Social and Emotional Learning Group Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the Reopening, and the Mobilization for Racial Justice

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Social and emotional learning (SEL) group activities are one of the most common intervention approaches to teach students the developmental skills they need to succeed in life. The COVID-19 (coronavirus disease of 2019) pandemic forced facilitators to rapidly adapt SEL activities in response to changing conditions, including restrictions on conducting activities in person. Then the national mobilization for racial justice following the murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others called for facilitators to tailor supports in relevant ways. This Practice Highlights column discusses the issues, challenges, and experience of staff and volunteers in one midwestern community-based youth agency in engaging K–12 Black students in SEL activities over three periods: before the pandemic, during the stay-at-home order, and when the agency reopened for in-person operations. Focus group discussions and interviews with staff and volunteers involved in facilitating the groups, as well as their logs documenting the proceedings of the group activities, were analyzed. Our research institutional review board approved the research activities. Overall experience indicates that the ability of the agency and facilitators to adapt and respond to students, families, and the community in creative ways ensured the successful delivery of SEL group activities during an uncertain time.

**PRE-COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The focal agency’s in-person SEL activities began in January 2020. Under the supervision of the first author, seven undergraduate and graduate student research assistants facilitated 30 minutes of SEL group activities weekly at the agency. Kindergarten to second-grade students received content from the evidence-based Second Step (Committee for Children, 2020), while two other groups, the third- to fifth- and the sixth- to eighth-grade students, were presented materials from Merrell’s Strong Kids (Carzales-Englemann, Feuerborn, Gueldner, & Tran, 2016a, 2016b). The activities were the subject of a research study seeking to address the gaps in understanding the cultural validity of SEL curricula, in particular for Black students who formed the majority of the SEL group participants. The facilitators were mostly social work college and graduate students of which four were people of color and three were White people.

Each group consisted of six to eight students. Based on the facilitator logs, common issues during the early stage of the groups included students being distracted by their phones and not showing interest in the activities (leading to feedback like “I did not understand the purpose of that activity,” and “I am not sure if I like doing mindfulness”). In response to these initial struggles, the facilitators created and reinforced rules relating to phone usage. They persisted, sometimes trying out different variations of mindfulness activities or incorporating music into their sessions to engage students. During the session on understanding emotions, facilitators incorporated “Happy” by Pharrell Williams (2013) and “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” by Bobby McFerrin (1988). A facilitator recorded in the log: “Students were moving their bodies and laughing during the songs! They said they felt happy, excited, calm, and relaxed. [Another student] said, ‘I felt really strong, I listened to this song with my grandma.’”

The SEL activities ceased when the center had to close on March 15, 2020, following the statewide stay-at-home mandate. Students had received five weeks of SEL activities. The last session focused on...
reframing maladaptive thinking traps. Facilitators presented various case scenarios that students might experience and coached students on ways to reframe the situation in a positive manner. A facilitator noted the following student responses: “Wow! I did not even think of this situation in a positive light!” Another student shared, “I think I could start thinking about the positives in each situation so that I am not caught in a thinking trap.” Facilitator logs indicated that the SEL groups were progressing well and students were showing signs of benefiting from the activities. Each facilitator provided individual reflections to the first author while the five sessions were ongoing.

ENSUING PERIOD OF THE STAY-AT-HOME ORDER
Like many around the country, SEL group facilitators and students expected to resume their group activities and believed that the closure of the university and the agency and suspension of all in-person activities would be weeks, not months. As it became apparent that the agency would be closed indefinitely, its staff conducted a needs assessment with parents by phone. Staff were most concerned about families’ basic needs regarding food, accessibility to technological devices and Internet services, child care, housing, and their ability to pay bills and rent. Parents’ understanding AND ability to carry out instructions for obtaining resources offered by the school district were unclear. The needs assessment also showed that parents believed that their children would be pleased to connect online with their peers from the center.

On April 7, 2020, the center started remote services over Zoom but did not yet reintroduce the SEL groups. Over the first two days, only a fifth of their students (19 out of 81 students) participated in the online sessions to any extent. Staff observed several barriers to participation. First, many parents and students were using outdated devices (for example, older desktops and laptops without a camera) that could not support their participation in Zoom meetings. The majority of parents were unfamiliar with the Zoom platform. This made it difficult to receive and accept Zoom meeting invitations, log their children onto the Zoom meetings, and ensure that their children were successfully connected. Other technological challenges included poor sound quality, poor-quality Internet connectivity that often resulted in breaks during video streaming, and bandwidth problems that required turning off the camera to be heard and stay connected to the Internet. Those households with more than one child attending the center also needed reliable devices for each person in the family.

Agency staff needed to address the challenges faced by these families to provide remote services. They elicited the assistance from the local university’s fabrication laboratory, a joint community–university operation, with whom they had a pre-existing partnership. Laboratory staff assisted parents over the phone to address technology problems. The local school district gave away Chromebooks to address such issues and widely shared information about it online, through phone announcements, and through the local media. The agency staff personally reached out to ensure that students could receive devices.

Recognizing that access to appropriate technology was just one barrier to participation, the center adjusted services to meet some of the families’ other needs. Based on the findings of the needs assessment, the center distributed food to families and provided academic review materials that students could work on independently at home either in addition or in the event they were unable to attend online sessions.

Overall, the staff observed that more middle and high school students (38 percent) participated in their remote sessions than elementary school students (14 percent). The staff believed this difference in participation reflects the older students’ higher level of independent digital literacy skills compared with younger students. To encourage greater participation in their online activities, the staff encouraged its students to phone or text one another and join in the activities. Staff also polled parents about their comfort navigating their children’s remote learning instruction and found that families with elementary school-age children averaged 3.2 out of 10, whereas families with high school youths averaged 6.2. The overall average among 36 families participating at this point was 4.5 out of 10, a sobering result.

The SEL groups were reinstated in June 2020 after the end of the school year, as the staff was cautious about not overwhelming parents with additional obligations because they were already struggling to keep up with their children’s remote learning instructions. By coincidence, the groups were restored the week following the murder of George Floyd; thus, activities resumed as mobilizations for racial justice rose around the country. In the last weekend of May 2020,
the local community where the agency and university are situated experienced active looting in response to the growing protests and a city response in the form of a curfew order.

The third author (RP), who identifies as Latinx, led the facilitation of the weekly 30-minute remote SEL groups supervised by the first two authors (KT and KW). Agency staff and volunteers attended and co-led each session; staff and volunteers have diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (White, Black, and Latinx), and all reside in the local community. The groups were set up much as they were before the pandemic. Activities from Merrell’s Strong Kids and Teens were again adapted and delivered remotely. Because activities were now delivered on an online platform, facilitators included materials identified from a range of online sources (for example, YouTube videos). After each SEL session, staff and their summer volunteers provided feedback and suggestions for future activities over Zoom chat.

Facilitators noted that sustaining student engagement continued to affect SEL lesson implementation, and they attributed the lack of student interest to the need to conduct SEL activities online. In addition, there were concerns to discuss due to the national reckoning with racial injustice. A staff member or volunteer shared in one focus group session that

the challenge is making sure that the kids are actually doing what you say ... you have to keep reminding them to pay attention. I think that if we weren’t doing it remotely, it’d be a lot easier to keep the children engaged.

Another facilitator reflected that “I feel like, over the phone or on the screen, it’s harder to hear what everyone is saying or see if they are actually doing the activity.” Another shared that, “We need to kind of try harder to pull it out of them [meaning: engage the students], especially those that are more reluctant to speak.” Another suggested that “Sometimes it’s hard for the kids to understand what it is that we are trying to get through to them and how they should respond. If they don’t understand quite fully, they don’t participate or they don’t answer.” These sessions also became an opportunity for staff and volunteers to discuss physical safety issues with the youths and families due to the social unrest in the local community and to monitor their well-being as COVID-19 rates increased in the community.

Students only received three weeks of online SEL activities. These sessions were planned around the objective of instilling hope in students. For instance, in one session, as part of the ice-breaker activities, students were asked who they would choose if they could swap lives with one person for a week. Students were also asked to describe their top three goals for the year. Facilitators shared that students enjoyed the following remote SEL activities: games, engaging videos, role-plays, and dancing. Students particularly liked the TikTok dance activities. A facilitator reflected that students “were just kind of shy about dancing, and you really need to encourage them to, kinda like, ‘come on, get up, let’s dance!’” Another summarized that the goal of the activities is “to build a relationship with the students.”

THE REOPENING

On July 7, 2020, as the restrictions from the COVID-19 pandemic eased, the agency decided to reopen the center, and the SEL sessions resumed in person. RP continued to lead in the sessions supervised by KT and KW. The center’s activities were conducted under strict guidelines and protocols; the area’s public health department and the authors’ institution division safety officer approved them. The guidelines proved to be a challenge as the facilitators needed to ensure that students stayed distanced from each other and wore their masks properly. As staff and volunteers observed, students were excited to be seeing their friends again in person. In the first few days of the reopening, it was a struggle to sustain students’ attention and maintain social distancing.

Facilitators developed creative ways to maintain public health requirements while delivering the activities in this reopening phase, such as placing hula hoops six feet apart on the ground for students to sit in during group activities to keep recommended physical distance from each other. Many activities, such as yoga and TikTok dances were planned to be conducted outdoors. These outdoor sessions provided more space for physical activities while maintaining social distancing. Before students were allowed to enter the building, a facilitator personally distributed hand sanitizer to each student to ensure that they had properly sanitized before touching any surfaces in the facility. Each student kept their personal belongings and SEL activity
materials (for example, pencils and worksheets) in gallon-size plastic bags to separate their things from materials used by others. Initially, facilitators found that enforcing proper mask wearing and social distancing was challenging; however, students responded well when staff and volunteers incentivized adherence to mask rules with small treats and sticker charts.

Facilitators reflected on the advantages of the in-person format:

If students get distracted by things, it’s easier for us to correct them like, ‘just put that down’ . . . but remotely, you can’t always see what they are doing on screen. They can turn the camera off . . . and we don’t have

But facilitators still struggled. For instance, when playing emotion charades, one facilitator observed that it “was fun for the younger students. But it was definitely a challenge for older youth, just because they’re in front of their friends and they don’t want to be their self[es].” At the same time, they were determined. A facilitator reflected: “The dancing, music, charades, all that kind of fun stuff . . . they don’t really think [it] is learning, but it’s learning.” Another facilitator said that it was important to “keep SEL engaging” through all the restrictions and challenges.

Further complicating the sessions, protests were ongoing nationally and in the local community, and the media made the murders of Black Americans at the hands of police very immediate. Effects were both deeply personal and societal. Although the Strong Kids and Teens curriculum does not directly address racism and discrimination, facilitators applied SEL skills based in the curriculum to their discussions with students, making it a natural and important extension of SEL content. Emotions were a frequent topic of focus, and facilitators sought to foster students’ understanding and their awareness of emotions. Emotional charades and similar games as well as having students develop their own emotion intensity charts and teaching them to recognize their body reactions to anger proved valuable. Facilitators validated students’ feelings of anger and sadness regarding systemic oppression. The groups discussed and practiced skillful ways for dealing with the inherent stressors of racial injustice, expressing emotions, and working for change. Facilitators reported that the mindfulness activities in the Strong Kids and Teens curriculum were particularly helpful in coaching students on appropriate ways to manage their feelings.

CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF CREATIVITY

The global pandemic and the national mobilization for racial justice have presented unique challenges to effective SEL education, both for in-person and remote sessions. At the focal agency, flexibility and creativity were critical to the success of SEL programming. Before conducting remote sessions during the stay-at-home order, agency staff assessed and responded to family needs with service changes to facilitate participation in remote SEL programming. Facilitators maintained open minds and exercised creative thinking to engage students in remote activities and to ensure that everyone abided by public health safety guidelines. In their creative and empathic response to the needs of students, families, and public health, the agency and its staff and volunteers modeled key SEL skills in real time, such as engaging in supportive relationships with students and families, making responsible decisions to benefit the community, and using knowledge and skills to achieve personal and collective goals (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2020), while also delivering a high-quality SEL curriculum. As the pandemic continues and the push for racial justice intensifies, the experiences of the agency and its staff and volunteers have emphasized the need for honest reflection; listening and responding to the needs of students and their families; and creative thinking in delivering high-quality, engaging SEL content in adverse circumstances. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic and mobilization for racial justice will have lasting effects on the practices of education and social work, as well as on student development. Thanks to the humble reflection, skilled response, and flexibility of the center and its staff and volunteers, students were able to learn and practice valuable SEL skills to help them cope with the challenges of an extraordinary time.

The following are three useful resources:

1. CASEL CARES COVID-19 Resources (https://casel.org/covid-resources/). This website was particularly useful as it provided numerous resources and pointers on addressing SEL specific to the pandemic.
2. YouTube Channel: The Kiboomers—Kids Music Channel (https://www.youtube.com/user/KIBOOMU). This resource was useful with the elementary group to identify music and dance lessons that can be woven into the
SEL lessons. The students particularly liked the “Emotions Hokey Pokey” song.

3. YouTube Channel: Lessons of SEL (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo0zW6kL
Pq2Ns_51AaZN0lQ). Videos from this channel were shown to the secondary group to talk about SEL. The wide range of topics covered in this channel helped to shape conversations with older youths.

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