

Preschool Teachers' Opinions About Second Step Early Learning Curriculum*

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Abstract

Children's problem behaviour in the preschool period is a severe obstacle to social-emotional development and a precondition for maladjustment in social relationships during school life. Professionals in the field have been improving existing practices to prevent and intervene in young children's challenging behaviour. To this end, many social-emotional learning curriculums are developed and put into practice. One curriculum that supports children's social-emotional learning during the preschool period is the Second Step Early Learning. The present study looked into the practical experiences of preschool teachers implementing the second step social-emotional learning curriculum. The study group consists of 13 preschool teachers who have received educator training in this learning curriculum and implemented it at schools. The teachers were asked questions about the curriculum's general qualities, its effects on the children's development levels, and their professional development. According to the study results, all teachers stated that the second step curriculum positively contributed to children's emotional and behavioural reactions. It helped them in class management and implementation, such behaviour as having confidence, asking for help, taking responsibility, and taking responsibility-sharing improved. In addition, expressing that they observed differences in hindering anger and in-class problem-solving processes, teachers emphasised that the children were more understanding and polite to each other, especially in free-time activities. Their interaction was healthier than before, and their listening and attention spans increased. Overall, the findings show preschool teachers' experience in implementation. They recommended the curriculum to their colleagues, claiming that it contributed to their professional development.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, Second Step Early Learning Curriculum, Preschool Teacher.

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INTRODUCTION

Parents, educators and society all agree that the primary aim of the education offered to children is to raise independent, socially talented, well-rounded and responsible citizens. Until the beginning of this century, on the other hand, children's social-emotional development and well-being fell behind the cognitive and academic achievement goals of the education provided by schools. As a result, they remained neglected as a developmental area in school-based evaluation (Thomson et al., 2018). However, social-emotional competence that develops during the preschool years is critical for early school achievement as much as for an upbeat adolescence and adulthood functioning (Blair & Diamond, 2008; Denham & Burton, 2003; Fraser, 1996; McClelland, et al., 2013; Rhoades, et al., 2011). As a result of the negligence of social-emotional development, recent studies reveal that emotional and behavioural problems are frequently observed in preschool children (Doi, et al., 2018; Justicia-Arráez, et al., 2021; Mitchinson, et al., 2020). In children having these problems, the lack of many social-emotional skills and their social and emotional incompetence affect their behaviour as much as their academic performance (Denham et al., 2013; Domitrovich, et al., 2007). Furthermore, studies on behaviour disorders draw attention to the discrepancy between the regular curricular practices for young children with challenging behaviours and effective practices that can improve these behaviours (Dunlap et al., 2006). For example, preschool teachers express that the biggest problem in managing their classes is challenging behaviours (Jalongo, 2006).

Failure to intervene in the emotional and behavioural problems seen in children on time may cause children to be excluded by their peers, their identity development to be affected negatively, and them to have difficulty adapting to school and social life (Agnafors, et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2015; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003). Research shows that individuals who exhibit behavioural problems as children continue such behaviours during adolescence and adulthood (Cabreré, et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies prove the connection between aggressive and antisocial behaviour in children and violence in adolescence and early adulthood (Alink & Egeland, 2013; Huesmann, et al., 2009; Snyder, et al., 2012).

Several early intervention curriculums have been developed to avoid negative behaviours that may continue in adulthood (Hemmeter, et al., 2007). Schools are seen as the ideal environment to implement prevention curriculums. Many countries today implement curriculums to increase children's motivation, keep them away from violence and support their social-emotional development in addition to the school curriculum (Blair, et al., 2000; Forness et al., 2000; Gülay, et al., 2011; McGoey, et al., 2005). With these curriculums, children can experience and learn various social-emotional skills in a secure environment.

An overview of social-emotional learning

Although the concept of social-emotional learning has been studied for approximately 30 years in the literature, concerning studies have increased in number only recently in Turkey (Ogelman, et al., 2021). Many different definitions have been offered for social and emotional learning. One of the most commonly accepted definitions is "*the process of acquiring the skills of knowing and managing emotions, caring and showing interest to others, building positive relationships, making responsible decisions and coping with difficulties effectively*" (Moy & Hazen, 2018; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines social-emotional learning as a process that develops five core areas of competence: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision-making. In addition to being essential for children's healthy development, these skills must be considered mainly for children with behavioural problems (Merrell & Walker, 2004).

Social-emotional learning starts in the preschool period and affects the person throughout life (Schultz et al., 2011). According to Jones and Doolittle (2017), children mastering social-emotional

learning skills get on better with their peers, show higher academic performance and have a more successful career in adulthood as they are mentally and physically healthier. Children who start school lacking social and emotional development skills, on the other hand, may have difficulties in learning (Türnüklü, 2004; McClelland et al., 2013). Since the long-term effects of social-emotional competence were understood, educators have increasingly been asked to support students' social and emotional development (Atwell & Bridgeland, 2019; Assessment Work Group, 2019).

Many school and community-based intervention and prevention curriculums are designed to support social-emotional learning skills (Thomson et al., 2018; Sklad, et al., 2012). However, preventive early intervention curriculums are suggested to be used and popularised systematically and well-organised (Domitrovich & Greenberg, 2000; Shure, 2001; Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2003; Webster-Stratton, et al., 2004). When the literature is reviewed, it can be seen that various early intervention curriculums support social and emotional learning. One of these curriculum is the Second Step Curriculum developed by the Committee for Children.

Second Step Early Learning Curriculum (SSEL)

SSEL, a structured and preventive curriculum indented for children's social and emotional development, includes curriculums designed for preschool (4 years), kindergarten (5 years), first, second, third and fourth-grade levels (Committee for Children, 2011; Frey, et al., 2000; Neace & Munoz, 2012). SSEL aims to create a positive educational setting to reduce problem behaviours, establish feelings of respect and unity in the classroom, increase children's confidence and responsibility, prevent violence, improve academic achievement, and teach empathy. It also aims to drive attachment/relationship establishment, executive functions and self-regulation, help children make their own choices, cultivate social-emotional competence, and prepare children for kindergarten and life (Upshur, et al., 2017).

The curriculum includes three core elements that regulate children's social reactions. These elements are emotions, thoughts and behaviours. The curriculum starts with empathic skills (focusing on emotions) in the first unit and deals with emotion management and self-soothing techniques in the second unit. Next, the unit includes problem-solving steps in the following parts and focuses on teaching constructive mind-sets. Finally, it scaffolds the steps of self-soothing and problem solving for children. The curriculum is implemented five days a week, and the activities last for up to 10 minutes (Brandenburg, 2018; Upshur et al., 2017). SSEL is a structured curriculum consisting of 20-28 lessons for each class. Each lesson includes an illustrated portrayal of a life event as a learning stimulus that provides a stimulus to discuss the given skills and suggests role-play activities to display.

Findings of research on the effect of the curriculum reveal that children who receive SSEL have considerably better executive function skills than children who do not receive the curriculum (Upshur et al., 2017). Their social-emotional skills are better than other children (Frey et al., 2005; Low, et al., 2015; Taylor, et al., 2017). Furthermore, violent behaviours decreased, and knowledge of social skills increased among children upon completion of the curriculum (McMahon, et al., 2000; Low et al., 2015). In addition, their academic skills improved, and they were more ready for the next level of education (Wenz-Gross, et al., 2018).

Teachers are among the most significant shareholders that make a curriculum successful. Teachers are the core facilitators in teaching children desired behaviours (Durlak, et al., 2011; Larsen & Samdal, 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Greenberg and Kusche (2006) highlight that teachers should be provided with the required knowledge and strategies to develop social-emotional skills in children, and they need the concerning curriculum and its materials. When preschool teachers are taught strategies related to possible challenging behaviours in their classes, they can decide which practice would be more effective in case of an undesired behaviour in the class and act accordingly (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Therefore, teachers are provided with guidelines and an informative video with the SSEL education set. The guidelines and the video emphasise teachers' responsibilities as role models and guides in developing children's social and emotional learning skills. (Committee for

Children, 2011; Larsen & Samdal, 2011). In addition, prior to implementing the second step curriculum at schools, teachers are given teacher training on the importance of social-emotional learning and the implementation of the second step curriculum (available at www.secondstep.org).

The Present Study

Early intervention in children's problem behaviours and supporting their social-emotional development is possible by designing, implementing and evaluating curriculum in and outside the school involving parents and society (Payton et al., 2008). Social-emotional learning curriculum suitable for and applicable to children's development are needed, particularly in preschool and primary education (Raver, et al., 2002). As the authorised representative of the Committee for Children in Turkey, The Social-Emotional Learning Academy has been offering teacher training to teachers and providing schools with the second step curriculum since 2009. Second Step is a paid early intervention curriculum. Moreover, only a few studies look into the effects of the SSEL on preschool children's social-emotional learning skills. Based on the importance of equality of opportunity in education, the researchers developed a scientific research project to enable children attending state schools to benefit from the second step curriculum. With the support of the Duzce University Committee for Scientific Research Projects, for the first time in our country, the SSEL was supplied and made available for state-run kindergartens' use for long years. In addition, preschool teachers working at state schools were given second step teacher training free of charge. The present study examined curriculum-related experiences of preschool teachers who received the SSEL and implemented the curriculum at various schools. In this regard, answers were sought for the following questions:

1. What are preschool teachers' evaluations of the general qualities of the curriculum?
2. How did the curriculum contribute to children's development?
3. How did the curriculum contribute to teachers' professional development?
4. What are the preschool teachers' recommendations to improve the curriculum?

METHOD

Research Design

The study asking for preschool teachers' opinions about their practice experiences employed the qualitative research approach. Since teachers' observations and experiences played a determining role in the success of the SSEL, the study adopted the basic qualitative research model, which "deals with the meaning attributed to experiences by individuals" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Participants

The study was conducted with 13 preschool teachers working in state-run kindergartens in the centre of Düzce Province. The criterion sampling technique was performed. The inclusion criteria were accepted as receiving the training on "the Second Step Early Learning" intervention curriculum and working at state-run kindergartens with children aged 4-6. Demographic data of the teachers included in the scope of the study are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics of the preschool teachers

Characteristics	Groups	n	%
Age	≤ 30	5	38.5
	31-36	5	38.5
	37-42	2	15
	≥ 43	1	8
Professional experience	5-10 years	6	46
	11-16 years	5	39
	≥ 17	2	15
Educational level	Bachelor's degree	12	92
	Master's degree	1	8
Age group of implementations	4	6	46
	5	7	54
Class size of implementation	≤ 20	4	69
	≥ 21	9	31

Five of the teachers who participated in the study are aged 30 and under, while five are 31-36. As for their professional experience, six have 5-10 years of experience. Twelve of the teachers hold a bachelor's degree. When the groups of classes where the second step curriculum was implemented are examined, seven are groups of children aged five years and class size in 21 and over in 9 of the classes.

Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured interview form consisting of items to cover the aim of the present study was employed as the data collection tool. While developing the interview questions, studies on the curriculum content and implementations and the curriculum evaluation processes were reviewed. Based on the review, 13 interview questions were developed and presented for expert opinion. Finally, the items were given their final form following the opinions of one academic among curriculum trainers and one academic who specialised in preschool education. The distribution of the interview questions according to the research questions is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Interview questions

Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. What are preschool teachers' evaluations of the general qualities of the curriculum?	1.1. What is your opinion about the curriculum materials? (Music, puppets, posters and cards, teacher guidance cards) 1.2. What is your opinion about the subjects and skills included within the curriculum's scope? 1.3. What do you like most about the Second Step curriculum? 1.4. Are there any challenges you faced when implementing the curriculum? If yes, please share.
2. How did the curriculum contribute to children's development?	2.1. Do you think the activities are appropriate for the children's developmental level? 2.2. Do you think the curriculum is effective in the children's development? If yes, what kind of contributions do you think it makes? 2.3. Did you observe any changes in the children's behaviours during the period you implemented the curriculum? 2.4. Can you evaluate the attitudes held by the children towards curriculum activities?
3. How did the curriculum contribute to teachers' professional development?	3.1. Do you think the curriculum contributed to your personal and professional development? If yes, what kind of contributions do you think it made? 3.2. Do you think the training provided prior to the curriculum was sufficient for you to learn about the curriculum?

4. What are the preschool teachers' recommendations to improve the curriculum?

4.1. What would you recommend for the improvement of the Second Step curriculum?

4.2. Are there any other subjects/themes/ skills you can recommend that should be added to the curriculum?

4.3. As an educator, how would you recommend this curriculum to a colleague or parents?

Data Collection and Analysis

Within the scope of the Second Step project, teacher training on the curriculum was given to 18 preschool teachers working in five state-run kindergartens. 3 teachers working with three-year-olds were excluded from the scope of the study. 2 teachers could not participate in implementations due to locational change. The curriculum, designed for 28 weeks in the 2019-2020 academic year, was completed through online practices for twelve weeks upon the school closure due to the pandemic restrictions at the end of week sixteen. One week after completing the implementation, online and telephone interviews were held with the teachers.

With the expectation that themes come out from the interview questions, the questions were left broad (Creswell, 2007). The primary goal is that the participants provide data for the researcher to define the main themes occurring naturally (Creswell, 2015). Therefore, main descriptive categories were generated for coding and content analysis was used to analyse the documents. Content analysis is a technique that helps researchers analyse the significant data resources they have (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Two researchers studied and coded data separately, and four main themes were created. Once the codes and themes were specified, their relations were revealed, and the findings were obtained.

Validity and Reliability

For the validity and reliability of the research, some strategies suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) were discussed. The first of these is member checks. After the interviews were transcribed, they were sent to the teachers in the study group and asked if they were reasonable. In addition, peer assessment was made. This review was conducted by a colleague and researcher familiar with the research. It was taken to screen some raw data from a colleague and evaluate whether the findings were reasonable based on data. In addition, one-to-one quotations from participant responses were included in the findings to enrich the data. Finally, Düzce University Clinical Research Ethics Committee approved the study, ensuring that the ethical procedures were fulfilled.

RESULTS

The findings are presented in categories and codes under four main headings, including examples of teachers' quotations:

Evaluation of the General Qualities of the Curriculum

When the teachers' opinions on curriculum materials were examined, it was seen that the teachers approached the materials from two aspects and expressed their opinions about the qualities of the materials in general and the qualities of individual materials. Regarding the overall quality of the materials, 17 opinions were grouped under four themes. The teachers thought that the materials were interesting (n=7), attention-grabbing for children (n=4), appropriate for their age and development (n=4) and supportive for children to express themselves (n=2). For instance, T9 expressed that the implementation and curriculum were attention-grabbing and facilitated learning, while T5 stated that the materials were followed with interest by children. Evaluating the materials individually, on the other hand, the teachers expressed 22 opinions concerning the puppets, music, posters and cards, and the teacher guidance cards. The teachers found each material visually and audibly exciting and expressed that the puppets were very supportive in the teaching process (n=4), posters and cards were simple and understandable (n=6). At the same time, the musical pieces remained a little slow and long (n=2), but they were still fun (n=1). Examples of teachers' opinions under this theme are as follows:

“The musical pieces used in the curriculum were fun, posters and cards were both large enough in size to attract children’s attention visually. Teacher guidance cards were also explanatory with the smallest details and were easy to use.” (T10)

“Puppets aroused a lot interest among children and they participated in puppet activities with attention. Pictures on the cards and posters were successful in drawing attention to the subject. We could easily discuss over them. Sufficient level of explanation for teachers was useful for guidance. Instructions were clear, focused and understandable.” (T12).

When teachers' opinions about the subjects and skills dealt with within the curriculum's scope were examined, teachers were seen to have expressed 17 opinions. They reported that awareness of emotions (n=4) and emotional management skills (n=2) were supported, their awareness increased in terms of social skills (n=4), their empathy improved (n=2), problem-solving and communication skills changed (n=2). Lastly, the teachers expressed that age and development of appropriate skills and subjects were covered (n=2), and the latest learnings in the national curriculum were fostered (n=1). For example, T1, one of the teachers, saying that children's awareness of their feelings increased, expressed his/her opinion as follows; "there are subjects that enable children experiencing emotional challenges to know themselves". Similarly, T7 said, "the subjects covered for emotional management for children were useful; they helped children manage themselves emotionally". Teachers who also stressed the contribution to children's social skills expressed opinions as follows:

“What we find most challenging in our classes is to support empathising and problem solving skills and I think it was beneficial in presenting them with attention-grabbing activities.” (T6)

The teachers were asked to evaluate the aspect they liked most about the curriculum, and they expressed 22 opinions under five different categories. The teachers said they liked the rich material support most about the curriculum (n=8) and that these materials were supported with planned activity flows (n=4). For example, T2 thought that the puppets and illustrated cards were explaining and provided guidance for teachers; T6, on the other hand, stated that she/he liked the planned educational content enriched with materials. In addition, the teachers also underlined the curriculum's contribution to children's social-emotional development (n=4) and cognitive development (n=5). Some expressions highlighting the contribution to children's development are as follows:

“..focusing on the neglected domain of social-emotional development is very important in my opinion, children who do not know their emotions may have difficulty in communication and expression” (T1)

“Children’s attention increased, even introverted children participate in practices willingly” (T8)

“Bringing children to think, improving their expression skills, encouraging them to work together and share in group activities, discovering their creativeness are the best aspects of the curriculum” (T11)

When evaluating the challenges they encountered while implementing the curriculum, the teachers expressed 13 opinions in different four categories. They stated that they had no difficulty during the implementation process (n=7). However, the teachers highlighted that they found it challenging to integrate the curriculum into their daily educational flow (n=3). T2 explained this difficulty by saying, "Instead of integrating the practice into the classical daily plan, I had to place it at the end of the day or in between two activities, but maybe this was a choice, not a challenge for me, I do not know". T11 stated that she/he had to conduct two curriculums concurrently within his/her educational flow at the beginning. In addition, the teachers thought the explanations at the beginning of activities were a little long (n=2), which caused a distraction for children. One teacher (T12), on the other hand, expressed the difficulty caused by a large class size as follows: *“Because of the large class*

size, I had difficulty in communicating with each child. It would be much easier to implement in classes of smaller size.”

Developmental contribution of the curriculum to children

Under the theme with which the teachers were asked to evaluate the curriculum's contribution to children's development, all the teachers stated that the curriculum made a positive contribution to children's development. They expressed 15 opinions in seven categories. After they started implementing the curriculum, the teachers observed that children gave emotional and social support to each other (n=4). They reported improvement in such behaviours as feeling confident, asking for help, taking responsibility and sharing. They also observed changes in hindering anger (n=2) and in-class problem-solving skills (n=1). T2 observed that children were more understanding and polite during free-time activities, especially to each other. They also underlined that children's communication with each other was healthier (n=3), and their listening (n=1) and attention (n=1) spans increased. Some teacher expressions are as follows:

“..doing soothing exercise when they get angry and supporting each other emotionally..” (T1)

“I observed that they could know their feelings better and could differentiate them more easily” (T5)

“I saw that the children expressed themselves better. I observed improvement in values education subjects like confidence, responsibility and sharing.” (T10)

The teachers expressed 27 opinions in mainly four categories when evaluating the children's attitudes towards the activities, and all of them stated that children participated actively. The teachers stressed that children waited for the activities in interest (n=8), curiosity (n=4) and excitement (n=4). One teacher explained the children's interest in the visual materials as follows:

“Especially with visuals and puppets, I observed that children followed with interest and participated in the activities.” (T5)

Moreover, some teachers expressed that children's interest and curiosity increased over time, saying:

“Every time I took the box to the classroom, they got very excited, and I saw their curiosity. One more thing, I think due to the high number of visual materials, information was more permanent.” (T2)

“They had lower interest when we first started to implement the curriculum while their interest rose as we spared time for it every day regularly and started using the materials. As we proceeded with the subjects, their listening skills and empathic skills improved, they began to solve their problems themselves instead of telling me and they supported each other in this respect” (T6)

“The children performed the curriculum activities willingly and interestedly” (T8)

Contribution of the curriculum to teachers' professional development

All the teachers expressed that the curriculum contributed to them in professional terms. Expressing 18 opinions in four different categories, the teachers stated that they learnt different and effective practices, particularly for children's social-emotional development (n=8). They also mentioned the opportunities to use different materials (n=4), communicate with the children in the class (n=3) and implement the curriculum (n=2). For example, T1 said she/he learnt different practices and activities that would contribute to children's development. Likewise, T4 explained the curriculum's contribution to himself/herself saying, *“It was a great pleasure to use various activities and materials to contribute to children's social-emotional development both for myself and children*

and see it return.” Sample expressions from teachers who stated that the curriculum contributed to their in-class communication with the children are as follows:

“Yes, it contributed in terms of finding long lasting solutions for negative situations that come up in the class” (T7)

“I believe it contributed. I learnt the ways of approaching children to make them aware of their emotions.” (T9)

They highlighted the contributions of different practices and activities with the following sentences:

“Such different types of practices both broaden teachers' perspectives and help us socialise by exchanging information with other teachers who implement the curriculum in the school.” (T2)

“I realised that I was not fully sufficient while trying to teach the skills covered by the curriculum before we started to implement it and that the skills were more permanent when they were thought using different materials and by extending over a longer period of time” (T6)

When teachers' opinions about the training competence that teachers received from the implementation of the curriculum were examined, it was seen that all the teachers (n=13) agreed on having received competent training as well as having an enjoyable and fruitful training period.

Recommendations for the Curriculum

The teachers who participated in the training and practice processes of the SSEL were asked about their recommendations to contribute to the curriculum. Possible recommendations to improve the curriculum content were asked to teachers, and while some teachers (n=6) found the content sufficient, some others made explanations in five different categories. T11, one of the teachers (n=3) who said visual and material diversity could be increased, expressed that diversification can be done according to children's interests and requests. Moreover, thinking that using more straightforward language would be more beneficial for both parents and teachers. A teacher (T2) expressed his/her opinion with the following sentences: *“In the parent participation part, another study can be conducted to make families understand more easily. With fewer texts, more visuals. Because such easy methods might be preferred as asking an authority to get a quick response instead of text reading.”*. Some teachers thought that more drama (n=1) and open-air activities (n=1) could be included. In addition, the teachers were asked about different themes or skills that could be added to the curriculum, and they expressed that they found the curriculum content sufficient in general (n=10). One teacher (T4) recommended that simple, applicable, and more concrete activities could be included for younger age groups.

When asked, “What would the reason be if you recommended the curriculum to your colleagues or parents as an educator?” all the teachers said they would recommend it. Most of the teachers claimed that supporting children's social-emotional development is critical today (n=10). For example, T7 recommended the curriculum to his/her colleagues, saying, *“generally we get lost in academic skills and take activities for social-emotional development for short times. Thanks to the curriculum, we can spare time for daily social-emotional development activities.”* Some teachers (n=2) expressed that it is vital to implement the curriculum in all institutions, and T10 supported the curriculum saying, *“I think it would be more beneficial to give this curriculum to teachers and parents at all levels of education”*.

DISCUSSION

One focus of the present study was to portray the implementation process of a structured social-emotional learning curriculum. The preschool teachers whose experiences were asked about

expressed that although implementing a structured curriculum with its specific materials and content along with the existing preschool curriculum they were already teaching seemed to be challenging at first. However, they did not have difficulty thanks to the detailed instruction and curriculum materials within the daily flow. Similar to our finding, Allen, Livingston, and Nickerson (2020), found that teachers were concerned about the curriculum practices initially, but their experiences of practice turned out to be positive. Addressing the material support, the teachers stated that the planned and understandable unit cards, puppets, and illustrated cards attracted children's attention and facilitated teachers' implementation. Likewise, Durlak et al. (2011) examined the effects of the social-emotional learning curriculum. They concluded that children found it boring to learn in ordinary learning environments, but they actively participated in activities with extra-curricula. Therefore, it is not surprising that the teachers emphasised the material diversity of the curriculum. SSEL includes five colourful posters, four listening rules cards, two puppets (snail and puppy), a stuffed toy called the calm bunny and a CD titled join us and sing (Committee for Children, 2011). Especially puppets, music pieces always arouse interest among preschool children and willingly help them participate in activities. With the help of the educational materials designed for teachers and included in the course and unit contents, teachers can easily follow the steps they need to take (CASEL, 2005).

The teachers think that the units and activities covered by the curriculum are appropriate for children's age and development and supplementary to the latent learnings in the national curriculum. They explained that the units have content that promotes emotional awareness, emotional management, and social skills; the subjects improved children's empathy, problem-solving, and communication. SSEL concentrates on three skills. The first one is empathy, which focuses in the definition of emotions and their possible reasons when interacting with others. Later, students learn thoughtful answers for social interactions through neutral problem-solving steps. Finally, students learn to manage their anger and intensive emotions (Frey et al., 2000; Pedraza, 2009). Jakob (2005) studied the Second Step curriculum to prevent violence and antisocial behaviours among children. At the end of the implementation, it was found that the curriculum was highly influential on children's prosocial behaviours, and there was a decrease in the aggressive behaviours of the children who received the curriculum. Schick and Cierpka (2005) implemented the curriculum with 6-9 years-old children in Germany, and an increase was observed in children's emotional competence and prosocial behaviours at the end of the curriculum. McMahan et al. (2000) implemented the Second Step curriculum for 28 weeks with 56 preschool children aged 3-5 and 53 kindergarten children aged 4-7. They reported a considerable decrease in children's problem behaviours in both groups at the end of the implementation. It was also found that children were informed about topics like social skills. Low et al. (2015) report that teachers saw the curriculum's positive effects, particularly on behavioural problems, hyperactivity, peer problems, prosocial skills, learning skills, emotion management, and problem-solving skills. Studies in the literature are consistent with the observations and evaluations of the teachers in the present study.

The teachers stated that children supported each other, and behaviours like feeling confident, asking for help, taking responsibility and sharing improved after they started implementing the curriculum. In addition, they observed changes in hindering anger and in-class problem-solving processes and highlighted that children were more understanding and polite to each other in free-time activities. Their communication was healthier than before, and their listening and attention spans got longer. Similar to this finding, Sezer (2020) concluded that the Second Step curriculum promoted children's assertiveness, self-regulation, attachment, and relation establishment skills. The results obtained in many studies in the literature support the findings. Research shows fewer problem behaviours are observed in children participating in the second step curriculum (Holsen, Smith & Frey, 2008; Weber, 2019). Besides, there has been an increase in positive social skills (Low et al., 2015), successful emotion management (Weissberg, et al., 2015), self-awareness (Bole, 2019), academic achievement and executive functions (Upshur et al., 2017). Children need less adult support (Frey, et al., 2005) and progress has been observed in children's verbal language skills (Bowi, et al., 2008). Positive effects of the short-term curriculum on children's behaviour is a significant finding of the study, which supports the results of previous studies.

As for the contribution of the SSEL to teachers' professional development, all the teachers expressed that it made professional contributions. They stated that they had a fruitful training period in the teacher training they received prior to the curriculum and experienced different and effective practices that promoted children's social-emotional development. The teachers also mentioned the facilitating effect of using different materials on establishing communication with children in the class. In the study carried out by Larsen and Samdal (2011), teachers reported that they became more sensitive with the second step curriculum. They were informed about the importance of social competence education, and they even got more open-minded and easy-going in their relationships with their colleagues. The teachers who provide children with the opportunity to discuss, role-play and solve problems in class with the training on the curriculum tend to be successful in the curriculum. Teacher training and Second Step teacher guidelines focus on key strategies to facilitate children's learning. In the teacher workshop, trainers present the curriculum's conceptual basics and offer opportunities to discuss and implement specific teaching strategies to teachers. Training for teachers concentrates on two critical aspects of the curriculum: conducting classes to develop students' skills and improving the environmental context in which these skills are expected to be used (Frey et al., 2000). Therefore, it could be asserted that the second step curriculum positively affects the social-emotional learning levels and professional development of teachers as much as of students.

While finding the curriculum content sufficient, the teachers made suggestions to improve the curriculum recommendation, such as increased material diversity, a more straightforward language, and more open-air activities. In addition, the teachers underlined the importance of promoting children's social-emotional development domains and therefore recommended the curriculum to their colleagues for use in their institutions. Similarly, in the study carried out by Ableser (2003), teachers reported that they thought the curriculum had positive effects on the school climate and recommended that it be used more commonly in schools. It might be challenging for teachers to implement a different curriculum and the existing school curriculum. However, research findings show that well-structured curriculums with understandable guidebooks and materials for teachers help teachers with classroom management and create a positive classroom climate rather than workload.

In conclusion, the present study focused on the student and teacher outcomes of the SSEL. It has been seen that a limited number of studies have been conducted so far on evaluating the observations and experiences of preschool teachers who implement the curriculum. However, it is considered that it is critically important to provide such curriculum training and open it up for experience for revealing social and emotional outcomes in children. The present study confirms that teachers can get information about the SSEL and present a curriculum in such a successful way to be a positive experience both for themselves and for their students. Teachers' experiences increase our awareness of the popularity of SSEL. The study's findings reveal that most of the concerns expressed by the teachers at the beginning turned out to be unnecessary after the implementation; and that there are more benefits of providing additional intervention practices at schools.

Limitations

The present study has some limitations. In the first place, because of the school closure due to the pandemic at the planning and implementation stage of the project, teachers could observe children's behaviours only for 16 weeks and conducted the remaining 12 weeks distantly. Although this comes out as a limitation of the study, teachers' general opinion is that the curriculum brought about positive results in children's behaviours within the short-term early intervention curriculum. Based on this view, it would be meaningful to test the permanence of children's positive behaviours in the long term.

Despite the opportunity to implement the early intervention curriculum in state schools in our country for the first time, it was managed thanks to the financial support within the scope of the project. Studies conducted on curriculum efficiency for years, offering free training and curriculum support in state schools are significant in promoting children's social-emotional learning in such a

critical period as the preschool period. In addition, it is imperative to remark that the teachers stated they benefited from the curriculum themselves.

Receiving feedback from the practitioners of the curriculum is essential for the sustainability and improvement of the curriculum; therefore, reaching out to more teachers and educators, recommendations to be gathered from further studies would bring absolute benefit to children's healthy social and emotional development.

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