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Promoting social–emotional competence: An evaluation of the elementary version of Second Step®

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ABSTRACT

Research has consistently linked social–emotional skills to important educational and life outcomes. Many children begin their school careers, however, without the requisite social and emotional skills that facilitate learning, which has prompted schools nationwide to adopt specific curricula to teach students the social–emotional skills that enable them to maintain optimal engagement in the learning process. *Second Step®* is one of the most widely disseminated social–emotional learning (SEL) programs; however, its newly revised version has never been empirically evaluated. The purpose of this study was to conduct a randomized controlled trial investigating the impact of the 4th Edition *Second Step®* on social–behavioral outcomes over a 1-year period when combined with a brief training on proactive classroom management. Participants were kindergarten to 2nd grade students in 61 schools (321 teachers, 7300 students) across six school districts. Hierarchical models (time × condition) suggest that the program had few main effects from teacher-reported social and behavioral indices, with small effect sizes. The majority of significant findings were moderated effects, with 8 out of 11 outcome variables indicating the intervention-produced significant improvements in social–emotional competence and behavior for children who started the school year with skill deficits relative to their peers. All the significant findings were based on teacher-report data highlighting a need for replication using other informants and sources of data. Findings provide program validation and have implications for understanding the reach of SEL programs.

1. Introduction

Although school readiness and success is most often associated with cognitive attributes and academic milestones, there is increasing evidence that social–emotional skills—in the form of understanding emotions of self and other, regulating emotions, controlling attention, problem solving, and engaging in prosocial behaviors—operate alongside and in conjunction with cognitive skills to facilitate school success (Cambourne, 2002; Denham, 2006; Denham, Bassett, & Zinsser, 2012). Social–emotional skills combine to enable social–emotional competence, which represents an overall evaluation of a child's ability to meet the social and emotional demands from the environment (Gresham, 1986; Merrell & Gueldner, 2012). A recent meta-analysis of 213 studies examining the impact of different social–emotional learning (SEL) curricula indicated that such programs are not only associated with significant improvements in students' social–emotional skills, but they were associated with improvements on end-of-the-

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year academic achievement (i.e., tests and grades; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Furthermore, research has shown that students' social–emotional skills are a better predictor of future academic performance than is their prior academic performance (Caprara, Barbaranelli, Pastorelli, Bandura, & Zimbardo, 2000; Malecki & Elliot, 2002). This is not altogether surprising, given that many scholars postulate that social interaction (with peers and teachers) is the bridge between instruction and optimized learning (Elias & Haynes, 2008; Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walberg, 2007).

It is well documented that there is considerable variation in students' academic readiness when they begin formal schooling (Phillips & Shonkoff, 2000). In a similar vein, students vary widely in their social–emotional readiness (Fantuzzo et al., 2007). Differences in performance upon school entry often do not vanish as students progress through school. Rather, the gaps between students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds tend to increase over time (Brooks-Gunn, Rouse, & McLanahan, 2007; Chatterji, 2006). Indeed, too often, children begin their school careers without the requisite social–emotional competency to facilitate learning (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000), which may be an increasing liability for socially or cognitively disadvantaged children, given the cumulative benefits of early cognitive-academic supports (Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). For these reasons, early elementary represents an opportune time to deploy universal prevention efforts that promote early school success (Bernard, 2006). Thus, the focus of the current study was on the implementation of an SEL curriculum for early elementary children (K–2nd grade).

2. *Second Step*® program

One of the most widely disseminated SEL curricula in schools is the *Second Step*® program, which was developed by Committee for Children (CfC), a non-profit organization in Seattle. *Second Step*® is a skills-focused SEL curriculum that emphasizes directly teaching students' skills that strengthen their ability to learn, have empathy, manage emotions, and solve problems. The *Second Step*® logic model (see Fig. 1) stipulates that students who are provided direct instruction in social–emotional skills and opportunities to practice those skills, and receive reinforcement for exhibiting them are likely to experience a range of improved intermediate outcomes, and result in a cascade of positive distal outcomes. Previous studies have found support for the underling logic model of the original *Second Step*® program, though other smaller or less rigorous studies have found mixed or null effects (see Gottfredson et al., 2010 for review). For example, Grossman et al. (1997) conducted a randomized controlled trial of the *Second Step*® program to examine its impact on aggression and positive social behavior among elementary school students. Findings from this study indicated that physical aggression decreased among students in the *Second Step*® classrooms when compared to students in the control classrooms. This improvement was maintained at a 6-month follow-up assessment. Other studies have shown that students receiving *Second Step*® lessons had improved social skills at posttest when compared to children in control classrooms, based on teacher reports (Holsen, Iversen, & Smith, 2009; Holsen, Smith, & Frey, 2008). However, a recent school randomized trial ($n = 12$ schools) by Gottfredson et al. (2010; 3rd Edition *Second Step*®) found no positive or negative effects of Second Step on school achievement or positive behaviors. In the case of this study, however, the control schools were, on average, found to be implementing a fairly high level of SEL programming/supports, making it difficult to clearly differentiate dosage between intervention and control schools.

Recently, CfC has developed and released the 4th Edition of the *Second Step*® program (2012). The new *Second Step*® program includes revised content and materials designed to further enhance student success in school. The most significant change to *Second Step*® is the new content related to teaching students *Skills for Learning*. Specifically, three aspects of self-regulation are addressed in the lessons in the first unit at each grade: attention, working memory, and inhibitory control. Attention refers to the ability to direct, focus, and shift attention while screening out or ignoring distractions (Barkley, 1997; Rueda, Rothbart, McCandliss, Saccomanno, & Posner, 2005). Working memory involves the ability to remember and use information, such as a teacher's directions or the instructions for an activity (Demetriou, Christou, Spanoudis, & Platsidou, 2002). Inhibitory control, also referred to as effortful control, helps children stop automatic but inappropriate responses or actions and remember appropriate behaviors such as raising a hand before speaking (Blair, 2002; Rennie, Bull, & Diamond, 2004). These skill domains are assumed to be important contributors to classroom success, but further research is needed to empirically validate these associations.

There are separate curricula for each grade to enable teachers to deliver instruction that is developmentally appropriate and relevant for their students. The program includes scripted, teacher-friendly lesson cards; posters that outline learned skills; DVDs that illustrate particular skills; brain builder games designed to increase retention and use of skills; and a material binder that includes lessons for teaching and reinforcing skills, skills for learning cards, and home links for families. There are a total of 22 lessons that are organized across four units: (a) Skills for Learning, (b) Empathy, (c) Emotion Management, and

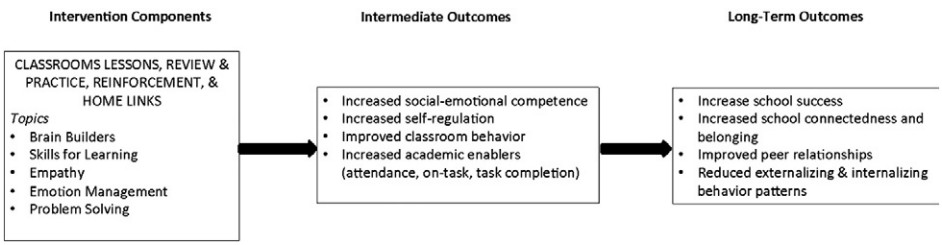

Fig. 1. Logic model for the *Second Step*® program.