

Supporting Students with Social and Emotional Issues

Melinda Roy

Abstract

This paper reviews literature relating to social and emotional (SE) issues that affect students within the school context. The three themes that emerged from the reviews include the particular SE issues affecting school performance, interventions and strategies assisting students who experience SE issues, and supportive people and environments. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize previous research conducted with the intention of enhancing my knowledge in relation to my current professional position, which involves working with students who experience SE issues in an alternative educational setting. The results of this synthesis are discussed in the context of the emergent themes. Discussion is centred not only on how these research findings relate to my professional position, but also on how implementation will be incorporated into school programming as a result of research discoveries.

In my current professional position, I work with students who experience many social and emotional (SE) difficulties. Some of these challenges include mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and personal trauma. Other issues that my students are dealing with include cutting, substance abuse, abuse, poverty, challenges with sexuality, and various home life challenges. Because of their life circumstances, many of these students have not been successful in school to this point, and they experience many gaps in their learning. My program helps to address the issues they are facing and then offer alternative ways for course delivery and appropriate programming. This approach to education looks different from individual to individual. Some students attend regular class and then have the option to work on their assignments in the alternative education (Alt. Ed.) room, where they receive support and guidance. Others may require a more individualized approach to coursework, whereby I provide the programming and they do not attend the regular classroom.

My literature research focused on strategies and programs that support students with SE challenges in high school. I wanted to find creative ways to support students who have difficulty managing the “traditional” school system because of personal challenges, not because of cognitive ability. I believe that we as educators can adapt our pedagogy and support these students so that they can experience success while addressing and guiding them through their personally challenging situations. I began to research articles on the following SE issues: depression, sleep difficulties, sexual orientation, risk-taking behaviours, and psychological needs satisfaction. I then explored articles that discussed interventions and strategies that assist students with SE issues in having positive school experiences.

Teachers and school systems are increasingly dealing with students with SE health challenges. Teachers and support personnel are not always prepared to cope with some of these issues, because they fall outside the formal training of academics and classroom management. Additional training is needed at the classroom level for teachers who are the first responders to students who present with emotional distress. Although I did not research this area specifically, the articles that I review in this paper have indicators of student emotional distress for teachers and offer strategies that may be helpful for all school personnel as they work to support their students through emotional anxiety and distress.

Review of Literature Related to Students’ Social and Emotional Issues

Literature examining SE difficulties for students in high school provides a basis for appropriate programming that fosters school success and supportive environments. The following sections present research findings that address SE issues affecting school

performance, interventions and strategies assisting students with SE issues, and supportive people and environments.

Social and Emotional Issues Affecting School Performance

SE issues present many academic and daily functioning challenges for students who experience symptoms in this area. Coping with mental health issues often prevents individuals from reaching their full potential at school and in all areas of life. SE concerns develop for several different reasons, including the environment at home and school, genetics, and specific circumstances such as loss, poverty, and lack of positive relationships, to name a few. This section reviews literature that discusses the following SE concerns: depression and particularly sleep disturbances related to depression, sexual orientation, risk-taking behaviour, and psychological needs satisfaction. These issues affect school performance and decrease overall school experiences for students who possess SE symptoms.

Depression, and sleep disturbances related to depression. Delva, Granillo, Grogan-Kaylor, and Maurizi (2013) reported the negative effects that symptoms of depression have on academic and overall achievement outcomes for students. This mental health issue is linked to many disruptions in daily living that directly relate to lack of success at school in all aspects. For example, school belonging is a major contributing factor to positive school experiences. “Research shows that school belonging contributes both to increased academic achievement and to lower levels of internalizing behaviours, depressive symptoms, and feelings of loneliness” (Delva et al., p. 619). Without a sense of belonging and meaningful social relationships, students are at risk for depressive symptoms that lead to lower academic achievement.

Boe, Haugland, Hysing, Sivertsen, and Stormark (2015) also investigated SE challenges for students in school. Their study’s main focus was to examine the association between school absences and “sleep duration, insomnia, sleep deficiency, tiredness, and sleepiness” (Boe et al., p. 3). Boe et al.’s second aim was to investigate “to what extent depression may explain some of these associations” (p. 3). At the developmental stage of adolescence, sleep becomes a health-related issue that affects many students, as growth and hormone changes are heightened. This age group also experiences a wide range of social changes that often affect the amount of sleep they get. Lack of sleep for adolescents is an issue that may influence school attendance and performance.

Boe et al. (2015) used a web-based questionnaire to conduct a survey that covered a broad range of mental health-related issues and daily life functioning questions, including questions on insomnia. Depression was measured by means of the Short Moods and Feelings Questionnaire (SMFQ). Official register-based data were collected from schools to measure attendance. The study yielded some interesting results. It revealed that there were increased absences among older students as compared to their younger peers. It also showed that there was decreased attendance among lower-income families. Sleep duration was significantly associated with school absence. Boe et al. also found that “mental health and depression account for some of the relationship between sleep and school attendance” (p. 7). Depression was only partially confirmed as having a direct association with amount of sleep and school attendance. This could be due to the nature of these disorders. Depression and insomnia are two separate disorders, but they often co-exist within individuals who experience either one.

The common theme between the studies by Delva et al. (2013) and Boe et al. (2015) is how depression and amount of sleep have a significant impact on school performance. Sleep disturbances appear to co-exist with depression, both which then ultimately influence school attendance. In my experience of working with students who live with depression, I have found that school expectations often exacerbate their symptoms. Students with depression comment that it is a struggle to get out of bed in the morning. They have also stated that they “feel like a

failure,” and when they are not able to attend school because of their disorder, they continue the cycle of failing. They fear that they have become that which they fear.

Sexual orientation. Challenges with sexual orientation and sexual minority affiliation also have potential to affect positive school experiences. Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) are at risk for SE distresses. Konishi and Saewyc (2013) examined the link between victimization and sexual orientation, and how this link contributes to challenges with SE health, extending to school-related outcomes among adolescents. Several studies have been conducted on the effects of bullying on students who identify as LGBTQQ. This particular study by Konishi and Saewyc examined how victimization has contributed to negative SE health.

Konishi and Saewyc (2013) collected their data from a survey that was done in collaboration with the provincial government in British Columbia. The British Columbia Adolescent Health Survey (BCAHS) surveyed random classrooms of grades 7-12 students across the province and in selected school districts across western Canada. The survey included self-labelling measures to determine sexual orientation, and measures of bullying and sexual harassment. It incorporated questions on SE variables and school-related variables, including skipping school, liking school, educational aspiration, and activity engagement. Results of the study indicated that the “prevalence of all forms of victimization among LGBTQQ students was higher than those for their heterosexual peers,” and that “LGBTQQ students who had been victimized were at greater risk for all school-related and social-emotional challenges than their non-victimized heterosexual peers” (Konishi & Saewyc, p. 509).

The results of Konishi and Saewyc’s (2013) study reflect what I have witnessed while working with LGBTQQ students. Depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation have been the most common SE issues that I have seen LGBTQQ students present. School environments wherein the cultural milieu is hetero-dominant can lead to LGBTQQ students feeling disconnected, and this feeling can often lead to further isolation. SE disorders such as depression result from these students not feeling safe to be who they are, a very real fear that plays out in their being bullied or marginalized because of their sexual identification. Even though many of these students are very capable of achieving academic success, they may not experience it because SE issues become too overwhelming.

Risk-taking behaviour. SE struggles often lead to risk-taking behaviour as a result of not feeling connections in school. Buckley, Chapman, Sheehan, and Shochet (2014) examined this concept in their research. They conducted semi-structured interviews that asked open-ended questions of 14 teachers. It was interesting to read teachers’ perspectives of students’ SE issues, because they are often the “first responders” when noticing changes in student behaviour within their classrooms. “Teachers who participated in this study believed that disengaged or high-risk students are often those who have low sense of self-worth” (Buckley et al., p. 423). When teachers become aware of the signs of disengagement in students, they can work to help build connections for them and encourage them to feel valued.

Engagement is an issue that teachers continually encounter in their classrooms. When students are engaged in their learning, they feel a connection to both their accomplishments and the environment. Disengaged students often look for other sources of engagement, which may lead to risk-taking behaviour. Learning and implementing ways to engage all students by building relationships wherein teachers get to know personal interests of students in order to promote positive engagement is a strategy that fosters connectedness.

Psychological needs satisfaction. Students perform better at school when their basic needs are met. The many unmet needs of students who cope with SE difficulties can be overwhelming, because they often struggle to attend school, have difficulty completing assignments, and spend a great deal of time managing stress. Duchesne and Ratelle (2014)

discussed how students perceive that their psychological needs satisfaction (PNS) is being addressed at school. As students move along through high school, the nature of their PNS changes due to different periods of demands and related stressors. Duchesne and Ratelle also looked at how well students adjust throughout this period of adolescence and how PNS is perceived at the end of high school. Through surveying a sample of 609 students from grades 7 to 12 at the end of every school year, Duchesne and Ratelle found that there is a subset of students who are at risk for experiencing declining PNS and who, consequently, may experience poorer adjustment. The results of this study suggest there is a need for PNS intervention during high school years for students at risk for SE concerns. I have witnessed how some students decline in their psychological satisfaction if their needs are not being met in various aspects of this area. If students' mental health issues go untreated, they are at risk for lower overall school achievement.

All of the SE issues discussed contribute to poor school performance and to lowered daily coping skills for students. When looking at factors that contribute to lack of success at school, mental health must be explored in order to plan for interventions. When the causes of SE issues are identified, programs and other supports can then be arranged for students in building a plan that will increase positive outcomes in their academic studies. Interventions and strategies can be built into their programs according to their individual needs.

Interventions and Strategies Assisting Students Who Experience SE Issues

Students who experience SE issues benefit from interventions and strategies that help them to gain positive school experiences both academically and socially. Many interventions are appropriate even if a student does not have a formal diagnosis, but still presents with SE symptoms. Even minor interventions can adjust the school experience so that a student's strengths outweigh the learning and/or SE challenges. This section looks at various interventions that assist students dealing with SE issues so they can experience positive outcomes at school. These interventions include goal setting, mental health curricula, alternative education settings, and universal school-based programs.

The importance of goals. Goal setting is an excellent strategy to guide students' visions of where they want to go in school and what they want to achieve. For students who experience SE issues, goal setting can be an effective planning tool that focuses on their strengths and leads to improved self-confidence as they work, step by step, to reach their goals. Carroll, Gordon, Haynes and Houghton (2013) investigated the characteristics and relationships between goal setting and self-efficacy. They hypothesized that the types of goals adolescents set for themselves will determine the kinds of reputation they seek. By understanding what motivates students in their decision-making, interventions can assist by making more positive short-term goals seem accessible for students who are at risk.

Determining how at-risk youth interpret goals as they relate to self-efficacy helps me as an educator to guide them in more positive directions. In their study, Carroll et al. (2013) divided the participants into three groups in order to determine what influence social goals have on delinquent, at-risk, and not-at-risk behaviours. There are some hopeful conclusions concerning the at-risk category. In the study, the at-risk group had some motivation toward career goals and sport-related goals. As an advocate and educator, I can focus on these goals that my students may have while helping them transition from high school to adult life, whether that be post-secondary education or employment. Another helpful finding with reference to the delinquent group in this study is that they reported a greater number of family goals. If educators can nurture positive relationships and social support through building a supportive network for students, it may help to reduce delinquent behaviour. Goal setting is an important process for adolescents because it serves to give them control over their decision-making. Whenever youth

are included in the process, they are more inclined to work toward achieving the goals that they develop themselves.

Setting goals can assist students in building positive school outcomes. By knowing what they want to achieve, they are more likely to recognize what they have to concentrate on and improve. Goal setting gives students long-term vision and short-term motivation. By setting goals and measuring their achievements, students are more able to see what they have done and what they are capable of doing. Seeing their results gives students the confidence that they need to believe they can achieve even higher goals.

Mental health curricula. When working with students with SE issues, it is important to look at the school environment, because this is where they spend a significant part of their day. There continues to be a stigma surrounding mental illness, because it is difficult to understand and therefore difficult to accept. Education is the best strategy for reducing attitudes that create stereotypes and biased behaviour. Teaching students about mental health within the school curriculum is a proactive approach not only for students who experience SE problems, but also for informing all students about SE issues.

Kutcher, Mcluckie, Weaver, and Wei (2014) examined students' knowledge and attitudes related to mental health changes following participation in a mental health literacy curriculum called *The Guide*. The results of this study showed improvement in the general knowledge of mental health after exposure to *The Guide*. A major reason for improvement was the method of delivery. Because it is taught in a regular classroom setting, the program is seen as a "normal" area of study. This normalcy helps to de-escalate the stigma often associated with mental health challenges.

Alternative school settings and student engagement. Fostering student engagement is another intervention strategy that can contribute to positive outcomes for students with SE difficulties. When students are engaged in their learning, their level of motivation to learn and to progress in their education increases. For students who suffer with SE concerns, engagement in school can be a struggle because classrooms are often places that cause stress. Managing stress is frequently at the forefront for SE students, which leads to less engagement. In short, the issues become reciprocal in their symbiotic challenges. An environment that includes strategies that assist with stress management, along with meaningful educational experiences, is optimal for students who experience SE issues.

Jones (2011) conducted qualitative research that examined student engagement through the perspective of students in an alternative high school that provided extra support to students who experienced SE issues. Jones reported that the main reasons for students being referred to alternative programs were behavioural issues, academic remediation, poor social skills, family or life events, and chronic absenteeism. These programs provided a supportive environment that addressed SE and individual needs. Student engagement is more likely to transpire when personal needs are met.

Jones' (2011) study used a model called participation identification, which measures "feeling of belonging and a sense of value for school related goals" (p. 221). Jones used this model to interpret students' accounts of how they perceived that they were connected to school and how those connections led them to increased overall success at school. Comments regarding engagement were positive, and students noted that they felt they were more engaged in school life as compared to their previous school.

Jones' (2011) study resonates with my current professional position, because I have recently started an off-site alternative program in the afternoons, where I take six students to work on cross-curricular projects. These students match the same characteristics that Jones outlined in his study (i.e., behavioural issues, academic remediation, poor social skills, family or life events, and chronic absenteeism). I have put together projects that incorporate English language arts, history, physical education, and career development curricula. We also have

group relationship-building activities wherein all students work on positive SE skill building. I can already see an improvement regarding student engagement. After reading Jones' report, I will use some of the recommendations that he discussed, such as creating connections within a close and supportive community, promoting student identification with the school community, and assisting students in resolving conflict or personal issues.

Universal school-based programs. In today's schools, there are increasing demands in teaching and in promoting the well-being of children and adolescents. Holistic approaches to teaching and learning that include social, emotional and behavioural skills, as well as academic and cognitive skills, are becoming common practice. In order to achieve these outcomes, schools have implemented several approaches that include SE programs delivered both in the curricula and outside the classroom environment.

Ben, De Ritter, Diekstra, and Sklad (2012) conducted a meta-analytical review of 75 published studies that report the effects of universal, school-based social, emotional, and behavioural (SEB) programs. In the meta-analysis, Ben et al. reviewed only those studies that took a "positive youth developmental perspective" (p. 894). They reported that 76% of students who participated in social skill programs increased their skills of positive self-image and pro-social behaviour, increased their academic achievement, and decreased their antisocial behaviour (p. 903). The study results revealed that programs that were shorter in duration had a better effect on social skills than programs that carried on longer.

Ben et al.'s (2012) study sparked great interest for me in universal-based SE programs. I read an article from the study's reference list, by Dadds, Harnett, Holland, Osgarby, Shochet, and Whitefield (2001). Dadds et al. discussed an intervention initiative called the Resourceful Adolescent Program, which attempts to integrate both cognitive-behavioural and interpersonal approaches to improving coping skills and to building resilience, so as to promote positive development. The program is delivered through classroom curriculum so that students do not face the risk of stigmatization by being singled out for intervention. The results of Dadds et al.'s study are very impressive: they showed a "significant greater decrease in depressive symptoms at post-intervention and at follow-up ten months later" (p. 312). I will use the results of these two studies by Ben et al. and Dadds et al. to advocate for universal mental health prevention programs in our school. Programs that are shorter in duration seem to have greater positive effect. Therefore creating short-term programs with short-term goals for students, created by the students themselves, would be worthwhile, because goals for students with SE challenges are much more attainable in the short term. As the process is mentored, and as success is experienced, then the goal setting may incorporate medium-term and long-term goals.

Supportive People and Environments

A very important and effective practice for assisting students who are affected by SE issues is to nurture positive social relationships. All of the studies that I have read in this literature review found that positive relationships are a protective factor for those experiencing mental health issues. The results of the study by Delva, Granillo, Grogan-Kaylor, and Maurizi (2013) revealed that positive relationships "do indeed play a moderating role in the association between depressive symptoms and academic achievement" (p. 623). It has been my experience that students who build positive relationships, whether with peers or adults, have fewer depressive symptoms in general. The relationships must be meaningful and genuine, however, rather than artificially put together in an attempt to provide an intervention for depression.

Having a caring adult in the lives of students with SE concerns is a protective factor that supports more positive school experiences. Konishi and Saewyc (2013) reported that having a caring adult supporting an individual who identifies as LGBTTTQQ lessens the development of distress and increases positive life experiences. In today's educational system, teachers often become that caring adult for these and other at-risk students. The conclusion that a caring adult

can have a positive influence on combating victimization for students who are LGBTTTQQ is a very hopeful statement for us as educators that we are making a difference.

Student relationships with other students and teachers in the school community have a significant impact on positive school outcomes. Many of the students interviewed in Jones' (2011) study gave a strong message about how making a connection with a caring teacher helped them feel more attached to their school. In an alternative high school setting, the student-teacher ratio is lower and SE supports have a greater focus. "Alternative learning environments strive to create a supportive environment that allows deep relationships to form and provides individualized instruction that meets students' unique academic and social-emotional needs to address pressing personal issues" (Jones, p. 221). Providing students who are affected by SE difficulties with an environment that promotes relationship-building with everyone helps to meet SE needs, which enables greater academic learning to take place.

Teachers play a very important role in fostering school connections for students. When teachers make positive connections and build valuable relationships with students who experience SE difficulties, they add to positive protective factors that promote better student success. Buckley et al. (2014) discussed how teachers play important roles in school connectedness for students, because teachers navigate the structure of the classroom and they have the opportunity to make positive bonds with students who may not have another supportive adult in their lives. Teachers spend a lot of time with students and therefore have the opportunity to develop and model positive relationships.

I have found that one of the benefits of having an alternative classroom setting is the opportunity to build relationships with students, and having students in my area build relationships with each other. We create a "family" atmosphere wherein students are free to discuss personal issues with the group, and we can support them with their issues. I work at providing the connectedness within our classroom that addresses the need to belong. I have witnessed students improve in their decision-making as a result of their sense of belonging that is fostered in our class.

Supportive people and environments have positive influences on students who experience SE issues. Schools can create these environments through programming, as in alternative education settings, group settings, teacher and student relationship-building, and other means by which individual students' needs can be met. When supporting students with SE challenges, building a supportive relationship can alleviate symptoms of anxiety, and create a sense of belonging that will promote an optimistic future for all students.

Discussion

Connecting the articles that I researched for this paper has given me a better understanding of the difficulties facing students with SE issues, and of the various opportunities schools have to intervene and foster positive experiences for these students. Prior to exploring the research-based literature, I made assumptions about programming for students with SE concerns that were not always backed up by research. I tended to draw primarily on my experiences of working with students with SE issues in developing programming. Although many of the strategies and interventions that I have used have had positive results, I now know the value of using research-based methods to program appropriately.

Working in an alternative setting both in school and in an off-site program, I realize that my professional position is unique. The research discussed in this paper has given me a better perspective on programming for students who experience SE concerns. One topic that surfaced several times is how important supportive environments and supportive relationships are when working with students with SE issues. Alternative settings are excellent environments to develop positive relationships, because there is more flexibility to incorporate group discussion and teacher-student connections. Moving forward, I will be mindful to nurture relationships within the

alternative setting and use strategies suggested from research studies, such as goal-setting and incorporating mental health curriculum into our daily check-ins.

I recently started a “mindfulness” practice with my students. I am confident that this program has many benefits, but the way that I was delivering it was not producing the results I wanted. After studying Jones’ (2011) article on student engagement, I will take a different approach to this valuable program. Instead of treating it like a “stand-alone” program, I will incorporate sections of it throughout the day so that students are able to practise the applications within a meaningful context.

The research studied on the topic of SE issues for students has valuable implications for providing school programming. Continuing research in the area of building supportive environments would be beneficial for those working in an alternative setting.

Conclusion

This paper examined a variety of social and emotional issues that affect students both academically and personally. The issues discussed in this literature review – depression and particularly sleep disturbances related to depression, sexual orientation, risk-taking behaviour, and psychological needs satisfaction – are only some of the many distresses that affect students. The common element among these issues is that, if not addressed, they all have a strong potential for negative school outcomes and experiences for students who present symptoms of SE concerns. Exploring some of these issues led to finding interventions that will assist students who experience SE difficulties. Many of the interventions and strategies that I reviewed stressed the importance of supportive and positive relationships, whether with a peer, a teacher, or another caring adult. Finding proactive ways to educate students on mental health issues through classroom curriculum or alternative settings produces constructive results in building positive school experiences. Researching studies that bring about positive change in education and treatment of social emotional issues is a valuable undertaking for all educators.

References

- Ben, J., De Ritter, M., Diekstra, R., Gravesteyn, C., & Sklad, M. (2012). Effectiveness of school-based universal, social, emotional, and behavioral programs: Do they enhance students’ development in the area of skill, behavior, and adjustment? *Psychology in the Schools*, 49(9), 892-909. doi:10.1002/pits.21641
- Boe, T., Haugland, S., Hysing, M., Sivertsen, B., & Stormark, K. (2015). Sleep and school attendance: Research from a large population-based study. *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health*, 43(1), 2-9. doi:10.1177/1403494814556647
- Buckley, L., Chapman, R., Sheehan, M., & Shochet, I. (2014). Teachers’ perceptions of school connectedness and risk-taking in adolescence. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(4), 413-431. doi:10.1080/09518398.2013.771225
- Carroll, A., Gordon, K., Haynes, M., & Houghton, S. (2013). Goal setting and self-efficacy among delinquent, at-risk and not at-risk adolescents. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 42(3), 431-443. doi:10.1007/s10964-012-9799-y
- Dadds, M. R., Harnett, P. H., Holland, D., Osgarby, S. M., Shochet, I. M., & Whitefield, K. (2001). The efficacy of a universal school-based program to prevent adolescent depression. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 30(3), 303-315.
- Delva, J., Granillo, M. T., Maurizi, Laura K., Grogan-Kaylor, A., & Maurizi, L. K. (2013). The role of social relationships in the association between adolescents' depressive symptoms and academic achievement. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 35(4), 618-625. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.01.006

- Duchesne, S., & Ratelle, C. (2014). Trajectories of psychological need satisfaction from early to late adolescence as a predictor of adjustment in school. *Contemporary Educational Psychology, 39*(4), 388-400. doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2014.09.003
- Jones, J. N. (2011). Narratives of student engagement in an alternative learning context. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 16*(3), 219-236. doi:10.1080/10824669.2011.586299
- Konishi, C., & Saewyc, E. (2014). Still a target: Sexual diversity and power of caring. *School Psychology International, 35*(5), 504-515. doi:10.1177/0143034313512407
- Kutcher, S., Mcluckie, A., Weaver, C., & Wei, W. (2014). Sustained improvements in students' mental health literacy with use of a mental health curriculum in Canadian schools. *BMC Psychiatry, 14*(1), 90-103. doi:10.1186/s12888-014-0379-4

About the Author

Melinda Roy acquired her Graduate Diploma in special education from Brandon University in 2010, and continues to work toward her Master of Education degree. Having focused her career on working with students in modified and alternative settings, including her current high school role in both onsite and off-site alternative settings, Melinda has come to realize that this type of setting meets many of the needs of students who experience social and emotional challenges.