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Youth Social and Emotional Learning in Quality-Enhanced, Out-of-School Time Programs

Annick Eudes Jean-Baptiste
Prime Time Palm Beach County
ajeanbaptiste@primetimepbc.org

Stephanie Giannella
Prime Time Palm Beach County
sgiannella@primetimepbc.org

Celine Provini
Prime Time Palm Beach County
cprovini@primetimepbc.org

Abstract

Researchers examined social and emotional learning (SEL) ratings for two samples of 559 and 406 predominantly elementary-age youth of color, who were enrolled in out-of-school time (OST) programs serving communities mostly of high socioeconomic need in Palm Beach County, Florida. Covering the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the study predicted that programs' participation in an SEL quality enhancement project would positively impact youth SEL. This quality enhancement was expected to emerge alongside the positive effects of foundational program quality achieved through participation in the Palm Beach County Quality Improvement System, which includes an array of supports provided by Prime Time Palm Beach County, a nonprofit OST intermediary organization. Amid the challenges of the pandemic, evidence emerged to support the positive impact of foundational quality on youth in OST, as well as the positive impact of an enhanced focus on SEL.

Key words: social and emotional learning, SEL, out-of-school time, after-school, quality

Introduction

Prior research has demonstrated the positive impact of out-of-school time (OST) program quality on youth outcomes, including social and emotional learning (SEL). Naftzger and colleagues (2014) found that students who attended higher-quality programs were more likely to be promoted to the next grade on time, compared to those who attended lower-quality

programs. Extending this finding, Lindeman et al. (2019) demonstrated that when programs improved in quality, youth were more likely to increase and maintain SEL skills. In fact, young people who began the school year with less-developed SEL skills were more likely to make progress.

Pierce et al. (2010), while controlling for child and family background and children's prior developmental outcomes, revealed a link between positive staff–child relations (a key element of program quality and SEL) and better academic performance and social skills.

American Institutes for Research (2015) reviewed rigorous studies examining SEL gains among youth who regularly attend quality OST programs, finding increases in indicators such as peer-to-peer social skills, engagement, intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and positive states of mind. Likewise, a key finding emerged from a review of 68 OST studies (Durlak & Weissberg, 2013). Compared to programs that do not implement established best practices for building youth SEL, programs that do implement these practices show significant improvements in youth outcomes related to self-perception, school bonding, positive social behaviors, conduct problems and drug use, achievement test scores, grades, and school attendance.

The present study built on this empirical base by examining changes in OST staff ratings of youth SEL during 2 school years, 2019-2020 (Year 1) and 2020-2021 (Year 2). Two analyses were conducted; each included some OST programs operated by the School District of Palm Beach County, and some operated by community-based organizations or municipalities. All programs engaged in continuous quality improvement by participating in the Palm Beach County Quality Improvement System (QIS).

Analysis 1, assessing the impact of foundational program quality, examined Year-1 SEL ratings for 559 youth attending 20 QIS-involved programs. Analysis 2, assessing the impact of an SEL program quality enhancement, examined youth SEL ratings for 406 total youth attending 12 QIS-involved OST programs that rated SEL for 203 youth in Year 1 and another 203 youth in Year 2.

Six programs in Analysis 1 and five programs in Analysis 2 were also implementing an SEL-related quality enhancement by participating in Partnerships for Social and Emotional Learning Initiative (PSELI), a multi-year research project funded by the Wallace Foundation (Schwartz et al., 2020).

Context of Continuous Quality Improvement

For Analysis 1, the 20 programs were experienced participants in the Palm Beach County QIS, with a range of 5–14 years and a median of 11 years of participation. For Analysis 2, the 12 programs were also experienced participants in the QIS, with a range of 6–14 years and a median of 11.5 years of participation.

The trusting relationships Prime Time staff develop with OST staff form the foundation of QIS (Lindeman et al., 2019). In this supportive context, the organization provides in-depth training, and a quality advisor—a coach certified by the Center for Coaching Certification and meeting International Coaching Federation standards—serves each OST program. Quality advisors focus on active listening while helping programs review their assessment data and achieve self-directed goals. Additional QIS benefits include networking events, career advising, and scholarships and wage incentives that reward educational attainment and career growth while helping qualified staff remain in the field.

Looking at a 10-year span of QIS history, Lindeman et al. (2019) demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach: The more Prime Time services OST programs received, the more they benefited. Almost all programs that fully utilized services improved in quality—more than half of these making dramatic improvement. As noted earlier, improvements in quality also led to strengthened youth SEL.

Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Programs in the current study experienced significant stress and disruption due to the pandemic beginning midway through Year 1. School district-operated programs closed from mid-March 2020 through the end of Year 1 (May 2020), and programs operated by municipalities or nonprofit organizations closed briefly during the early pandemic. In a May 2020 QIS-wide survey, only 24% of respondents said all staff were being paid at their programs, and the majority (82%) reported that their program was at risk of staff layoffs and/or resignations. During this time, Prime Time provided frequent check-ins and emotional support, virtual coaching and virtual training, and monetary training incentives to mitigate loss of income. In Year 2, programs remained open with reduced youth enrollment.

Study Hypotheses

Hypotheses included the following:

Analysis 1 (Year 1)

a. **Main effect of quality level:** OST programs with assessment scores in the high-quality range, regardless of time of measurement, will have higher average youth SEL ratings, compared to programs with assessment scores in the satisfactory-quality range (the Methods section defines ranges). This effect was expected due to the SEL emphasis already inherent in Prime Time's QIS supports and services.
b. **Main effect of time of measurement:** OST programs, regardless of quality level, will have higher average youth SEL ratings in spring (at posttest), compared to fall (at pretest). Due to the foundational level of quality achieved by all QIS-involved programs, youth SEL skills were expected to grow over the course of the year.
c. **Interaction between quality level and time of measurement:** The highest average youth SEL ratings were expected in spring (at posttest) among high-quality programs.

Analysis 2 (Years 1 and 2)

a. **Main effect of time of measurement:** OST programs, regardless of whether they implemented an SEL enhancement, will have higher average youth SEL ratings in spring (at posttest), compared to fall (at pretest). This gain was expected to be cumulative across the four times of measurement, such that the spring gain from Year 1 served as the new starting point in the fall of Year 2, and then increased again by the spring of Year 2. This sustained effect was expected due to the foundational level of quality achieved by all QIS-involved programs.
b. **Main effect of SEL enhancement:** SEL-enhanced OST programs, regardless of time of measurement, will have higher average youth SEL ratings, compared to non SEL-enhanced programs. This effect was expected due to the additional youth benefits associated with the SEL enhancement.
c. **Interaction between time of measurement and SEL enhancement:** Significantly higher average youth SEL ratings were expected to be most likely at the fourth time of measurement (Year-2 spring posttest) among SEL-enhanced programs.

Methods

Sample

Analysis 1 included 20 OST programs that completed fall and spring SEL ratings for 559 youth in Year 1. Analysis 2 included 12 OST programs that completed fall and spring SEL ratings of 203 youth in Year 1 and another 203 youth in Year 2, for a total of 406 youth. Analysis 2's sample overlapped with Analysis 1's sample (i.e., in Year 1, the 203 youth from 12 programs in Analysis 2 were a subset of the 559 youth from 20 programs in Analysis 1).

Each program's community location had a socioeconomic need designation of low, medium, or high (Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2017) based on indicators such as children living in poverty, low-birthweight babies, and school readiness scores.

Quality assessments were conducted by certified reliable raters in 2019-2020 (Year 1) using the Palm Beach County Program Quality Assessment (PBC-PQA), which includes 20 scales within four larger domains of *safe environment*, *supportive environment*, *interactive environment*, and *engaging environment*. The PBC-PQA is based on the school-age Program Quality Assessment, a validated instrument from the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (Smith & Hohmann, 2005). For three programs that missed 2019-2020 assessments due to pandemic closures, scores from 2018-2019 assessments were substituted.

With 5 being the maximum overall score, Prime Time defined the range for satisfactory-quality programs as overall scores from 3.4 to 4, and the range for high-quality programs as overall scores from 4.1 to 5. Ranges were based on long-term local trends and informed by stakeholder input.

Analysis 1

The 20 OST programs included 13 run by the School District of Palm Beach County and seven run by municipalities or nonprofit organizations. Most programs (15 out of 20) were located in communities of high socioeconomic need (Table 1). All programs met at least the threshold for satisfactory program quality based on their most recent quality assessments, and 11 out of 20 met the threshold for high quality. Quality scores ranged from 3.01 to 4.83 (out of 5), with a mean of 4.14 and a median of 4.15.

Five of the 13 school district programs and one program run by a nonprofit organization were implementing SEL practices as part of the PSELI project's intervention group. Of these six programs, three also met the high-quality threshold.

Table 1. Analysis 1: Number of OST Programs by Quality Level, SEL Enhancement Status, and Community Socioeconomic Need

	SEL-enhanced				Non-SEL-enhanced			Total
	Low need	*Med. need*	*High need*		*Low need*	*Med. need*	*High need*	
High quality	0	0	3		1	1	7	12
Satisfactory quality	0	1	2		1	1	3	8
Total (by need level)	0	1	5		2	2	10	20
Total (by SEL status)	6				14			20

Analysis 2

The 12 OST programs completed fall and spring staff ratings of youth SEL in both Year 1 and Year 2. Thus, Analysis 2 included 12 of the 20 programs from Analysis 1. The 12 programs included nine run by the School District of Palm Beach County and three run by municipalities or nonprofit organizations. Most programs (nine out of 12) were located in communities of high socioeconomic need (Table 2). All programs met the threshold for program quality based on their most recent quality assessments, and most (eight out of 12) met the threshold for high quality. Quality scores ranged from 3.44 to 4.83 (out of 5), with a mean of 4.06 and a median of 4.03.

Five of the nine school district programs were implementing SEL practices as part of the PSELI project's intervention group. Of these five programs, three also met the high-quality threshold.

Table 2. Analysis 2: Number of OST Programs by Quality Level, SEL Enhancement Status and Community Socioeconomic Need

	SEL-enhanced				Non-SEL-enhanced			Total
	Low need	*Med. need*	*High need*		*Low need*	*Med. need*	*High need*	
High quality	0	0	3		1	1	3	8
Satisfactory quality	0	1	1		0	0	2	4
Total (by need level)	0	1	4		1	1	5	12
Total (by SEL status)	5				7			12

SEL Program-Quality Enhancement

For Analysis 1 (covering Year 1), six of the 20 OST programs, in addition to participating in the QIS, were engaged in the 3rd implementation year of the PSELI project (Schwartz et al., 2020).

For Analysis 2 (covering Year 1 and Year 2), five of the 12 OST programs, in addition to participating in the QIS, were engaged in the PSELI project's 3rd and 4th implementation years.

OST programs with the SEL enhancement had therefore received not only Prime Time's typical supports through QIS participation, but also 2 to 3 years of supplemental training and coaching in four evidence-based implementation areas:

- promoting positive program climate and culture through SEL signature practices (Meyers et al., 2019), as well as skillful adult SEL practice and staff modeling of self-regulation, inclusion practices, positive interaction, and empathetic behaviors;
- SEL explicit instruction, including lessons from the Second Step curriculum (Low et al., 2019), delivered to youth as part of a structured, circle-based gathering called afternoon meeting;
- integrating SEL into all aspects of OST program delivery by using the Responsive Classroom approach (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007); and
- family engagement efforts including education regarding after-school SEL activities and communications to support SEL at home.

Guiding models for the SEL enhancement included the Youth Program Quality Intervention from the David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality (Smith et al., 2012) and the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) Guide to Schoolwide SEL (Meyers et al., 2019). Prime Time's quality improvement efforts were already informed by these models, and PBC-PQA items encourage many SEL-related practices aimed at promoting a positive climate and helping youth feel safe and supported.

The four implementation areas of the SEL enhancement therefore deepened an existing focus by directing attention to adults' SEL growth and adding more intentional elements of youth practice such as afternoon meetings. Examples of visible indicators more common among SEL-enhanced programs than non-SEL-enhanced OST programs included a special area set up to help youth regulate their emotions and a Peace Path to guide peer conflict resolution.

Prime Time's full-time, Wallace Foundation-funded SEL specialist designed and delivered intensive training specifically for the SEL-enhanced OST programs. In Year 1, program directors

and direct-delivery staff attended an eight-session SEL Academy series in person (24 hours total). Examples of topics included

- self-awareness and perception;
- trauma and reactivity;
- resilience and self-care; and
- empathy, compassion, and equity.

The evidence-based approaches of mindful inquiry (McCown et al., 2010) and the ORID (Objective, Reflective, Interpretive, Decisional) method (Hogan, 2005) helped OST staff develop their own SEL skills so they could more proactively respond to personal and professional challenges (Held, 2021).

Between training sessions, participants provided artifacts or evidence of learning and shared ideas and successes on a virtual communication platform. The specialist also provided micro-trainings (sessions of less than an hour that teach and model a single practice) as needed to reinforce key implementation skills.

A 4-month follow-up survey of a cohort of SEL Academy participants (Prime Time Palm Beach County, 2020) revealed that virtually all participants were implementing key practices with at least moderate frequency, and the majority were implementing them often. Accordingly, one participant shared their success with mindfulness and intentional self-care:

> *I have noticed that on the days I implement [a "power pause" by] setting a timer for 3 minutes and just sitting in my car before work and when I get home from work . . . I am not as stressed. It allows me to be more present and engaged.*

Another participant explained the benefits of an empathetic approach: "When one of the students fell in class, I labeled his feelings and let him know that I've felt that way, too. Instead of walking away from his tantrums, I stayed calm and talked him through it."

Alongside SEL Academy, a four-session SEL Leadership series (12 hours total) for program directors taught transformational leadership and emotional intelligence tools, along with data-informed SEL coaching and mentoring strategies to support direct-delivery staff.

With the onset of the pandemic, Prime Time transitioned to virtual delivery of these offerings and added a 10-hour adult SEL series. In addition, just before Year 2, two new self-paced, virtual trainings included an SEL Basics onboarding session and a 7-day self-care challenge.

In addition to training, the SEL specialist provided on-site coaching sessions at least monthly, including observations of direct-delivery staff. Prime Time developed evidence-based observation "look-fors," as well as a structured protocol for debrief/reflection. A web article (Prime Time Palm Beach County, 2019) offers a snapshot of a typical session. The specialist concluded by developing mutually agreed-upon action steps with the OST director. During the pandemic, all coaching was delivered virtually.

Programs gauged their progress using PBC-PQA assessments: the Staff Rating of Youth Behavior (SRYB) SEL assessment (described later), ongoing coach feedback, and detailed formative feedback (for example, findings from staff surveys about SEL implementation) provided annually by the PSELI project evaluator (Schwartz et al., 2020).

OST programs worked to align with school-day practices to create a cohesive youth experience across settings (Leschitz et al., 2022). In each study year, OST staff participated along with their counterpart school-day staff in local communities of practice and a local summer conference. The Wallace Foundation also presented an annual, national conference. With the onset of the pandemic in Year 2, these events occured virtually.

All OST staff received monetary incentives to participate in activities outside of their normal working hours, and program directors received a small annual stipend.

Rated Youth

Due to the high mobility of youth in OST, attrition within school years was expected. Thus, for Analysis 1, youth whose SEL skills were rated at a given year's pretest, but not the same year's posttest, were excluded. This resulted in a sample of 559 youth.

For Analysis 2, youth not rated at posttest were again excluded. In addition, programs that did not participate in both study years were excluded and the sample of rated youth was truncated within each study year in order to create balanced sample sizes. This resulted in final counts of 203 in Year 1 and 203 in Year 2.

Gender identification, grade level, and race/ethnicity of rated youth were provided to Prime Time by direct-delivery staff on tracking sheets, alongside youth ID numbers. Table 3 reasonably estimates the demographics of rated youth, which consisted of predominantly elementary-age youth of color with a slight overrepresentation of female gender. Due to the

anonymity of youth, it was not possible to adjust demographic counts to remove youth who were excluded from each analysis.

Table 3. Estimated Percentages for Gender Identification, Grade Level and Race/Ethnicity of Rated Youth

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 1 & Year 2 combined
Gender identification	**Percent**		
Female	55.9	42.5	52.8
Male	44.1	40.7	40.3
Other	0	0	0
Missing	0	16.8	6.9
Total	100	100	100
Grade level	**Percent**		
K-1	22.8	24.6	23.5
2-3	28.3	31.9	29.8
4-5	36.3	23.6	31.1
6-7	10.7	3	7.6
Missing	1.9	16.8	8.0
Total	100	100	100
Race/ethnicity	**Percent**		
African American	43.5	23.9	35.5
Haitian	18.1	5	12.8
Hispanic	26.6	29.6	27.8
Native American	0	0	0
Asian	0.5	0	0.3
White	9.5	17.6	12.8
Other	2.6	4	3.2
Missing	0	19.8	7.6
Total	100	100	100

Procedures

Recruitment of OST Programs

Youth SEL ratings represent one of several types of data that Prime Time encourages OST programs to collect for the purpose of continuous improvement. Thus, all QIS programs (over 100 programs in 2019-2020) were invited to participate in youth SEL data collection.

Requiring programs and staff to participate, or excluding them from participation, would be contrary to Prime Time's uniquely supportive relationships with OST programs and staff. This study therefore engaged a voluntary response sample at both the program and staff levels. Both program directors and direct-delivery staff received a $50 gift card incentive per time of measurement.

Youth SEL Ratings

Within each study year, between one and three (most commonly two) direct-delivery staff at each OST program identified their own set of at least 15 youth—whom they knew well and who regularly attended—and rated their SEL skills in both fall and spring using an electronic version of the SRYB, a validated instrument that aligns with the PBC-PQA (David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality, 2016). Capturing a snapshot of average youth social and emotional skills, the SRYB helps identify areas for staff training and coaching.

Assessed youth SEL domains include *expresses emotion knowledge*, *behaviorally manages emotions*, *displays social-role mastery*, and *displays goal-striving mastery*. Within these domains, individual items present a behaviorally defined skill, and the rater indicates the degree to which the rated youth generally exhibits it on a scale of 1 (*not at all like this youth/none of the time*) to 5 (*exactly like this youth/all of the time*). Examples of items include "describes own emotional needs" and "seeks timely help from other youth or staff."

Staff created youth ID numbers to allow Prime Time to match fall and spring ratings while maintaining youth anonymity. To avoid expectancy effects, youth were not made aware that they were being rated by staff. At all programs, whenever a staff member left the program within a given year, Prime Time encouraged another staff member at the program to take over for the former rater's set of youth.

Despite the staff turnover challenges posed by the pandemic during both study years, the vast majority of raters rated their youth at both pretest and posttest within each year. (At school district-operated programs, staff completed Year 1 posttest ratings during the early pandemic,

when programs were temporarily closed to youth.) In addition, although different youth were rated in Year 1 and Year 2, continuity was strengthened by the fact that over 90% of OST staff raters from Year 1 also participated in Year 2.

Prime Time provided an annual orientation session for staff raters and remained available to answer questions. In a low-stakes feedback process designed to empower and inform, each program director received a confidential summary of rating results.

Analyses

The means, standard deviations, and distributions of scores for all variables were examined. Distributions were roughly normal, permitting valid statistical analyses.

Analysis 1

A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was performed to assess the effect of the two categorical independent variables (program quality level and time of measurement) on the single, continuous dependent variable of youth SEL ratings. Alpha was set at .05.

Levels of the independent variables included the following:

- Quality level of OST program:
    - high quality
    - satisfactory quality
- Time of measurement:
    - Year-1 pretest (fall 2019)
    - Year-1 posttest (spring 2020)

Analysis 2

To more efficiently investigate repeated measures, data were reshaped to a longer form and divided into identifier and measured variables (Wickham, 2007). A two-way, repeated-measures analysis of variance was performed to assess the effect of the two categorical independent variables (SEL enhancement status and time of measurement) on the single, continuous, dependent variable of youth SEL ratings. In the repeated measures design, the OST program, rather than the youth, was defined as the subject. Alpha was set at .05.

Levels of the independent variables included the following:

- SEL enhancement status of OST program:
  - SEL-enhanced
  - Non SEL-enhanced
- Time of measurement:
  - Year-1 (fall 2019) pretest
  - Year-1 (spring 2020) posttest
  - Year-2 (fall 2020) pretest
  - Year-2 (spring 2021) posttest

Post-hoc comparisons of mean SEL rating (Tukey's HSD) were used to identify specific differences among groups. Alpha was set at .05 family-wise.

Results

Descriptive Statistics: Analysis 1

Table 4 presents means and standard deviations for youth SEL ratings at both times of measurement in Year 1, at both high-quality and satisfactory-quality programs.

Table 4. Youth SEL Ratings at High-Quality and Satisfactory-Quality Programs in Year 1

	Fall 2019 pretest		Spring 2020 posttest	
Program quality	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
High *n* = 325 youth	3.13	1.06	3.28	1.08
Satisfactory *n* = 234 youth	2.94	0.93	3.08	0.81

Note. Youth SEL ratings range from 1 (*not at all like this youth/none of the time*) to 5 (*exactly like this youth/all of the time*).

Descriptive Statistics: Analysis 2

Table 5 presents means and standard deviations for youth SEL ratings at all four times of measurement in Years 1 and 2, at SEL-enhanced and non-SEL-enhanced programs.

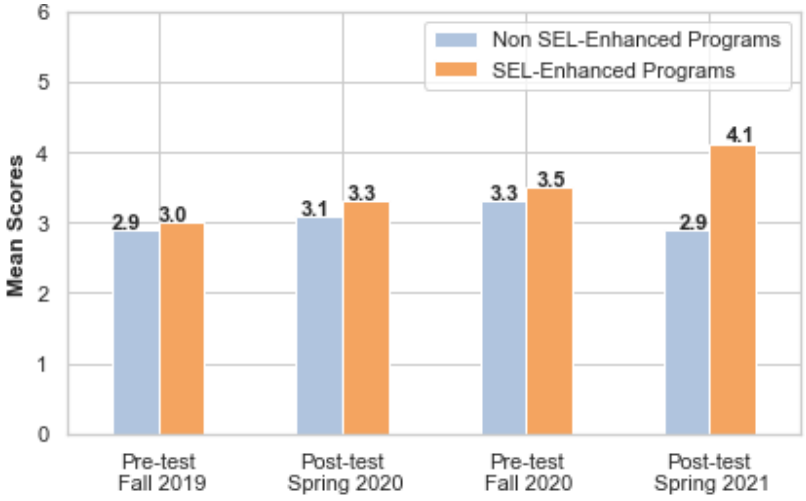
Table 5. Youth SEL Ratings at SEL-Enhanced and Non-SEL-Enhanced Programs in Years 1 and 2

	Fall 2019 Year-1 pretest		Spring 2020 Year-1 posttest		Fall 2020 Year-2 pretest		Spring 2021 Year-2 posttest	
Type of program	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Non-SEL-enhanced *n* = 122 youth	2.9	0.85	3.1	0.80	3.3	0.94	2.9	0.74
SEL-enhanced *n* = 81 youth	3.0	1.1	3.3	0.94	3.5	0.87	4.1	0.78

Note. Youth SEL ratings range from 1 (*not at all like this youth/none of the time*) to 5 (*exactly like this youth/all of the time*).

Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the average youth SEL ratings at the four time points.

Figure 1. Mean Pretest and Posttest Youth SEL Scores at SEL-Enhanced and Non-SEL-Enhanced Programs in Years 1 and 2



Note. Youth SEL ratings range from 1 (*not at all like this youth/none of the time*) to 5 (*exactly like this youth/all of the time*).

Inferential Statistics: Analysis 1

Simple main effects analysis showed that program quality level had a statistically significant effect on youth SEL ratings: $F(1, 558) = 8.72$, $p < .01$. Simple main effects analysis also showed that time of measurement had a statistically significant effect on youth SEL ratings: $F(1, 558) = 7.45$, $p < .01$. No significant interaction emerged between quality level and time of measurement.

Table 6. Effects of Quality Level and Time of Measurement in Year 1

Source of variation	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Quality level	1	2.93	2.93	8.72	.003
Time of measurement	1	76.84	76.84	7.45	.007
Time x quality level	1	0.28	0.28	0.82	.37
Error	558	189.97	.34		

These results supported two of three hypotheses for Analysis 1:

- *Hypothesis A*: Compared to programs with assessment scores in the satisfactory-quality range, OST programs with assessment scores in the high-quality range did have higher average youth SEL ratings, and this difference was statistically significant.
- *Hypothesis B*: Among OST programs overall, higher average youth SEL ratings were in fact seen at posttest, compared to pretest, and this difference was statistically significant.
- *Hypothesis C*: Not supported.

Inferential Statistics: Analysis 2

Simple main effects analysis showed that time of measurement had a statistically significant effect on youth SEL ratings: $F(3, 804) = 11.14$, $p < .001$. In addition, a statistically significant interaction emerged between time of measurement and SEL enhancement status: $F(3, 804) = 15.20$, $p < .001$. A simple main effects analysis regarding the effect of SEL enhancement status on youth SEL ratings was not clearly interpretable due to this interaction.

Table 7. Effects of Time of Measurement and of SEL Enhancement Status in Years 1 and 2

Source of Variation	*df*	*SS*	*MS*	*F*	*p*
Time of measurement	3	25.62	8.54	11.14	< .001
SEL enhancement status	1	30.53	30.53	39.83	< .001
Time x SEL enhancement status	3	34.96	11.65	15.20	< .001
Error	804	616.29	0.77		

Post-hoc comparisons of means using Tukey's HSD yielded additional insights. Compared to mean youth SEL score at Year-1 pretest, mean youth SEL scores were significantly greater at Year-1 posttest ($p < .05$), Year-2 pretest ($p < .01$) and Year-2 posttest ($p < .001$). No significant difference between youth SEL ratings emerged between other times of measurement.

Regarding the interaction between time of measurement and SEL enhancement status, Figure 1 suggests that youth SEL ratings at SEL-enhanced programs were significantly higher than youth SEL ratings at non-SEL-enhanced programs, specifically at Year-2 posttest (the last of the four times of measurement).

Thus, for Analysis 2, results partially supported the hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis A* : Pretest to posttest gain in average youth SEL rating during Year 1 was statistically significant and was in fact sustained into Year 2. A cumulative gain in youth SEL did not emerge across all times of measurement, however, since there was no significant difference in average youth SEL rating between the second and third, or between the third and fourth, times of measurement.
- *Hypotheses B and C*: Youth participating in SEL-enhanced programs did have higher average SEL ratings, compared to youth at non-SEL-enhanced programs, and this difference was statistically significant, although the effect appeared limited to the fourth and final time of measurement.

Discussion

Even within the challenging context of the COVID-19 pandemic, this study reinforced the value of intentional efforts to improve OST program quality, as well as the value of providing training and coaching to programs implementing enhanced strategies to support youth SEL.

Although the study did not fully explore the mechanisms behind increases in youth SEL skills, reduced enrollment, and the shared experience of coping with the pandemic, likely fostered stronger relationship building between staff and youth, leading to stronger youth SEL.

Future research might consider different program contexts, such as those with low quality versus satisfactory quality, those in communities of lower versus higher socioeconomic need, or those run by a school district versus a community-based organization. Future research might also define youth SEL differently than did the current study (i.e., youth report or live observation of youth SEL skills).

In addition to exploring program context, future research might examine elements of quality improvement and SEL enhancement efforts in order to tease apart their relative influence on youth SEL and test their effects at various dosages.

Study Limitations

Lack of Comparison Group

OST program participation in the quality improvement process, including PBC-PQA assessments, is voluntary, and Prime Time did not have access to non-QIS programs that potentially would have exhibited lower levels of quality. It is therefore not known whether youth SEL might have increased over time at these programs, even without participation in quality improvement and the SEL enhancement.

Voluntary Response Sample

This study engaged a voluntary response sample of OST staff raters, such that they, rather than researchers, selected youth for rating. This type of sampling was unavoidable, since the SRYB requires that youth be well known to the rater, and since requiring participation in (or prohibiting) data collection would have undermined Prime Time's uniquely supportive relationships.

Potential bias may have been introduced due to non-random selection of staff raters and youth, and participating OST programs may have had a greater-than-average desire to gain insight into areas for staff skill growth. Rater social desirability bias and/or youth expectancy effects were considered less likely, however. Youth were not aware of being rated, and because the study was conducted using archival data, staff raters were not aware of study hypotheses at the time they made ratings.

Attrition of Raters and Youth

Attrition of staff raters was minimal, despite the staff turnover challenges posed by the pandemic during both study years. The vast majority of raters rated their youth at both pretest and posttest within each year. In addition, although different youth were rated in Year 1 and Year 2, continuity was strengthened by the fact that over 90% of OST staff raters from Year 1 also participated in Year 2. In addition, only programs completing ratings in both study years were included in Analysis 2.

Attrition of youth was more significant, given the fluidity of youth enrollment in OST, and because anonymity prohibited matching of youth ratings across years. Although analyses excluded youth who left their program within a study year (i.e., missed the posttest), this mitigation strategy may also have introduced bias, in that youth who remained enrolled in an OST program for a full school year may have differed from those who did not.

Implications for Youth Development Practice

OST Intermediary Organizations

The study highlighted OST intermediary organizations' role in designing and delivering impactful SEL training. Micro-training sessions, which teach and model a single practice, proved effective. Also of great value were coaches' on-site observations with specific implementation "look-fors."

At the same time, coaches needed a flexible approach. Prime Time's quality advisors and SEL specialist were able to pivot not only when the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, but also when youth returned to programs after a period of stress and isolation. For example, quality advisors shifted focus from higher-level skills of youth engagement to more fundamental relationship-building and social skills, and the SEL specialist placed even greater emphasis on staff self-care and stress management. To that end, mindful inquiry-based coaching emerged as an important supplement to quality-focused coaching. In fact, a focus on adult SEL greatly strengthened programs' resilience during the pandemic.

Given the high level of effort required and the need for OST staff to spend time in training and peer learning outside of normal working hours, monetary incentives also contributed to a successful SEL enhancement.

OST Programs

This study supports programs' expectation of additional benefits from a more intensive focus on both adult and youth SEL, even in stressful contexts such as a pandemic. Further, paying attention to distinctions between satisfactory and high program quality, while recognizing SEL as an essential element of quality, mattered for OST-enrolled youth of color living in communities of high socioeconomic need. Thus, programs can apply the study's findings to help ensure equitable experiences for youth.

For programs ready to embrace the challenge of SEL implementation, gaining staff buy-in is an important first step. Program directors are encouraged to acknowledge practices they are already implementing to support staff and youth SEL, work with their direct-delivery staff to identify new practices to add incrementally, and ensure that staff celebrate success. For example, it may be challenging to find time in their tight schedules to conduct afternoon meetings, including planning a short segment of SEL explicit instruction. Yet motivation can increase when benefits emerge for youth. One staff member explained: "Afternoon meeting works perfectly for my program. For some of my kids who are not talkers, it helps them open up a little . . . they don't feel left out . . . it lets them feel heard and cared for."

Related to youth benefits, it is important for programs to assess youth SEL skills as a measure of progress, since doing so will clearly demonstrate the value of quality improvement efforts and data-based decision making. The Staff Rating of Youth Behavior, with relative ease of data collection, offers an informative snapshot that aligns with the Youth Program Quality Assessment so that youth findings can inform quality-improvement goals.

Because effective coaching of direct-delivery staff is critical for sustaining SEL implementation, program directors can benefit from leadership training that prepares them to quickly orient new staff when turnover occurs, and then monitor implementation, such as by conducting informal walk-throughs.

OST programs also formed a supportive community through their involvement in the PSELI project, demonstrating the value of partnering with peers who are implementing SEL enhancements.

In schools that have co-located OST programs and are committed to infusing SEL across youth settings, directors also can benefit by partnering with school-day staff to ensure consistent youth experiences.

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