Have any of these problems made it more difficult for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

Not difficult at all
 Somewhat difficult

Very difficult
 Extremely difficult

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This Program is funded through San Benito County Behavioral Health MHSA funds.
 Please submit form with cover page to: 831-636-4025 (FAX) or in an encrypted email to: JGutierrez@sbcmh.org or contact Juan with any questions at: 831-636-4020

Recommendations

All case managers and facilitators among all the programs at Youth Alliance can use the ice breakers to begin any meeting/workshop to establish trust and transparency. Workshops facilitated by case managers will use the ice breakers at the beginning of the workshops/case management, especially in the first meeting, where the case managers and the students will meet for the first time. Every time there is a workshop or case management meeting, students will have about five minutes to reflect on the ice breaker. If students do not feel comfortable speaking out loud, they will have the opportunity to also journal. Journaling is a great method for students to express themselves. Writing down what they feel will release all their tension and anxiety in pen and paper. The journaling process is meant to help students transition to speaking out loud to the group and engaging with others. Case managers can have more of an insight into where the issue lies when students journal about their day, what causes their breakdowns or triggers, and what emotions they are feeling at the moment. This can help students and the case manager create a plan to prioritize the immediate need.

It is highly encouraged that case managers use the ice breakers to have a one-on-one meeting with their clients. Qualitative data assessed during one-on-one meetings established a safer space for students and encouraged a more profound and meaningful conversation. It is recommended that case managers use ice breakers according to the issue that is being discussed. This is a chance for the students and case managers to connect and learn about themselves with a two-way conversation. The ice breakers are also meant to target adults to think critically and strengthen their mental capability to destress and converse challenges that they are facing. The

ice breakers should be used during every meeting as a ritual to be consistent with the student's progress.

Conclusion

In closing, the SELIB was used to assess the effectiveness of the quality of case management. When the case manager used the SELIB they had to first assess the students' needs and then properly use an icebreaker. The ice breakers were developed as a tool for the case manager and the student to form a strong and positive relationship. The SELIB touched on the five primitive areas of focus that teenagers experience and where they need the most guidance.

The project was implemented in San Benito High School and targeted tier one students that have issues with anxiety, depression, and stress in their lives. The case manager had six students that needed guidance among the different types of stressors. The project resulted in all six students finding coping strategies that alleviate their stressors and concluded that only the majority were able to fully find some way to cope. Some of the coping mechanisms include journaling, meditating through the day, and taking mental breaks. To furthermore understand the effectiveness of the project the agency needs to keep on implementing the SELIB throughout the different programs and within case management. A larger group of students would be more effective to have positive results and a greater outcome.

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Appendix A

Scope of Work

	Project Timeline: April 2020 - December 2020						
Activities	Apr.	May	June	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Research about Social Emotional Learning	X	X					
Create Social Emotional Learning Questions that are going to be for High School students		X	X				
Create flashcards and a Google Drive for the Ice Breakers				X	X		
Advertise the ice breakers to other program staff to be used and added everyone to the Google Drive					X		
Used agencies pre and post-surveys for students to fill out about social-emotional.					X	X	
Created Survey for Youth Alliance staff to provide feedback on the SELIB.					X		
The Ice Breakers were implemented during Fall 21 academic year school during case management					X	X	
Received Feedback from case managers and supporting staff						X	

Improved ice breakers for future use.					X	X	
Closed all case management cases.						X	X