



Enhancing academic performance and social and emotional competence with the RULER feeling words curriculum

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ABSTRACT

A pre- and post-test quasi-experimental design was used to test the impact of a 30-week, theoretically-based social and emotional learning (SEL) curriculum, The RULER Feeling Words Curriculum (“RULER”), on the academic performance and social and emotional competence of 5th and 6th grade students ($N=273$) in fifteen classrooms in three schools. Academic performance was assessed by report card grades. Social and emotional competence was assessed with teacher reports of student behavior. Students in classrooms integrating RULER had higher year-end grades and higher teacher ratings of social and emotional competence (e.g., leadership, social skills, and study skills) compared to students in the comparison group. This study provides preliminary empirical evidence that SEL programs like RULER improve important student outcomes.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, numerous programs have been developed to promote social and emotional learning (SEL) among youth (Elias et al., 1997; Greenberg et al., 2003). SEL programs are designed to complement existing school curricula by teaching the social and emotional skills that contribute to better social and emotional adjustment and higher academic achievement (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). A recent meta-analysis of 207 studies examining the effects of SEL programs revealed that students enrolled in such programs perform significantly better in school and on standardized tests compared to non-participating students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, in press). The average effect size obtained for SEL programming on academic performance, Hedges' $g=0.22$, is comparable to those obtained for other educational interventions.

In an era of academic accountability, receptivity toward integrating SEL programming into the curriculum is dependent upon empirical evidence demonstrating improvements in academic performance and social and emotional competence. The study presented here tests the effectiveness of a theoretically-based SEL program in enhancing student outcomes. The RULER Feeling Words Curriculum (“RULER”; Maurer & Brackett, 2004) is one component of a comprehensive approach to SEL, called The RULER Approach, that includes professional development for school leaders and educators,

as well as workshops for families (Brackett et al., 2009). Anchored in emotional intelligence theory (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and research on emotional development (e.g., Denham, 1998) and emotional competence (e.g., Saarni, 1999), RULER was designed to be integrated into existing school curricula and to aid schools in achieving national educational goals such as those articulated by the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB, 2001). RULER uses a skill-based approach to foster social, emotional, and academic competence. The program teaches children how to *recognize* emotions in oneself and in other people, *understand* the causes and consequences of a wide range of emotions, *label* emotions using a sophisticated vocabulary, *express* emotions in socially appropriate ways, and *regulate* emotions effectively (the “RULER” skills). RULER helps students to learn these skills by integrating formal lessons and opportunities to practice using them into regular classroom instruction. The premise is that teaching and providing opportunities to develop the RULER skills is necessary to build relationships, promote healthy living, prevent problematic behavior, and increase academic achievement (Brackett & Rivers, forthcoming). Indeed, research shows that emotions are pervasive in daily life and affect how children and adults think, learn, feel, and act (Damasio, 1994). Observe any classroom for any length of time—it is obvious that students' daily experiences are saturated with emotions such as frustration, loneliness, enjoyment, and interest (as are the experiences of their teachers, principals, and family members).

The cognitive (thoughts), physiological (bodily feeling), and behavioral (action) changes that accompany emotional experiences are adaptive when the information they provide is attended to, interpreted, understood, used, and managed effectively (Denham, 1998; Lazarus, 1991; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Saarni, 1999). RULER is grounded in emotional intelligence theory, which suggests that

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the ability to process emotional information can enhance cognitive activities (i.e., thinking, decision-making, and remembering), promote well-being, and facilitate social functioning (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). We use the term “emotional literacy” to refer to the acquisition and development of the RULER skills, just as “literacy” refers to the acquisition and development of reading and writing skills. RULER is based on the premise that students will be more effective when they become *emotionally literate*, i.e., they develop their RULER skills, appreciate the value of these skills, and use these skills to problem-solve and interact effectively with others. The curriculum under evaluation here helps students acquire and develop the interrelated but distinct skills of recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotions and teaches these skills directly, just as reading programs teach the distinct skills that form the foundation for reading (phonemic awareness, sounds, symbols, etc.).

1.1. Program overview

The RULER Feeling Words Curriculum is a multi-year, structured curriculum designed to promote social, emotional, and academic learning with units and lessons centered on feeling words and related concepts (Maurer & Brackett, 2004). RULER aims simultaneously to enhance the social and emotional skills of adolescents and create an optimal learning environment that promotes academic, social, and personal effectiveness. Like other programs that effectively foster SEL, RULER uses a synergistic approach to education that incorporates the learner, the learning process, and the learning environment (McCombs, 2004).

Feeling word units are available for kindergarten through eighth grade and include developmentally appropriate lessons and content for each level. The curriculum is designed to help students gain a deep understanding of *feeling words* – words that characterize the gamut of human experience such as excitement, shame, alienation, and commitment. Each unit centers on one feeling word and includes multiple lessons or steps that are integrated into regular classroom instruction. Given the high demands on teachers, English language arts (ELA) and history are the most practical subject areas in which to incorporate an SEL curriculum that centers on literature, writing, and understanding human experience. ELA lessons, for example, invariably involve characters that experience a myriad of emotional experiences that need to be recognized, understood, labeled, expressed, and regulated. Characters in literature (from children's picture books to chapter books and novels) provide rich examples of how emotions play an integral role in human interaction. For example, one class was reading the book, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, during the *empathy* unit. Students identified instances in the book where one character felt empathy for another (which involves the recognition and labeling of emotion). They explored how feeling empathy caused one character to change her behavior toward another (treating him more kindly, for example), which involves understanding the causes and consequence of emotion as well as strategies for expressing and managing the emotion.

Each feeling word unit includes a set of steps that follows a basic structure and meets specific learning objectives. Table 1 outlines the unit structure and significance of each step, including a sample of the RULER skills each step addresses. The lessons are organized to help teachers differentiate instruction and offer different types of learning activities to meet the myriad learning styles and needs of students. Briefly, in the curriculum for middle school classrooms, teachers introduce the feeling word using a personalized connection (Step 1); students interpret an abstract design using the feeling word (Step 2); students connect the feeling word to academic material or current events (Step 3); students discuss the feeling word with family members and write a short paragraph about the conversation (Step 4); the class discusses the feeling word and its relationship to the family discussions, academic material, or current events (Step 5); and, finally, students write a short essay using the

feeling word (Step 6). The lessons vary in complexity across grade levels to meet the developmental capacity of the students. For example, kindergarten students draw images representing the feeling word but middle school students, as Table 1 shows, interpret an abstract image that represents the feeling word.

RULER adheres to best practice guidelines set forth by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (<http://www.CASEL.org>). These guidelines include: linking social-emotional instruction to standard curricula without taking time and focus from other academic areas; providing differentiated instructional procedures; involving parents; training and supporting teachers and staff; and demonstrating program quality through empirical evidence (Elias, 2006; Elias et al., 1997; Zins et al., 2004). RULER is grounded in theory, provides developmentally appropriate instruction across time, offers classroom instruction that engenders positive student interactions, attempts to create a caring and engaging learning environment, and involves active participation from students, parents, and the school community in the planning, learning, and evaluation process.

In sum, RULER leverages existing curricula and provides lessons designed to enhance outcomes related to both academics (e.g., vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing, and creativity) and social and emotional competence (e.g., healthy relationships, better decision-making, and prosocial behavior). It is designed to last across the academic year with one feeling word unit taught about every two weeks.

1.2. The present study

This study used a quasi-experimental design with a pre- and post-test to evaluate the extent to which integrating RULER into existing curricula increases academic grades and social and emotional competence over the course of one academic year (about seven months). We tested two hypotheses. First, because RULER is designed to teach skills related to emotion management and understanding others' feelings and perspectives, we predicted that students in RULER classrooms would have greater gains in teacher ratings of social and emotional competencies compared to students in classrooms not using RULER (comparison classrooms) (Hypothesis 1). RULER infuses directly into ELA lessons, is writing-intensive, and teaches children to be more self-aware and self-managed, thus we expected to see gains in grades assessing performance in ELA but not in an unrelated subject, like math (Hypothesis 2a). We also looked at grades related to work habits and social development. We predicted that students in RULER classrooms would demonstrate greater gains in grades in these areas (Hypothesis 2b). Based on a meta-analysis of SEL programs (Durlak et al., in press), we expected a moderate effect size for social and emotional competencies and small effect sizes for the other outcomes.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three elementary schools on Long Island, New York volunteered their fifth and sixth grade classrooms to participate in the evaluation. The ethnic and racial background of students in these schools was diverse (58.6% White, 21.6% Hispanic, 10.3% Asian, 8.4% African American, and 1.1% unidentified). Relatively few students in these schools were eligible for free lunch ($\leq 7\%$), an indicator of socioeconomic status (New York State Education Department, 2006).

Schools were assigned randomly, using a coin toss, to teach RULER in either their fifth or sixth grade classrooms. Schools would commit to teaching the program in only one grade and principals requested that the program be taught in each grade across the schools to see how it fit with both fifth and sixth grade classrooms. Thus, two schools

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