

LEVERAGING SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL) FOR JUSTICE-INVOLVED YOUTH

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Overview

As defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary 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. SEL is a proven educational approach used in schools across the United States.¹ Because of its versatility, SEL is used widely for students ranging from early childhood to high school.

SEL is traditionally implemented in school settings, but the framework has direct implications for promoting success for justice-involved youth. Juvenile justice researchers and practitioners can use SEL as a tool for addressing delinquent behavior. Mental health issues,¹ exposure to trauma,^{4,5} and emotion regulation challenges^{1,4,5} are not uncommon for justice-involved youth. Despite its clear potential to address the behavioral and social challenges generally often found for youthful offenders, there remains a dearth of research on the use of SEL-informed interventions for justice-involved youth. This brief highlights an application of SEL especially designed for justice-involved and difficult-to-serve youth. Implications for juvenile justice practice and for community-based interventions are discussed.

SEL takes a holistic approach to behavioral and emotional skill building, highlighting several key skills especially important for educational

Tenants of SEL

success. SEL focuses on building self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision making, self-management, and relationship management (see Figure 1).^{1,3,6} The SEL approach posits these five social and emotional functions directly relate to a child's behaviors, thus affecting their ability to be successful in academic settings.^{1,3} Researchers have documented the success of SEL programs in promoting student academic achievement and improving social behaviors.⁸



Figure 1- Model of Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)

Despite its overall positive findings, one shortcoming of the SEL approach is that it depends on the ability for teachers to connect with and re-engage “at-risk” students in order to encourage the skills depicted in the SEL model (Figure 1). Relationships between teachers and

students from low-income, minority, and underserved communities can sometimes be difficult, so the personal connection needed for the successful SEL implementation may be weak or non-existent. For some justice-involved students, the increased likelihood of trauma, family instability, and out-of-home placements may lead to maladaptive coping and serious behavior problems that may result in placement in comprehensive or alternative schools, posing an additional challenge to positive teacher relationships. Adaptations to the SEL model that take these challenges into consideration are needed in order to broaden its applicability to “at-risk” students.

To improve the efficacy of SEL interventions, importance of cultural competence implementing SEL I of ntervention programs has been underscored. A multi-level model for developing culturally grounded SEL programs has been published⁹, providing excellent conceptual information for this work. Exploration of the impact of modifications to SEL programs on student success has been proposed as a future direction of research.¹

Culturally Responsive SEL Program: Dangers of the Mind

Given the limitations of traditional SEL, coupled with well-documented and unique needs of justice-involved youth, a culturally responsive variation of SEL specifically for youth of color has been developed. **Dangers of the Mind** (DOM) reaches, teaches, and builds young people and educators using culturally responsive resources that change the climate in which students and teachers learn, grow, and work. DOM is an SEL curriculum that guides young people through exploration of their personal struggles, (called Dangers of the Mind) and reflection on their past, present, and future decisions and responsibilities. Developed for use in grades 6-12, students gain valuable leadership skills and start on a road towards college and career readiness. DOM emphasizes social and



emotional learning through discussion, journaling, and application of lessons learned about the self and others.

Developed by Kristen Hopkins, DOM leverages the power of technology and popular culture in its approach to SEL, using examples and illustrations that speak to the unique experiences of at-risk youth of color. DOM builds key SEL concepts into digital multimedia platforms that include podcasts, social media, and wrap around supports for participating youth. The curriculum also offers opportunities for brand ambassadorships. DOM actively focuses on overcoming the sociocultural gaps between teachers and students that may hinder the learning process. Moreover, DOM’s use of technology allows for the application of higher dosages of SEL for longer durations to youth. Justice system involvement and housing insecurity are key issues for many participating youth. Dom’s youth-centered, culturally relevant content and emphasis on ease of access make it an ideal SEL intervention for justice-involved youth of color.

DOM interventions have been successfully implemented with hard-to-serve, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and justice-involved youth. Empirical evaluation of the program is currently underway. Preliminary evidence from school districts and youth detention centers in Washington DC and Durham, NC, which have implemented the DOM program, show marked improvement in student’s academic and behavioral outcomes. Students showed increased confidence in their academic performance, improved self-concept, and a stronger connection to the adults in their lives. DOM is grounded in SEL’s theoretical framework, which underscores the importance of creating relatable learning environments for students.² DOM’s innovative approach to SEL overcomes the well-documented challenges traditional SEL programs experience by taking steps to ensure an organic learning process for disadvantaged youth. Findings from the forthcoming evaluation of this program can be used to guide SEL program development for other student populations of interest.

Applications and Implications for Juvenile Justice

Despite the wide use and documented success of SEL interventions in educational settings, SEL-informed juvenile justice interventions are not common. Programs designed to promote academic and social success for justice-involved youth must focus on the unique needs of this population through programming that is evidence-based and also relevant and impactful. Programs like DOM are rare and deserve wider recognition for meeting the needs of underserved, justice-involved students of color. More research is needed to validate the positive outcomes found in preliminary evaluations of the DOM curriculum. Using programs such as DOM or other similar efforts, juvenile jurisdictions and youth-serving programs should consider how to integrate SEL into their treatment of youthful offenders. Because Youth Development Centers (YDCs) and Detention Centers in the state of North Carolina already provide educational services to custodial youth, implementing SEL into the existing curricula in these facilities could occur relatively seamlessly. Given the overrepresentation of minority youth confined in these facilities, culturally relevant educational options for these youth is critical for their success upon reentry.

SEL is an evidence-based and popular approach to educational and behavioral intervention. Juvenile justice practitioners should leverage the high quality research and information that exists on SEL as a tool for promoting adjustment for justice-involved youth. With North Carolina's recent implementation of Raise the Age (RTA), now is the time to infuse educational programming for justice-involved youth with high quality intervention approaches and models that are likely to be successful. Special attention should be given to culturally responsive programs like DOM that build on

successful practice, with adaptations to meet the needs of a wider range of youth.

To learn more about the Dangers of the Mind curriculum, visit:

<http://www.dangersofthemind.com/home-page>

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