

12-2021

Lean on Me; Social Emotional Learning Creates Successful Students

Michaelene Cummins

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all

This Capstone Project (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Projects and Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

Lean on Me; Social Emotional Learning Creates Successful Students

Michaelene E. Cummins

California State University Monterey Bay

LS 400: Senior Capstone

Dr. Patty Whang

December 20, 2021

Abstract

The Focus of this Capstone Project is to really lean into the social emotional side of learning. Students were already silently suffering with mental health struggles prior to the Pandemic and they have only worsened since going back to in person classes. As educators it is our job to provide a safe space to nurture the development of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, decision making, and relationship skills. Social Emotional Learning has always been important but given these unprecedented times it is essential that we as educators and staff provide our students with the most well equipped social emotional learning skills possible. After interviewing administrators, teachers, and students three different action options were thoroughly discussed to better enhance social emotional learning. Much time and effort was put into deciding which action would be the most successful, with that being said fortifying Tier I instruction seemed to be the most necessary and best fit for all.

Setting the Stage

This Pandemic has affected each and every one of us in different ways. The percentages of anxiety, severe depression, and suicide skyrocketed while we were all forced to stay home. Isolation quickly went from being a “feeling” people would get, to a very real reality. The reality of this national pandemic is that we were all isolated from one another. Not only were you isolated from family and friends, but a mask kept you from giving a friendly hello to your mail man. We were unable to hug a stranger because we were advised to stay six feet apart. We couldn’t even go to a park to get fresh air. This is the most traumatic event that our world has experienced in ages. Whether you were a man or woman, child or adult, we were all affected and we all suffered.

After living through isolation, working from home, schooling from home, just trying to survive; boom! We were thrown back into normalcy and I use the term “normal” very lightly. We were the closest thing back to our old way of living that we could have been. Children were back in schools, with some restrictions of course. It sounds great, right? Children finally get to close those computer screens and venture back into their schools. Unfortunately, the trauma people experienced after the pandemic has been just as bad if not worse than the actual pandemic itself.

I know a little boy, we’ll call him Aiden to protect his privacy. Before the pandemic Aiden was a happy healthy young boy. Because I have a personal relationship with Aiden’s parents I was not only able to see how successful he was in school, but I witnessed him thrive outside of school as well. He loved t-ball and was quickly showing interest in soccer. When the pandemic hit Aiden was eight years old, loved his family and friends and just had an overall positive outlook on life. Even though Aiden was considerably smart he did have a tendency to give his teacher a hard time. You see, he had a tendency to be a little overly social. Some may

even say hyper. He was just a social butterfly and oftentimes had a hard time switching that on and off switch when he entered the classroom. Other than being a “talker” he was well liked by his peers.

When Covid-19 entered the United States and schools were first shut down, know one thought it would last more than two weeks, including Aiden. He took it as a celebration of getting an early spring break. The more the weeks rolled on the more it became real to Aiden that this wasn't going to be a “little vacation.” Aiden's parents are great people and I care for them deeply. But they didn't do the best job shielding Aiden from the very harsh realities of what was going on. We began to see little changes in Aiden. It first started with excessive hand washing. We kind of looked past it, because well, that's what we were supposed to do. You'd hear the sink turn on followed by the humming of happy birthday multiple times a day. Even if he didn't leave the house he was finding a reason to wash his hands. There was this one moment in particular that really stood out to all of us. Aiden's mom had taken him to the grocery store which she typically never did. You could tell it made him anxious being in public places, so they avoided it as best they could. Unfortunately, no one was home to watch Aiden so his mom had no choice. While they were at the store his mom's mask broke. She immediately retired and wrapped it around her ear, but the reaction she got from her son was nothing she ever expected. Aiden was crying so hard he could barely breathe. She wasn't wasn't sure what was going on at first. She just kept yelling “Aiden, Aiden! What's wrong?” And he let out a huge scream. “Mommy, your mask fell off and now you have covid and are going to die.” The hearts of everyone in that store were instantly shattered. Could she see that her son was struggling before this? Absolutely yes. But this reaction should not be coming from an innocent eight year old. When you are eight years old the last thing you need to worry about is death. This little boy believed if you were not

in your home and you breathed in any surrounding air you would die. Just like that, Aiden's innocence and youth was just gone in the snap of a finger.

When school's began to open a lot of parents had a sigh of relief. A lot of people were working full time jobs while essentially teaching their children as well. Well Adien's mom had a sigh of relief for different reasons. She thought having Aiden be back in school, surrounded by his friends, would only help him realize that life will go on and we will all be okay. He excelled there before the pandemic, why wouldn't he after? Unfortunately for Aiden he was simply unable to cope. Aiden was so terrified of that sickness itself he is physically unable to focus his mind on anything else. He refused to rejoin t-ball because everyone touches the same ball. He didn't want to socialize with his best friend because his friend just wasn't as good at keeping his mask on as him. And when it came to learning, well there was none. Aiden's grades were reflecting how much he was struggling. As much as his teacher tried to help him, he was just on too much of a sensory overload.

How can a perfectly healthy little boy live in fear that he will die everyday he is in school? We need to be creating better programs, systems, and ideas for children dealing with trauma. Not only does this impact academics, but it affects the overall health of the children we are supposed to be protecting. I want every Aiden in the world to regain their innocence and willingness to live. There is truly no better way to put it. Every child deserves to feel safe, protected, and seen. Aiden isn't the only child out there who was and is suffering. Let's start prioritizing social emotional health in school and help our children heal.

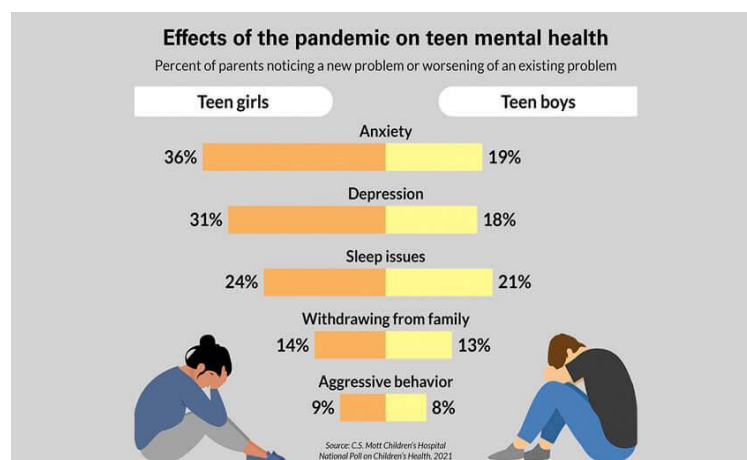
Literature Synthesis & Integration

It is clear that the pandemic that occurred as a result of Covid-19 has impacted people globally. Not only did the Covid-19 pandemic result in widespread death, there were also

disruptions to our social systems, extreme financial hardships, exponential growth in mental health concerns as well as disruptions to our political systems. Prior to 2020, life was different. People freely traveled, gatherings were plentiful and the reassurance of human touch was taken for granted. With the last pandemic occurring in 1918, humanity had become comfortable with the freedom to move about and enjoy life. One must stop to wonder how this global event impacted the overall development of children and their resiliency as they transition back into the new norm in school. Prior to the pandemic, school was comfortable and predictable. Given the toll that this event has caused on adults one must assume that there were significant psycho-social impacts on the most vulnerable in society; the youth. There are children that were born during this global shutdown, toddlers that have been isolated and school children that were returned to the confines of their own home. The Covid-19 Pandemic has created latent trauma and it is important to understand how this trauma has impacted children as they return to in person learning. This pandemic did not just induce fear into children and young adults globally but it actually induced a reaction known as traumatic stress. (NYU Langone Health, n.d.)

Figure 1

Percent of Teenagers with new or worsening mental health issues after the Pandemic



Note. Source: Michigan Health (2021)

Why is it an Issue?

As the world starts emerging from the dark cloud of the pandemic, it is time to begin to look at the ripple effects and its overall impact on students and learning. Solitary confinement, historically, has been used as a form of extreme punishment in the prison system. Research from *The Medical News Today* shows the mental toll this confinement has on the mind. Those in confinement experience many physical responses but the latent mental toll is of greater concern. Although isolation in prisons is the extreme form, when “Stay at home” orders were first introduced, children experienced a similar form of isolation.

When looking at cognitive development, one must consider how children think and explore, in other words, how they figure things out. According to the *National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, children that experience trauma often show delays in language development and their ability to reason. (NCTSN, 2018) The isolation and trauma experienced through the pandemic created deficits in executive functioning and made planning a challenge. The stressors experienced often make it difficult for the child to think things through and to reason. This is an essential element in appropriate cognitive development and school interaction. Children that have experienced trauma struggle with self-regulation. They are not exposed to others to help them understand and emulate appropriate behaviors and thought processes.

The greatest impact of Covid-19 is anticipated to be found within the psychosocial domain. “It is anticipated that the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and associated societal response will have wide-ranging impacts on youth development and mental health.” (Becker, 2020) The heightened level of adult stress and lack of access to community resources increases the amount of child abuse and disengagement in schools. The idea that we needed to stay home and social distance created heightened anxiety in all. Calls to Domestic

Abuse Hotlines were increased by a notable 25 percent. (Kelly and Morgan, 2020) Historically schools had been one of the safest places for children and as they shut down, risks for the youth have increased. In an article discussing the impacts of Covid 19 it was stated that “The impact of COVID-19 has meant children and young people experiencing abuse have gone from being unnoticed to invisible.” (Donagh, 2020)

What Should Be Done?

As we start emerging from an unprecedented time, it is important to take the lessons learned for future planning. Child development sets the foundation for the future of how we respond and are able to exist in society. The pandemic resulted in latent trauma in our youth. The approach in current school practice must be trauma informed. As a school, opportunities must be thoughtfully provided to give children an opportunity to access the deficits that they have experienced. These opportunities can and should be accessible both inside and out of the classroom. As a result, in order to get students back on track for learning we're going to have to put more effort into their social emotional learning. Right now these students' brains are not fully ready to learn. We need to supply them with the resources they need to feel fully safe and ready to learn again. When it comes to learning after the pandemic safety and comfort are the first priorities that need to be addressed. As a twenty eight year old woman I still have a hard time putting into words what the pandemic did to me and my emotional health. I can't even begin to imagine the toll it has taken on these students' health. Each classroom needs to focus on the importance of labeling emotions. When someone can label how they are feeling; mad, sad, happy, etc. it is easier to come up with a “plan of attack.” Everyday the students in this class will start with a “check in.” It can be as brief as saying “today I am happy.” The *Kids Help Line* identifies the importance of allowing children to both express and identify their emotions is a

crucial step towards aiding into the overall learning process of the child. (KHL, 2021) Not only does it help the student channel their feelings, it allows the teacher the knowledge to decide how they can help students in need. Another really important aspect of social emotional learning is the need to provide a loving and nurturing classroom. Oftentimes there can be a strain on teacher students' relationships when navigating a hard time. Whether it be resistance from the student or lack of necessary tools for the teacher, disagreements happen. However this does not always have to be the case. Teachers can provide a safe environment. An environment that is effective in promoting change. Educator Martha Schubert notes that when done so in the right way, teacher and student can build an incredible partnership. (Shubert, 2015) For a lot of people the pandemic was the most isolating feeling they had ever experienced in their entire lives. People lost normal everyday social interactions. Therefore, people forgot how to treat one another. When a child feels nurtured, loved, and seen they are truly able to let their guards down and feel comfortable enough to learn. Classrooms should be bombarded with words of positivity. There needs to be open communication between teacher, student, and classmates. This means always allowing the time and safe space to be able to talk and share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns. When students feel they have the “podium” to speak, it helps build the self confidence that so many are lacking after living through a pandemic. Group work is another essential aspect to helping students overcome past trauma of Covid 19. This pandemic was not only isolating but it left children without the basic skills of knowing how to work alongside others. As much as people like to think this is a very “dog eat dog world,” it is very much the opposite. Without basic social skills it is hard for people to blossom or flourish. People depend on social skills when applying for jobs, going to church, joining a sports team, walking through the grocery store, and so much more. We need to help students rebuild and strengthen their social skills so that way they can

blossom and flourish in life. Covid 19 may have felt like a lifetime, but the reality is these children still have a lifetime left that is worth living. Going to school is not just about learning your A,B,C's and the capital of the United States. It is really about learning how to function in a community of people.

Method

I do not think the educational institutions were as prepared to deal with the latent trauma that impacted both students and staff as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. Given the emotional state of society as a whole, as an educator it is essential that time has historically been dedicated to pure academics and needs to be replaced with social emotional learning. If our students are not emotionally available to learn, the highest quality instruction would be lost. For this Capstone project, the researcher is exploring the emotional impact of the pandemic in order to support our students moving forward. I will work closely with staff to analyze the data and develop ways in which we can develop long term solutions for the problem.

Context

My research will take place in the San Ramon Unified School District (SRUSD)¹ which is located in the northern section of San Diego County. It is a highly diversified district. Students range in social classes and come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds. The greatest number of students in the district are either hispanic (45.47%) or white (39.25%). It is a quickly growing community that houses 21 different schools and has a student population of roughly 25,000 students. Due to the recent Pandemic, SRUSD has experienced a decline in attendance for the first time in over ten years. With the recent introduction of vaccination requirements, they have seen more families opting for alternative educational options. Even with the decline, SRUSD is one of the larger school districts in San Diego County.

¹ Pseudonyms were used in place of faculty, and student names as well as organization

Participants and Participant Selection

San Ramon High School is the largest high school in San Ramon Unified. This particular school site was chosen as it mirrors the overall demographics and socioeconomic status of the entire district. By selecting a site that mirrors the district, I felt that I would be capturing a true sense of need and response. This particular school was also chosen as a focus school as I had a previous relationship with the site administration.

Those interviewed were as follows:

For the teacher groups, **Mr. Sam Normandy**, an Education Specialist for students in grades 9-12 was interviewed. He has a long history in the district and has been actively involved in student wellness programs on site. Also interviewed was **Michelle Heartkins**, a social worker/teacher on site. She too has a long history in the district. Ms. Heartkins is also involved in emotional wellness throughout the district with her primary focus at San Ramon High School.

Students A, B, C and D were selected with the assistance of Principal Carl Dawn. The names of the students have been excluded as they are all minors. The students were selected to represent the most prominent races and socioeconomic groups. There was an equal distribution of male and female students interviewed. All students were in grade twelve and all have been enrolled in SRUSD since elementary school.

Mr. Carl Dawn and **Ms. Jane Frias** were both interviewed for the administrative groupings. Mr. Dawson is the current principal at San Ramon High School. He has been in the leadership position for 6 years. Ms. Frias is the Director of Student Services. Her primary role is

student wellness.

Researcher. Social emotional wellness has always been a passion of mine. As a future educator, I think that it is important for teachers to keep that at the forefront of learning. I also think that the trauma that students experienced as a result of the Covid 19 Pandemic has been greater than educators were anticipating. Although the initial focus upon the return to in-person learning has been on learning loss, I feel strongly that our students were not prepared to access the learning presented as a direct result of the latent trauma. I think that I am similar to the participants in that we have all been impacted by Covid in one way or another. I think we are all experiencing some form of trauma related to the isolation and fear associated with the past year. Mental health is an area that many people are not comfortable with discussing or expressing concerns about. I need to be aware that the individuals that I am working with might each be coming from a different head space. I will approach the interview questions with compassion and understanding. It is important that the groups that I am interviewing feel comfortable and open in talking about such a sensitive subject.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions

Interview #1: Teacher Group

The following questions were asked to 2 Teacher Group participants.

1. How would you describe your students' experiences during the pandemic? What are you most concerned about when it comes to students returning to school and their emotional wellness?
2. What is currently being done to support your students and their emotional and social well being - what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
3. What do you think should be done about supporting the emotional and social wellness

of your students?

4. What do you think are the challenges to doing something about your students' wellbeing and/or the improvement of social emotional learning?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about your students' wellbeing and/or the improvement of social emotional learning?

Interview #2: Student Group

The following questions were asked to 4 student participants in grade 12.

1. How did you feel about returning to school for in person instruction and what successes and problems have you experienced when it comes to learning?

2. What are your teachers doing to help you with your return to school after participating in distance learning for so long?

3. What do you think should be done to help you make sure that you are successful in school both academically and socially/emotionally?

4. What do you think are the challenges that you have had both emotionally and academically?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about how you feel after returning to school and things that could help students make the transition better?

These interviews will be done individually over the phone in an effort to decrease inhibitions.

Interview #3: Administration Group

The following questions were asked to 2 Administration Group participants.

1. What do you know about the effects of the pandemic on students? What are you most concerned about when it comes to students returning to school and their emotional wellness?

2. What is currently being done to mitigate the effects of the latent trauma incurred with your students and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?

3. What do you think should be done about supporting the social and emotional wellness of the students at your school?

4. What do you think are the challenges to doing something about social emotional wellness?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to say about social emotional wellness and/or the improvement of social emotional learning?

Procedure

All interviews were held individually in an effort to promote transparent responses. Interviews happened via phone conversations or through Zoom. All interviewees participated openly and willingly. Each interview took no more than thirty minutes to complete. The student interviews were scheduled by Mr. Dawn, during times that were convenient for the students and did not interfere with their learning opportunities. All interviews occurred within the instructional day over a series of four days.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, two school administrators, two current educators and two students were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve social emotional learning in educational institutions. This is important because, as students and staff return to in person learning in educational institutions, they are all still reeling from the latent effects of

trauma as directly related to the Covid-19 Pandemic. It is becoming evident that in order for students to access the curriculum and have meaningful learning, they must be emotionally available to receive and store the information for long-term gains. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time requirements, cost, and effectiveness. Time requirements are an important factor to consider as the instructional day is limited and schools are already facing the challenges related to learning loss. Financial impact, or cost, must also be considered. Although schools have been the recipients of an extensive amount of Covid related funding, sustainability of newly introduced programs is essential so long term cost must be considered. Finally, the overall effectiveness and academic impact must be contemplated. Schools are public institutions with the primary goal of educating the youth. Anything that is implemented in schools should have a positive impact on learning and assist with the development of students who will become productive and contributing members of society. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option, an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	TIME REQUIRED	COST	EFFECTIVENESS
Fortify Tier I Instruction (CASEL 3 Signature Practices)	Medium	Low	High
Implementation of Restorative Practices	Medium	Medium	High
Restructuring of Counseling and Social Worker roles and duties	Low	Medium	Medium

Fortifying Tier I Instruction

Understanding where learners are foundationally, not just academically, is essential to the implementation of high quality Tier I instruction. Prior to the time period in which schools were thrust into redefining education as a result of Covid-19, the focus for Tier I instruction involved a consistent, valid, reliable, standards-based curriculum that provided academic access for all students. Although it is not called out directly, through the statement “providing access for all students”, it is implied that the needs are often based on emotional readiness; some of the hierarchical needs that foundationally might be creating unexpected roadblocks. Through the interviews, the students themselves admitted that they are currently distracted by outside influences. They shared that they have struggled with learning to re-engage with peers on an academic level, well as with establishing norms on working collaboratively. Often their day starts off in an irritable state. A state in which they are unable to define the cause. Once they enter the classroom, they are thrust into learning with the expectations that the feelings that they

are experiencing are “checked at the door.” Teachers, through the interviews, have shared that they feel as if they do not have the time, or mental capacity themselves, to address anything other than academic standards. Foundationally, they are unable to recognize the chaotic aftermath and mental confusion that exists in their students. In light of the trauma experienced throughout all of society as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic, it is evident that students and staff have all returned to in person learning only to continue to struggle. One teacher himself stated. “I knew a different kid would come back to us after Covid but I was not prepared to respond with how different they would be. I myself have struggled with the routine of showing up on campus each day but I do not have the tolerance to deal with students that might be having the same struggles.” (Sam Normandy, personal interview, October 27, 2021). School administrators reported similar experiences with the added level of supporting not just students, but staff as well.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that all participants recognized that teaching and learning was being impacted by an outside force that was foreign to all. This force simply being the mental capacity of all stakeholders. All those that were interviewed recognized the importance of, and could parrot the term, high quality Tier I Instruction but seemed to be at a disadvantage in finding ways to fortify its foundation. Student A stated, “The teachers don’t get it. We have been out of school trying to learn on our own and we don’t remember how to deal with the pressures in school. We need to be heard. We are more than just students” (Interview, October 29, 2021). School administrators have reported higher levels of crisis response since returning to school. Many of the students report that they just can not handle the pressure of learning right now. CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) has developed three signature practices to address this very thing. Foundationally, CASEL emphasises the need for welcoming inclusive activities, incorporating engaging strategies and an

optimistic closure each day. Through the interviews of both the students and teachers, it was clear that most, if not all of these practices are non-existent throughout the school day. The cost to implement this practice would be low for schools as it would simply require conscientious efforts to put availability to learn at the forefront. By fortifying Tier I Instruction, school districts will have a higher likelihood of increasing student engagement and learning.

Implementation of Restorative Practices

Image 1

Restorative Justice in Education



Note. Source: EMU Graduate and Professional Programs

Restorative practices benefit students and staff by increasing school connectedness and can be utilized in both prevention of and response to unexpected negative behaviors. Increasing school connectedness is essential to success. Through taking a restorative approach in schools, there are more inclusive opportunities to deal with problems and conflicts (Porter, 2007). There is an overall shift from punishment to restoring relationships. Principal Dawn shared, “All of our staff members and key student leaders were trained on Restorative Circles by the County Office several years ago. When we first started, we saw an immediate increase in empathy for others. It seems since we have come back to school this year, we have lost that focus and tensions have permeated the campus. Our teachers are hyper-focused on curriculum while losing sight of the

client, our students” (Dawn, personal interview, October 29, 2021). His statement supports that, even on a limited level of implementation, there are visible improvements and benefits to school culture when restorative practices are in place. In looking at the foundational meaning of the word discipline, we find that it comes from the latin word “disciplina” which means to teach. Restorative practices are a way to teach and guide students prior to the implementation of a consequence. When educators state that there is no room in an instructional day, they have lost sight of the teaching component in the practice. Students have been disconnected from society for an extended period of time. The impact on schools has been huge. As a direct result of the trauma experienced through the pandemic, executive functioning seems impossible. When asked about restorative practices, there is confusion as expressed by this as expressed by these students, “There was a time that I got to do a restorative circle... it was cool but it seemed odd that we were trying to solve the problem after it happened” (Student B, October 28, 2021) The practice has been lost and must be retaught.

“Since coming back to school we have seen a significant increase in discipline referrals. It’s like the students have forgotten what it is like to interact with others and the staff has become reactionary in their response. At one time, we would take the time to talk through a problem, and now problems pop up and we don’t bother to take the time to determine the antecedent or cause of the behavior. It makes me wonder what we are doing wrong as adults. I don’t think that kids wake up hopeful that they will get in trouble.” (Dawn, personal interview, October 29, 2021) To fix the overall problem, schools need to restore empathy and understanding in not only themselves, but the students as well. Through restorative practices, a higher level of self-reflection occurs. Both students and staff are able to understand their own emotional state in preparation to learn. Restorative practices have an overall positive impact on school culture and

increasing student learning. This Action Option does come at a slight financial cost to a school. Training will need to be established and time set aside to implement the restorative circles. The action may be beneficial to some students but due to the intensive nature of the practice, it can not be made available to all. In theory, restorative practices are about building community. The practice is based on solutions and must be facilitated by open minded individuals.

Restructuring of Counseling and Social Worker Roles and Duties

School social workers and even counselors have historically been in the position that they are either coordinating community resources or assisting with academic planning. Positive impacts on bringing both into school communities have been noted through time. When a student is struggling, the social worker and/or counselor is able to offer the temporary support that is needed to help. What must be noted is that the majority of the support comes as a reaction to an event or a need. As students return to school after a year or more of isolation, the needs are great. Without restructuring the system, these key personnel are limited in both their scope and accessibility. Michelle Heartkins shared “My time and resources are limited. I spend much of my day in triage, responding to the emotional toll related to returning to in person learning. Most students did not do well with the isolation but are struggling even more with the reintegration” (Heartkins, personal interview, October 26, 2021). Through the interview process, the intent was to seek to understand how schools can support social emotional capacity in an effort to make learning available to all students. Although students and staff all agreed that opportunities have been provided for individuals to get to know each other, the opportunities appear to be limited and superficial. Although it appears that the school is trying to create a safe and welcoming environment, it seems to be superficial to students and staff. Tolerance for others is limited. Communication is fractured, and overall, the students are not getting along well. School social

workers would typically be addressing each of these areas for a select few students. The need has grown exponentially.

Students are reporting that they are unable to meet their learning goals, they are distracted in class and have lost their tolerance to work cooperatively with others. Teachers report that they feel a great sense to return to the pre-covid norm and it is their responsibility to recover the learning loss experienced by students over this past year and a half. They admitted that they do not have time to incorporate anything aside from academics into the day. There is also a general fear of mental health. Administrators are frustrated with staff in their rigid approach to learning but clearly recognize that they are in a fragile state themselves and are clearly trying to stick with what they are comfortable with, academics. The site administrators have admitted that their role has transitioned from leader to manager dealing with quarantines, staff shortages and increased levels of discipline. They self admit that they are not experts in mental health, and are just hopeful that over time, the trauma will subside. Unfortunately, this stand back and wait approach is crippling the educational community, and action must be taken. Again, counselors and social workers would typically address these deficits on a limited basis not the global scale that exists. As a direct result, the system of response would need to change.

Conclusion

Given the three action items recommended, fortifying Tier I instruction, implementing restorative practices and the restructuring of the systems established by counselors and social workers, I recommend fortifying Tier I instruction. Both the review of research and assimilation of the data collected through the interview process, are in support of the need to implement this action item. In looking for a long-term, sustainable solution to the problems that exist related to this disengagement of students, I am confident that through the fortification of Tier I instruction,

all students and staff would benefit; not just a select few that many school initiatives target. As with any consideration, the selection comes with concessions, limitations and potential negative outcomes. Each of which will be addressed.

Concessions. Although my recommendation is to fortify Tier I instruction, it is important to note that the other two options were not without strength and merit. In looking at restorative practices, it must be recognized that much of the achievement gap in schools is a direct result of punitive actions often found in our schools as directly related to a response to negative behavior (Elias, 2016). There is a direct correlation on how stress impacts a student's ability to behave appropriately in school. Through restorative practices, the shift would go from removing the misbehaving students which further creates a lack of school engagement to finding ways to develop school communities and repair negative relationships that are a result of conflict. The research shows restorative practices help build strong relationships in schools supporting the students ability to problem solve and maintain a positive association with school. Positive associations with school support overall school connectedness. In looking at the roles and responsibilities, much like restorative practices, they are often reactionary in nature but provide a necessary support that many of our struggling students are often lacking. Counselors and school social workers are able to foster the skills needed to respond to conflict by working with students individually and in small groups. They are often brought in after a student has failed to succeed rather than proactively to create systems alignment in anticipation of conflict that might arise. They are skilled at supporting a limited scope of students yet if their approach was to support all students, lessons could be generalized and have an overall impact on school climate and culture. It is clear that the two action options that were not selected, would also benefit students' engagement with the outcome of overall school success.

Limitations. With the selection of fortifying Tier I instruction as my overall recommendation, it too comes with some limitations. By recommending this action option it is assumed that all stakeholders understand Tiered instruction. There are some educators that take the stance that it is purely academic in nature and not about student preparedness to learn. Foundationally, it is assumed that all teachers are able to deliver the high quality first instruction that is engaging to the learner.

Potential negative outcomes. With every call to action, there are potential negative outcomes. When fortifying Tier I instruction comes into play, very seasoned teachers will be tasked with incorporating strategies that they personally are uncomfortable with or that they do not feel belong within the instructional day. Teachers will be tasked with meeting students at their emotional level and state, which will be new and foreign to some. This uncomfortable feeling could bleed into Union complaints as teachers may interpret it as adding another duty to an already full workload. Overall teacher resistance will impact full implementation and fortification. Parents may respond negatively to the schools asking students to be introspective. They may voice concerns that educators are prying into the emotional wake that might occur as a result of a home environmental issue. Although

Conclusion. After reviewing and reflecting on the concessions, limitations and negative outcomes, it is still my suggestion that schools fortify Tier I instruction to include social emotional learning. This action will have a high probability of increasing student engagement and connectedness at a minimal cost to the schools as well as minor adaptations to overall time commitments. After reviewing both published research as well as interview data and through my quest to understand how to re-establish engagement in schools since the pandemic, everything points to the need to build social emotional capacity. This foundational level of need can be

worked on in small, focused chunks but in order to have the overall cultural impact, it must become a part of daily instruction, thus the fortification of Tier I instruction. By incorporating social emotional learning, both children and adults will benefit. Schools will benefit from stakeholders that have higher levels of self-awareness that support learning. Students that are engaged will be less likely to engage in negative behaviors both in and out of the classroom. This action item is the only one that has the potential to impact every student and adult on campus. The other two actions are designed to specifically target student groups. When an action has the ability to target all students there is a higher likelihood of cultural change and tolerance of all individuals. In having an action that has the ability to have a global benefit, it becomes evident that this particular action would be the most effective and should be put into play.

Image 2

Social Emotional Learning Circle

Note. Source: School Guide Casel Organization (2019)

Action Documentation

In an effort to fortify Tier I instruction, I am going to work with teachers to ensure that they are implementing CASEL's three signature practices. To begin, teachers will be taught to begin each class with a "Welcoming Inclusive Activity." This helps to build community and connections that work. The lessons themselves will include engaging strategies that implement brain breaks. Teachers will be taught to anchor thinking and learning. Strategies must be intentionally selected to engage all learners. Finally, teachers will be taught to provide an "Optimistic Closure." This highlights the shared learning and understandings that were developed through the course of the lesson. It gives the students a sense of accomplishment. Some examples of Welcoming Activities include; smiling warmly while the teacher greets each person by their preferred name, whole-group greeting activities, morning circles and interactive "do-nows," such as peer-to-peer homework help. These are all extremely beneficial and effective ways to incorporate welcome activities. When it comes to incorporating "Engaging Strategies" teachers must remain open minded and accepting. Some examples of Engaging Strategies: Think, Ink, Pair, Share (silent time to reflect; time to write; partner discussions; close with a group share out), Clock Partners (prearrange partners for quickly pairing up for reflection and discussion) Private think-time (facilitator wait-time), Mindful Minute Brain Break (a calming activity, promoting focus and readiness to learn.) Lastly, it is absolutely essential that teachers include "Optimistic Closures" in their daily routine. Oftentimes Optimistic Closures can be confused with a cheerful ending. But, it is more so about constant reflection, engagement, and providing one's self with a feeling of overall accomplishment. (Bryson, 2013) Optimistic Closures of statements like; Something I learned today, Something I still question, I am looking forward to tomorrow, so on and so forth.

As my action I wanted to ensure I remain as close to CASEL's Three Signature Practices as possible. To ensure that teachers were always incorporating CASEL's three signature practices into their classroom I decided to make a flier. This flier is meant to be used as a visual reminder to the teachers of the three signature practices that they will incorporate daily.

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING



WELCOMING INCLUSIVE ACTIVITY. Community and connections.

Examples of Welcoming Activities:

- Smile warmly and greet each person by their preferred name
- Whole-group greeting activities
- Morning circles
- Interactive "do-nows," such as peer-to-peer homework help



ENGAGING STRATEGIES that include brain breaks.

Examples of Engaging Strategies:

- Think, Ink, Pair, Share (silent time to reflect; time to write; partner discussions; close with a group share out)
- Clock Partners (prearrange partners for quickly pairing up for reflection and discussion)
- Private think-time (facilitator wait-time)
- Mindful Minute Brain Break (a calming activity, promoting focus and readiness to learn)



OPTOMISTIC CLOSURE.

Examples of Optimistic Closure:

- One-Minute Accolade
- Something I learned today...
- I am curious about...
- I am looking forward to tomorrow because...
- Suit Yourself
- Something I'll do as a result of this meeting is...
- Something I still question...
- Something that still concerns me...

Image 1. Screenshot of the flier that was supplied for teachers to hang in his or her classroom

Critical Reflection

Throughout this process of engaging and working with both teachers and students after Covid 19 I learned that people are all resilient. Given the right tools educators and students can

heal and overcome the trauma that was induced by Covid19. Before enrolling in Dr. Patty Whang's LS 400: *Senior Capstone* course I was really unsure of what to expect or even be prepared for. This class really allowed me freedoms that other courses have not. We became the masters of our own subject. Having the control to choose what we wanted to work with made the experience that more special. I have and always will be a mental health advocate. Knowing how many students and even faculty members were struggling after returning to in person learning was heartbreaking to me. Students should always feel safe and comfortable in the classroom and teachers should always be supplied with the necessary tools to help their students reach that comfortability. I found it somewhat ironic that throughout this process I was advocating for Social Emotional Learning, meanwhile I was struggling myself. I am at the age where I am just now graduating college. It has been ten years since I was in High School. I had this preconceived idea that I would relate more to the teacher, as I am closer in age to them. However I kept connecting with these post covid students because I am a post covid student myself. The same struggles these high school students were dealing with were some of the exact same issues I was having. There was an overall loss of human connection and empathy with my teachers on zoom and I was nervous to attend in person courses because of the disease itself. Either way, I found myself struggling as a learner. This, to me, made this project that much more rewarding. I will always cherish being put through this experience. And while I am proud of myself, I'm even more proud of the way the faculty and staff related to this problem. They wanted the best for their students and that is all that really matters.

Synthesis and Integration

My time at California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) will forever be held close to my heart. Having the opportunity to actively be a part of the Liberal Studies Department

has prepared me to be the best possible educator. The Liberal Studies MLOs, the required coursework, and this Action Research Project have greatly impacted me both as an individual and an educator. MLO 3: Innovative Technology Practitioner, may have been the most challenging yet rewarding MLO for me. I struggled with technology prior to this course. Being a student in LS 400: *Senior Capstone* I was forced to be uncomfortable. Using technology was a must, especially during Covid. This has helped me obtain the skills required of a teacher. Additionally, MLO 4: Social Justice Collaborator, I am proud of the work I have done throughout this process. I know I helped create a safer, more comforting environment for students. An environment that may have initially seemed damaged by Covid19. Restoring empathy back into our schools was essential. Whether Covid19 had happened or not, students and educators were already losing tolerance for one another. This is not how education should be. I played a part in restoring the overall empathy and understanding that takes place on campus. Lastly, MLO 5: Subject Matter Generalist, I have mastered Subject Matter Generalist after taking this course. I successfully studied, gathered information, data, strategies and tools in order to become skilled in my subject of Social Emotional Learning. This very extensive, in depth form of study I engaged with proves that I have the skills to become a future educator in California.

References

- Becker, S. P., & Gregory, A. M. (2020). Editorial Perspective: Perils and promise for child and adolescent sleep and associated psychopathology during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 61(7), 757–759. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13278>
- Bryson, Ann. “SEL 3 SIGNATURE PRACTICES PLAYBOOK 2019.” *Schoolguide.casel.org*, 2019, https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/2018/12/CASEL_SEL-3-Signature-Practices-Playbook-V3.pdf.
- Donagh, B. (2020). From Unnoticed to Invisible: The Impact of COVID-19 on Children and Young People Experiencing Domestic Violence and Abuse. *Child Abuse Review (Chichester, England : 1992)*, 29(4), 387–391. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2649>
- Elias, Maurice J. “Why Restorative Practices Benefit All Students.” *Edutopia*, George Lucas Educational Foundation, 23 Nov. 2016, <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/why-restorative-practices-benefit-all-students-maurice-elias>.
- Harding, C., Aloysius, A., Bell, N., Edney, S., Gordon, Z., Lewis, H., Sweeting, M., & Murphy, R. (2021). Reflections on COVID -19 and the potential impact on preterm infant feeding and speech, language and communication development. *Journal of Neonatal Nursing : JNN*, 27(3), 220–222. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jnn.2020.09.001>
- “Helping Kids Identify and Express Feelings.” *Kids Helpline*, 19 Jan. 2021, <https://kidshelpline.com.au/parents/issues/helping-kids-identify-and-express-feelings>.
- Hiraoka, D., & Tomoda, A. (2020). Relationship between parenting stress and school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 74(9), 497–498. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pcn.13088>
- “Isolation and Mental Health: Signs, Impact, and How to Cope.” *Medical News Today*, MediLexicon International, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/isolation-and-mental-health>.
- Morgan, June Kelly and Tomos. “Coronavirus: Domestic Abuse Calls up 25% since Lockdown, Charity Says.” *BBC News*, BBC, 6 Apr. 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-52157620>.

Peterson, Sarah. "Effects." *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/complex-trauma/effects>.

Schubert, Marsha A. "Nurturing a Self-Help Group." *SAGE Open*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2015, p. 215824401557493., <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015574939>.

"Trauma in Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *NYU Langone News*, <https://nyulangone.org/news/trauma-children-during-covid-19-pandemic>.