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“Positive Attitude”: A multilevel model analysis of the effectiveness of a Social and Emotional Learning Program for Portuguese middle school students



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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact, reported by students and their teachers, of a universal, school-based, social-emotional learning program, implemented in three school years on the social-emotional competencies of middle school students (7th to 9th grade). It also analyzes, at post-test and follow-up, the differential results by gender and among students with lower levels of competence. There were 1091 participants, 855 students received the treatment condition (i.e., Project Attitude) and 236 students the control condition. Self-reports identified positive intervention results in social awareness, self-control, self-esteem, social isolation and social anxiety, teachers reported gains in all dimensions. These positive effects were stably effective along the three cohorts. Self-reports also identified bigger gains for girls in social awareness and for boys in social anxiety, self-esteem and leadership. Students with initial lower levels of competence benefited more from the intervention, especially at follow-up. These results support the effectiveness of social-emotional learning programs.

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Introduction

In today's society children and adolescents spend more time in schools than any other place and, as such, schools are expected to play important roles in promoting their development by preparing them for their future roles in society (Sklad, Diekstra, DeRitter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012). There is increasing consensus that to fulfil their role as best as possible, the teaching of social and emotional skills should also be considered a core task of school systems in addition to cognitive-academic skills (Greenberg et al., 2003; Sklad et al., 2012). Thus, the development of social and emotional competencies is an area that has been receiving increased attention in several countries (Coelho & Figueira, 2011; Diekstra & Gravesteyn, 2008; Kimber & Sandell, 2009), but studies about SEL program implementation have mainly been done in the United States (Sklad et al., 2012). As such, the cultural specificity renders it unclear the extent to which they are appropriate for students in other national or cultural contexts (Castillo, Salguero, Fernández-Berrocal, & Balluerka, 2013; Diekstra & Gravesteyn, 2008).

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Social and emotional learning (SEL)

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) claims that Social and Emotional Learning “involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills 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 (2012, p. 6)”, as such the SEL conceptual framework targets a combination of behaviours, emotions and cognitions.

Most SEL programs are focused on universal prevention, which is preventing behavioural problems by promoting the development of social and emotional competence (Greenberg et al., 2003). Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) recommend that SEL program follow four practices presented under the acronym SAFE: Sequenced (a step-by-step training approach), Active (include active forms of learning), Focused (focus sufficient time on skill development) and Explicit (have explicit learning goals), which lead to more successful SEL programs. Programs also need to be carefully monitored to ensure that they are delivered as intended by their developers in order to achieve better results (Durlak et al., 2011).

SEL in the classroom setting

SEL is linked to improved classroom climate (Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004), pro-social behaviour (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012) and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004), as well as reductions in aggressiveness (Castillo et al., 2013; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002; Ruiz-Aranda et al., 2012), mental health problems (Castillo et al., 2013; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2011; Ruiz-Aranda et al., 2012) and substance use (Catalano et al., 2002; Kimber & Sandell, 2009).

An extensive meta-analysis including 213 SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011) concluded that participation in universal SEL programs improved students' social and emotional competencies, attitudes about self, others, and school, pro-social behaviours, while also contributing to reduced conduct and internalizing problems. Another meta-analysis of 75 recently published studies (Sklad et al., 2012) also concluded that these programs have beneficial effects in social skills and pro-social behaviour.

CASEL (2012) recommends that SEL programming should be carried out from preschool to high school. However, in recent reviews, the majority of studies analysed involve program application with elementary school students (Durlak et al., 2011). An exception is a meta-analysis by Sklad et al. (2012), where the majority of studies was conducted with secondary students.

This is an important issue since programs that present a pattern of good results among elementary school students may lack effectiveness in middle school settings (Orpinas et al., 2000). Shapiro, Burgoon, Welker, and Clough (2002) reported that after the application of a program for late elementary (4th and 5th grade) and middle school, there was a higher impact on aggressive behaviours among middle school students. Intervention during middle school is crucial, since students become more disengaged from school as they progress from elementary to middle and to high school, with 40–60% of high school students becoming chronically disengaged from school during that period (Klem & Connell, 2004). In Portugal this is a pressing issue since in 2013 there was still a school dropout rate of 19.2%, against an average of 11.9% in the European Union (Eurostat, 2012). However the revision conducted by Faria (2011) for the Fundación Botín did not report upon any SEL middle school program in the country.

Ongoing issues with SEL programs

Despite the rapid development of the investigation in this field, some important issues still remain to be addressed in SEL research: the use of more than one informant to report program results is often recommended (Achenbach et al., 2008; Wigelsworth, Humphrey, Lendrum, & Kalambouka, 2010), but seldom used. Another important issue raised in recent meta-analyses (Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012) is that there are few studies in the literature analysing the impact of variables that influence the effects of the programs and some, such as gender or baseline levels of competence present mixed results.

Regarding gender, there are some studies where effects from these programs vary in accordance to gender. There are studies that report higher intervention effects for boys, in the reduction of violent behaviour (Shapiro et al., 2002) and in the enhancement of emotional self-concept (Coelho, Sousa, & Figueira, 2014). While other studies (Taylor, Liang, Tracy, Williams, & Seigle, 2002) found different results from the intervention by gender with boys presenting increased levels of self-concept while girls had developed assertiveness and better overall middle school adjustment. However, in their reviews, neither Adi, Killoran, Janmohamed, and Stewart-Brown (2007), nor Diekstra and Gravesteyn (2008) concluded for the existence of sufficient evidence for the differential effects of gender in the effectiveness of SEL programs.

Program effectiveness may also vary according to the pre-existing levels of the competencies worked (Coelho, Sousa, & Figueira, 2014; Coelho, Sousa, & Marchante, 2014), however there are results that present SEL programs as being more beneficial to students with lower levels of problem behaviour (Kimber & Sandell, 2009), while others (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2011) report that a SEL program was only effective among students who presented higher initial risk in a large longitudinal study.

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