

The Social Emotional Learning Language Arts (SELLA) Curriculum:

A Qualitative Evaluation of Implementation

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ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which students incorporate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively with life's daily obstacles. Social and emotional skills are predictors of school success; thus, schools are increasingly looking for ways to develop students' skills. SEL programs can have a long-term impact behaviorally and academically. Using a qualitative inquiry design, the implementation of a social-emotional learning English/Language Arts program known as SELLA was examined from the perspective of participating teachers for its feasibility, acceptability, and alignment with the state's learning standards for ELA. Themes fell into two categories related to teachers' perceptions of the program experience, including: 1) areas of strength and 2) areas of suggested improvement. Three themes emerged regarding alignment of the program with the state's learning standards in writing: 1) teachers needed to independently add content to meet writing standards; 2) teachers see improvements in their students writing after the SELLA program; however, they cannot deduce if that is a direct result of the program; and 3) students who do not normally participate in the general curriculum are now participating.

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Social-emotional learning (SEL) is the process by which students incorporate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to deal effectively with life's daily obstacles.
- Social and emotional skills are predictors of school success and beyond into the workplace. Students who participate in SEL programs demonstrate improved social behavior, fewer conduct problems, and less emotional distress.
- SEL learning standards can be met by pairing them with English/Language Arts (ELA), given the opportunities to apply SEL competencies in reading material and writing assignments.
- The implementation of the SELLA program was examined from the perspective of participating teachers for its feasibility, acceptability, and alignment with the state's ELA learning standards.

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METHODS

Research Questions: 1) What are the experiences and perceptions of teachers who participate in the SELLA program with regard to program quality, feasibility, and impact? 2) How does the SELLA program integrate SEL within Ohio's ELA writing standards?

Sample: $n = 10$ teachers (grades 4-6) who were implementing the SELLA curriculum.

Research design: Qualitative inquiry design – data collection through interviews & observations.

Methodology: All interviews were transcribed & coded in entirety. To address interrater reliability, A trained colleague also transcribed and coded teacher interviews. Both researchers searched for patterns and meaningful fragments within coded data. In a similar procedure, the classroom observations were categorized and analyzed in terms of the program implementation.

RESULTS

RQ 1 Overarching Categories: Areas of Strength and Areas for Suggested Improvement

Themes: 1) social skills need to be taught at school; 2) training was beneficial to teachers; 3) the program works well for the demands of average class sizes; 4) and improved classroom discussions.

“Oh, I don't think parents will talk about these things. I love social emotional learning because I feel like we teach them everything else, this is a life skill.”

“I think the biggest thing is it gives us a springboard for dialoguing.”

RQ 2 Themes: 1) teachers had to independently add more to the SELLA curriculum to Ohio's ELA writing standards; 2) teachers see improvements in their students writing after the SELLA program; however, they cannot deduce if that is a result of the SELLA program; and 3) students who do not normally participate in the general curriculum are now participating in the SELLA curriculum.

“They spell out all the standards but you have to stop and go deeper into that standard or I added more writing into it.”

“Students who don't feel like they can contribute to a lesson because maybe they're not confident in the standard were learning, they are contributing to these lessons because it's about their feelings. They can connect to it and it's not assessing them on their academics at all. It's just their life.”

The SELLA Program

The SELLA program is composed of six modules. These modules “seek to support individual growth in these areas in an achievable and impactful manner by supporting students in making connections in their learning to personal experiences. Students engage in teacher-guided reading and writing instruction, and shared reading and writing activities, and have dedicated time for independent reading and journal writing” (SELLA, 2019).



IMPLICATIONS

- Future qualitative research might: a) examine student perceptions of and experiences with the SELLA program; b) use teacher interviews and observations, but also review student work samples for impact on SEL and writing skills; and c) compare student writing samples before and after participation in the SELLA program.
- Findings from this study can be applied in other school systems. The SELLA program will be submitted to CASEL for review and potentially available for other school systems.
- SEL programs are becoming more frequent, as they are a preventative approach to education and can lead to long-lasting improvements in a variety of ways in students' lives.
- The state of Ohio has recently released social and emotional standards for all grade levels (Ohio Department of Education, 2019).

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