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Socio-Emotional Learning Interventions for Student Achievement

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Abstract

Marina High School students face challenges including misbehavior, truancy, and academic struggles. In collaboration with a social worker, the school's counseling department focuses on supporting high-risk students. High-risk students can lead to dropouts, involvement in crime, and poverty. The focus is on addressing academic underachievement due to behavior issues and low grades. Targeting the roots of this issue is to tackle mental health, improve life skills, and build a positive environment. The capstone aims to develop educational interventions around mental health, skill development, and socio-emotional well-being. High-risk students were identified and placed in targeted interventions or groups to address their specific challenges. Success was measured by the impact of interventions on behavior and academic performance before and after the completed educational sessions. Results showed limited improvement in managing emotions, prioritization, and overall academic performance. To improve outcomes, there needs to be increased consistency and individual monitoring to accurately address students' issues.

Keywords: *students, misbehavior, intervention, academic success, Marina High School.*

Agency & Communities Served

Marina High School (MHS) is a secondary school located in Marina, California. The overall purpose of the school is to educate students on the most crucial subjects that further develop the knowledge and skills of students to implement in their everyday lives. The mission of Marina High School is "to provide our students with a rigorous, relevant educational experience in a supportive environment that promotes critical thinking, creativity, innovation, and community" (Marina High School, n.d., para. 3). MHS can accomplish this by providing classes and opportunities to enhance creativity, inclusivity, and emotional support through different resources. This school offers a few services: counseling, credit recovery, and English Learner Services. Counseling is offered in two ways, emotional or academic. This fosters an environment wherein students can increase self-awareness of their academic needs. Emotional counseling helps provide that mental support. Credit recovery assists with extra support for any subject when a student is struggling. English Learner Services helps Spanish-speaking students gain literacy skills and develop intercultural understandings. "The AP participation rate at Marina High School is 22%. The total minority enrollment is 83%, and 66% of students are economically disadvantaged" (U.S. News, 2024, para.1). Given that the majority of the population being served comes from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, these conditions can significantly affect academic success.

Problem Model Background and Literature Review

Problem Statement

The issue to be addressed is that too many students who are displaying low grades reported misbehaviors, and poor attendance who are close to or have been labeled as "high risk" by the school's system. There are difficulties students face in balancing their academic

responsibilities while also fostering positive behavioral habits. According to the School Plan for Student Achievement in Marina Highschool, "the 2022 Fall Dashboard English Language Arts Performance for All Students displayed: 98.2 points below standard for English Learners, Socioeconomically Disadvantage 5.7 points below standard, Hispanic 1.6 points below standard" (pg. 23, 2022). Data analytics have indicated substandard performance among several minority groups. The students' backgrounds likely play a significant role in their academic struggles. Although only a few minority groups are mentioned, they make up the majority of the school's population. The problem model in Figure 1, illustrates the causes and effects. Issues that contribute to this problem are mental disorders, financial stress, and lack of family support. This problem of students engaging in behaviors labeled as "high risk" has consequences such as misbehavior, substance abuse, and poor academic performance from students.

High school students are often targets for surface judgment by school staff based on their actions. The underlying reasons for their actions are often overlooked, leading to the repetition of poor actions. The U.S. Department of Education states, "...compared to their white peers, American Indian and Pacific Islander students are over 50 percent more likely to lose three weeks of school or more, black students 40 percent more likely, and Hispanic students 17 percent more likely" (para. 5, 2019). Absenteeism and low academic performance manifest in various diverse student groups, often tied to challenges within their home environment. These difficulties may include balancing adult responsibilities while being a student, transportation issues, struggles during school hours, and the pressure to perform or socialize effectively at school. Punishment, often the course taken to address poor behavior, is repeatedly enforced, and the root causes of students' issues are not addressed. High school is an important time in an individual's life when responsibilities are increased which contributes to a variety of instability in school performance. Change requires the root causes to be thoroughly investigated and addressed

through appropriate interventions.

Figure 1: Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Mental Health	Too many students are displaying low grades, misbehavior, and poor attendance and have been labeled as "high risk."	Higher Drop-Out Rate
Life Skills		Involvement in the Criminal Justice System
Environment		Poverty

Contributing Factors

Mental Health

Mental illness is rising in teen years with the presence of difficulty in finding one's identity added on to personal issues going on with the students or students' home and social life. According to the National Institute of Health (NIH) MedlinePlus Magazine, "Almost half (44%) of high schoolers reported feeling persistently sad or hopeless in the last year. Some of these feelings were also linked to experiences of racism, social stigma around gender and sexual identity, and sexual violence" (National Health Institute, 2023, para. 2). The study reports what can be contributing to the rise of mental illness in high school students. High school is a place that involves lots of different opinions from peers which can greatly affect the state of mind for those who may feel "different" from the rest. High school is a vulnerable environment as teens are self-discovering and coming face-to-face with the pressures of fitting in or not finding the right places to fit in.

According to the JED Foundation, "students felt that their peers did not know how to cope with stress, where to seek help for mental health issues, or even the signs of suicidal ideation" (The Jed Foundation, 2020, para. 1). Increasing the social problem of mental health,

students do not know where to get help at times. This can be difficult if there are no school social workers or counselors on campus. If they are present, it can still take courage for students to meet with a counselor as opening up to someone from school can be difficult. How to cope with mental health is something high school students struggle with. This is how they can lead themselves into seeking coping mechanisms in an unhealthy manner based on what their peers are doing or what they see on social media.

Life Skills

Students who are struggling academically or emotionally can be struggling from a lack of life skills required to excel in their school work. These life skills include time management, interpersonal skills, managing stress, communication, and relationship skills. The way each skill is performed can have a large effect on students in terms of consistent tardiness, failing grades, or a rise in bad behaviors. In Sudderth's article, "Ava [a senior] explained, 'So when you're in stress, your mind is so blurry, you're not able to focus on certain things that might help you destress because you're just so overwhelmed by it'" (Sudderth & Fertig, 2024, para. 19). The given quote describes how stress can take a toll on a student's mind and the way it affects managing stress. Several of the students interviewed for the article are struggling with something personal either in school or within their at-home life. These struggles create stress and therefore, students are unable to handle certain situations properly or control their reactions, which is why their behavior can be impulsive.

Life skills are important for personal growth which a high school student is diving into through their teenage years. These are the times they are challenged with obstacles, dilemmas, worry, and pressure all of which require working with others to solve. According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP),

One key life skill is for students to be able to articulate and convey how they feel. It is equally important for them to learn how to be effective listeners and to respect diverse opinions and cultures—to treat every conversation as if the person they are speaking with may have something to teach them (2018, para. 9).

The significance of this statement is that students need to learn how to be open-minded to the differences around them regarding perspectives. Students feel misunderstood by authority figures which leads to more conflict. This is where students need to learn the life skill of communication. Both open-mindedness and communication skills are important in having respectful conversations from teacher to student and student to teacher. Often these two parties are seen as opposing sides. How one expresses their words through a certain tone, can create a negative dynamic and also has the power to make it a positive one. This life skill can also help students to be respectful to one another when discussing personal opinions. Lack of these life skills results in impulsive, reactive, and combative behavior which is disruptive in the educational environment.

Environment

A lot of what becomes an academic struggle is rooted at home. Home is the environment that often can be reflected in who the person student is at school whether it is good or bad. Family creates the base of how well a student performs in school. The absence of a healthy family dynamic can have a profound and damaging impact on an individual's mental health. A bad environment can cause stress within a student that affects their academic performance. As Ayodele states, multiple research sources unanimously concluded that

Home is the most influential factor... It is the first institution where a child starts to learn, and mother is the first teacher for the baby, while the role of peers is performed by the other members of the family. "Home environment" is not an abstract concept. It is

the combination of physical and psychological environment (2023, para. 8).

A student will reflect on what they are shown at home through their behavior. This can be interpreted in many different ways. A student brings what they learned at home into how they complete tasks throughout the day. How a student's relationship is with his/her family or how he/she is treated at home, will be something they express in how they treat their peers or school staff. If a student is having a tough time in their home, it can decrease their likelihood to care about their studies. Students can become focused on their own problems at home instead of being able to focus on what their teacher is presenting. According to Umland,

> When parents, or the leaders of the household, are able to provide an environment with cohesion, support, and low-conflict, students are more likely to find success within their secondary schooling years. However, those students who are raised in a non-traditional family type are more likely to be unsuccessful. This lack of success can be attributed to the family experiencing increased conflict, and parents being unable to devote substantial amounts of time or resources to their children (2020, p. 8).

A support system is crucial in a student's life. A student goes through this new stage in their education while facing the pressure of the world and the responsibilities lying upon their shoulders. Support is needed as that offers guidance, motivation, care, and help. A student can get back up again or improve if they have an environment that is positive and uplifting. The break-up of a family often leads to unsuccessful students as that is a problem the family is dealing with physically and emotionally that affects the student.

Consequences

Higher Drop-Out Rate

High school students can often find themselves at risk of dropping out due to a lack of academic achievement. Dropout rates are closely tied to discouragement, with many students

perceiving low academic progress as a sign that continuing education is pointless. Dropping out of school can lead to various prior behaviors, one being absenteeism. "A study of public school students in Utah found that an incidence of chronic absenteeism in even a single year between 8th and 12th grade was associated with a seven-fold increase in the likelihood of dropping out" (U.S. Department of Education, 2019, para. 23). Regular absenteeism is a precursor to dropping out of school. When coupled with consistently poor academic performance, it can be inferred that a student lacks interest in their education or has other prioritization whether it is of personal choice or environmental factors. Various factors include: spending time with other dropouts, dependence on substances, or facing challenging family circumstances.

Throughout high school, students can appear as disinterested in their education at this time of their lives. This careless behavior can lead to performing at a minimum level which can potentially lead them to academic probation or reaching a barely passing grade point average. **"**[H]igh-stakes testing policies that mandate grade repetition and high school exit exams may be the tipping point for students who are already struggling academically. These extra demands… push students out of school" (Glennie et al., 2013, para. 8). When facing academic challenges, these students are met with academic and counseling support to assist them in improving their grades. However, as much help as there is to be provided, a student can refuse to implement the help or not utilize the tools wisely in their academics. This "push-away" can lead to a student's downfall leading them to repeat their grade. When approached with this information, students make a personal choice to drop out of school.

Involvement in the Criminal Justice System

In high school, a student's academic progress and completion can indicate their perspective on education, their outlook on the future, and their level of responsibility. "States that

have higher levels of educational attainment also had lower violent crime rates" (Justice Policy Institute, 2007, p. 5). When students exhibit misbehavior, it's often influenced by their surroundings. Misconduct may stem from peer pressure or an environment that encourages defensiveness, hindering the formation of positive relationships with peers, authority figures, and themselves. These pressures and a negative environment can manifest both in and outside of school. When misconduct extends beyond school grounds, it may be supported by individuals with criminal backgrounds or those targeted by law enforcement due to their involvement in illegal activities.

Starting on the wrong foot can simply begin with misbehavior or low grades which leads to not attaining a higher education. The lack of education results in consequences such as the inability to obtain analytical thinking skills, problem-solving, a sense of responsibility, and ethical principles. "The lack of education and educational attainment generally limits one's IQ, thus making them more vulnerable to others for exploitation and potential secondary criminal involvement" (Crews, 2009, p. 3). When a student has a limited intelligence quotient (IQ), this can lead them onto a dangerous path full of criminal activities. This path is often perceived as reckless, carefree, and pure sensation to adrenaline, leading the person to feel invincible. However, this only eventually leads to hurting one's image with future job opportunities or being exposed to greater amounts of life-threatening risks.

Poverty

Dropping out of school often results in poverty due to the loss of educational direction and stability. Education significantly affects the likelihood of individuals succeeding. "High school dropout, which chronically absent students are more likely to experience, has been linked to poor outcomes later in life, from poverty and diminished health to involvement in the criminal

justice system" (U.S. Department of Education, 2019, para. 24). Poverty is closely linked to limited or no education, ranging from the lack of a high school diploma to a lack of awareness about potential paths to personal fulfillment. A good education opens up job opportunities, increasing the chance of achieving success. Limited opportunities arise for individuals without a high school diploma, as many jobs that do not require one tend to offer lower wages, lack benefits, and may have unstable job positions or fewer prospects for advancement. Consequently, the lack of a reliable income can result in financial insecurity, leaving individuals unable to provide for themselves.

Low school performance contributes to ongoing poverty as it can lead to a student being unable to complete high school or not being able to pursue a higher education. Lack of education leads to the cause of poverty as it decreases the likelihood of obtaining job opportunities or being qualified. "Poor school performance in lower-income students perpetuates chronic poverty through higher dropout rates and impeded employment" (Bradley, 2023, para. 6). Education is often the base for setting a person for success. Education is what sparks an employer's attention and interest in a person as a potential employee. Even if a person doesn't pursue higher education, the individual still benefits and is set to a potentially better pathway with given resources from their prior school to guide them into different pathways as opposed to not having a history of education.

Project Description and Implementation Process

Project Description

The project aimed to implement an educational intervention targeting Marina High School students. The primary objective was to enhance students' behavioral and academic

performance by increasing their knowledge of essential life skills. The intervention was primarily focused on socio-emotional learning and life skill development through specially designed classes and activities. Focusing on developing skills in managing emotions, building relationships, making responsible decisions, and effective communication can significantly enhance students' mental health, social competence, and academic performance. Each class consisted of three to five students selected based on their potential to develop enhanced interpersonal skills.

Project Justification & Benefits

The primary objective of the project was to provide students with effective strategies aimed at fostering positive behavior and enhancing academic success within the school environment. Through the conducted presentations, the curriculum aims to create a nurturing, learning environment that fosters personal growth, academic excellence, and development among students. Intervention strategies aimed to establish meaningful connections with students, fostering a sense of engagement with the material and enabling them to discover effective learning methods tailored to their needs. The intervention facilitated students' awareness of their decisions, thoughts, consequences, and emotions. Additionally, the project delved into addressing not only the underlying issues faced by students but also equipping them with coping mechanisms to navigate challenges effectively. Ultimately, the project aimed to equip students with the tools and resources necessary to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally, thereby laying the foundation for lifelong success and well-being.

Aligned with Marina High School's mission to empower students to reach their fullest potential, this curriculum reflected a commitment to supporting students through educational interventions. The school recognizes the interconnectedness of personal and academic issues,

aiming to provide holistic support that enhances students' overall well-being. The project held significant benefits for students not only within the school environment but also in their personal lives. By enhancing their skills and relationships, students could utilize the interventions and methods taught to foster healthier interactions with both peers and staff. The curriculum was designed not only to address personal conflicts but also to equip students with tools to make better choices in their behaviors, thoughts, and decisions, ultimately leading to positive outcomes for the individual.

Expected Outcomes & Assessment Plan

The expected outcome of this project was academic success. This was measured through increased grades, less reported misbehaviors, and consistent attendance. Firstly, students were expected to demonstrate improvement in their grades, resulting in higher academic performance compared to previous assessments, with the aim of students making it to graduation, academically. Additionally, a decrease in disciplinary incidents reported by teachers concerning these students was anticipated. Improved attendance was also expected, which was likely to contribute positively to both academic achievement and behavior management.

As part of the curriculum, students were expected to acquire skills in emotional awareness, enabling them to recognize and manage escalating situations both within themselves and their environment. This included learning techniques to de-escalate conflicts, effectively managing their emotions to prevent situations from worsening, and understanding the importance of monitoring emotions to remain sensitive to others and ongoing conversations. To achieve these outcomes, the intervention was structured into two separate classes, each catering to 'high-risk students.'

The method for collecting this measurement was through surveys, and looking back to the school database for any significant changes or improvements on the level of academic risk or reported incidents made of that specific individual. One key aspect of the evaluation process involved conducting the pre and post-surveys of the given interventional presentations to gather feedback and content from the students who are participants regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. The surveys provided valuable insights into students' perceptions, experiences, and areas of growth from the beginning to the end of the sessions. Furthermore, presentations were conducted to share the evaluation findings and discuss potential improvement areas in the intervention approach. This evaluation process offered a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the intervention on students' overall well-being and academic performance.

Implementation Process

To lead an effective educational intervention aimed at improving the well-being of students at Marina High School, several steps had to be implemented. The intervention targets the intention to reduce poor behaviors, enhance academic performance, foster positive learning environments, and establish a support system for students who may feel marginalized or unable to fulfill their academics. The timeline for this intervention was from February 6th to April 5th.

The initial phase of the intervention involved identifying the target audience. In this case, the focus was on high school students labeled as "high-risk" due to their involvement in frequent fights, use of inappropriate language, and disobedient behavior. These behaviors have been tied to a decline in academic performance attributed to their lack of participation in classroom activities. Identification of these students was facilitated through the School Student database, where incident reports and individual information are documented. Additionally, referrals from

the principal of Marina High School were used to identify students who may benefit from intervention to address behavioral issues.

This process of identifying the target audience was supported by collaboration with my mentor who provided valuable assistance in accessing the database and locating the relevant students. Through this partnership, research was conducted to gather necessary insights, allowing for specific identification and selection of students in need of the intervention.

In addition to this process, a pre-and post-survey was created, that reflected where the student was in terms of how they felt towards their academics, outlook on their future, and their mental well-being, with all interconnecting. The purpose of the pre and post-survey was to examine if, through the sessions, students developed a positive perspective on education or an improvement in their grades. The surveys served as a visual of any effectiveness that may have occurred as the sessions progressed.

The findings of reports and referrals made on these students were used in regard to knowing what type of teaching content from the *School Connect* curriculum was to be pulled from the modules to be presented. After collecting the information, the sessions concluded with topics such as building relationships, managing and monitoring emotions, emotional awareness, thinking about future paths, and stress and anxiety. The importance of these specific topics was due to the behaviors that the students displayed which were essential to not have poor behavior displayed that was affecting their overall environment at school, at home, and themselves. The step that brought everything together was the gathering of the students on the day of the session and delivering the presentation to them.

Project Results

Throughout the project's implementation of educational interventions focusing on life skills and socio-emotional learning presentations, the anticipated outcomes of significant improvement in academic success were not fulfilled. The expected transformation included a significant decrease in D's and F's, accompanied by positive shifts in behavior. Another objective was to instill a change in perspective among students, fostering a more positive outlook on themselves, others, and their educational journey. It was hoped that students would retain the lessons learned during sessions and apply them both within and outside the school environment.

As the project unfolded, it became recognizable that increased student engagement was necessary for success. Efforts were made to make learning sessions more engaging, applying methods to sustain focus throughout the entirety of each lesson. It became observable that students were less interested when the classes lacked interactive activities. As these observations were made, adjustments were implemented to incorporate more group discussions, interactive games, writing activities, and opportunities for sharing personal experiences and viewpoints. Additionally, establishing boundaries became crucial, with ground rules set and behavior of assertiveness through myself, specifically with the consistently disruptive students. This new approach led to a shift in the groups to minimize negative peer influence.

To measure the effectiveness of the intervention, pre- and post-surveys were conducted to assess the impact of the modules on students' behavior and academic outlook. These surveys were useful in providing valuable insights from the students. The pre-survey served as a view of an individual's stance, which revealed an initial understanding of each student's knowledge, perspectives, and academic standing. The post-survey revealed the outcome to which the intervention had achieved its expected goals, providing valuable feedback for future modifications and improvement.

Unfortunately, the outcomes did not result as expected. This is due to the insignificant improvement of the students. To name some examples, "Do you currently have any D's or F's?" had a minimal decrease of 7.5% of the answer "Yes," (a 2-person difference), "I prioritize school/homework over leisure time," had a 20% increase of the answer "Disagree," "I would rate my current level of Mental Health on a scale of 1-5 (1 being not great, 5 being good)," with 1 person per number dropping down, "I attend school consistently," with a no-change 50% answer on "Strongly Agree," and "I know how to de-escalate conflict," with a 15% decrease in the answer "Agree." The results could have been as produced due to several reasons. The number in the groups dropped. The project began with a total of 10 students and ended with 8. Students have switched groups in hopes of improvement. This made a less distracting environment for some of the students as they were to negatively influence each other. Students may have worked better individually and/or with different peers. The setting could have impacted the way a student was able to focus, possibly a bigger room and seating arrangement. Despite these failures, ways to encourage a learning environment were put into place.

Conclusion & Recommendations

In summary, several factors contribute to the risk of academic failure among students, rooted in internal struggles and environmental influences. Poor mental health creates challenges to high school student's academic progress and desire to search for support. Additionally, the lack of life skills, whether due to dysfunctional home environments or limited exposure to academic or social support, further worsens students' difficulties. Effective communication, emotional management, and decision-making skills are essential for academic success but may be lacking in some students.

The environment plays a significant role in how students' mental health and life skills develop, which ultimately influences their academic performance. Despite having had interventions targeted at addressing these areas, the results did not reach the expectations, with students showing little to no improvement. To enhance the effectiveness of future educational interventions, it may be useful to incorporate individual mental health support paired with academic interventions. This paired method could create a better understanding and engagement with the material for the student.

Furthermore, incorporating interactive components into the curriculum can enhance student engagement and comprehension. By making important concepts more relatable and hands-on, students are more likely to absorb the significance and apply them effectively in their lives in school, homes, and personal life experiences.

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Appendix A

Project Implementation Plan

Tasks	Timeline/ Deadlines	Parties Involved	Materials/ Services Needed	Deliverables
Go over the School Student Database	February 6th & 13th	Mentor, Self	Agency's data site, Notebook	Students who are high-risk
Create survey	February	Mentor, Professor Barbara	Google Forms, Laptop	Pre-Survey
Finding Teaching-Modules	February	Mentor, Myself	Laptop, Curriculum	4 Chosen Modules
Finding the participants	February 20 (ongoing)	Students, Teachers	Agency's data site, Classroom #'s	Gathered Group
Delivering Presentation	February 20	Myself, Students	Board, Table, Chairs	Presentation