

Perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy in teaching SEL

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine educators' beliefs, perceptions and use of culturally responsive practices in implementing a social-emotional learning (SEL) intervention.

Design/methodology/approach – Focus groups with school personnel in a school with a diverse student population that had sustained success with an SEL intervention were conducted. Grounded theory was used to analyze data.

Findings – The analyses produced 11 interrelated themes.

Practical implications – School personnel noted that instruction in culturally responsive practices was foundational and should occur before SEL intervention implementation commences to ensure the use of culturally responsive practices as part of SEL implementation. Moreover, they noted the importance of school community buy-in (administrator, faculty, staff, parent and student) in supporting school-based SEL intervention sustainability.

Social implications – Within the USA, continued diversification of the student population is predicted, while the teaching force is projected to remain primarily White, middle class and female. Consequently, educators often differ in cultural background from their students, which has implications for SEL instruction. Incorporating the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in teaching SEL skills is one approach to addressing this cultural mismatch.

Originality/value – There are currently few studies that explore educator perceptions of SEL and no studies that examine the use of culturally responsive pedagogy in teaching SEL.

Keywords Pedagogy, Culturally responsive pedagogy, Social emotional learning, RULER

Paper type Case study

Students with challenging behavior often engage in internalizing and externalizing behaviors that are associated with negative academic, interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes. Among the internalizing and externalizing behaviors common among this population are aggression, noncompliance, delinquency, social withdrawal, fearfulness and self-harm (Kopala-Sibley and Klein, 2017; Murray *et al.*, 2010). Negative outcomes associated with these behaviors extend beyond childhood and adolescence and includes academic failure, a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school, social maladjustment, chronic unemployment and/or underemployment, increased risk of substance abuse and adult criminality (Vaughn *et al.*, 2013; Weissman *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, these negative outcomes also influence peers, teachers and the students' parents as engaging in these behaviors lead to negative relationships (i.e. teacher-student, parent-student and peer-student) and negative school and classroom climate (Murray *et al.*, 2010; Wang and Dishion, 2012). To support the prevention and amelioration of internalizing and externalizing behaviors and the outcomes



associated with these behaviors, school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) interventions can be implemented (Durlak *et al.*, 2011).

SEL interventions

SEL interventions are those that include content to equip students with the necessary information to engage in emotion recognition and management, positive goal setting and achievement, empathetic thinking, positive relationship development and maintenance and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning, 2015). SEL interventions are effective in reducing both internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Moreover, participation in SEL interventions is related to increased academic achievement, improved classroom behavior, more positive attitudes about the self and others and a decrease in stress and depression (Durlak *et al.*, 2011; Payton *et al.*, 2008).

While studies on the effectiveness of SEL are promising, there are concerns about the translation of research-to-practice in the school and classroom setting. The effectiveness of SEL interventions depends on the presence of adequate and positive resources; among the needed resources are personnel (Elbertson *et al.*, 2010). Within school settings, school personnel (i.e. educators) are likely to fill the role of intervention implementers and/or supporters and, thus, are vital to the success of students' social emotional learning. Though researchers have found evidence to suggest that school personnel are effective implementers of SEL interventions (Barnes *et al.*, 2014), educators often report feeling ill-prepared to handle students' social and emotional issues in their classrooms (Reinke *et al.*, 2011). There is, therefore, a need to support educators in overcoming challenges they may face in supporting student SEL growth.

Culturally responsive SEL

Among the challenges faced by educators is finding culturally responsive ways to support students' learning of social-emotional competencies. The US student population is becoming increasingly diverse with a majority of the school population composed of racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse students (Hussar and Bailey, 2011). While continued diversification of the student population is predicted, the teaching force is projected to remain primarily White, middle class, and female (USA Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Consequently, educators often differ in cultural background from their students, which has implications for SEL instruction. Culture influences the relative importance of SEL competencies in various cultures and how SEL competencies are defined and developed (Hecht and Shin, 2015). To address the possible cultural mismatch between the school (or teacher) and students, there is a need to use culturally responsive practices to support SEL instruction.

Culturally responsive SEL uses the lived experiences and frames of reference of students to reinforce and teach SEL competencies. Incorporating student interests, views and wants into already existing SEL programming and/or in developing new SEL programming may increase buy-in and engagement from the student population (Barrera *et al.*, 2011). Moreover, it may help educators in targeting competencies that are most important to their students. Currently, there is a lack of research that examines if and how educators use culturally responsive pedagogy to support learning of SEL competencies in diverse student populations. The presented study attempts to fill this gap by explores the implementation of an evidence-based SEL intervention in one school with a racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse population. In this paper, we explore educators' beliefs, perceptions and use of culturally responsive practices in their implementation of the RULER approach, a

school-based SEL intervention. Through this exploration, we draw on findings to inform future research in the field of social emotional learning.

Purpose

The current study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of school personnel’s beliefs, perceptions and use of culturally responsive practices in their implementation of the RULER Approach, a school-based SEL intervention. The researchers examined the educators’ beliefs, perceptions and practices by conducting focus groups and examined the data for common themes.

Methods

Intervention

RULER is an evidence-based approach to SEL that is grounded in emotional intelligence theory (Brackett *et al.*, 2012; Hagelskamp *et al.*, 2013; Mayer and Salovey, 1997; Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman, 2015; Rivers *et al.*, 2013). RULER incorporates five skills that are foundational to social and emotional competencies and that are reflected in its acronym: recognizing emotion in the self and others, understanding the causes and consequences of emotion, labeling emotion accurately, expressing emotion in socially appropriate ways and regulating emotions effectively. Teaching school staff, parents and children these skills results in significant shifts in social, emotional and academic competencies (Brackett *et al.*, 2012) as well as improvements in classroom climate (Hagelskamp *et al.*, 2013; Rivers *et al.*, 2013). As part of RULER implementation, adult stakeholders (i.e. superintendents, school leaders, teachers and staff) are trained on the theory underlying RULER, the role of emotional intelligence in school success and how to foster emotionally supportive learning environments through teaching and personal use of the RULER Approach (Reyes *et al.*, 2012). RULER is not designed as a culturally responsive intervention and at the time of this focus group, the RULER team was exploring strategies to engage diverse student populations. The school that was used for this focus group had a racially/ethnically diverse student population and had successfully implemented RULER for approximately four years.

Participants

The focus group sessions included seven participants from a private school in the Northeastern USA serving students in grades Pre-Kindergarten to five. The participants had all implemented RULER for at least two years before the study and agreed to participate when the assistant principal asked for volunteers. Five of the participants were classroom teachers, the sixth was a school administrator, and the seventh was the school psychologist who also was leading the family component of the RULER Approach at the school. All the participants worked at the school for at least two years. A majority identified as White females (71 per cent). Table 1 presents information on teacher, administrator and school psychologist experience.

Procedure

Participants attended two focus group sessions that were about an hour in length for a total of two hours. After the first hour-long focus group, the participants did not answer all of the intended questions, so the group arranged a second hour-long focus group. The focus groups were facilitated by the lead researcher and a research assistant and took place during school hours in late winter and early spring during the 2015-2016 school year. During the

focus group sessions, the participants were asked to share experiences regarding the following topics:

- experiences with implementing RULER for the first time;
- translating RULER skills into their personal lives as well as students' translation of skills to their home life;
- expanding on challenges and successes in implementing RULER; and
- explaining if and how RULER helped them utilize culturally responsive practices in their classroom.

Data analysis procedure

The grounded theory approach was used to analyze data. This approach directed the conversation to illustrate emerging themes and interests of the participants. Furthermore, the approach enabled the researchers to ask questions relevant to the conversation rather than preconceived topics and questions (Charmaz, 2003; Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

The focus group responses were recorded during the sessions and later transcribed by a research assistant. Following the transcription, the lead researcher read the transcript to look for pre-set themes (based on questions posed during the focus group). Then, the researcher read the transcript again to identify emergent themes, which were themes that were not identified as pre-set themes. The researchers utilized line-by-line coding and developed the emergent categories by reading each line of data rather than grouping together whole segments of the participants' responses (Glaser, 1978). This vital part of the coding process ensured that each participant's responses were fully understood and correctly coded (Charmaz, 2003). A graduate assistant coded the data independently and compared themes with the lead researcher to ensure that common themes were found across reviewers. All findings were discussed and a total of eleven pre-set and emergent themes were identified. Following the identification of the 11 themes, the lead researcher conducted a member check by sending the results to the school, so the participants could review the themes and add to or modify any of the themes. Participants agreed with the themes and made no suggestions for modifications.

Results

The analyses produced 11 interrelated themes: training stories, previous skill set, buy-in, school climate/classroom climate, building new skills, developing teacher self-efficacy, transferable skills, family partnerships, implementation challenges, implementation successes and cultural responsiveness. We discuss each theme below.

Focus group participant background information	Grade level taught	years at school	Years of RULER implementation
Teacher 1	5	6	4
Teacher 2	2	4 ½	4
Teacher 3	4 and 5	2	2
Teacher 4	4	3	3
Teacher 5	1	7	4
Administrator	N/A	13	4
School psychologist	N/A	7	2

Table I.
Teacher,
administrator and
school psychologist
experience

Training stories

As prompted by the focus group leader, the participants were asked to expand on their RULER training experiences. Overall, they found that the training was helpful in a variety of ways. For example, one participant stated, “The one part of the training I really liked is [...] you did not feel overwhelmed by it in the way in which it was broken down”. In addition to being broken down into manageable segments, another participant commented on one of the training activities. The participant said:

We broke up into brainstorming groups, so it was fun to talk about how we want to feel and sort of seeing it come alive for us made it a lot easier for us to picture how we do it in the classroom.

Furthermore, they mentioned it was a great time to reflect on their own teaching practices and their transparency when teaching.

Previous skill set

The participants reported that RULER training was critical to successful implementation because they did not necessarily have the skills to implement this type of SEL program. Participants described how, before RULER, they would ask students about their feelings to understand their students’ actions, but the participants did not have the skills to teach students to “fix problems” or instruct students on how to make themselves feel more positive emotions. Additionally, participants also mentioned their concerns with discussing emotions at a deeper level, and one participant said, “prior to [RULER], I had been teaching in a high school so to me it was very different for that kind of discussion to be on the table”.

Buy-in

Buy-in focused on the participants’ full engagement with the RULER approach, as well as observations of the engagement of other teachers and staff members in the school. For example, one participant stated, “I think for me it was just having seen the other teachers buy into it too, ya know? It’s not just me and the co-teacher, it’s really a school culture type of thing. That was really powerful”. This demonstrated that the buy-in was at an individual and school-wide level. Additionally, the participants explained that buying into RULER was not an easy task, it required a substantial amount of time and effort for it to be effective for their students.

School climate/Classroom climate

Participants also attributed their success in implementing RULER to having a school community, parents and staff who were open to learning more about SEL. One participant talked about how seeing other teachers engaged in the SEL intervention was a powerful motivator to use RULER because it seemed like it was a part of the school culture. Furthermore, a participant noted that RULER became such a pivotal part of the school and classroom climate because they were using RULER in all aspects of the classroom. One example of the use of SEL concepts during an academic lesson is, “[...] reading a book from the literature group and how that character processes their emotions and talking about how people would have felt in this specific time in history during the social studies lesson”.

Building new skills

The participants discussed how they used the RULER Approach to develop their students’ social and emotional competencies. Participants talked about how they brainstormed with their students about what they would like in their classroom charters (i.e. a collaborative

document used to outline how members of the classroom aspire to treat each other) and that they checked in with students throughout the year to ensure that all classroom members were supporting the agreed upon classroom charter. The participants emphasized the importance of having all members of the classroom and school community involved in fostering the development of SEL skills. To illustrate, a participant mentioned an activity she conducted to help her students learn perspective taking that involved talking about family dynamics and mindfulness practices she developed with her students.

Developing teacher self-efficacy

In addition to building new skills in their students, the participants also reported further developing their own self-efficacy in teaching SEL skills to their students and incorporating SEL into their own lives. While implementing RULER, many of the participants had to think about their own teaching practices and style and how RULER helped with that process. One participant talked about how the process of taking a “meta-moment” (one of the RULER tools that teaches individuals to pause and think before acting), helped her get through “tough teacher moments” and reflect on “[...] the teacher I want to be right now and how can I get myself back to that [...]” The participants also felt the program gave them language and strategies to improve themselves and their own use of SEL skills to become better teachers. They noticed that once they practiced the elements of RULER, they were able to easily and comfortably implement the program and make connections between multiple activities.

Transferable skills

Participants were also asked about how they utilized RULER skills in their personal lives. One participant explained that she was able to educate her father about the ways in which he regulates his emotions. The participant stated the following:

I finally got my dad [to realize his actions were a part of how he regulates emotions], instead of labeling emotions and just saying [them, he would say] I’m going to the golf course and hit balls for 10 minutes. [I told him] [...] you’re taking a meta moment, but you just don’t realize it.

In addition, the participants discussed the importance of teaching their students to translate RULER skills into their home lives. One participant illustrated the importance of translating these skills by saying, “This was something that was just as important as students reading fluently, knowing how to multiply and divide”. A few of the participants acknowledged that students also need support to transfer these skills to their home lives. One said, “We view RULER as a toolkit for them, processing those feelings and emotions and then figuring out a way to rise above whatever they’re dealing with, their circumstances, to be their best selves”.

Family partnerships

As RULER is also designed to be implemented at home, the participants discussed how they expressed to the parents the importance of RULER and implementing all elements at home as well as making the parents feel like they are impactful and making a difference for their child. However, one participant noted that while implementing the program at home was crucial to the students’ successes, it was also important to understand that it is not always possible because of family stress. “In their home when the stress is happening [...] it’s really hard to make it all happen”. In addition to being mindful of family stress, another participant pointed out that while implementing RULER, the participant wanted to be mindful of the family’s cultures. The participant stated:

The way we were going to approach things, we wanted to be mindful of peoples' cultures and their comfort level and how we might want to really make sure we were doing the work slow and steady with families together instead of saying "this is what we're doing at school, here are all the expenses.

Implementation challenges

Participants were also asked about their challenges in implementing RULER. This included discussion about concerns before RULER implementation and challenges they faced in their first year of implementation. Initially, participants were concerned about the time it would take to implement RULER, and once RULER was implemented, participants had concerns about the time it took to complete activities. Additional concerns included determining the age level appropriateness of some activities as well as making sure they followed all of the steps during the activities. Furthermore, other participants discussed how they needed tips to understand some of the RULER concepts and how to model them effectively. One participant stated, "I was very used to a different non-emotional discussion in a classroom, so it was a very big transition for me".

Implementation successes

In addition to implementation challenges, participants discussed their successes with implementing RULER. Many of the participants noted that the RULER language was very accessible. One participant mentioned, "Just having someone say, think about your best self, can snap them back into a mini version of those steps. To take that "ugh this is not how I want to be right now" [moment] is very accessible language for them". Additionally, they said RULER felt comfortable and was easy to implement. A participant mentioned that some of the skills necessary for RULER, such as brainstorming, were ones the students were used to doing, so that helped the implementation process.

Cultural responsiveness

A large focus of the discussion was the use of culturally responsive practices. Participants talked about the importance of having school-wide goals toward cultural responsiveness to have a school environment where cultural competence is at the forefront. They suggested that to truly deliver a SEL intervention like RULER in a culturally responsive manner, the school environment must first be immersed in the use of culturally responsive practices. One participant noted:

It has to become a school wide goal. You spend the year immersed in cultural competency, in your meetings and finding ways to incorporate a very open frame of mind to situations that may arise and then having conversations about them [...]. I think it starts with immersing yourself. Not necessarily in RULER to begin with, but just in the aspect and mindset that I'm going to learn with each and every one of my students. Going to remain open and really listen to what the parents are telling me. Look for ways to incorporate aspects of their culture and beliefs into their instruction, to topics that we are studying. Provided with opportunities to share. Once you do that, then you have that toolkit to fall back on.

In addition to a school-wide approach, they discussed the importance of individual educators taking on the responsibility of building culturally responsive skills by way of reflecting on their own pre-conceived biases and notions and keeping them in mind particularly when dealing with parents' use of RULER. Perspective taking was also presented as key to culturally responsive teaching. Participants mentioned using perspective taking with both students and families.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine educators' beliefs, perceptions and use of culturally responsive practices in their implementation of a school-based SEL intervention, the RULER Approach. The themes presented from this study suggest that implementation of SEL, like most school-based interventions, requires buy-in from school administration, teachers and staff (Friend *et al.*, 2014; Pinkelman *et al.*, 2015). This aligns with findings from Forman and colleagues (2009)'s study of implementation barriers and facilitators in implementing evidence-based interventions in schools. Like participants in this study, Forman and colleagues noted the importance of teacher buy-in and administrator support in the long-term sustainability of school-based interventions. The school also addressed the other areas presented by Forman and colleagues (2009) to ensure effective implementation and sustainability of the RULER program. These included:

- committing financial resources to sustain the SEL program;
- investing in high-quality training and consultation to guarantee fidelity;
- aligning RULER with the school's philosophy, goals, policies and programs; and
- developing a method to ensure that new school staff and administrators received training on the SEL program (Forman *et al.*, 2009).

Investigating the school's ability to meet these criteria may help schools in preparing to implement a sustainable SEL program.

Study participants also discussed the importance of generalizing SEL skills presented in the RULER approach across settings both for the students and for the adults who were implementing RULER. The family played a key role in this generalization, which heightens the need to examine ways that SEL skills can move across school and home culture. This also suggests the need to explore additional supports for SEL generalization for families that may be facing adversity as they have other needs that must be met before they can truly focus on strengthening or learning SEL competencies. One possibility may be the use of a tiered intervention system like that presented by the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program (de Graaf *et al.*, 2008; Sanders, 1999) along with community resources to meet families' needs. Like building school culture and gaining staff buy-in, the participants discussed building family partnerships as a slow and steady process that takes place over time.

The participants in this study also credit quality training that was presented in a slow and steady manner as key to their comfort in implementing the SEL intervention. This speaks to the need for adequate teacher training before implementing SEL interventions or strategies. The literature supports this, as survey data shows that teachers report a need for more training on SEL (Bridgeland *et al.*, 2013). There may be an even greater need for SEL training of high school teachers. One participant commented on how high school discussions of SEL concepts are uncommon. This reflects findings that show that only 28 per cent of high school teachers report that their school participates in school-wide SEL programming (Bridgeland *et al.*, 2013). Relatedly, much of the available SEL interventions focus on elementary and middle school contexts (Bridgeland *et al.*, 2013; Durlak *et al.*, 2011). Further research on teacher preparation to implement SEL strategies and intervention in high school settings is warranted.

Participant's implementation challenges centered on support with modeling concepts and determining appropriateness of concepts for their student population. These are challenges that can be addressed with ongoing coaching for teachers. In fact, coaching is a component of the RULER Approach (Rivers *et al.*, 2013). Further exploration of whether teachers took advantage of coaching opportunities and their challenges and successes with

this component would support addressing the challenges they put forth. Participants credited their success in implementing RULER to the SEL intervention's accessible language and alignment of skills to concepts that the students had previously learned. Practitioners are encouraged to consider these two characteristics along with the evidence-base and fit of the intervention for their current program when looking for an SEL intervention to incorporate.

In regard to the use of culturally responsive practices in the implementation of SEL, participants cite a need for school-wide support of and training on the use of culturally responsive practices. In fact, the participants saw training on the use of culturally responsive practices as foundational and something that should be achieved before an SEL intervention or training in SEL strategies is attempted. This seems fair as the use of culturally responsive pedagogy has a place in all instruction, not just SEL. Concerning SEL, participants' comments shed light on the need to consider culturally responsive practices in implementing SEL interventions, even when these interventions have been named "culturally responsive". Simply using an intervention donned "culturally responsive" may not be enough if the implementers have not received training in this pedagogy. Future research should explore the use of culturally responsive pedagogy as part of SEL intervention implementation and compare the effectiveness of SEL intervention implementation in diverse student populations when facilitators have received training in culturally responsive pedagogy and when they have not to see if there are differences in intervention effectiveness.

Limitations

This study investigates teachers' and staff members' beliefs, perceptions, and use of culturally responsive practices in their implementation of a school-based SEL intervention. While the results shed light on this important topic, several limitations exist. One limitation of this study was the limited duration of discussion. Because of participant schedules, our discussion had to be broken into two separate meeting times with several weeks in between meeting times. This may have affected the quality of the discussion. Though the inclusion of a mixed group of school personnel provided diverse viewpoints on our topic of interest, the inclusion of an administrator in the focus group may have affected the teachers' and staff member's willingness to discuss the challenges they faced at the school level.

Another limitation is related to our choice of using grounded theory for our analysis, which is a method that is vulnerable to research bias (Olesen, 2007). To support the reliability of our results, we included two separate coders and member checking of the results. In future research of this topic, we will also combine our focus group results with other data collection methods for data triangulation.

Conclusion

This study highlights school personnel's perceptions of the use of culturally responsive practices in implementing a school-wide SEL intervention. Overall, participants noted the importance of addressing criteria presented in the literature as key to school-based intervention sustainability. Regarding the use of culturally responsive strategies in SEL interventions, participants felt that instruction in culturally responsive practices was foundational and should occur before SEL intervention implementation commences. These findings provide ideas for future investigation into how culturally responsive practices influence SEL effectiveness and ways to support teachers in implementing culturally responsive SEL. This is a worthwhile endeavor to ensure that we are supporting the social emotional well-being of all students.

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Further reading

McKenna, J. (2013), "The disproportionate representation of African Americans in programs for students with emotional and behavioral disorders", *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, Vol. 57 No. 4, pp. 206-211.

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