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Big Feelings in Tiny Humans: Examining How Emotions and Current Social Emotional Practices Impact Behavior in the Classroom

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**Big Feelings in Tiny Humans: Examining How Emotions and Current Social Emotional
Practices Impact Behavior in the Classroom**

Annie Gilb

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Abstract

As a result of COVID-19, many schools are experiencing a rise of challenging behavior among students. This is causing many teachers to implement social emotional practices to help students regulate their behavior. The purpose of this study was to examine the impacts of social emotional learning, specifically implementing a daily feelings check-in, within a kindergarten classroom. Additionally, this study sought to understand teacher and student perceptions of the current SEL curriculum. This was completed through conducting interviews, surveys, and field notes over a three-week period. Using the constant comparative method, I generated 16 level 1 and 4 level 2 codes from key themes and analyzed the numerical data from my surveys and behavior trackers. The major findings of this study include factors that can trigger challenging behaviors for students, as well as an increase in students independently using the tools and language to regulate and express their own emotions.

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Big Feelings in Tiny Humans: Examining How Emotions and Current Social Emotional Practices Impact Behavior in the Classroom

“They hit me! They took my pencil! They cut in line!”

If you are an early elementary teacher, you are likely no stranger to hearing these sentences from your students multiple times a day, every day. My response to my kindergarteners is usually something along the lines of “I am sorry that happened. Go tell them you did not like that and try to work it out together. If you need help, come back and get me.” Sometimes the interaction goes well and makes me want to jump for joy at their ability to handle conflict. Other times, it can end very poorly, causing conflict, harsh words, and hurt feelings, which at that point I choose to intervene. However, after months of listening to these conversations and studying my students’ interactions with each other, I realized that while many of them were able to voice why they did not like something, they did not have the language to voice *why* they did not like it. I realized that I had missed teaching them a very important piece: to know how it feels to be experiencing different emotions. Naming and understanding emotions is an incredibly important, foundational skill that leads to stronger self-awareness, therefore decreasing conflict and challenging behavior in the classroom (Rademacher, 2022). As I studied my students and their actions while experiencing different emotions, I began to wonder what it would look like in our classroom for me to explicitly teach emotions and feelings during our Morning Meeting together.

Purpose

Research trends are showing that “the pandemic has already had a significant impact on the mental health of children and young people, with particular effect on the most deprived families and their children” (Cowie & Myers, 2021, p.3). The greater the struggle with mental health becomes, the more children will portray challenging behaviors in school settings.

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Research shows that “differences in self-regulation predict important developmental outcomes, like early school performance and behavior problems” (Rademacher, 2022, pp.112-113). If challenging behavior is a constant struggle in a classroom, it keeps students from having a safe and productive space to learn (Pincus et al., 2020). Schools are working to combat behavioral challenges in students through community-building practices such as Morning Meeting (Anderson, 2022; Rademacher, 2022). My goal in this research was to examine student and teacher perceptions of SEL (social emotional learning) curriculum, and their view of its effectiveness. Along with this, I also wanted to examine whether incorporating a daily feelings check-in into their daily routine would impact behavior challenges in the classroom. My research questions were as follows: What happens when daily feelings check-ins are implemented as part of the current SEL curriculum in a kindergarten classroom? What are student and teacher perceptions of the current SEL instruction used in the classroom? Do daily feelings check-ins impact behavior in a kindergarten classroom?

This study took place while I was earning my M.Ed. in Teaching and Learning and was in a year-long clinical placement. This took place in a West Texas city with a population of around 125,000 people. My placement was at Sam Houston Elementary (all names are pseudonyms), which serves approximately 500 kindergarten through fifth grade students. Sam Houston is one of 14 elementary schools in the district. Around half of the students at Sam Houston are considered to be economically disadvantaged. Almost half of students are White, 30% are Hispanic, and 10.9% are African American. Over 12% of students receive special education services, and 2.9% of students are considered to be emergent bilinguals.

Literature Review

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When taking a look at self-regulation and social emotional learning, one must first back pedal and examine factors that have increased the awareness and instruction of these things in schools across the country. We know that social emotional learning is crucial to student development and well-being, but *why* is it important? This literature review is organized as a timeline, or sequence, in order to create a deeper understanding of what created social and emotional gaps for students, and how teachers can work to help their students overcome those gaps.

In March of 2020, COVID-19 impacted our world in ways that researchers will still be learning about for years to come. For children and students, this is especially true as they were in a crucial time of development in their lives. This time was greatly disrupted and even completely lost for some. Studies show that COVID-19's negative impact on student mental health and well-being is greater than schools and families have the resources for (Cowie & Myers, 2021; Pincus et al., 2020; Tyler, 2022). COVID is believed to have long term effects for students due to an increase of adverse or challenging experiences (Pincus et al., 2020). Many are referring to the rapid decline of student mental health as a crisis (Cowie & Myers, 2021).

In the wake of COVID, schools across the nation have seen an unprecedented and dramatic increase of challenging behavior in their students (Rademacher, 2022). This has been observed in the form of defiance and sometimes aggressive or even violent behavior towards other students and teachers. The trauma that many children experienced is also exacerbated by their developmental level. Most adults have the capability and language to talk about their grief from COVID, but for the majority of children, this is something that they are still learning and developing, if they are taught how to at all. If children are not taught to deal with all that they

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experienced from COVID and other contextual factors, this cycle of challenging behavior in schools will only continue (Pincus et al., 2020).

Due to the rise of challenging behavior, fostering a sense of belonging and teacher-student relationships are of incredible importance in the classroom. Students need to feel emotionally and mentally safe in their environments before academic learning can occur (Hammond, 2014). This increases student autonomy, a desire to learn, and creates a culture of hospitality and belonging in the classroom. One of the ways that teachers can foster this is what is called Morning Meeting, which is largely defined as a “strategy that is used to incorporate social-emotional learning within the classroom... [and] consists of four components: greeting, sharing, group activity, and message” (Suggs, 2019, p. 2). Morning Meeting is a way to come together as a class to review expectations and prepare for the day. It is both for individual strategies of self-regulation, and a way to foster community in the classroom. One potential way to do this is to discuss and teach and reflect on the emotions and feelings that students may be having as they begin their day. While there are some negative public opinions out there, such as a critique from Anderson (2022), the response and results of Morning Meeting and social emotional learning are overwhelmingly positive.

Although some researchers have focused on emotional maturity and understanding in students based on their families (Dereli, 2016), and others have examined children’s understanding and perceptions of emotions (Hasegawa, 2022; Yamac, 2014), there is a lack of research in looking explicitly at how utilizing specific portions of Morning Meeting, such as daily feelings check-ins, affect students’ individual awareness and community building. There is an overwhelming amount of research on the need for social emotional learning implementation to be in the classroom. However, there is not always support or resources to help teachers keep

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up with this need. My goal in this research was to examine student and teacher perceptions of SEL curriculum, and whether they thought it was effective. Additionally, I also wanted to examine whether incorporating a daily feelings check-in into their daily routine will impact behavior challenges in the classroom.

Methods

This study examined what happened when daily feelings checks were implemented in a kindergarten classroom. It also examined what teacher and student perceptions of the current social-emotional learning curriculum were and what were the implications on student behaviors. Data was collected through both qualitative and quantitative methods that will be further discussed below.

Participant Selection

This study took place in my year-long clinical teaching placement. The participants of this study included a single classroom of kindergarten students and one classroom teacher. I sent home a parent information letter and consent form, and the students were asked to sign an assent form. I made it clear in the consent and assent materials that participation was completely optional, and the students could withdraw from the study at any time. Participation was not tied to grades in any way. Of the twenty-one students in class, fourteen received parent permission to participate. All who received parent permission and assented to the study participated. My class consisted of twelve boys and nine girls. Eleven of the students were Caucasian, three were Hispanic, and seven were African American. The classroom teacher was a Caucasian female.

Data Collection

I collected the data using a variety of methods (Hendricks, 2013). All students that participated in the study were given a survey full of closed and open-ended questions in order to

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understand their perceptions of and ability to self-regulate. I also created a daily feelings tracker as the intervention portion of my research. Naming and understanding emotions is a foundational skill in self-regulation. We tracked these anonymously and discussed skills for understanding our emotions. This intervention occurred during Morning Meeting every day for three weeks, or the duration of the study. The students would put a clip on a feelings chart for how they were feeling that morning as a part of their morning routine. Then, during Morning Meeting, we would discuss the different emotions that the class was feeling. Students could share what emotion they were feeling and why if they volunteered to. Lastly, I would teach a pre-planned skill (naming emotions, what different emotions look or feel like, tools for regulating emotions, etc.) as a mini lesson. I also used a behavior chart to track whole class behavior, as well as used the same tracker to track two who regularly struggled with challenging behavior in our classroom. This was done through observations, and the goal of this tracker was to see whether the daily feelings check-in impacted behavior in the classroom.

Along with the tracker I took field notes to observe whether and how students were putting into practice what they had been taught during the intervention strategy. I fleshed these notes out every day after school. I interviewed eight students from a range of behavioral needs, as well as the teacher, to understand their perceptions of SEL and the used curriculum in the classroom. This included two who had many behavioral needs or struggles, three students with some behavioral struggles, and three students who had little to no behavioral struggles. These students were picked based on past observations in the class, and I worked to be conscious that the students picked represented the overall demographics of the class (ethnicity, gender, SPED or RTI, etc). The interview for the teacher was approximately thirty minutes, and the interviews

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with the students were approximately ten to fifteen minutes per interview. All interviews were audio recorded and manually transcribed. All participants were assigned as a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data through the constant comparative method (Hubbard & Power, 2003), collecting data through qualitative and quantitative approaches. For my qualitative data, I analyzed and coded the data in order to look for themes, connections, and patterns. This data came from interviews with the teacher and students, surveys, and field notes that were fleshed out every day after school. I began the process of coding my data by first organizing chronologically by date. Then, I analyzed the first 20% of collected data looking for words or phrases that were often repeated or appeared to be themes across the data to generate 16 level 1 codes. Level 1 codes (Tracy, 2013) are codes that are considered descriptive and are themes that are easily understood and present across the data. I then used the level 1 codes to analyze the remaining 80% of the data. From there, I created four level 2 codes to further synthesize and critique the collected data. Level 2 codes are codes that are created from level 1 codes with the intention of analyzing the data in more depth to look for explanations and theories for the level 1 codes (Tracy, 2013). For example, I created the level 2 code “behavior” as a way to connect all of the level 1 codes that analyzed student behavior. These level 1 codes were “impulse control, safety, play, relationships, conflict, and a need for routine and predictability.”

For each created level 2 code, I created a memo to explain the code, along with an example of where this code was seen in the data. All level 1 and level 2 codes were organized into a codebook that can be seen in Appendix A at the end of this paper. The codebook tells what the theme or pattern is among the data, what level code it is, explains the code, and then gives an

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example found within the data. The codes were then each indexed into a binder and organized by level of code.

For my quantitative data, I created both a pie chart and bar graph in Google Sheets to compare pre- and post-assessment behavior chart tallies and notes, and analyzed surveys by creating percentages. Each time a student's name had to be called, redirected, or a student displayed a challenging behavior (conflict with another student, not following directions, not doing work, etc.), a tally was placed in the current part of the day it happened (for example, if a student was running during stations, a tally would be marked during stations). Then, all tallies were added up at the end of every day for the whole class, as well as the chosen individual students. The pre-assessment was considered the first three days of the study, and the post-assessment was considered the last three days of the study. I then analyzed the number of tallies and notes in order to create the bar graph of showing whether there was an impact on challenging behavior in the classroom. To create percentages out of the survey answers, I created pie charts to showcase student answers on each survey question.

Findings

After data collection and analysis of interviews and field notes (interventions included), the following four major codes emerged: student knowledge and backgrounds, behavior, feelings and opinions, and student engagement and implementation. Additionally, I collected quantitative data from surveys and our behavior trackers to notice trends in students' feelings towards social emotional learning and school, as well as to notice trends in behavior based on the daily feelings check-in interventions. One of the biggest takeaways that I gained from this research is that there are many factors that impact student behavior in the classroom. I was hoping that one type of intervention (daily feelings check-in and a mini-lesson intervention about the check-in) would

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impact behavior. While I did see impacts of this in my qualitative data through students growing in naming and understanding their emotions, I did not see a decrease in challenging behavior, due to many external factors that were outside of my and my cooperating teacher's control. This made me quickly realize just how many factors can impact student behavior in the classroom, including the need for routine and structure, students' mornings before coming to school or their families, and more.

Student Knowledge and Backgrounds

In order to understand the full scope of my students' behavior in the classroom, I first needed to understand what they were bringing into the classroom with them, and where their knowledge of emotions began and ended. The level 1 codes that made up this code were family, before kindergarten, language, and in my body. The data that I collected from interventions and interviews showed just how integral students' families are to their development and emotions. This code helps me answer my research question of how emotions impact behavior in the classroom by laying the foundation of showing the diverse range of knowledge and backgrounds that my students entered into kindergarten with when it comes to naming and understanding their emotions. It was the first step to me understanding what was happening in my students' minds and where they were on a spectrum when it came to their development of how to handle interpersonal relationships and conflict with others.

The students loved talking about their families, and took every opportunity that they could get to share something connected to their families. For example, Timothy shared the same story about his brother "kicking him out of his room to play his game" multiple times over a span of 2 days. Gan told me in our interview that he did not like going to school because "then I don't have that much time with my mom and dad..." There were also students sharing stories of how

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their families help them regulate or comfort them when their child is feeling upset. For example, when I asked Cami what she does when she is feeling sad, she said, “I just go to my mommy and hug her.” When I asked her what she did at school, when her mom was not with her, Cami’s only response was “I would just be sitting at my desk for a [long] time.” There were many other stories shared of students’ initial responses for how to calm their bodies that had to do with their families. If they were not with their families, many students could not name tools that they could use when they were feeling overwhelmed by their emotions.

Whenever I was creating my interview questions, I created a question asking about what students did before coming to kindergarten (whether they went to preschool, daycare, stayed home, etc). I was curious to see if there was a connection between behavior and students that were exposed to other children before coming to kindergarten, or if this year was their first time being surrounded by other people outside of their family every day. I did not find a direct connection between school experience and their behavior. However, most students who went to school or daycare before kindergarten did have positive experiences and talked about how much they played with others. These students were all of the ones who were categorized as students with little to no behavior struggles, or only some behavioral struggles. Cami, a student who we have many behavioral struggles with, immediately talked about how she “got bad marks” and “was being bad over there [her old school].” Timothy told me that he “played on [his] video games” before kindergarten. This shows just how important exposure to others is for students before entering kindergarten. If they do not already have that foundation of learning how to share, carry on a conversation, and work through conflict with others, that has the potential to make those first years of school that much more challenging for students. In my interview with Mrs. Leonard, she said she has seen a major decrease in students entering into kindergarten with

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these skills: “Pre COVID... they could handle social situations... it didn’t take as long to teach those skills.” This is an integral piece of students learning how to name and understand their emotions, because it gives them the skills to understand how their actions impact others and vice versa. It is a foundational step in social emotional learning that begins with playing with others.

A crucial piece of students learning how to name and understand their emotions, then move forward in regulating their emotions, is the language that they learn from those around them and then use. The level 1 code “language” was created from a mix of interviews and field note observations as I noticed the language that the students were using (or, were lacking in) as they talked about their emotions throughout the school day. If students do not have the language to talk about their emotions, then that was the first warning to me that they were likely to not have an understanding of what emotions are, or what they meant for how they felt and acted towards others. This is where our intervention of a daily feelings check-in (see Figure 1) and mini lesson was introduced in order to start building students’ language.

Figure 1

Daily Feelings Check-In



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Note. This is an example of a feelings check-in during the first week of the study. Students took a random clip from the teacher table to place on the emotion they were feeling that morning.

I was surprised by how quickly my students were able to begin implementing naming their emotions in their conversations with their peers. For example, in the third week of my data collection, I noticed Lily crying during literacy stations. Before I could go over to her, Holly walked up to Lily, put her arm around her, and said, “Are you feeling sad?” Lily explained that no one wanted to play with her, and that “hurt her feelings and made her feel alone.” Holly walked Lily over to me, and said, “She is feeling sad, but I’m trying to help her feel happy.” We were able to let Lily talk about her feelings, and took some deep breaths to calm down. I watched Holly make sure that Lily had someone to play with every day that week during literacy stations. If Lily did not, Holly would sit and play with her. Students would come up to me throughout the day and say, “Ms. Gilb, I’m feeling sad...” I would ask them why, and it opened up the door for them to process their emotions in a safe space and practice tools for regulating their emotions.

On my last day of data collection, I asked students to share one thing that they learned during our daily feelings check-ins. Sophia said that “I now know that everyone feels different emotions at the same time. I may be happy, but someone else may be sad. I need to think about that when I am talking to others.” Johnny said, “I can ask an adult for help if I am feeling sad, or I can take big breaths. It is okay to feel sad, and sometimes it just happens.” During interviews, I asked students to talk about emotions that they may feel at school, as well as how they might look or feel whenever they are happy or sad. Overall, students who had little to no behavioral struggles, and two of the students who had some behavioral struggles were able to name and discuss these emotions with little to no teacher support. However, one student with some behavioral struggles, and all of the students interviewed who had a history of having many

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behavioral struggles in our class, could not answer these questions, or needed a lot of support to answer. For example, when I asked Timothy what emotions he most often felt at school in our interview, his answer was “walking feet and follow directions the first time.” These were our classroom rules that were repeated and retaught constantly. This told me that while he knows and can process what he is hearing, he does not necessarily know exactly what it all means.

The last level 1 code is “in my body,” which was a code for whether students have the skills to understand and discuss how emotions look and feel in their bodies, as well as tools to practice regulating their emotions in order to help their behavior. Similar to the “language” code, students who were categorized as having little to no behavior struggles were able to put to words easier how emotions feel in their body. For example, when I asked Sophia in our interview about how her body might look or feel whenever she is sad, she told me, “Everything feels off, and I’m just not thinking.” Crystal answered this same question with “It would feel like I don’t know where I’m standing at and where I am and that I’m sad and everything is not normal.” Students such as Gan, Cade, and Cami, who had a history of having more struggles with behavior, asked me “What do you mean?” when I asked them this same question, and needed more support and prompting to give an answer.

The level 2 code “student knowledge and backgrounds,” that was created from field notes and interview questions, allowed me to be able to see the history that my students were bringing into our daily feelings check-ins and mini lessons, in order to be able to accurately know and describe the growth that they were making throughout my implementation period. The most prominent trends that I noticed were that students who were less likely to have struggles with behavior were more likely to already have some understanding of their emotions and what that meant for them as they interacted with their peers and teachers.

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Quantitative Data Findings

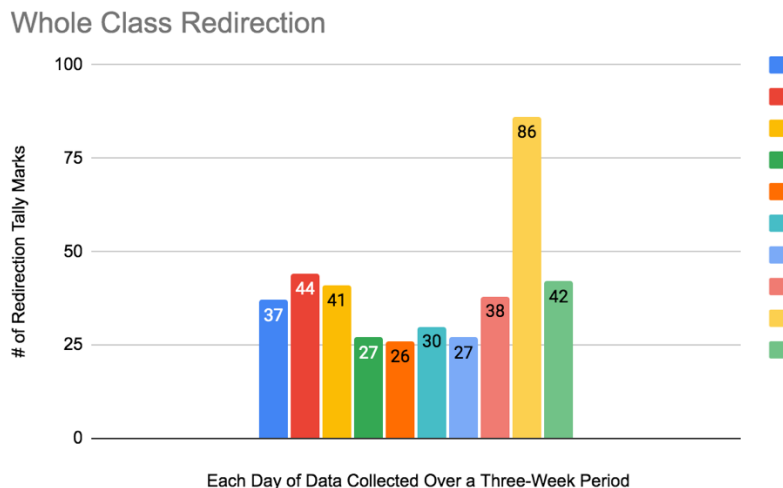
Along with the qualitative data that I collected and analyzed, I also collected quantitative data. I utilized class-wide and individual student (specifically, two students who had a history of struggling with behavior in our classroom) behavior trackers (see Appendix B), where I noted a tally mark every time we gave a redirection to a student. I chose to use this, because it was something that my cooperating teacher, Mrs. Leonard, was already using when we were data tracking for other students' behaviors for district documentation, as well as to find their possible behavior triggers. My hope in using this behavior tracker was to see a possible decrease in tallies marks, or the number of times we had to redirect students throughout the day, as a result of our daily feelings chart interventions. This directly answers my sub question of whether daily feelings check-ins impact behavior in a kindergarten classroom. Along with the behavior trackers, I gave surveys (see Appendix C) to all students participating in the study. These questions were all based on the Likert scale, with the intention of answering another one of my sub-questions: what are student perceptions of the current SEL instruction used in the classroom?

The results from the behavior trackers were not what I was hoping for (seeing a decrease in challenging behavior among my students), but they allowed me to look more closely at my qualitative data findings to understand more of my students' behavior and how that is impacted by their emotions. In Figure 2, I created a graph to represent the number of tallies marked in each behavior tracker for the whole class, as well as Timothy and Freddy, who are 2 students who we were seeing many struggles with behavior.

Figure 2

Whole Class Redirection Shown with Number of Tally Marks Per Day

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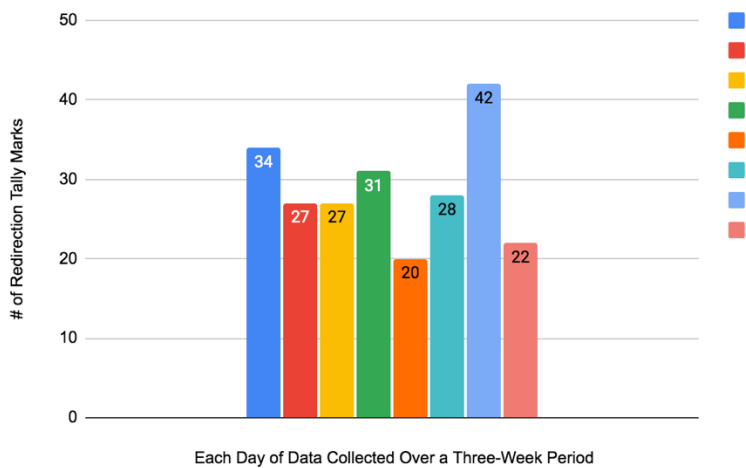
Note. This graph shows the number of tallies marked for behavior for the whole class for every day of our three-week study.

The graph for the whole class redirection shows a slight decrease in the number of tally marks as we entered the second week of the study, but then a significant uptick in tally marks in the last week of the study. This caused me to examine my field notes to see if there was a pattern, trend, or something significant that day that could have triggered an increase in challenging behavior. This led to me finding a theme of my students having a major need for routine and predictability (this level 1 code can be found under level 2 code: behavior, which will be discussed later in this paper). If that routine is thrown, there was usually a significant increase in behavior. For example, we had a class field trip to the zoo on March 7th, the last week of the study. I did not do any data collection on this day. The day before our field trip, Monday, March 6th, I noted thirty-eight tally marks for whole class redirection throughout the day. The day after our field trip, we saw the number of redirections we were giving to our students more than double, with eighty-six redirections throughout the day. Timothy was absent three times (not consecutively) throughout the study. Every first day back after being absent, the graph in Figure 3 showed an increase in the number of times that we had to redirect him.

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Figure 3

Individual Student Redirection Shown with Number of Tally Marks Per Day



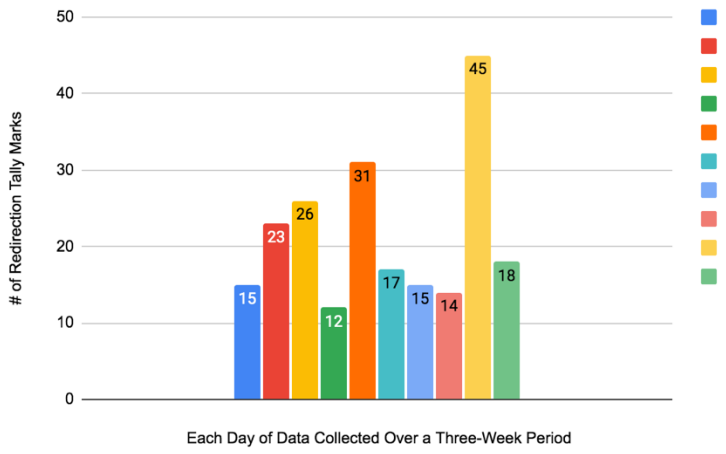
Note. This graph shows the number of tallies marked for behavior for Timothy for every day of our three-week study.

In Freddy’s graph, there was a similar trend to the whole class. The first week I collected data, we received a new student that majorly shifted the dynamics of our classroom. The graph in Figure 4 shows an increase in behaviors for him that first week, a decrease, and then another significant uptick when we took our field trip.

Figure 4

Individual Student Redirection Shown with Number of Tally Marks Per Day

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Note. This graph shows the number of tallies marked for behavior for Freddy for every day of our three-week study.

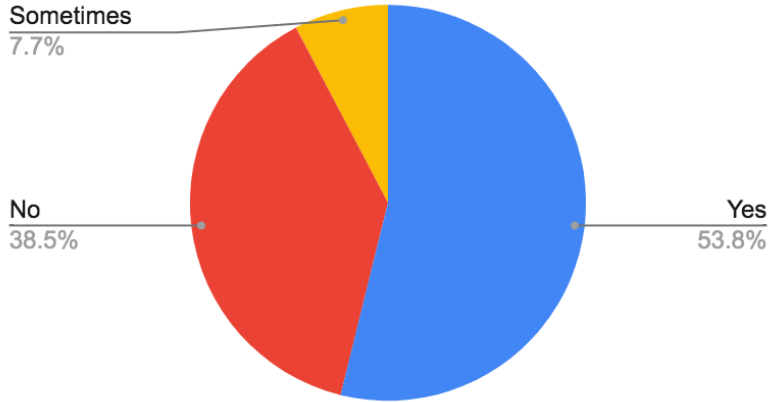
The given surveys were mostly created to understand student perceptions of school, social emotional learning, and Morning Meeting. Despite their age, kindergarteners are much more in tune with what is going on around them than many adults give them credit for. Some of these answers were hard to read, but were great feedback for the emotions that students felt at school, and how we as teachers can help better regulate themselves. For example, only approximately half of students who participated in the survey said that they feel safe at school, as seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Count of Question #5 in Survey: "I feel at safe at school."

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Count of Question 5: I feel safe at school.



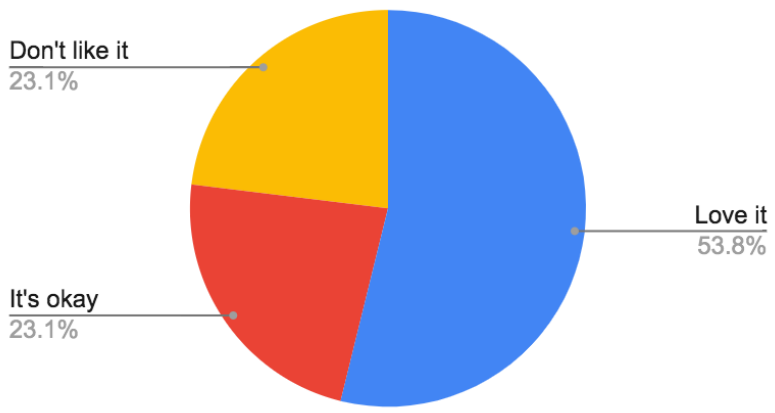
Note. This figure shows the results of students being asked whether they feel safe at school (question was presented in a Likert-scale format) in the form of a pie chart.

In Figure 6, approximately half of the students said that they loved Morning Meeting. Figure 7 shows whether it helped them feel prepared for the day.

Figure 6

Count of Question #3 in Survey: "How do you feel about Morning Meeting?"

Count of Question 3: How do you feel a...



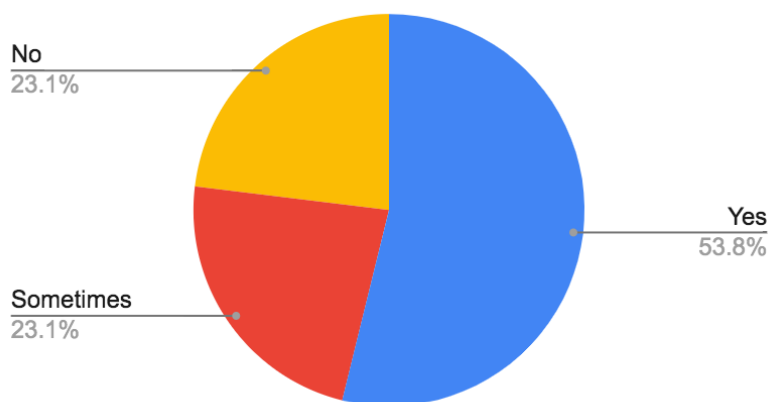
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Note. This figure shows the results of students being asked their thoughts on Morning Meeting (question was presented in a Likert-scale format) in the form of a pie chart.

Figure 7

Count of Question #4 in Survey: "Morning Meeting helps me feel prepared for the day."

Count of Question 4: Morning meeting h...



Note. This figure shows the results of students being asked whether Morning Meeting helps them feel prepared for the day (question was presented in a Likert-scale format) in the form of a pie chart.

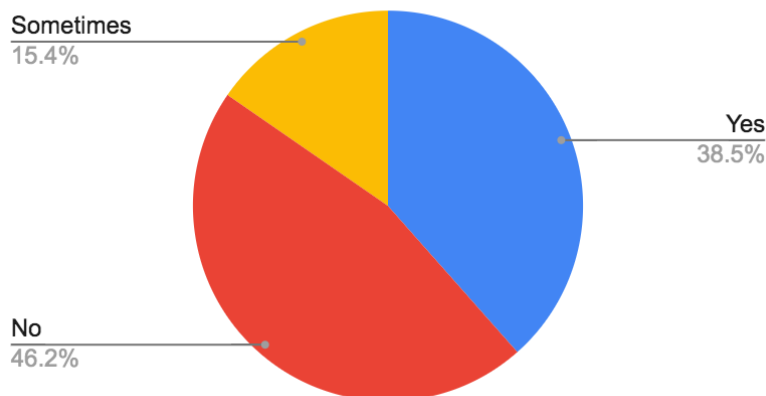
In Figure 8, almost half of the students said that they did not feel confident in telling someone when they did not like what they were doing (advocating for themselves).

Figure 8

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Count of Question #7 in Survey: "I can tell someone when I do not like what they are doing."

Count of Question 7: I can tell someone...



Note. This figure shows the results of students being asked whether they feel confident to tell someone how their actions make them feel (question was presented in a Likert-scale format) in the form of a pie chart.

Behavior

The level 2 code “behavior” was created by connecting six level 1 codes, including impulse control, safety, play, relationships, conflict, and a need for routine and predictability. This code answers my research question because it is the data that shows specifically how students were behaving and acting, and whether there was any noted growth or changes in their behavior throughout the study. Since my research questions were about how students’ emotions and feelings can impact behavior, I knew that I needed to have behavior as a level 2 code to be able to have a full understanding of the different types of behavior that we saw in the classroom and what could have been a possible trigger or effect of the noted behavior. I wondered if the behavior would be affected if students could understand why they were feeling the way that they were. Throughout the school year, a majority of our students’ behavioral struggles could be narrowed down to impulse control. In the field notes that I collected, this ranged from interrupting, arguing, running inside, not keeping their hands to themselves, and essentially

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appearing to not be in full control of their bodies. This was by far the most prominent behavior seen throughout the study. For example, in interviews with multiple students, I would ask them a question, and they would jump from topic to topic. In my interview with Timothy, the first minute of our interview was me redirecting him and helping him to stay on topic. Later on in the interview, he kept wanting to talk about his game, as seen in Figure 9:

Figure 9

Interview with Timothy

A: You feel all those feelings at school? T: Because whenever I die in that game... A: Remember, I said that we would... T: That we wouldn't say that. Dangit. A: Tell me about how our daily feelings check-in might have impacted you so far. T: You know what's my friend? Bobby.

Note. This figure is an excerpt of an interview with Timothy (a student who has a history of challenging behavior). This quote is one example from our interview to show how challenging impulse control could be for our class.

I ended up being unable to use the interview with Freddy, because he wanted so badly to share a story about his family with me. When I tried to get him to interview with me other times, he said no. We did two intervention mini lessons on the big emotion of excitement, and how that feels in our bodies. We learned tools and techniques to help calm our bodies in those moments, too.

We always referred back to whether a behavior is “safe” or not when giving a directive to a student. The goal in this was for students to see the “why” behind behavior management, and how their actions can impact both themselves and others. Play is a key piece for students learning how to interact, form relationships, problem solve, etc. I wondered if students’ experiences with play before coming to kindergarten impacted their behavior and ability to

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self-regulate. Typically, I found in the data that students who talked about playing with others were usually the students that had minimal struggles with behavior. Relationships are key to classroom and behavior management, and I was also curious to hear how students talked about the relationships in their lives, and how peer or adult relationships affected students' ability to manage their own behavior or work through conflict (another level 1 code). I was amazed to hear about how different relationships were during peak COVID in my teacher's interview, and how many students lost the social skills needed in order to form relationships. Lastly, I noticed that many of my students talked about how Morning Meeting helped ease their anxieties about what was going on in their day at school. This told me that students need a sense of routine and predictability; when their day was unpredictable, we often saw an increase in behavior throughout the data. With this level 2 code of behavior, I wanted to be able to get to the root of student behavior and see if giving students the tools and language to problem solve through discussing their emotions would have an impact on their behavior. The level 1 codes discussed above were the factors that could greatly affect student behavior during data collection. For example, when our day was not our normal schedule for a field trip, we saw a very large increase in challenging behavior from students. While I did not necessarily see a decrease in challenging behavior in the data from the beginning of my interventions to the end of them, I was able to gain a better understanding of the factors that greatly impact behavior, which is reflected in the data.

Feelings and Opinions

As one of my sub research questions was asking what were student and teacher perceptions of social emotional learning instruction, I knew that feelings and opinions of both students and my cooperating teacher would be an important level 2 code. Morning Meeting was something that we had every morning in our class to set and prepare for the day. This was the

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time when a lot of social emotional learning took place and was when I chose to do our feelings check-in and mini lesson interventions. Students' thoughts on Morning Meeting were a more diverse range of answers than I expected them to be. In our interview, Sophia told me that Morning Meeting made her "feel good... so I know how our day is going to go." Crystal told me that it makes her feel "happy and excited... because we get to show our feelings." Cami said that it made her feel "bored." Many students told me that they thought we did Morning Meeting mostly for academic reasons.

Mrs. Leonard talked about how she mostly had to supplement her social emotional learning curriculum, because the SEL curriculum used across the district was not the best fit for our students. She compared it to more of a "school-wide best practices model. Not social emotional learning." A lot of our interview was spent discussing SEL lessons and skills that Mrs. Leonard supplemented on her own into our Morning Meeting time. She used ideals from Conscious Discipline such as "deep breathing... putting words to things, and [teaching] language and skills to problem solve." Mrs. Leonard also shared her experiences of the differences she saw in her students pre- and post-COVID. Pre-COVID, students could "handle social situations... it didn't take as long to teach those skills." Post-COVID, students were showing more challenging behavior, struggling to get along with others, and problem solve independently. The school district did not offer a SEL curriculum until after the pandemic began to slow. Mrs. Leonard stated in our interview that, when it comes to managing and teaching behavior skills you have to be creative, and "...figure it out as you go. Whether it works or not, it's trying something." It appeared that she believed there could be more beneficial social emotional practices that are beneficial and developmentally appropriate for students put in place. Another level 1 code that could have a major impact on behavior was students' feelings towards school. While students

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with little to no behavioral struggles usually told me that they felt happy or excited to be at school, students who usually sat somewhere in the middle, or were more likely to struggle with behavior, could not answer the question; for example, Gan just told me, “I don’t know.” These answers showed that my students could benefit from more integration of specific SEL tools during Morning Meeting time, more share time, and a variety of other ways to build relationships and problem-solving skills.

Student Engagement and Implementation

This level 2 code is made up of four level 1 codes, including student excitement, student implementation, tools, and problem solving. This code helped answer the main research question of what happens when a daily feelings check-in is implemented in a kindergarten classroom, and whether it can impact behavior. The first major change that I noticed in my students during my study was how excited they were to participate in Morning Meeting and talk about their feelings. They would walk into the room first thing in the mornings, and I could hear them buzzing about what they were feeling and why, or quizzing another student on what they were feeling based on their facial expression. Next came student implementation, which showed examples of how my students were implementing what I was teaching in my mini-lesson interventions into their conversation and interactions with their peers. For example, one day during writing, in the second week of my study, the students had time for free writing. As I was walking around and conferencing with the students, I noticed many of them drawing facial expressions and writing about how they were feeling and why. Maggie drew all of the different emotions or facial expressions on her paper and labeled them with the correct name of the emotion. Even though I did not necessarily see a decrease in challenging behaviors as a result of the feelings check-in and intervention mini-lessons, I did see an increase in students sharing their emotions,

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comforting one another, and using their tools that we learned in our intervention mini-lessons. For example, in the last week of my study, Timothy was having a really hard day. He had gotten in trouble and had to miss several activities for not following directions and struggling to keep his hands to himself. I told him we were going to make a plan together for what was going to change in our day, and he responded with “can we take deep breaths first?” This showed that while my daily feelings check-ins may not have shown a decrease in challenging behavior, it was teaching them empathy, problem-solving skills, and how to regulate their emotions.

Implications for Teachers

The major goals of my study were to see if implementing a daily feelings check-in in the classroom decreased challenging behavior, as well as seeking to understand student and teacher perceptions of current SEL practices. The data that I collected about the behaviors of my students showed that there were so many factors that impacted student behavior. I quickly learned that I needed to widen my viewpoint from just how the daily feelings check-ins impacted behavior; I also needed to examine the skills and language they were bringing into the study, the students’ diverse needs and personalities, their families and backgrounds, and any other factors that could impact how they felt and acted. While the interventions did positively impact the way that students problem-solved, shared, and understood their emotions, the biggest lesson learned from this study was how we as teachers should be sensitive, conscientious, and responsive to how other factors impact student emotions and behavior.

Due to the multitude of contextual factors that students bring into the classroom at a range of different levels, this study has shown me that social emotional learning is a practice or mindset that all teachers should be integrating into the classroom and their teaching. This project allowed me to really be able to pay attention to the behaviors of my students, and take notice of

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their gaps in ability to solve problems, manage conflict, and regulate their own emotions. These are skills that students need to form to be successful both inside and outside of school. As teachers, we have a responsibility to the well-being of the whole student, not just to the student academically. Social emotional learning is a great way to meet this need through building relationships and giving students the tools and language that they need to be successful in life. For my class, I found it incredibly beneficial to start with foundational skills like naming and understanding emotions and having conversations about how those emotions can impact our actions and behavior. I encourage teachers to begin with foundational or simple skills such as this at the beginning of the school year (but adjusted to be developmentally appropriate depending on the grade level) and build on these skills to foster independence. Any grade level could benefit from a feelings check-in; not only did it give my students a safe place to discuss what was going on in their world, but it also allowed my cooperating teacher and I to have a better understanding of what our students were carrying and how that could affect them academically.

This allowed me to begin pondering new questions that emerged from my study. I wondered exactly what a feelings check-in could look like in upper grades, as well as what kind of language and tools other students may have in connection to SEL. Additionally, since I did not see a significant decrease in challenging behavior, I wondered how long of an intervention period would be needed in order to begin to see a difference in behavior. The last question that emerged from this study is how districts can differentiate their SEL curriculums to fit the diverse needs of students and campuses. What would it look like to have different curriculums for different campuses (elementary versus secondary) and what extra resources could be provided for teachers that would be beneficial for SEL instruction? These are all questions that I will continue to wonder about and examine in real-life situations in connection to my own classroom.

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Another important thing for teachers to note when teaching or implementing new social skills or tools is that these things take an abundance of time and patience for us to see a difference in our students and their behavior. My study was only 3 weeks. The reality for teachers is that we are planting seeds that we may never see the fruits of. Things that we are teaching our students now may not click for them or be fully understood until they are older and out of our classrooms. However, that does not mean that our actions and what we teach our students do not have an impact on them. Even after the implementation period of my study ended, I still witnessed my students talk about their emotions and use the language and tools that I taught them without prompting from me, even more so after the study finished. It took time and repetition for new skills and ideas to settle in with our students. Another thing that worked well for my students and I when it came to them grasping and practicing some of the tools and skills I was teaching them was me doing lots of modeling in real-life scenarios. For example, one day in the middle of the study, I felt like I could not get a word in edgewise with the students in a whole group setting. They were interrupting me, talking over me, and I just did not feel like I had their full attention. I chose to be honest with them, and using the language and tools that I had been teaching them said the following to the class:

I am feeling frustrated, because I feel like no one is listening to me. I am going to step over here for some space and take five deep breaths to calm my body. Then I'll come back, and we can make a plan for how to fix what is happening.

This instantly caught their attention. Not only did it teach them an authentic lesson about how their actions were impacting someone else's emotions, but it also allowed them to see me model an example of how to regulate my own emotions through using the language, tools, and sentence of "I am feeling _____ because of _____" that was outside of our intervention

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time. This worked well and kept me from raising my voice and frustration levels with my students. When I did this on a consistent basis with the students, I noticed the students saying similar words to their friends, removing themselves from the situation for space, or taking deep breaths on their own.

One of the major goals I had for my students when designing this study was to give them the tools and language to understand what they were feeling and how to use that problem solve, know themselves better, and know their peers better. When discussing areas of growth for our students in Figure 10, Mrs. Leonard and I were on exactly the same page.

Figure 10

Interview with Mrs. Leonard

Mrs. L: Another one is just being able to problem solve. Because I think that's such an important skill for the rest of their lives. And obviously problems change as you got older so you have to adapt to them. But kinder and first... and second, tend to have the same kind of problems.

Mrs. L: So just being able to problem solve and stick up for themselves, like be able to put the words to like... defend themselves, defend others. Um... yeah. That's my goal.

Note. This figure is from my interview with my cooperating teacher, Mrs. Leonard. She shared her goals for our class and how they can grow and become more adaptable through problem-solving.

I wanted the conversations that I was hearing between my students go from “They hit me!” to “It hurt when you hit me. Please don't do that again” or “They took my pencil!” to “That is my pencil, please give it back.” Our role as teachers is to support students and of course step in to help whenever necessary as they learn to interact and be in the world with others. However, the

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ultimate goal is that they can advocate for themselves and for others as they navigate relationships and grow. I have continued to notice this growth and language being used among my students. Children are always so much more resilient and capable than we expect them to be; they first just need the tools and support to show us so.

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Appendix A

Codebook

Code Name	Level	Definition	Example
Student Knowledge and Backgrounds	2	I created this code as I was analyzing level 1 codes, and began to wonder how what students have been exposed to can affect their behavior and social skills.	Who taught you that? My dad.
Family	1	This code appeared as I noted how often students brought up their families during the school day.	Why don't you like school? G: It's because... I never... I used... because um... then I don't have that much time to be with my mom and dad and stuff.
Language	1	This code appeared as I began to notice the language that students used, or the lack of language that they may have had when it came to naming and understanding their emotions.	"That means excited!" and pointed to our feelings check-in. Then another said "that's a big emotion!"
In My Body	1	This code appeared as I began to note whether students could name and understand how emotions may look and feel, and what happens in their body when they feel emotions.	Okay, so how might your body look or feel whenever you are sad? S: Um, my face is down and everything feels like... off. I'm just not thinking, everything feels off.
Before Kindergarten	1	This code appeared as an answer to an interview question, and as I began to wonder if students' experiences before kindergarten (whether they went to school) affected their behavior and social skills.	A: You didn't. Okay, what did you do during the day? T: Um... played on my video games before coming to kindergarten.
Behavior	2	This code was created out of combining multiple level 1 codes that showed examples of student behavior in the classroom.	Like, we just had to focus on... just getting along. And that's even when I had to retain the most students was the two years after COVID. And it was just mostly off social skills.

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Impulse control	1	This code appeared as I was collecting data on student behavior, and noticed that a majority of my students' behavior struggles stem from impulse control, or a lack of that skill.	They continued to interrupt the teacher and have their own side conversations. They also struggled to stay in their own space (ripping up their dots, scooting all over the floor, not sitting criss cross, etc).
Safety	1	This code appeared as I noted how much of an emphasis is placed on student safety as a means for students understanding and regulating their behavior.	...because I think it's going to be the most safe. Always resorting back to 'is this safe?' you know, things like that.
Play	1	This code appeared from student interviews, and I began to wonder if students' exposure to play aided in behavior management.	And... and... we just did stuff with the centers and we have a little kitchen and... toys for centers but I don't know what else and that's all I remember.
Relationships	1	This code appeared as I observed students navigate relationships in the classroom, and how their ability to interact with others affected their ability to solve conflict (and therefore, behavior).	When we treat other people good, they feel happy and cared for.
Conflict	1	This code appeared as I watched students navigate conflict with their peers, and began to notice the correlation between this and social emotional skills.	And when they say no, it's okay. You can- you can ask other friends to say can you play with me when they- when the other be sad like me, I can ask 'em, can you play with me, and he will say yeah! And now we get to play together and play some good games.
A Need For Routine and Predictability	1	This code appeared as I noticed that many of our students relied on knowing what was going to happen in their day to ease anxieties about school.	I like to know what's going to happen in the day and it helps me feel prepared.

Feelings and Opinions	2	I created this code because my sub research questions include how students and my cooperating teacher felt about morning meeting and social emotional learning.	But... um, I do think it's such an important time to just start off our day on a positive note. So again with like... we're gonna open our brain, it's like... we're gonna take a deep breath, um, and those little
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			opportunities to even share with their friends.
Thoughts on Morning Meeting	1	This code appeared as a large part of my research was creating a conversation to discover how students and the teacher felt about Morning Meeting during our interviews.	Um, it makes me feel good that we do it, Morning Meeting, so I know how our day is going to go.
Students' Feelings Towards School	1	This code appeared as I was asking students about the emotions that they most often felt at school.	Alright, what kind of emotions do you most often feel at school? L: Happy.













Student Engagement and Implementation	2	This code appeared as I observed the students utilizing the social emotional learning tools and discussions from Morning Meeting throughout their day at school.	The student doing the comforting came up to me and told me “_____ is feeling sad.” I called them over and we talked about our tools and practiced taking some deep breaths.
Student Excitement	1	This code appeared as I was surprised by how excited and ready the students were to discuss their feelings every morning and to participate in the SEL lesson.	...students entered the room appearing to be excited to do the feelings check in by laughing, smiling, and discussing their feelings with others.
Student Implementation	1	This code appeared as I observed the students begin discussing their emotions and practicing some of the tools that we learned about during Morning Meeting.	...many of them started drawing either how they were feeling, or pictures that included emotions in some way.
Tools	1	This code appeared as I observed students practicing their tools or discussing how they practice their tools.	I would sit criss cross and I would put my fingers like this and I would take three deep breaths.
Problem solving	1	This code appeared as I connected that problem solving is an essential social emotional skill by watching students interact.	I feel like we don't address as many things as often because they can kind of hear themselves solving their own problems now.

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Appendix B

Behavior Tracker

Name: _____ Date: _____

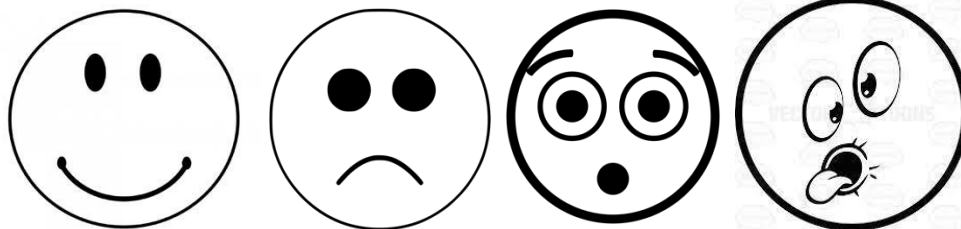
		Tally Marks	Details
Morning Work			
Morning Meeting			
Recess			
Station #1			
Station #2			
Station #3			
Station #4			
Lunch			
Writing Workshop			
Math			
P.E.			
Math Stations			
Social Studies/Science	 		
Dismissal			10 😊 = iPad

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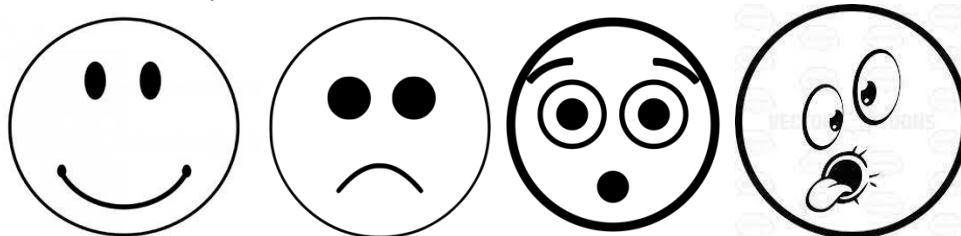
Appendix C

Survey

1. When I am happy, my face looks like...



0. When I am sad, my face looks like...



0. How do you feel about Morning Meeting?

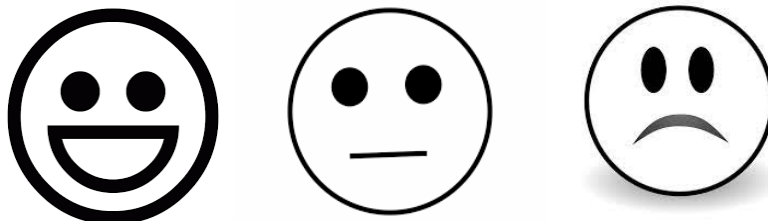


Love it

It's okay

Don't like it

0. Morning Meeting helps me feel ready for the day.



Yes

Sometimes

No

0. I feel safe at school.

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Yes



Sometimes



No

0. What I have learned at school has helped me to be a better friend.



Yes



Sometimes



No

0. I can tell someone when I don't like what they are doing or how they are acting.



Yes



Sometimes



No

8. I can use kind words, even when I feel upset.



Yes



Sometimes

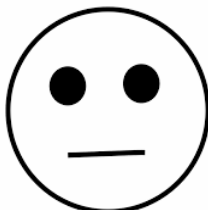


No

0. I have tools to help calm me down when I feel upset.



Yes



Sometimes



No

0. Draw a picture to show how you are feeling right now...