

These Children Are In Your Classroom: How Elementary Teachers Can Integrate Social-Emotional Learning to Support Children who have Adverse Childhood Experiences

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Abstract

Research indicates that two-thirds of children in the United States have at least one adverse childhood experience. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events, such as abuse, neglect, and family dysfunction, which can negatively affect well-being and school performance. Children who have three or more ACEs are three times more likely to experience academic failure, five times more likely to have attendance problems, and six times more likely to have behavioral problems than those with no ACEs. These children are also more likely to have emotional insecurities and difficulty connecting with others. The integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) is a strategy that teachers can use to better support children, especially those who have ACEs. SEL helps create a safe learning environment for children that fosters equality and respect, while teaching conflict-resolution skills, stress management techniques, and other behaviors that may not be modeled at home. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how SEL benefits children in elementary school, especially those who have ACEs. A second purpose was to examine ways elementary teachers can integrate SEL into their classrooms. This study addressed two research questions: (1) How does social-emotional learning benefit children in elementary school, especially those who have adverse childhood experiences? and (2) How can elementary teachers integrate social-emotional learning into the classroom? Data was collected through classroom observations over one academic year and interviews with four elementary teachers. Results indicated that the negative effects of ACEs are reduced when integrated efforts are used to develop children's social-emotional skills. Teachers can integrate SEL by creating a safe, low-stress classroom environment, planning time for mindfulness and movement, and embedding SEL into academic instruction.

Keywords: Adverse Childhood Experiences, Social-Emotional Learning, Elementary Education

1. Introduction

Research conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente¹ revealed that two-thirds of children in the United States have at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE). These organizations defined ACEs as extremely stressful or traumatic events that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being. These events occur before the child reaches 18 and include abuse or neglect, economic hardship, separation or divorce of a caregiver, witnessing domestic violence against a caregiver, a household member with a mental illness or substance abuse problem, the incarceration of a household member, or the death of a household member.

Unfortunately, ACEs can greatly affect school performance. Children who have three or more ACEs are three times as likely to experience academic failure, five times as likely to have attendance problems, and six times as likely to

have behavioral problems compared to children with no ACEs². These children are also more likely to have emotional insecurities and difficulty connecting with others.

The integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) is a strategy that teachers can use to better support children who have ACEs. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning defines SEL as a process through which people “acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions”³. In other words, SEL helps children better understand the relationship between their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The negative effects of ACEs can be reduced when integrated efforts are used to develop children’s social-emotional skills, as reflected through more positive social behaviors, healthy peer relationships, and less psychological distress among these children⁴.

This study is important because elementary schools need to better support the social and emotional well-being of children who have ACEs. The integration of SEL helps create a safe, low-stress learning environment for children that fosters equality and respect, while teaching conflict-resolution skills, stress management techniques, and other forms of respectful behavior that may not be modeled at home. Teachers are often the only trusted adults in the lives of children who come from unstable home environments and schools may be the only place where they feel safe. If children feel a sense of security at school, they are more likely to gain the social-emotional skills that are needed to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine how SEL benefits children in elementary school, especially those who have ACEs. A second purpose was to examine ways elementary teachers can integrate SEL into the classroom. This study addressed two research questions. The research questions are (1) How does social-emotional learning benefit children in elementary school, especially those who have adverse childhood experiences? (2) How can elementary teachers integrate social-emotional learning into the classroom?

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Prevalence of ACEs

This study examined how SEL benefits children in elementary school, especially those who have ACEs, and how elementary teachers can integrate it into the classroom. The first research on ACEs was conducted by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente between 1995 and 1997⁵. These organizations surveyed 17,337 participants about their childhood experiences and current health status and found that ACEs are common, with two-thirds of participants reporting at least one ACE. The researchers also found that ACEs often occur together, as nearly 40% of participants reported two or more ACEs and 12.5% participants reported four or more ACEs.

A growing body of research has consistently confirmed the findings of the original ACEs study by finding a relationship between ACEs and life outcomes. In the Spokane Childhood ACEs Study, researchers Blodgett, C. and Harrington, R.⁶ examined the prevalence of ACEs in children in elementary school and if these experiences correlated with their classroom behavior. They found that that ACEs were the principle predictor of poor attendance and behavior problems. Moreover, Sacks, V., Murphey, D., & Moore, K.⁷ used data from the 2011/2012 National Survey of Children’s Health to estimate the prevalence of eight specific ACEs. They found that 46% of children in the United States have one ACE and 11% of children have three or more ACEs. Their results also showed that economic hardship and separated or divorced caregivers were the most reported ACEs in almost all fifty states.

2.2 Trauma and Other Effects of ACEs

Hall and Souers define trauma as “an experience that overwhelms our ability to cope”⁸. Research suggests that between half and two-thirds of children experience trauma, as they have ACEs that can be trauma-inducing⁹. Children are especially vulnerable to the effects of trauma due to rapid developmental growth, dependence on their caregivers, and limited coping skills.

Lamers-Winkelmann, Willemen, and Visser¹⁰ examined trauma-related symptoms in children who witnessed violence against a caregiver. Prior research has shown that children who witness domestic violence have a higher risk of developing behavioral and emotional problems and exhibiting trauma-related symptoms. This study evaluated the relationship among ACEs in children who witnessed violence against a caregiver and the severity of their behavioral and emotional problems and trauma-related symptoms. This clinical sample was made up of 208 children who ranged from 2 to 12 years old. These children were referred to mental health and welfare institutions between 2004 and 2009

after witnessing violence toward a caregiver. After reviewing reports from Child Protective Services, the researchers had the children's caregivers fill out questionnaires that asked about their child's emotions and behavior. The caregivers rated each trauma-related symptom on a four-point scale according to how often their child exhibited particular symptoms in the previous month. Moreover, the children's caregivers were interviewed and their teachers reported on their behavior at school. Lamers-Winkelman, Willemsen, and Visser compiled this data and found that children who witnessed domestic violence were also exposed to other ACEs. Of the 208 children, 108 (51.9%) were physically abused, 146 (71.9%) had a caregiver with a mental illness, and 192 (92.5%) had caregivers who were separated or divorced. Results also showed that 20% of the children had experienced seven or more ACEs. Although there was no relationship between the number of ACEs and behavioral and emotional problems, there was a relationship between ACEs and trauma-related symptoms reported by the caregivers. This study revealed that children who witnessed violence against a caregiver were also exposed to other ACEs, such as physical abuse, a caregiver with a mental illness, and caregivers who separated or divorced. Children in this clinical sample had significantly higher levels of adjustment problems compared to those who did not witness domestic violence against a caregiver.

As shown in the study conducted by Lamers-Winkelman, Willemsen, and Visser, children who have ACEs may have trouble reaching developmental milestones due to trauma-related symptoms. Children usually learn how to appropriately express aggression and anger from their caregivers, but having ACEs may teach them harmful ways of communicating these emotions and they may even imitate the unhealthy behaviors they witness. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network School Committee¹¹ explains that this may cause conflicting messages about appropriate behavior if children get in trouble for acting this way at school. They may question why they are being punished for behavior they see in their home. Children who have difficulty regulating their emotions may create chaos in their environment in order to gain a sense of control. In contrast to those who externalize their trauma by acting out, other children may internalize it and isolate themselves from school and peer relationships.

Trauma also has a direct and potentially overwhelming impact on the ability of children to learn¹². Children who have ACEs may find it more challenging to pay attention and process information. The effects of trauma on school can be summarized through an ABC acronym, which stands for attendance, behavior, and coursework. Children who have experienced three or more ACEs are three times more likely to experience academic failure, five times more likely to have attendance problems, and six times more likely to have behavioral problems than their peers with no ACEs¹³.

Carrell and Hoekstra¹⁴ looked more in-depth at how ACEs and trauma negatively impact school success. There is a widespread belief that children who witness violence against a caregiver negatively affect learning in the classroom; therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine if classroom learning is negatively affected by children who have witnessed domestic violence. To collect data, the researchers utilized a confidential database that was provided by the School Board of Alachua County in Florida that linked cases of domestic violence to children's school records, test scores, and behavior infractions. After analyzing these records, Carrell and Hoekstra discovered that children who witnessed violence against a caregiver caused significant reduction in standardized test scores for the entire class. They estimated that each child who witnessed violence against a caregiver reduced the average test scores by ten percentile points and increased classroom disciplinary infractions by 40%. These results show that children's academic achievement may decrease because they are often distracted by the behavior of children who have witnessed domestic violence. All children in this study who had witnessed domestic violence experienced substantially lower academic achievement and higher behavioral infractions than those who had not.

Moreover, Leahy¹⁵ analyzed the impact of caregivers with a mental illness on children's academic performance in elementary school. Research shows that nearly two-thirds of those with mental illnesses do not seek professional help so they do not get the support that they need; therefore, the needs of their children are often neglected. This is detrimental because children are dependent on their caregivers and have limited coping skills. This qualitative study consisted of biographic interviews of eight adult participants who had a mentally ill caregiver as a child. The interviews revealed that all eight participants felt that their needs were neglected by their caregiver and that it was difficult for them to concentrate at school since they felt an over-responsibility at home. These participants recommended that elementary school teachers monitor children for an increase in missed assignments or absences. Since children may not tell teachers that their caregiver has a mental illness, the participants also encouraged teachers to not assume that everything is okay just because a child chooses not to disclose this information. This exemplifies the importance of creating a classroom environment that supports children who have ACEs.

2.3 Benefits of SEL

Although the negative effects of ACEs are often long-lasting and detrimental, they can be reduced when integrated efforts are used to develop children's social-emotional skills. Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley¹⁶ explore the benefits of

implementing SEL into the classroom by investigating how the presence of social-emotional skills in early elementary school can predict future life outcomes. Prior research has shown that low levels of social-emotional competence correlate with violence, substance abuse, and other problems in late adolescents and early adulthood. In contrast, higher levels of social-emotional competence correspond with increased educational and occupational opportunities. Since social-emotional skills are more malleable at a young age, elementary school is the ideal time to help children develop these skills. A longitudinal study was conducted over 19 years that looked at 753 children from North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Washington. In 1991, kindergarten teachers rated children on their social-emotional competence using the Prosocial-Communication Skills Assessment. Data was also collected on each child's gender, race, household dynamics, and early academic ability. In 2010, Jones, Greenberg, and Crowley had the twenty-five year old participants self-report on their education, employment, criminal history, mental health, and substance use. After analyzing the data, the researchers found that children's social-emotional skills in kindergarten predicted many life outcomes. While those with a higher social-emotional competence in kindergarten were more likely to graduate high school on time, receive a college degree, and work full-time, those children with lower social-emotional skills were more likely to require academic support and fail grades in high school. Jones, Greenberg, & Crowley concluded that there is a relationship between children's kindergarten social-emotional skills and their life outcomes in late adolescence and adulthood. This data revealed the importance of integrating SEL into the classroom to increase the likelihood of healthy development and future well-being.

2.4 How Elementary Teachers Can Integrate SEL into the Classroom

Elementary teachers must effectively integrate SEL into their classrooms in order for children to benefit from it. Low, Cook, Smolkowski, and Buntain-Ricklefs¹⁷ examined how SEL contributes to success in elementary school. Many children enter their first year of formal schooling without the social-emotional skills needed to learn, which has caused over twenty-five thousand schools nationwide to utilize *Second Step*, a SEL curriculum developed by the Committee for Children in 1985. Through the use of lessons, posters, games, and digital media, *Second Step* teaches skills that strengthen children's ability to learn, empathize with others, manage emotions, and problem-solve. Although research shows that *Second Step* has led to improvement in both social-emotional skills and academic achievement, the program was recently revised and there have been no studies evaluating the success of the updated version. Thus, the purpose of this study was to assess the new edition of *Second Step* and find if classroom conditions affect the program's effectiveness. A randomized control trial was conducted over the course of the 2012-2013 school year. Participants were children in kindergarten, first, and second grade from 61 schools in the states of Arizona and Washington. Half of the schools were randomly assigned to implement *Second Step* and these teachers received training to increase their familiarity with the program. At the start of the academic year, all schools tested children on their social-emotional competence in eleven different categories. Throughout the year, teachers completed weekly assessments of children's behavior and trained graduate students observed each of the classrooms during academic instruction. Since disruptive behavior is associated with low social-emotional competence, these observers collected data on how often children called out, talked to peers, and got out of their seats during lecture-based instruction. At the end of the academic year, children were retested on their social-emotional competence. After analyzing the data, the researchers found that children in schools that implemented *Second Step* showed greater improvement in teacher reported social-emotional skills than those in control classrooms. Observers also reported lower levels of disruptive behavior in classrooms that implemented *Second Step*. The researchers did take into consideration that children who tested lower on the pretest would have larger gains in social-emotional competency compared to those who already possessed strong skills. However, the researchers believed that the program benefits all children since it reduces disruptive behaviors. Despite the limitations of conducting the study over a short period of time and only implementing the program in two states, the researchers concluded that the new edition of *Second Step* increased children's social-emotional competency. This study suggests that some children may not exhibit improvement after participating in social-emotional programs, such as *Second Step*, because they already possess strong skills when they enter formal schooling.

Furthermore, Dahle and Archbold¹⁸ evaluated an education-based domestic violence prevention program that was implemented in several elementary schools. *I Wish the Hitting Would Stop* is a program designed by the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center to help children in elementary school identify acts of violence and know what to do if they witness violence against a caregiver. Although it has been used in elementary schools in North Dakota for over two decades, this is the first research on the effectiveness of the program. The purpose of this study was to examine the knowledge retention of children in fourth and fifth grade who participated in *I Wish the Hitting Would Stop*. This study takes place between the years of 2010 and 2012. In this study, researchers collected data from eight elementary schools in North Dakota. An instructor from the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center presented *I Wish the Hitting Would Stop* in two 45-minute sessions using videos and an interactive workbook. The fourth graders who participated in this program

took a survey three months later to evaluate their short-term knowledge retention. The fourth graders were then tested again as fifth graders to evaluate their long-term knowledge retention. The data revealed that 71% of the fourth graders remembered the definition of domestic violence compared to 51% of the fifth graders. Furthermore, 85% of fourth graders said that they would never keep secrets about domestic violence compared to 71% of fifth graders. Overall, the fourth graders retained more of the information than the fifth graders. Dahle and Archbold found that there were higher rates of short-term knowledge retention than long-term knowledge retention, illuminating the importance of SEL programs in each year of elementary school. Although some believe that this topic is too intense for children, research has shown that it is important to reach them before they become involved in their own romantic relationships, as rates of violence during middle school and high school are two to three times higher than violence among adults.

Although some elementary schools do not have programs like *Second Step* and *I Wish the Hitting Would Stop*, there are still numerous ways for teachers to implement SEL into the classroom. Bowen and Mahnke¹⁹ suggested that teachers check in regularly with children since those experiencing trauma often isolate themselves and something as simple as calling the child by name can make him or her feel seen. They also emphasized creating a calm, predictable environment, as children exposed with ACEs may be in a constant state of sensory overload. This heightened state of alertness can affect their attention and ability to engage, so it is suggested that teachers use mindfulness to help children cope with these emotions.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee²⁰ also emphasizes the importance of creating a safe, low-stress learning environment where children know what to expect and can be successful. Transitions can be eased by giving a warning before doing something unexpected, such as turning off the lights or making a loud sound. This organization also encourage teachers to be aware that some activities or situations may be stressful for children who have ACEs, such as raised voices, violence on the playground, and making a card to give to a caregiver on a holiday. Additionally, a variety of support strategies can be utilized, such as providing time during the school day for homework completion when children may be more focused and likely to complete it. Furthermore, Wolpow, et. al²¹ recommends that teachers create a calm zone where children can voluntarily move to when they feel overwhelmed during class. This calm zone has tools such as Silly Putty, coloring pages, and puzzles. Moreover, teachers can lead the whole class in movement or mindfulness exercises to bring the focus back to learning. These exercises are beneficial to the brain and helps with emotional regulation.

2.5 Summary of Literature Review

The ACEs Study²² and the Spokane Childhood ACEs Study²³ found that ACEs are common, often occur together, and are the principle predictor of attendance and behavioral problems. Trauma is a common effect of ACEs, as between half and two thirds of children experience trauma as a result of ACEs. This leads to poor academic performance, attendance problems, and behavioral issues, as children who experience three or more ACEs were three times more likely to experience academic failure, five times more likely to have attendance problems, and six times more likely to have behavioral problems than their peers with no ACEs²⁴. However, all of the above studies show that the integration of SEL has reduced the effects of ACEs and its benefits are supported through plausible research. Although the implementation of the SEL programs *Second Step* and *I Wish the Hitting Would Stop* increased children's social-emotional skills and reduced disruptive behavior in the classroom, the low rates of long-term knowledge retention illuminate the importance of integrating SEL. Some of the recurring themes for SEL integration included creating a predictable learning environment and using mindfulness, movement, and calm zones.

3. Methods

This study follows qualitative design using classroom observations and interviews with elementary teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area. To answer each research question, the researcher observed two classrooms in one elementary school, second and third grade. The third grade classroom was observed in the fall semester of 2016 for a total of 38 hours and the second grade classroom was observed in the spring semester of 2017 for a total of 24 hours. Six observations were recorded during that time, three in the fall and three in the spring, for two hours each. In addition, the researcher designed an Interview Protocol instrument, and interviewed four elementary teachers. The Interview Protocol included five standardized questions that asked teachers about their demographics, what SEL looked like in their classroom and how they thought it benefitted students, what ACEs they most commonly saw in children, how ACEs impacted children in the classroom, and how they supported children who have ACEs. These interviews lasted for an average of 20 minutes and were conducted over a period of two weeks.

For the observation portion of the study, the researcher observed two teachers who are currently teaching elementary school in the San Francisco Bay Area. The teachers were chosen because they were teaching at the school in where the researcher was conducting her fieldwork. Teacher #1 is a Caucasian female third-grade teacher at a public elementary school. She has been teaching for 17 years and has taught kindergarten, first, second, third, and fourth grades. She was also a reading specialist for seven years for middle school students. Teacher #2 is a Caucasian female second-grade teacher at the same public elementary school as Teacher #1. She has been teaching for ten years and has taught kindergarten, first, second, and fourth grades.

For the interview portion of the study, the researcher interviewed Teacher #1 and Teacher #2, along with two teachers who are currently teaching elementary school. The teachers were chosen because the researcher had previously known them through fieldwork. Teacher #3 is a Caucasian female third-grade teacher at a public elementary school. She has been teaching for 14 years and has taught kindergarten and third grade. Teacher #4 is a Caucasian female kindergarten teacher at a public elementary school. She has been teaching for 19 years and has only taught kindergarten.

The data was analyzed thematically. Themes apparent in the Review of Literature, observations, and interviews were compared and synthesized.

4. Findings

4.1 Addressing the Needs of Children who have ACEs

Both the observations and the interviews showed that there are children who have ACEs and that SEL can be used to support them. Moreover, they revealed that ACEs affect children in a variety of ways so different accommodations need to be made for each child. The observations and interviews provided an in-depth insight on the prevalence of ACEs and how these affect children at school. Teacher #1 explained that the ACEs she most commonly sees are economic hardship, children who are abused or witness the abuse of a family member, have caregivers who are separated or divorced, have a family member with a mental illness, or have a family member who died. She says that these children often have decreased academic success, are less focused in class, experience physical outbursts, and have trouble communicating and maintaining relationships with others. Teacher #2 most often sees economic hardship, children whose caregivers are separated or divorced, and children who witness the abuse of a family member. She believes that these challenges often led children to develop a negative attitude toward school, have difficulty getting along with others, and have trouble focusing in the classroom. During the observation in her classroom on 2/2/17, some of the children revealed in their letters to the pen pals that their caregivers were divorced or had passed away. On 2/16/17, Teacher #2 had the researcher work with a child on a comprehension assessment because he needed help reading the passages and accompanying questions. She explained that the child was homeless and had trouble focusing in class because he did not know where he and his family members would be living. On 3/23/17, the researcher noticed that this child had difficulty pronouncing some of the words while reading Beverly Cleary's *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*. However, he was still comfortable reading aloud because the other children were supporting him and helping him with the words that he did not know. Furthermore, Teacher #3 stated that the most common ACEs she sees in children are economic hardship, children with family members who are incarcerated, and children with family members who have a problem with substance abuse. She says that these children often have trouble focusing in class, have a lower self-esteem due to a lack of support, and are behind academically. Additionally, Teacher #4 noted that these children may have violent outbursts, an inability to focus in class, difficulty solving problems, trouble getting along with others, and a fearfulness of new situations.

In terms of addressing the needs of these children, all four teachers agreed that SEL is beneficial. Teacher #1 believed that SEL helps create an environment where children feel safe and supported, are encouraged to tell someone if they are having a bad day, and are able to make their own decisions. Similarly, Teacher #2 explains that SEL helps these children feel supported and learn the importance of respect. Teacher #3 says SEL helps children build confidence and promotes positive interactions and behaviors. Furthermore, Teacher #4 details the benefits of a SEL program called *Second Step*, which provides children with skills to be a better learner, establish healthy relationships, and develop problem-solving strategies. She says that the lessons focus on topics such as understanding and managing emotions, focusing in the classroom, and asking for help when needed, which are abilities that children who have ACEs may not have learned at home but need the rest of their lives.

4.2 Creating a Low-Stress Classroom Environment

All of the observations and interviews illuminated the importance of creating a low-stress classroom environment in which children feel safe. One of the strategies that was apparent in all of the observations was a morning meeting or community circle. Teacher #1 discussed the importance of having a morning meeting during her interview and the researcher observed this in her classroom on 9/9/16, 10/14/16, and 11/9/16. These meetings included a question of the day, in which each child said good morning responded to a question. During these meetings, children were expected to be active listeners, not interrupt each other, and behave respectfully. This strategy was effective because all of the children felt safe enough to share their answer with the rest of the class. Since many of the children were feeling overwhelmed on the morning after the election, Teacher #1 had a longer morning meeting on 11/9/16. She reassured her third graders that their school was a safe place where everyone was welcome and that no disrespectful remarks would be tolerated. Similarly, Teacher #2 has a daily morning meeting in her classroom and the researcher observed this on 2/2/17, 2/16/17, and 3/23/17. Although Teacher #2 refers to it as the community circle instead of a morning meeting, it has the same purpose and structure. The children are given a stuffed animal to hold when they share their answers, which is a form of emotional support. The researcher noticed that there were two answers for the second graders to pick from, which was different from the open-ended questions that Teacher #1 asked her third graders. However, both types of questions promote the idea of choice and individual opinion. Teacher #2 ensures that the community circle is a safe place for children, as shown through the researcher's observation on 2/16/17. When two children engaged in a side conversation, the teacher reminded them that the rules of the community circle were to not talk while others were talking and to be respectful listeners. Furthermore, Teacher #4 also has her kindergarteners sit on the carpet each morning. She says good morning to each child and reads a story before transitioning into other activities.

Although the morning meeting was the most common technique used by teachers to create a safe classroom environment, the researcher took note of other strategies seen during her observations. On 10/14/16, Teacher #1 established an environment where children were able to make mistakes and encouraged to talk about how they were feeling after their math assessment. The researcher noticed that the children felt comfortable in sharing their thoughts, as some expressed the frustration, pressure, and anxiety they felt during the assessment. On 11/9/16, Teacher #1 had a discussion with her class about what they could do to support those who were nervous about presenting their mystery book reports. On 3/23/17, Teacher #2 explained that she allows children to use fidget cubes to help them stay focused in class. She made it clear that this object is a learning tool and not a toy. Additionally, both teachers posted the schedule on the whiteboard so children knew what to expect each day.

All four teachers expanded on this topic during the interviews. Teacher #1 believes that building a classroom community should start on the first day of school by emphasizing the importance of respect, helping children become independent, and letting them know that it is okay to make mistakes. Teacher #2 creates a safe classroom environment by utilizing the activities in a SEL program called *Welcoming Schools*. This program focuses on embracing diverse backgrounds and families, creating a gender inclusive environment, and reducing name-calling and bullying. It encourages children to stick up for what they believe in and helps them know where to go if they have a problem or feel unsafe. Teacher #3 leads her third graders in monthly discussions about character traits, such as respect and citizenship, and encourages her class to use this positive behavior in her classroom. These character traits are part of a school-wide program called *Character Counts*, which Teacher #3 believes helps children feel part of the school community. Moreover, Teacher #4 makes her classroom a safe place for children to say how they are feeling and teaches her kindergarteners how to use "I" statements to solve disagreements.

4.3 Planning Time for Mindfulness

The researcher observed mindfulness in three of her observations and noticed that it was used to reduce feelings of anxiety, encourage reflection, or help children refocus. During her observation on 10/14/16, Teacher #1 led her class in mindfulness exercise before the children took a math assessment. The purpose of this exercise was to help children calm themselves down and reduce their testing anxiety before the assessment. She promoted the growth mindset through the use of imagery and reassured them she cared more about their thinking than their score. She had them pretend to put on their test-taking hats and asked children what their hats were telling them. The children responded with answers such as "you can do this" and try "your best", and Teacher #1 told them to listen to these words of encouragement while they took the assessment. On 11/9/16, many children were feeling overwhelmed due to the presidential election results, so Teacher #1 decided to begin the morning with a mindfulness exercise. She had children sit as tall as a redwood tree and focus on their breathing while she spoke about kindness. She also had them envision

kind things people had done for them and how this made them feel. Teacher #2 also used mindfulness, as shown through the researcher's observation on 2/16/17. She noticed that her class was having trouble focusing so she led a mindfulness exercise in which the children listened to the sounds around them. Two children were being disruptive during the exercise so Teacher #2 sent them outside to take a walk around campus, showing that mindfulness should be taken seriously.

During her interview, Teacher #1 explained that in addition to using mindfulness in her classroom each day, she also encourages the children to use it at home. Her school has had workshops for parents to learn about various mindfulness exercises so they can support their children when they are feeling overwhelmed. She believes that this is a useful SEL tool to help children feel in control of their bodies, take a mental break, and manage their emotions.

4.4 Embedding SEL into Academic Instruction

Many of the researcher's observations and interviews included ways that teachers integrate SEL into their academic instruction. During the researcher's observation on 9/9/16, Teacher #1 had her class practice their writing abilities during a lesson about goal-setting, which is an aspect of SEL. She explained that hard work and patience are needed to reach our goals, and had the children practice setting their own academic and behavioral goals. The researcher checked the children's work for correct spelling and complete sentences before they were allowed to write these goals on a soccer ball template. On 10/14/16, Teacher #1 had her class practice their communication skills, being respectful, and voicing their opinions during a math talk. She gave the children sentence starters such as, "I agree with _____ because" or "I disagree with _____ because", to help them express their feelings about the math assessment they took earlier that morning. Furthermore, Teacher #1 instilled the idea of social justice in her third graders while explaining how the presidential election process works on 11/9/16. She led a discussion about what makes people decide for certain candidates and had children share qualities that would make them vote for someone in a leadership role, connecting this to how they vote for representatives for student council and school clubs. She encouraged the children to use their voices to stand up for the things that they care about by writing letters to elected officials or supporting organizations with a similar mission. She said that one of the children in the room, male or female, could grow up and be our nation's president. This reminded children that their voices are powerful and that they should stand up for the things that are important to them. Additionally, Teacher #2 had her second graders write letters to their pen pals, which was shown in the researcher's observations on 2/2/17 and 3/23/17. This communication helps them form relationships with peers and encourages the children to open up about their interests and experiences. Moreover, Teacher #2 connected the question of the day to science when she had students explain why they would rather be a butterfly or a caterpillar on 3/23/17.

During the researcher's interviews, both Teacher #1 and Teacher #2 agreed that using children's literature is an effective way to teach SEL, as teachers can use characters from the books to teach important lessons and become aware of other people's feelings. While Teacher #2 said that she was currently using literature to talk about different family dynamics, Teacher #1 explained that she frequently uses books to directly address ACEs. For example, her class reads *Because of Winn Dixie* and then has discussions on divorce and alcoholism. Although some teachers choose not to talk about these topics, Teacher #1 believes that teachers should be talking about them since some children are experiencing these things outside of the classroom. These discussions can help these children share their feelings, cope with what is going on at home, and find characters who they can relate to.

4.5 Summary of Findings

The analysis of data from the observations and interviews indicated that there are four main themes. The first was addressing the needs of children who have ACEs, which means that teachers recognize that ACEs affect each child differently and make appropriate accommodations to support them. The second theme that emerged from the data was creating a safe, low-stress classroom environment. The researcher's observations and interviews showed that this can be accomplished through daily morning meetings that emphasize respect and help build a classroom community. Creating a safe, low-stress classroom environment also includes posting a daily schedule, having daily transitions, and making individual accommodations that support children's needs. Moreover, planning time for mindfulness was another theme that emerged from the researcher's observations and interviews. The researcher observed teachers leading their class in mindfulness exercise to help reduce feelings of anxiety before an assessment, encourage reflection, and help children refocus. Furthermore, the fourth theme was embedding SEL into academic instruction. In addition to reflective writing prompts and math talks that promote respectful communication, teachers explained

how literary works that feature characters with ACEs provide children with relatable role models that can help them cope with what is happening at home.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine how SEL benefits children in elementary school, especially those who have ACEs. A second purpose was to examine ways elementary teachers can integrate SEL into the classroom.

The first research question asked: *How does social-emotional learning benefit children in elementary school, especially who have adverse childhood experiences?* The review of literature, observations, and interviews indicate that SEL benefits children in elementary school, especially those who have ACEs. All data points showed that ACEs are prevalent in children and can affect school success in terms of attendance, behavior, and coursework. The review of the literature also revealed that SEL reduces these negative effects by helping children feel a sense of security at school and teaching them valuable skills they may have not learned at home. Since there is a relationship between children's social-emotional skills and life outcomes, it is important to integrate SEL into the classroom to increase the likelihood of healthy development and future well-being²⁵. All four teachers discussed the benefits of SEL during the interviews, explaining that it helps create an environment where children feel supported.

The second research question asked: *How can elementary teachers integrate social-emotional learning into the classroom?* The review of literature, observations in elementary classrooms, and interviews with teachers indicate that teachers can incorporate various SEL strategies into their classrooms to support children with ACEs. The review of literature showed that although SEL programs are effective in increasing children's social-emotional skills, they tend to have low rates of long-term knowledge retention, which illuminates the importance of integrating SEL into the classroom.

One way that teachers can integrate SEL into the classroom is by creating a safe, low-stress classroom environment through morning meetings, predictable routines, and individual accommodations. The review of literature explained that children from unstable home environments need to know what to expect and emphasized the importance of creating a predictable environment with regular routines and transitions²⁵. The idea of creating a safe, low-stress classroom environment was expanded on through the researcher's observations and interviews, as she saw many teachers begin the school day with a morning meeting. The teachers explained that morning meetings are effective in promoting respect and building community. Additionally, teachers used individual accommodations such as fidget cubes and academic support to further support children in the classroom.

Another way that teachers can integrate SEL into the classroom is by planning time for mindfulness and movement. The review of literature suggested that teachers use mindfulness and movement exercises to help children cope with their emotions. The researcher's observations in elementary classrooms and interviews with teachers further supported the review of literature, as she saw teachers leading mindfulness exercises to reduce feelings of anxiety before an assessment, encourage reflection, or help children refocus.

Finally, teachers can integrate SEL into the classroom by embedding SEL into academic instruction. Although the review of the literature did not support this finding, this was present in all of the observations and interviews. Teachers embedded SEL into academic instruction by having children write letters to pen pals, leading a math talk that emphasized respectful communication, and having a question of the day that related to the current science unit. Teachers also revealed that they use books to directly address ACEs. These books provide children with relatable role models, and often embed coping skills and problem-solving strategies.

Ultimately, teachers can support children who have ACEs and effectively integrate SEL into the classroom by creating a safe, low-stress classroom environment, planning time for movement and mindfulness, and embedding SEL into academic instruction.

6. Limitations

There were a few main limitations of this study. First, this was a sample of convenience because teachers were selected to participate in this study because they were teaching at the schools where the researcher had previously or was currently conducting her fieldwork. The sample size was very small, as the researcher only observed two classrooms and interview four elementary teachers. Moreover, the researcher observed these classrooms during the same time each week so the subject matter was usually the same. Additionally, the researcher only knew of ACEs that were revealed to her by the child or the child's teacher.

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