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YOU'RE IN THE RED ZONE!

The Importance of Educational Leadership on the Implementation of Social Emotional Learning Programs

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of mental health education in schools, specifically, teaching students the skills necessary to become emotionally regulated individuals. In response, many schools and school districts have made the development of social-emotional learning (SEL) a priority. To effectively meet students' needs for SEL, teachers seek out readily available educational programs, such as the Zones of Regulation (ZOR) program. This autoethnography analyzes the personal experiences of four teacher-researchers in using the ZOR program. The teacher accounts identified common themes in SEL program implementation; a cohesive approach, teacher education, and administrative support are all essential for effective program delivery. The shared experiences underscore the importance of effective leadership practices in successful SEL program implementation. The conclusions drawn may be beneficial for school boards, school administration, and educational policymakers when making leadership decisions about SEL programming.

Keywords: mental health education, social-emotional learning (SEL), Zones of Regulation, educational leadership, program implementation, educational policy

Introduction

As educators, we have understood that student mental health and well-being are essential for successful learning, but the COVID-19 pandemic has brought this understanding into a more critical role in our education systems. Since the onset of the pandemic, students have been facing difficulties such as navigating online learning, frequent quarantines, and isolation, constantly changing government health restrictions and dealing with the resulting mental health challenges. Current research is uncovering the importance of mental health education in schools; studies are

finding evidence that social-emotional awareness and self-regulation skills are essential for proper child development (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2017; National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2008). Knowing this, teachers are being pressed to continue to deliver high-quality curricular-based instruction while also being tasked with helping students develop social-emotional skills.

In recent years, in response to the growing need for mental health interventions, many schools and school districts have prioritized mental health and wellness (Government of Alberta, 2020). An example of this is reflected in the Calgary Board of Education’s three-year education plan for 2021–2024. The plan prioritizes the inclusion of wellness goals to “respond to [the] impacts of COVID-19 on learning and well-being across grade levels” (Calgary Board of Education, 2021, p. 11).

To better meet these goals, teachers are seeking effective social–emotional learning (SEL) programs to use in their classrooms. As defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, SEL is a fundamental part of education and human development, as it refers to the acquirement of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to “develop healthy identities, manage emotions, and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (Fundamentals of SEL, 2021). Evidence-based, SEL programming has been shown to provide numerous personal and academic benefits to students; it has been shown to help reduce negative behaviours and emotional distress (Dowling & Barry, 2020), reduce attendance issues, and increase student engagement and academic success (Walker, 2020), improve test scores, as well as reduce the use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2008).

To ensure a cohesive, school-wide response, some schools responded by promoting the use of specific SEL programs in their school development plans. The Zones of Regulation (ZOR) is often one of the programs that schools use to address SEL challenges. The ZOR program is widely available and because of its easy access, it can often be confused for being ‘free’. The ZOR program focuses on developing self-regulation skills for students and can be implemented by teachers, parents, and health professionals (Kuypers, 2020). The program’s popularity and prevalence in many schools make it a useful tool to examine issues related to effective program implementation for SEL education.

How can school administration and school board leaders ensure that a SEL program is successful within their unique demographics? How can leadership support implementing a SEL program, without being experts in the field themselves? These, and many other questions, are undoubtedly on the minds of many of our educational leaders. Knowing the importance of using evidence-based programs to meet the needs of students (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Langley, 2010), and the significance of proper program implementation (Walker, 2020), leaders must carefully consider the various factors impacting this crucial aspect of education. While teachers may have the most direct impact on student well-being, administration and leadership are directly tied to the success of teachers (Searby et al., 2017, as cited in Ryan & Loughland, 2020). It is therefore imperative that school administration and leadership understand and support teachers with delivering high-quality SEL programming.

Methodology and Theoretical Perspectives

In this work, we have chosen to write about our lived experiences from our perspective as classroom teachers through autoethnography. Autoethnographies share essential information in

the form of relatable stories; experts share their lived experiences and reflect on how they inform current research in their field (Sparkes, 2000).

In recognition that some traditional scholars may prioritize more quantitative approaches to research and therefore still hold reservations in accepting autoethnography as scientific, we have chosen to contribute to new avenues of support and criticism for this methodology (Wall, 2006). We also consider the numerous researchers who have pointed out how observations and interpretations of numerical data can be easily infiltrated with personal biases, including how data can be socially constructed (Bloor, Goldberg & Emslie, 1991; Garkinkel, 1967; Gephart, 1988; Knorr-Cetina, 1991, as cited in Wall, 2006). Overall, our work reflects a postmodern philosophic perspective on scientific research where all methods are subject to critique or acceptance (Richardson, 2000). The reflections we share are supported by literature to confirm our findings as valid data. The methods we used to collect data include personal reflection, observation, conversations with colleagues, artifacts, and compiled findings from current literature.

This autoethnography will bring together teacher experiences in using the ZOR program to compare how a SEL program is used in different contexts to draw conclusions about how support from school leadership impacts the implementation of the program. Our qualitative accounts examine the factors that impact feelings of teacher preparedness and perceptions of success when using the ZOR program. We also chose this reflective approach as an avenue to disseminate and personalize findings from a review of current literature addressing the role administration and leadership can play in helping facilitate the delivery of SEL programs.

Spanning the public and private systems of both Alberta and British Columbia, the four accounts below seek to provide guidance and clarity for administrators and school leadership to implement a SEL program successfully. Our accounts give details of teaching context, decisions

by school leaders, and collaboration with colleagues to illustrate how professional confidence and support from school leadership carries great weight in the effective delivery of lessons. The stories weave through central themes and include a variety of successful and challenging experiences in the process of SEL program implementation. We invite you, as the reader, into the intricacies of our worldview as educators, by reflecting on your own experiences along the way.

Autoethnographic Accounts

“Unified Vision, Time, and Attention”

My first year of teaching as an elementary generalist was abundant in new experiences and overwhelming in how much learning I had to do. Although I had already been teaching for over five years, it felt like it was my first. Alongside the various curricular resources and teaching materials for a language immersion program, I was also introduced to the Zones of Regulation to guide health and wellness lessons.

In a staff meeting, the administrative team communicated the expectation for every teacher to adapt and display posters with the four zone colours in a student-accessible area of their classroom. In a subsequent grade team meeting, teachers created the posters and brainstormed ways to teach students to identify the emotions associated with each colour and the strategies that help students move into the preferred green zone, identified as the focused learning zone. Each classroom teacher was provided with a ZOR textbook to learn the program in their own time. This school-wide initiative was put forth along with a new three-year math strategy that also required teachers to read and learn from a content-heavy textbook and another simultaneous three-year literacy strategy targeting reading in both English and French.

Overall, the teaching staff bought into these intentions, but in the end, the goals for implementation were overly ambitious. Eventually, the ZOR program was put on the back burner by most teachers. One month after the program was introduced, the principal took a tour of the school to check if all classrooms had visible posters with signs of usage that could be recognized at first glance. This included pictures of faces showing a variety of emotions on the four colours indicating that students had correctly identified which colours represent certain emotions. Unfortunately, the method of implementation was never discussed, nor how materials and lessons had been adapted and delivered. Naturally, some teachers shared their thoughts and ideas in less formal settings, which is when I learned of the wide range of usage strategies, including a grade team that chose to not teach one of the colours, while some teachers communicated frustration as they did not see how the program could help their students with challenging behaviours. Most teachers, as did I, skimmed the program textbook to look for quick and easy lessons.

As the years passed, the school continued to recommend the usage of the ZOR program with the expectation that teachers would learn and train themselves on their own time. In the span of five years, I was able to see how this approach resulted in very fragmented implementation while methods of usage and knowledge of the program varied immensely from teacher to teacher. Nevertheless, the goal of creating a common school language for identifying emotions was simple enough that most students at the school were able to correctly associate certain emotions with the suggested colour category of the ZOR program. Unfortunately, use of the emotional regulation strategies was less consistent. Meanwhile, increased focus on math, literacy, and other innovative pedagogies continued and teachers slowed down their use of the program.

Looking back, I see that having a common vision helped to get the program started, but there was not enough time and attention allotted for teachers to gain the necessary knowledge they

needed to fully understand and correctly implement the program. The lack of opportunities during assignable time for teachers to discuss the program content and review suggested lessons, resulted in limited cohesion. Some teachers lost faith in the program, further reducing its efficacy.

My next encounter with the ZOR program was at another school setting. This time, I saw posters on the walls of the school, which I took as an invitation to ask colleagues how and when they used the program. Very few teachers said they used the program, while some referred to it as a tool for the educational assistants to use with special needs students. I understood that the school did not have an explicit health and wellness strategy and the displayed ZOR materials had been left on the walls from the school's previous administrative team. Teachers were free to plan and deliver health lessons. The freedom to pick and choose from anywhere can be exciting for some yet overwhelming for others. As a result, experienced teachers that are passionate about the topic indulge by pulling from, adapting, and integrating materials and ideas from various sources. Meanwhile, the less experienced or those with less interest or value in the topic, try to "cover" the topic, or skip the subject matter altogether.

Then there was a change. The benefits of SEL quickly gained attention and a health and wellness strategy became a requirement. The following school year, the school principal suggested a SEL resource that would be made available for teachers to borrow from the school library. This content-heavy textbook offered a complete program; during their assignable time, a rotating group of teachers working in a professional learning community was tasked to design lessons for the teaching staff to provide SEL instruction. The initial suggestion to use a specific program was quickly put aside, as flaws regarding adaptability for age appropriateness were perceived. During this collaborative time, a wellness-framework was adopted ever-growing list of SEL resources that teachers recommended to each other was shared with corresponding lesson plans. In the end,

teachers were once again faced with the freedom to pick and choose from a large variety of resources.

“Teaching with the Whole Class”

My experience using the ZOR program began when I was teaching middle school, I was struggling to help a student emotionally regulate and was referred to some of the strategies from the program. The student would have emotional outbursts that I was not able to manage when he was confused, frustrated, or if he was experiencing conflict with his peers. His dysregulation was affecting my classroom management, increasing my stress levels, and impacting student learning. I had tried strategies such as removing him from the situation and discussing the incident once he was calm, involving his parents in a positive behaviour reward system, and reaching out to other behavioural support professionals in the school, to no avail.

With the assistance of the behavioural support team, we coached the student to identify his emotional zone when he was dysregulated and to use strategies to move him back to the Green Zone. My role in using the program was to use a ZOR stoplight visual to help the student identify his zone when I felt he needed it, then, he would work on using the ZOR program with a member of the behavioural support team while I continued teaching in the classroom. I was not involved in working with him to use any of the emotional regulation strategies; he would leave the classroom when he was dysregulated and return when he was calm.

Using the program helped the student learn to regulate his emotions; he was able to return to the classroom more quickly and to be present for longer periods. -By the end of the year, the student had fewer emotional outbursts and was more able to regulate his emotions without assistance.

I had no training for the ZOR program, nor did I read the ZOR textbook or support materials. I was very unfamiliar with the program while I was implementing it with the student. In hindsight, I would have benefited from receiving ZOR program training; using a more informed approach to implement the program would have helped me be more effective in its delivery. I would have felt more confident in applying the strategies and better able to use the specific ZOR terminology. If I had been trained properly in using the program, I would have known not to point out when I felt the student was in the Red Zone, and the student to self-identify his zone and help him choose a regulation strategy to use.

I also feel the intervention may have been more effective if I had integrated it into my teaching with the whole class; the student may have benefited from regular ZOR lessons and a whole class approach where his peers also modeled the strategies. I feel that teaching regular ZOR lessons in the classroom and referring to the program during appropriate in situ opportunities would help students learn to use the ZOR strategies more authentically.

My experience in using the program was successful for the individual student, though I feel it would have been improved in there was a whole-school approach where the strategies are reinforced year after year. Rather than utilizing the behavioural support team's valuable time to help regulate one student in reaction to his emotional dysregulation, we could benefit every student by teaching the ZOR strategies to the whole class.

“A Common Language”

My teaching career began in an elementary mental health special education class where I completed numerous professional development sessions on well-being, emotional regulation, and trauma. Ironically though, my first exposure to ZOR was not until years later when I was teaching

in a regular grade-two class. I was given a new classroom assignment where I would be teaching grade two in a double classroom with a teacher who had been using ZOR in her classroom for about a year. As we began making our long-range plans and establishing our classroom routines and expectations, she shared an idea around teaching students about their feelings through the four colours, red, yellow, green, and blue. This was a strategy given to her the previous year by an occupational therapist (OT) who was helping to support several of her students that were having social and emotional difficulties in the classroom.

The OT, who had been working with a handful of teachers, shared handouts with the four colours and some emotions connected with each colour, which the teachers then hung in their classroom. Some had bullseye targets with the four colours; some had ladders or individual traffic lights for each student. I decided to put students' pictures on clothespins and a card with each of the four colours on them and students would move their faces to the colour that best represented how they were feeling at the time. They would do this when they arrived in the morning, and anytime they left or entered the room they had the opportunity to move it. However, as the year went on, it became more common for me to move the student's faces to the different zones, and as I reflect on it now, I was often moving them into the Red Zone to let them know I could see that they were feeling angry or frustrated or more realistically that I noticed they were behaving in an undesirable way. When they stopped the behaviour, I would return their face to the Green Zone. I realize now that I was using red to identify "bad behaviour" and green to recognize "good behaviour" and it had little to do with states of alertness as intended by the ZOR. It did not feel like the students were gaining much from this approach so, at the end of that year, when I left that school, I left the ZOR program behind.

It was not until a few years later when, yet again, an OT and physical therapist (PT) set the zones in motion at our school to help support students who were emotionally dysregulated. In an open area, they set up red, yellow, green, and blue stations, each with pictures and instructions for exercises designed to alter the students' level of alertness and move towards the Green Zone to be ready for learning. For example, Blue Zone exercises, such as running on the spot and jumping jacks, were designed to help a student become more alert or “wake up,” while red and yellow exercises, such as heavy lifting and deep breathing, were intended to help lower their states of alertness or “calm down”. I utilized this strategy a few times with some students who were dysregulated. Unfortunately, I was still unaware that implementing this program properly involved explicitly teaching students about emotions and how to identify the zones they are in based on the feelings they are experiencing before ever teaching them the strategies that were being used at these stations. So again, I was telling the students what zone I thought they were in and pointed them to the station I thought they should go to. The kids appreciated the time away from the class and enjoyed the movement break at times, but they did not develop an understanding of self-regulation. Once again, my lack of understanding of the program resulted in low buy-in from my students, and ZOR returned to the back of my mind.

My next experience with the ZOR program was working in a system support role. I visited many schools where I worked with the whole staff, grade teams, or individual teachers. It was during one of my week-long sessions of co-teaching with a grade two teacher when she began to reference the ZOR. Students were sharing what zone they were in and explaining why they felt a particular emotion that morning. These young children were able to articulate that they were “in the blue zone because they stayed up too late and were feeling tired this morning” or were “in the yellow zone because they were playing with their friends at daycare before school and were still

feeling a little bit silly.” When I asked her about it, she explained that the whole school used the ZOR program with their classes. It was an administrative directive and they had been using it for several years and she showed me the ZOR curriculum. She explained that students at their school are exposed to the program starting in kindergarten, so by grade two, they are familiar with the language and can develop personalized strategies for moving through the zones. This common language was utilized when supervisors were problem-solving during recess and lunch or when they saw a dysregulated student in the hallway.

It was at this time that I realized what had been missing in many of the other attempts at implementation: an understanding of the essence of the program and the progression of learning. Further, having access to the materials, including the lessons, student worksheets, and games created opportunities for students to deepen their understanding and develop personalized emotional regulation skills. A school-wide approach initiated and followed up by the school administration created a culture of communication and understanding of social and emotional learning.

Right around this time, when I was already prepared to dig a little deeper into the ZOR program the COVID-19 pandemic hit, I was going back into a classroom teaching role, and the need for SEL was greater than ever. There was no better time to discover what the ZOR program was all about. I purchased the textbook and signed up for the ZOR web-based training seminar. I immediately decided to implement the program in my grade two classroom with a clear understanding of the intention, and the pieces of the program. My 7- and 8-year-old students were identifying their feelings and could match them with the correlating zone colours. We played games, read stories, and watched videos to help illustrate all the different feelings people experience. As a class, we developed a collective understanding and a common language to talk

about the zones. Next, we discovered that we all move throughout the zones each day and can use strategies to help us manage our zones. Once we started to practice different strategies, such as the Lazy 8 breathing, or the 6 Sides of Breathing, mindfulness, and movement breaks, students developed preferences for different strategies. I also found myself modelling self-regulation. For example, I would say, “Oh wow, boys and girls, the volume in here is making me feel a little frustrated. I think I am in the yellow zone, and right now, I would like to be in the green zone. I am going to take some deep breaths. I wonder if anyone else feels like they are in the yellow zone? Could we all do a few Lazy 8 breaths together?” They would all respond. For the first time in all my ZOR experiences, I felt like they were getting it! I was seeing and feeling the positive impact this program was having on my students and was realizing the potential of the program as a classroom-wide or even school-wide program.

“Support of a Team”

Working in a large public high school, you see a lot of kids in the ‘red zone’, regardless of if you recognize the signs or not. The omnipresent challenge of navigating an increasingly complex world has contributed to an increase in mental health issues for children and youth. This becomes glaringly obvious in certain moments of anger and outbursts, many of which seem to come out of nowhere. As a high school teacher, my first experience with the ZOR program came in anticipation of one such outburst. A student admitted to the Alberta Children’s Hospital for mental health challenges had been discharged and was beginning their return to school. As a trusted adult in that student’s journey, I had been tasked with helping them through their transition. Arriving at school the morning of the anticipated return, I opened an email from the hospital outlining strategies to try when things were beginning to escalate. Unknown to me then, I was reading a modified version of the ZOR program, which was supposed to help my returning student successfully navigate their

days back at school. With no training, no administrative support, and virtually no time in my schedule, I was being tasked with helping a grade eleven student identify their triggers, use strategies as outlined by health professionals, and return them to a place of social-emotional calm where they could go back to learning. This was not an appropriate use of the program, nor was it an effective plan for the student returning. The system, from hospital to administration to classroom teacher, failed this young person in their most vulnerable time.

Several years later, a province away and a change from public to an independent school, I found myself again exposed to the ZOR program. In full honesty, I was embittered by my previous experience. I deeply valued the importance of social-emotional learning in school, but without a taste of effective and inspired leadership to implement such learning, I found myself feeling isolated and alone in my delivery, seeing only my failures to evoke large-scale change. Luckily, this was not the climate in my new school, and the implementation of the program was delivered with confidence and competence from administration downward, with great success. The program is delivered by all adults in the K-5 program, and assistance is provided to teach the content as connected to the school's culture and not as a separate lesson to set aside at the end of the day. Administration supports a common language through the school community at large, including parents and guardians, and does not limit this important instruction to classroom teachers alone. Teachers have access to both legitimate programs and training, and they can draw on the expertise of those around them who have the experience and education to help increase their efficacy in implementing the program. A common language is shared throughout the school and is reflected in a variety of documents, everything from playground rules to Individual Education Plan goals. The ZOR here is helping kids to thrive, to be kinder to themselves and others, and this would simply not be possible without administration support, buy-in from the teachers, and trust.

What then, is the difference between these two extremes I have lived with the journey of implementing SEL programs? I believe the main difference lies in the belief of the administration to help their teachers feel confident in implementing a program that encompasses more than a simple curriculum. Effective administration allows teachers to implement a program from beginning to end, not piecemeal and incomplete. My current administration are not experts on ZOR or SEL programs in general, but they believe in their importance and surround themselves with others that do have that expertise. They value the importance of training and legitimate materials and ensure we have access to both. They support us to implement the use of common language and listen when we have questions.

It is not that my new school has fewer mental health challenges—it is that my administration helps teachers navigate those challenges alongside students and parents. It is the approach they take to make teachers feel supported and confident in managing classroom behaviours.

The Power of Leadership in Program Implementation

Of all the challenges and successes discussed above, none is more prevalent than the power and influence leadership has in the outcome of a program. Support and leadership of school administration, more than any other factor, can influence the success of SEL programs (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). Evidence-based programs that are supported by school leadership can “enhance implementation, achieve positive outcomes and lay the foundation for long term stability” (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2008, p. 8). Leaders who develop a strong organizational culture, clear expectations, and provide support, experience more success with program implementation (Arnold et al., 2020; Bunger et al., 2019). Lindholm et al. (2020) identify the role and performance of

leadership to “be critical for the success of a programme and also for sustaining its outcomes” (p. 2); they also assert the importance of leadership in establishing shared goals and a clear plan to achieve them as key factors to successful program implementation. Johnson et al. (2017) found that teachers who feel supported by their administration and who feel competent in their ability were more open to adopting new teaching practices.

Several studies highlight that the way leaders can positively impact student outcomes is through supporting teachers. A longitudinal study demonstrated how the impact of principal leadership has an indirect impact on student learning and well-being, while teachers have a more direct impact (Searby et al., 2017, as cited in Ryan & Loughland, 2020). Meanwhile, principals play the most influential role in teachers’ sense of professional achievement. When teachers collaborated with colleagues, the highest positive effect on the success of their work was reported by teachers to be the “... belief that the administration and leadership of the school were supportive and fostered increased collaboration and collective efficacy.” (Gray et al., 2016 as cited in Ryan & Loughland, 2020). The relationship between student, teacher, and administration is cyclical in nature, with each informing the others of their ongoing needs and impacts. Administrators are also positioned to make decisions that will be most influential for teachers engaging in professional learning opportunities (Durksen et al., 2017, as cited in Ryan & Loughland, 2020). These professional learning opportunities, as discussed in our examples above, are key for teachers to feel confident and capable of delivering a program. School leaders can have positive impacts on student learning and well-being through their ability to support and influence teachers in their professional development and their collaborative work.

Thankfully, school principals are not expected to be the ‘expert’ in all subjects, but rather be capable of finding and utilizing specialists when needed. At times, these experts are external

resources called upon to introduce a program and train staff. When an SEL expert, and in our example, a ZOR expert, offers this training, the program's integrity remains intact, and teachers have a clear understanding of the intention and purpose of the program's elements. Often, teachers take on the role of an in-school expert after the initial training. Dove and Freely (2011) found that when this ongoing learning was conducted by the teachers themselves, through teacher leadership and collaboration, it was even more impactful than inviting outside experts. When teachers share their experiences amongst their colleagues, they create a group understanding and common language, which leads to teachers feeling both competent and confident in their work.

Whether it be the school administrator or a teacher leader, a quality leader brings the staff together by developing a shared vision and group values, sets realistic, yet high expectations and supports the staff body as well as individual teachers (Steyn, 2006). This type of leader can maintain program implementation for as long as they are in the building. Leaders play an essential role in the implementation process of quality programming by disseminating information in a meaningful way, ensuring the program is relevant and meaningful and by clearly communicating expectations (Bunger et al., 2019). Finding the right rhythm and pace with staff can take time. Unfortunately, administrator turnover, or in some cases lead teacher turnover is a reality and affects the sustainability of an initiative. When a program is taken on by a whole school from the direction of a quality leader, that passion and desire must remain present to sustain the program over time (Dove & Freely, 2011). Knowing this importance, a common thread woven between our stories is the theme of a whole-school approach and commitment to a SEL program.

When working in a perceived silo, teachers are less likely to collaborate and seek guidance from others. A whole-school approach, guided by genuine and effective leadership, can be more effective in long-term changes for program implementation. A study conducted in the U.K. that

examined whole-school implementation versus individual classrooms found that school-wide implementations were considerably more effective, both in short-term and long-term results (Naylor & McKay, 2008). Goldberg et al.'s (2018) meta-analysis of the effectiveness of a whole-school approach to SEL also aligns with our experiences. They found interventions enhanced children's social and emotional development when the whole staff was involved, and when components of the SEL program were embedded in daily practice and utilized in all areas of the school, such as hallways and on the playground. They determined that programs using a whole school approach “yield small, but significant positive effects on social and emotional adjustment, behavioural adjustment, and internalizing symptoms” (Goldberg et al., 2018, p. 770). As evident in our experiences, without the ongoing support and whole-school buy-in, programs have the potential to fizzle out.

The Zones of Regulation program encourages a school-wide approach for many of the same reasons we have discovered throughout our combined experiences. This same philosophy can be applied to all SEL approaches: undertaken as a school, they provide more effective implementation and success. High-quality program implementation is important for the success and sustainability of SEL programming in schools, and poor implementation can reduce the efficacy of such initiatives and have negative effects on student learning (Dowling & Barry, 2020; Lawlor, 2014). Reyes et al. (2012) studied how training, dosage, and implementation quality of the SEL program called the RULER approach were related to student social–emotional competencies. They found when teachers were prepared to deliver the program with higher levels of training and more implementation practice, students had more positive outcomes on social-emotional competencies.

When looking at factors that impact the implementation of evidence-based practices, Langley et al. (2010) identified many catalysts that positively or negatively affected program implementation. Administrator and teacher support, professional networks, availability of resources, and teachers' perceptions of the program are all factors that played a role in the successful usage of a program. In the case of ZOR, the program highlights five essential components for school-wide implementation (1) staff buy-in, (2) easy access to ZOR curriculum, (3) common language and visuals, (4) consistent opportunities for students and staff to check in with their zones and (5) access for students and staff to use the ZOR regulation tools (Reyes et al., 2012). For any SEL program to run the way it was designed, leadership support is critical. Freeman, Wertheim and Trinder (2014) found that “at the center of the facilitative factors, in the schools that made the most comprehensive changes, was a whole school approach” (p. 855).

Through our collective experience, we have all bore witness to teachers (ourselves included) who had less training and practice and were faced with less successful outcomes. A study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health found several barriers to successful program implementation. These barriers included: insufficient knowledge or skills, feelings of unpreparedness, being overstressed or under-supported, and the educational philosophy or teaching style of the implementer did not align with the intervention (Greenberg et al., 2005). Effective and powerful leadership should address these barriers for success, which should take place in program implementation and the perception of teacher efficacy in administering a SEL program. This, as the body of evidence shows, confirms our claims of the importance of training, ongoing professional learning, and continued support from leadership.

Conclusion

There is ample evidence supported through research on the importance of effective leadership in successful program implementation. Coupled with our lived experiences, the connection is clear. As these are issues that administration and leadership find themselves entangled with regularly, the benefits of SEL continue beyond the student. Advocates for SEL continue to compile research to show the advances it has on educational quality through meaningful instruction and building trusting collaborative relationships, which has an empowering effect on students and teachers as they work toward building thriving schools and safe and healthy communities.

As our world grows increasingly more complicated, the need for dedicated commitment to providing quality SEL education is imperative. Committing to our young people will take time, dedication, and persistence, but it will be invaluable to improve the mental health and well-being of our future generations. We hope our collective stories and lived experiences will inspire you to choose your path forward and make meaningful contributions to mental health and well-being education.

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