Theorizing Social and Emotional Learning: Key Mechanisms for Effective Programs

By

Robert A. Marx

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Science

in

Community Research and Action

May, 2016

Nashville, TN

Approved:

Professor David K. Diehl, PhD

Professor Douglas D. Perkins, PhD

Table of Contents

List of Figures iii

Introduction 1

Theoretical Background
- Social and Emotional Learning 4
- Mechanisms in the Social Sciences 7
- Current Models 11
- Presumed Mechanisms that Matter 14
- A Mechanistic Understanding of SEL 15

Methods 16
- Participants 17
- Classroom Observations 18
- Student Focus Groups 18
- Teacher Interviews 19
- Analysis 20

Results: Key Mechanisms for SEL 22
- Mechanism 1: Expanded Roles 25
- Mechanism 2: Discovered Commonalities 30
- Mechanism 3: Altered Behavior 33

Discussion 38
- Limitations 40
- Strengths 41
- Future Research 41

Conclusion 42

References 44

Appendix A: Student Focus Group Protocol 49

Appendix B: Teacher Interview Protocol 52

List of Figures

Figures Pages

1. Typology of Social Mechanisms 8

2. Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman's (2015) Model for SEL Efficacy 12

3. Model for Key Mechanisms' Role in SEL Programs 24

Introduction

In 2013, adolescent students reported experiencing 1,420,900 victimizations at school, including theft, assault, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault, and students were more likely to experience victimization at school than anywhere else (Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015). Although these statistics may be alarming, they do not even include often-underreported bullying, fear for safety, or verbal victimization. As a response to this potentially threatening environment for students, and as a means of cultivating more engaged and responsive citizens, many educators and consultants have suggested implementing programs that increase students' social and emotional competencies, encouraging students to develop ethical and responsible behaviors, engage in socially appropriate and respectful interactions, and participate in their schools, families, and communities in supportive and positive ways (Elias et al, 1997). Teachers also turn to these programs as the changes brought about by SEL programs are further associated with improved classroom climate and student-teacher and peer-to-peer interactions (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015).

Due in no small part to increasing awareness of the importance of a healthy school climate in the last fifteen years, social and emotional learning (SEL)—acquiring emotional self-regulation, self-awareness, and the ability to interact with others in positive ways—has moved from a peripheral concern of progressive schools to a chief aspect of many districts' institutional plans. As schools are tasked with providing more services to students with diminishing resources (Greenberg et al., 2003) and as many schools emphasize the importance of math and reading over community responsibility and ethical dispositions (Cohen, 2006), teachers in classrooms that have begun to

incorporate SEL programs and administrators in districts who want to bring SEL programs to all classrooms have encountered difficulty in scaling up SEL initiatives to reach a broader audience of students (Elbertson, Brackett, & Weissberg, 2010; Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003).

This difficulty is certainly not due to a paucity of evidence for the success of SEL programs: a watershed meta-analysis has demonstrated the positive behavioral, attitudinal, and academic effects of more than 200 studies of SEL programs (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Research on SEL has proliferated and provided support for its implementation by demonstrating associations between social and emotional competencies and academic skills (see Elias, 2006 for a review), and yet SEL programs are still not widespread (Elias et al., 2003). In part, this may be due to a shortcoming of the current research: although it demonstrates the many benefits of social and emotional competencies, it does not offer an explanation of the mechanisms by which SEL programs achieve these results. That is to say, researchers are providing correlations between instituting SEL programs that alter certain features of classrooms and improved relationships between members of those classrooms, but they put forth no clear explanation for how those improved relationships come about.

Educators and administrators are being asked to trust research that aims to provide them with a clear understanding of the benefits SEL programs offer without the necessary explanation of how these benefits come to be associated with SEL programs themselves. Elias et al. (2003) suggested that in order to scale up programming, professionals must be prepared with a variety of skills that enables widespread SEL instruction; however, current research offers these practitioners no clear rationale or explanation for how these

newly acquired skills will bring about desired changes in their students and schools. Indeed, in *The Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* (2015), Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman explained that SEL programs are so multifaceted that SEL experts draw on the "*presumed* mechanisms that matter, not actual demonstrated evidence of the effects of those mechanisms" (p. 152, [emphasis in original]).

In the current work, I use a qualitative case study of an SEL program to develop a pathway model for the mechanisms that may broadly contribute to the observed proximal benefits of SEL programs, specifically improved peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships within the classroom. In doing so, I provide a path of change, offering three key mechanisms that bridge the theoretical gap between effective core components and observed proximal outcomes (as reported by Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). These mechanisms, when added to the existing logic models for SEL programs, also generate a testable model for the community-level benefits of SEL programming.

By bringing social science frameworks for the underlying causal mechanisms to bear on the correlational SEL literature, I offer a new way of thinking about SEL programming and classroom-level research. I hope to give practitioners a different perspective on designing and implementing their programming. They can employ these mechanisms as guiding principles for the creation of programs that effectively bring about positive associations between SEL programming and classroom-level benefits. Further, researchers who study SEL programming will have a new structure to guide their research; researchers have made clear that examining fidelity to program implementation is tantamount to understanding the effectiveness of programming, but they need clearer guidance on what aspects of programming are most important in their studies (Zins &

Elias, 2006). Beyond SEL programming, though, understanding the causal mechanisms that bring about the association between an alteration in the activities in a classroom and its resultant change on the relationships between teachers and students has further reaching impacts for all educators; the mechanisms identified by applying social mechanism theory to SEL programming could be of use to educators in classroom settings who aim to improve student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships. Although the focus of this research is on SEL programming, the mechanisms identified could be applied in any school setting in the hopes of bringing about positive changes in classroom interactions. Therefore, bringing together these two literatures offers new avenues for thinking about classroom practices as well as research agendas for those concerned with improving interpersonal relationships in educational settings.

Theoretical Background

Social and Emotional Learning

Although SEL is understood in a variety of ways, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) offered a clear definition: it is "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2015). In this way, SEL education provides students with the tools necessary to become active, productive citizens who can live holistic and generative lives. The direct focus on managing emotions and better understanding one's own reactions to stimuli provides youth with necessary skills for dealing with setbacks and problems, and the interpersonal aspect of SEL education aims to ensure that youth

interact with one another in supportive and kind ways, emphasizing the empathy needed to develop positive relationships.

With a clear focus on emotional growth and positive behavior, SEL education has become a useful tool in providing support for individual students' mental health needs, as well as school-level violence, victimization, and bullying (Greenberg et al., 2003; Merrell, 2002). Because SEL programs are concerned with youths' treatment of themselves and others, they promote skills that both strengthen youths' internal resources to protect against negative influences and teach them how to rely on others and provide them support.

Based on this formulation of the potential benefits of SEL programs, researchers have endeavored to identify positive associations between the implementation of SEL programs and individual benefits. One important study conducted a quantitative synthesis of 213 primary investigations of school-based, universal SEL programs (that is, programs that target all students at a school and are not aimed at a specific subpopulation with special needs) and found significant positive outcomes for social and emotional skills, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as academic success (Durlak et al., 2011). This meta-analysis provided clear support for the implementation of universal SEL programming and offered important insight into the variety of positive outcomes SEL programming can offer students. It stands to reason that programs that explicitly encourage students to manage their emotions and engage in healthy relationships with their peers might bring about greater emotional skills and positive social behaviors while decreasing conduct problems and emotional stress; indeed, if SEL programs were not able to meet these goals, they might serve little purpose. However, they not only provide increased SEL

competencies and the benefits that accompany such growth, but they also provide further benefits. Perhaps most surprisingly, SEL programming has been shown to provide similar academic benefits as programs that are explicitly and solely focused on academic skills (Durlak et al., 2011). One could therefore argue that many of the existing non-curricular programs in schools could be replaced by SEL programs and students and teachers would meet similar goals. Although the study focused only on longer-term, individual outcomes, it formed the basis for much of researchers current conception of SEL programming and the community-level benefits it may offer.

Primary research on SEL programs' effects on classroom-level functioning has demonstrated similar benefits to classroom order, student-teacher interactions, and peer-to-peer behavior. Classrooms that implement SEL programming were marked by rule-following, focused behavior and appropriate expression of feelings (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999), greater student perceptions of the classroom as supportive and welcoming (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps, & Delucchi, 1996), and positive classroom climate (Cook, Murphy, & Hunt, 2000; Raver et al., 2008). Importantly, independent observers' evaluations of student-teacher and peer-to-peer interactions in a randomly controlled experiment demonstrated that SEL programming improved classroom interactions and climate (Brown, Jones, LaRusso, & Aber, 2010). These classroom-level benefits, then, show that SEL programs are not only associated with benefits at the individual, student level, but that they also are correlated with larger, higher level benefits. What remains lacking from this work, though, is a model that explains the causal, mechanistic pathways that explain such associations.

Mechanisms in the Social Sciences

The current research on SEL programming has provided robust associations between SEL interventions and the cultivation of personal skills and interpersonal benefits. Unfortunately, it offers no model for how those benefits result from the implementation of SEL programming. Of course, correlations do not indicate causation, and research must move beyond associations in order to provide a framework for the underlying causal links between the implementation of SEL programming and the benefits subsequently observed. Identifying these causal links is the work of mechanistic study in the social sciences: by examining the intervening paths between two higher level associations, we can often understand how situational forces lead to individual changes that then aggregate up to situational changes, as observed in the higher level changes.

In order to understand the importance of this way of thinking, we must explore what is meant by *mechanisms*, especially in social science. In the primary studies of SEL programs and the reviews of SEL effectiveness, authors use the term mechanisms generically to refer to the process that researchers are interested in or "shifts in teachers' and students' day-to-day behaviors and experiences in the classroom" (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015, p. 151). This understanding of mechanisms focuses on what happens within classrooms, rather than the causal links between those practices. However, in order to posit actual paths of change due to SEL programs, it is more useful to consider mechanisms "the wheelwork or agency by which an effect is produced. In this way, mechanisms do not merely address what happened but also how it happened" (Hernes, 1998, p. 74). In considering mechanisms, then, as the underlying causal processes that explain how variables are related to outcomes, I aim to put forth a theory that "make[s]

explicit the linkages that connect the input and the output, thereby illuminating the process by which the input is transformed into the output" (Anderson et al., 2006, p. 104). This process of transformation may be most easily understood following a model that outlines the underlying causal mechanisms that undergird macro-level associations: macro-level changes give rise to micro-level changes which in turn accumulate into visible macro-level changes (Coleman, 1990). This model for mechanisms in social science literature (see Figure 1) provides a structure for explaining the connection between macro-level associations within SEL programming.

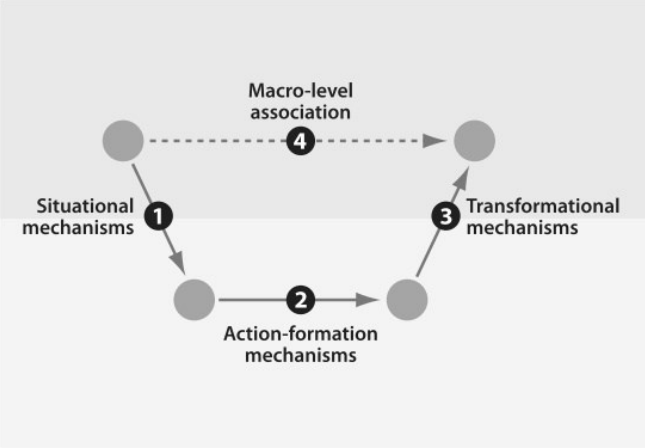

Figure 1. A typology of social mechanisms (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010, p. 59).

In this model, it is important to note the dotted line between macro-level associations; these associations are to be understood only as correlations and not as a mechanistic process that connects macro-level changes. Instead, the changes occur incrementally on the individual level and then aggregate up to the macro-level, providing the associations between macro-level inputs and outputs that are often observed in correlational research. Further, in Coleman's (1990) conception, *macro-level* changes referred to larger societal forces such as religious doctrines or economic systems; when applying this to SEL, my use of the Coleman's (1990) framework traces the changes

observed at the classroom level that can be best understood as an aggregation of individual-level changes. Although this does not follow exactly from Coleman's model, it retains the spirit of the separation between the individual-level changes and the larger-than-individual level associations; my macro levels are classrooms, as they are the aggregation of many student and teacher experiences.

In this model, then, we focus not on the classroom-level associations, but on the connective lines labeled situational, action-formation, and transformational mechanisms that connect these observed classroom-level changes. Situational mechanisms, the line connecting the macro-level situation to the individual, are those mechanisms that result in individual-level change as a result of macro-level alterations. Coleman (1990) offered as an example the individual-level changes that Protestantism, a macro-level societal force, brings about in its followers; similarly, we will examine the individual-level student and teacher changes that SEL programming, a classroom-level intervention, brings about in those who participate. These are changes that arise in individuals' psychologies, understandings, and approaches to the world as a result of forces larger than themselves.

Action-formation mechanisms are those changes that happen within individuals as a result of situational mechanisms; that is, as macro-level forces alter individuals through situational mechanisms, action-formation mechanisms represent the changes that happen between individuals as a result. To return to Coleman's (1990) example, Protestant individuals, who have been changed as a result of the situational mechanism of religious doctrine, have altered views and practices with respect to economic behavior. Within SEL programming, we could see this in the changed understanding of peers and teachers as a result of the situational mechanism's change in individual psychologies. This gives

rise to the transformational mechanisms that move these individual-level changes back up to the higher level, often as an accumulation of individual behaviors. Coleman (1990) argued that the altered views and practices of Protestant individuals explained by the action-formation mechanism led to macro-level capitalist organization in society; the transformational mechanism, then, is the aggregation of individual orientations that coalesces into macro-level, societal change. Within SEL programming, this transformational mechanism refers to the alteration of the classroom structure as a result of the aggregation of individual student and teacher behavioral changes that can be traced upstream to the action-formation changes in student and teacher perspectives as a result of the situational changes of the SEL programming on the students and teachers.

This mode of thinking about problems—utilizing a mechanistic structure to explain macro-level associations—is a powerful way to explain underlying causal aspects of correlations observed at the greater than individual level. For example, criminology research has endeavored to explain the correlation between social conditions and crime rates, as macro-level explanations leave much lacking (Wikström, 2014). By applying Coleman's (1990) framework, this research demonstrated the underlying pathway that leads to such a correlation, offering a more nuanced way to understand how ecological factors affect individual potential-criminals' psychologies to lead to acts of crime and an aggregated higher level of area crime rates. Similarly, social science research on barriers to adoption of innovative water conservation practices have benefited from such a mechanistic approach, as identifying the underlying causal mechanisms of political impasses offers a way around such gridlock (Biesbroek, Termeer, Klostermann, & Kabat, 2014). This framework has also been fruitfully applied to understandings of increased

suicide risk among those who have previous exposure to suicides in their networks (Hedström, Ka-Yuet, & Nordvik, 2008), information technology sustainability among firms that invest in new technologies (Hoadley, 2008), the relationship between fertility and family dynamics (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2012), and the association between globalization and development (Goetze, 2014). In various settings, approaching higher-level associations as the starting point for deeper examinations of the causal mechanisms that underlie them has proven to be a worthy avenue to a clearer understanding of how change occurs and what levers can be pulled to improve outcomes, be they the bypassing of legislative impasse, greater sustainability of information technology infrastructure, or decreasing suicide rates. Applying this framework to SEL programming may be equally productive in offering deeper understanding of the underlying causal linkages between SEL programming and improved classroom interaction.

Current Models

In order to understand how we might situate a social mechanisms framework within the broader SEL literature, it is important to understand the current models that outline the positive associations between SEL programming and classroom-level benefits. As research continues to demonstrate that SEL programming brings about positive results for students, several scholars have turned to providing models for the ways in which SEL programming is able to achieve these results. A current logic model, as proposed in *The Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning*, offers that the use of SEL core components (i.e., explicit SEL skill instruction, integration of SEL and academics, and SEL classroom practices) leads to proximal outcomes (i.e., improved classroom environment, better peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships, greater SEL skills) that then lead to distal

outcomes (i.e., improved social and academic performance, long-term growth and change) (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). This model (see Figure 2), which I refer to as the SEL efficacy model, offers a useful means of conceptualizing the path of SEL benefits; SEL programs must first create a safe and conducive classroom environment so that students can learn and practice the skills taught, and then they internalize these skills for longer-term change. Moreover, the model helpfully offers the bidirectional relationship between proximal outcomes: as classroom relationships improve, students gain increased skills, and those increased skills in turn improve the classroom environment.

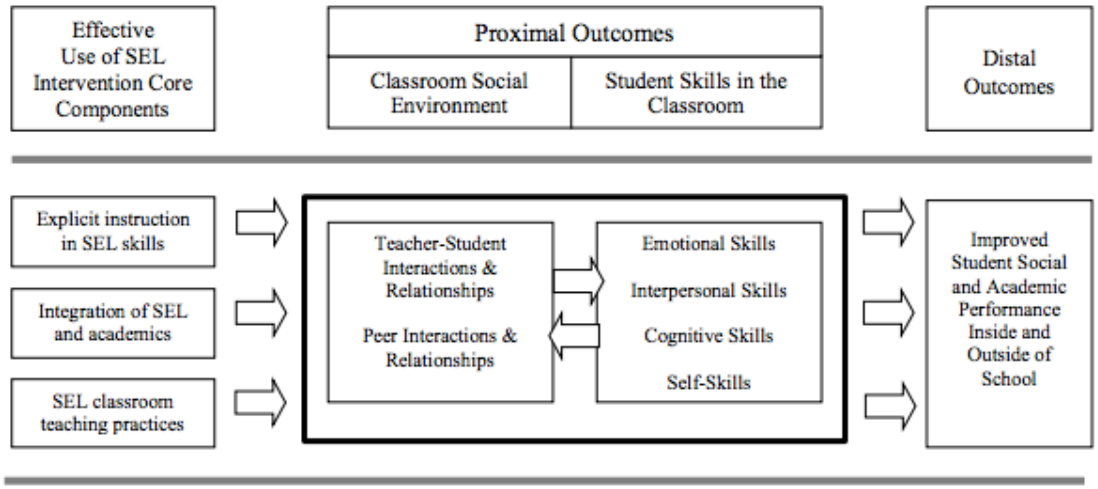

Figure 2. Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman's (2015) Model for SEL Efficacy, as presented in *The Handbook for Social and Emotional Learning*

In creating such a logic model for SEL programming, researchers have endeavored to explain correlations, namely the association between the SEL core components and distal student outcomes, with further correlations, those between SEL core components and proximal, classroom-level outcomes. This logic model treats the proximal outcomes identified as mechanisms through which distal outcomes follow,

without providing an understanding of how these proximal outcomes come to be. In this way, the authors have attempted to explain the larger observed benefits with intervening benefits that occur along the way, but they have not offered an explanation for why any of these benefits take place. This absence of a causal mechanistic structure limits the research and understanding of SEL programming and makes more difficult the application of SEL programs for educators and practitioners. What is needed, then, is a model that connects the core components of SEL programming to the proximal benefits that are posited to follow from them; rather than blank arrows, we need a mechanistic structure that explains how a change at the classroom level—SEL programming—leads to a transformation in the observed classroom structure—improved student-teacher and peer-to-peer interactions and relationships.

In light of these limitations, I propose that three key mechanisms from SEL programming create classroom-level benefits and I then offer a model that incorporates these mechanisms, based on a qualitative case study of an SEL program. My aim is not an exhaustive listing of all activities that SEL programs might employ to improve student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships, but rather to illuminate the underlying causal mechanisms that bring about the proximal outcomes noted by researchers. As we have a well-established and supported logic model that details the inputs, mediating steps, and outputs of SEL programs, I endeavor to "open the black box" that this logic model presents (Scriven, 1994) by providing insight into three categories of mechanisms that potentially provide the proximal outcomes identified by the SEL efficacy models.

Presumed Mechanisms that Matter

Some would argue that within the literature on SEL programming, several researchers have endeavored to identify mechanisms that matter for effective SEL programs. In their review of ten SEL programs with demonstrated positive effects, Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman (2015) identified what they labeled as *presumed mechanisms that matter* as various as collaboration across communities, behavioral modeling, practicing social skills, discussion groups, mindfulness lessons, active listening, writing opportunities, and prepared scripts. Often, the discussion of mechanisms focused purely on the activities that took place within the programs. For example, the authors offered a variety of examples of SEL programs' explicit indication of a larger community to which students belong, but they do not endeavor to explain why this might matter.

In similar reviews of SEL programs that work, Elias and Weissberg (2000) and Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloodworth, Tompsett, and Weissberg (2000) offered distillations of the important features of effective SEL programs, again isolating several core features of SEL programs and a discussion of the various aspects of SEL programming that offer student benefits. Payton et al. (2000) suggested that successful SEL programs were often clearly designed, structured across subject areas, and able to make connections across communities. Elias and Weissberg (2000) elaborated on the core components that undergird the models for SEL programs' success, exploring the importance of explicit instruction in SEL skills, sequenced lessons that build to a coherent whole, and opportunities for application of those skills.

From these various studies, it is important to note that although several endeavored to identify what they termed mechanisms that matter, they can better be understood as identifying activities and events associated with improved outcomes. Their use of the term mechanism does not fit within the more developed social science notion of causal mechanisms, and they do not attempt to explain the causal path that underlies the associations noted. It is difficult, then, to say which of these identified mechanisms that matter are truly vital and which are superfluous. Thus, a more complete model that endeavors to explain the underlying causal mechanisms is needed to move beyond associational models and onto a more complete understanding of SEL programming. By applying greater systematicity to our understanding of mechanisms, we are able to better understand not only how SEL programs work, but also how to leverage that knowledge in implementations in other classrooms and through other modalities that draw on similar mechanisms.

A Mechanistic Understanding of SEL

Within in the SEL literature, current logic models provide clear notions of classroom-level changes: the introduction of an SEL program gives rise to proximal outcomes such as improved peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships. Further, the classroom-level change of an SEL program is broken down into its three component parts: explicit SEL instruction, SEL classroom practices, and inclusion of SEL practices into existing curricula (CASEL, 2013). What these models lack, though, is the underlying mechanistic structure that explains how these macro-level inputs and outputs translate into micro-level alterations in individuals and the environment. Because mechanistic structures are often cog-like, this model is inherently more complex than a traditional

logic model and therefore cannot be achieved simply by inserting another box into a linear flow chart; rather, the proposed theory offers changes across levels, demonstrating how classroom-level changes—the introduction of an SEL program—alter student and teacher beliefs and behaviors, in turn altering the classroom environment. The mechanisms, then, may be situational, in that they are a classroom-individual relationship; action-formation, an individual-individual relationship; or transformational, an individual-classroom relationship that results in aggregation of individual changes to the classroom-level.

The body of research as it stands does not endeavor to identify these mechanisms. Although many researchers have identified a variety of colloquial explanations for activities that they labeled mechanisms that matter that bring about positive SEL outcomes, they have not applied social science's understanding of mechanisms. My work unites these two bodies of literature in order to understand the ways that SEL programs achieve the proximal benefits inherent in the established models for SEL implementation. By drawing on a qualitative case study to ground these mechanisms, I offer one potential theory for the mechanisms present in SEL programs that bring about benefits, and then insert those mechanisms into a testable model.

Methods

The theoretical model I propose is based on a qualitative case study of the implementation of one SEL program in a midsized Southern city's public high schools. The design, data collection, and analysis of the case study were part of a larger program evaluation undertaken by myself and another researcher; in the methods section, "we" refers to myself and this researcher, Carol T. Nixon, PhD. Coordinators within the

program, run by a local non-profit that focuses on increasing the presence of spoken word poetry in schools and the community, organize school residencies during which two professional spoken word poets lead three 90-minute class sessions during which students watch videos of spoken word, engage in free writing and brainstorming about their lives and identities, and create and perform original pieces. By the end of the three days, each student has written at least one complete poem that discusses their identity formation and their lived experiences. Many students go on to perform these poems in school-based or citywide slams that the non-profit organizes. The non-profit also records approximately 20 students' poems from each school, putting together a CD of student voices. Because the mechanisms identified are based on a single case study of one SEL program's implementation, the model is not meant to rule out other explanations for community-level SEL benefits; rather, the findings suggest one likely model that must be systematically tested in future research.

Participants

This study included students and teachers in a midsize Southern city in whose classrooms the spoken word poetry residency program transpired. Because the program is not grade- or level-specific, the high school students were generally between 14 and 18 years old with any academic history. Teachers who hosted residencies during the project period were invited to participate via email; their participation in the evaluation was voluntary and not a requirement of the residency. To ensure the confidentiality of participants and their schools, I provide only district-level demographic data: in the school district, there are approximately 20,000 high school students, 45% of whom identify as black, 32% as white, 19% as Hispanic, 4% as Asian, and 0.26% other. Further,

73% of students are labeled economically disadvantaged, 12% are students with disabilities, and 15% are speakers of limited English proficiency. Approximately 30% of graduating seniors scored above the ACT composite benchmark for proficient high school performance.

Classroom Observation

In the six months of the case study, we conducted participant observations during the SEL program residency, passively observing and taking field notes during one or more of the three to four classes that make up each residency, observing 10 sessions in all. We also attended several culminating slams, watching the final performances of the pieces the students had created over the course of the residency. Throughout the process, we attempted to participate in the residencies as little as possible to ensure that our observations were purely passive and did not alter the residency in any way. Teachers and poets knew that we were present for observational research, though we did not publicly inform students of our purpose. During all observations, we took detailed field notes that were later reviewed for pertinent quotations or powerful anecdotes and any themes that could guide the coding of interviews and focus groups.

Student Focus Groups

In the weeks following the culmination of the residencies, we conducted semi-structured student focus groups on the schools' campuses. Five separate focus groups of between 8 and 12 students met over lunch to discuss their perceptions of the residency as well as their experiences writing and reading poetry and their impressions of their school more broadly (see Appendix A). Teachers who had hosted residencies determined the students who participated; they were instructed to select a representative sample of the

students from the program and not to simply pick those who would tell positive or transformative stories. The focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed, with all identifying information removed, and then coded for emergent themes.

The primary goal of the focus groups was to better understand students' perceptions of the residencies by allowing them to give voice to their experiences and understandings of the events in their classroom. Students gave retrospective information and endeavored to describe their engagement, interactions with the poets, and emotional responses to the residencies. In this way, the focus groups served as member checking and deepening of the preliminary findings from classroom observations. Moreover, the student focus groups allowed students to provide information on constructs the researchers had not identified; in this way, the students were involved in the creation of knowledge and meaning around the evaluation.

Teacher Interviews

In addition to observations and student focus groups, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 of the teachers who had hosted residencies. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and were scheduled onsite at the school and at the convenience of the teacher. We discussed teachers' experiences with the program, its strengths and limitations, and student outcomes (see Appendix B). Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for emergent themes.

Much like the student focus groups, the teacher interviews supplemented the observations and focus groups, giving another perspective on the students' engagement, interactions with the poets, and emotional involvement in the residencies. Further, we captured teachers' perceptions of the residencies' effectiveness, hoping to understand the

specific mechanisms that engender observed outcomes. Finally, we hoped to better understand the ways in which teachers change their own pedagogical practice as a result of their work with the program.

Analysis

Once transcribed, we used Dedoose, a web-based qualitative software, to analyze interview and focus data for emergent themes. Although the literature grounding research on spoken word poetry suggests that certain themes—empowerment, engagement, student self-direction—might be prevalent, we initially coded blindly so as not to force our preconceived notions onto the data and to help to ensure that no themes were missed. We read through the teacher interviews independently, using constant comparison to identify key themes and subthemes. We then met to reach consensus on the themes and establish a preliminary codebook and independently coded two interviews, meeting to reach consensus and add new themes and subthemes to the codebook. Once this was established, I coded the remaining teacher interviews and then similarly coded the student focus groups. The focus groups, interviews, and classroom observations were used in concert to triangulate the findings and verify that what was observed or reflected was also present in the members' experiences.

Working with the textual material and the constant comparative analysis of the codes gave rise to five main topics with accompanying subtopics: (1) classroom benefits, such as improved peer relationships, sense of community, and student-teacher relationships; (2) individual student benefits, such as greater academic skill, self-confidence, and emotional comfort; (3) teacher benefits, such as pride, renewed energy, and new pedagogical techniques; (4) program design and delivery, such as the alignment

with state academic standards, poets' impacts on the classroom, and change of pace; and (5) program improvement, such as dissemination of information, communication of structure, and classroom management. The literature on social and emotional learning supports these facets as key themes for the implementation of a SEL program and aspects of programs that may be successful (Elias & Weissberg, 2000; Greenberg, et al, 2003; Zins & Elias, 2006).

As the overarching study was a program evaluation of the spoken word program, our goal in the initial coding process that gave rise to the five themes within the data was to better understand the spoken word poetry residencies themselves in order to document their impacts on students and schools and to suggest changes to the program organizers. Once this round of coding was complete, I reviewed the codes and transcripts to identify generalizable mechanisms that would explain such impacts, the substance of which constitutes this paper. I worked iteratively between the transcripts and primary studies and reviews of SEL programs, identifying patterns and areas of overlap, ultimately working to fit the disparate mechanisms identified in other SEL programs into the three key mechanisms that emerged from the spoken word research.

It should be noted that one limitation of this code creation and application process was that it did not involve member checking, an important means of ensuring the validity of a researcher's interpretation of participants' words (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013). Although the constant comparative method does allow the researcher the necessary space to create meaningful categories and understand the interrelationship between and among the coding categories created (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), one should interpret our findings in light of the absence of member checking. The practical and logistical difficulties in

reconvening the focus groups and consuming more of the interviewed teachers' times precluded member checking for this project.

Results: Key Mechanisms for SEL

In the coding of interviews and focus groups, teachers and students continually returned to several aspects of the program that they felt contributed to their growth and achievement. In situating their responses within the broader literature of SEL programs and the mechanisms that matter, I saw the emergence of three key mechanisms, a complement to the three core components of SEL programming. These mechanisms offer an explanation for how core components bring about the proximal benefits that the SEL efficacy model stresses, namely improved student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships. Unlike previous studies and reviews, I do not attempt to comprehensively and exhaustively list the various activities through which SEL programming brings about benefits. Instead, I offer three key, interrelated mechanisms that undergird the benefits associated with SEL programming.

CASEL (2013) identified the three core components of SEL programming: explicit instruction in SEL skills, including identifying and defining key SEL terms and vocabulary and practicing SEL skills; integration of SEL and academics, by finding points of entry into the curriculum that also incorporate SEL skills, such as an analysis of a character's perspective and emotional regulation in an English Language Arts text; and SEL classroom and teaching practices, through the creation of routines or processes that encourage students' social and emotional growth and understanding. Because CASEL has identified these three core competencies as the primary evidence-supported practices for the promotion of SEL for students and classes, I draw on these three sometimes-

overlapping aspects of SEL programming as a starting point for key mechanisms. My three mechanisms are the intervening processes that lead from these three core competencies to the proximal benefits outlined in the SEL efficacy model (see Figure 3). These mechanisms provide the intervening path that connects the classroom-level associations between the SEL programming and proximal benefits, moving from classroom-individual mechanism to individual-individual mechanism to individual-classroom mechanism. When discussing these classroom-level forces, it is important to note that these are not true macro-level forces as in Coleman's (1990) model; rather than looking at societal forces such as religion, politics, or economics, I choose the classroom as the higher level of focus, as it represents a larger level than the individual students and teachers who constitute it.

The classroom-level change, then, as identified in previous models, is the proximal change in classroom structure and relationships between and among students and teachers. In the model, this is represented by the dotted line between SEL core components and the proximal outcomes of SEL, and is conceived of as increased teacher responsiveness to student need, higher rates of cooperation and prosocial behavior, fewer conflicts and aggressive interactions, fewer disruptions and interruptions to class activities, and increased trusting relationships in both student-to-student and student-teacher roles (Zins & Elias, 2006). Without endeavoring to explore the mechanisms that underlie such classroom-level associations, researchers are only able to state that SEL programming is associated with improvements in student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships, as demonstrated by increased observation of positive behavior and interactions within the classroom following a program. The mechanistic model proposed

here enables researchers to better understand how these benefits come to be associated with SEL programming.

I will describe each component of the model in the subsections that follow. In summary, teacher's explicit SEL instruction, inclusion of SEL classroom practices, and incorporation of SEL programs into academic curricula give rise to the possibility for (1) expanded and changed roles for both teachers and students that in turn create space for (2) students (and to some extent teachers) to find commonalities and explore the ways in which they navigate similar emotional terrain, which alters classroom interactional patterns as (3) students and teachers treat each other with increased respect and kindness. These three key mechanisms provide a clear guideline for those endeavoring to employ an effective SEL program; the extent to which an SEL program is able to provide space for teachers and students to alter and expand their roles, find commonalities in their experiences, and alter behavioral patterns will determine the success of achieving the posited proximal outcomes in the classroom.

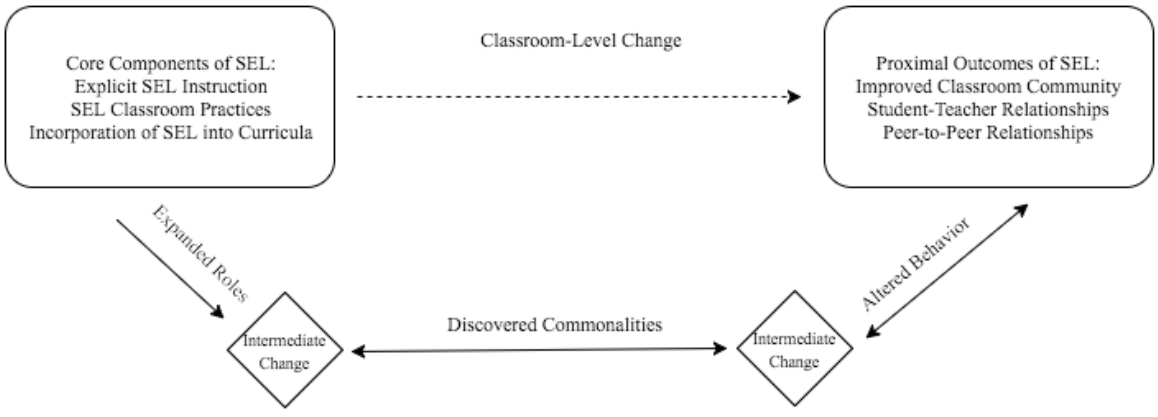

Figure 3. The Model for Key Mechanisms' Role in SEL Programming

Mechanism 1: Expanded Roles

One of the key aspects of a mechanism model is the identification of a situational mechanism that bridges the macro-micro level, what Coleman referred to as "goals toward which [players] act [that] can be changed by the course of the game" (Coleman, 1969, p. 2). To borrow Coleman's metaphor, we can understand SEL programs as altering the rules of the game of schooling, which is a change to the classroom-level structure of the classroom with effects on individual students and teachers. These new rules for the classroom can be mapped most neatly onto the core component of SEL programming that relates to explicit instruction in SEL skills (CASEL, 2013; Elias & Weissberg, 2000), as teachers are to provide direct lessons relating to empathy, managing emotions, and positive interactions with peers. These new rules may also arise from teachers' use of classroom practices that draw on SEL, as they encourage students to discuss their feelings or take on others' perspectives. Undergirding these changes to the classroom structure is the first key mechanism necessary for an improved classroom social environment: expanding and changing roles. The focus on a change in instruction and practices implies that teachers alter their existing roles in the classroom, but SEL programming truly relies on both teachers and students changing and altering their presence within the classroom. These altered and expanded roles help foster improved student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships within the classroom, the proximal benefits identified in the SEL efficacy model.

As teachers offer any of the variety of instructional methods outlined in current research (see Elias & Weissberg, 2000; Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015), they act in ways not often seen within the classroom. They retain the pedagogical bent that is

inherent in explicit instruction, but because of the subject matter and the vulnerability necessary to teach about emotional regulation, social awareness, relationships, and responsible decision making, they become caring mentors who offer guidance through the non-academic trials of school life. Although, of course, all teachers to varying extents may serve as both academic instructors and emotional guides, when teachers in SEL programs are tasked with explicitly discussing emotional regulation and interpersonal relationships, the need to alter their existing role is heightened and pronounced. Whether the SEL program relies on previously identified presumed mechanisms that matter such as scripts, role-playing, reading from books, or sharing personal experiences, the teachers who lead such activities must alter their presence in the classroom, portraying another side of their identity that merges academic instruction with emotional support.

Students, likewise, must alter their presence in the classroom as a result of SEL programming, interacting with subject matter and material that require a different stance than much of the academic work that takes place within a classroom. All student-centered classroom work requires increased maturity and direction, but SEL work in classrooms specifically demands students to adopt a more vulnerable and emotionally accessible stance. As students are encouraged to engage with SEL instruction, discussing their feelings, views of themselves and others, and interaction with their communities, they move away from the academic acquiring and interpretation of facts that takes place in traditional classes and become, like their teachers, emotionally engaged in the classroom environment. Especially in this time of focus on standardized testing and mathematical and linguistic fluency, discussions of students' emotions are less likely to enter into the classroom (Cohen, 2006). SEL programs require students to take part in the emotional

climate of the classroom; regardless of the specific nature of the program, by definition SEL interventions rely on students' discussion of positive behaviors, emotional self-regulation, and community effects of behaviors.

It is important to note that although the mechanism is labeled *expanded roles*, the extent to which teachers and students alter and expand their roles depends on both the existing classroom structure and the nature of the SEL programming. For some classrooms and programs, the expanded roles that are taken on can be seen as small extensions of previously inhabited roles: for example, students may already share their emotions, but the SEL program encourages them to do so within a more specific framework. In other classrooms, teachers have never spoken about emotional regulation or empathy, and so students and teachers may be altering their roles in new directions, incorporating facets of themselves that have not been brought into the classroom. While the degree of change may be important, our focus here is on the fact that the role is expanded and changed in some small or large part.

Spoken word poetry may be an ideal example of such expansion of roles, as it clearly imbues the traditional teacher and student roles with social and emotional characteristics. Throughout the program, students remained in their desks, often taking notes and learning about poetic technique, as in any other unit. Similarly, teachers occupied their traditional space, sometimes enforcing classroom rules and managing behavior. Additionally, though, the SEL components of the spoken word residency opened the potential for role expansion and alteration within the classroom. Teachers no longer served only as instructors, but rather presented themselves as emotional beings who have some expertise in successfully navigating their own and others' emotional

needs, and who also have struggled in ways similar to their students. One teacher said, "I shared a couple [of poems]…with them…and that made a difference when they got to see…here's my vulnerable side, too." Another also spoke to a change in her role in the classroom, saying "I was a student…and I shared my pieces with the class, and I cried as I was reading…it did something really meaningful with me and my students." A third teacher did not explicitly reference that her role had altered, but as she pointed out that she "was emotionally drained because [she] cried every day with [her] students," we can infer that this emotional presence, as represented by crying, was not a typical part of her classroom experience, as she mentioned it as a unique part of the spoken word poetry program.

One student referred to this change in teachers' roles, saying, "my English teacher shared…she did this three stanza poem about her mother who had passed…[my teacher is] opening up." This new form of sharing, opening up, and expressing herself is an expansion and extension of her traditional role as teacher within the classroom; the SEL program required her to alter her classroom presence in a way that broadened her visible identity for students. When students discussed their new perspective on their teachers, they offered that "[the residency] just brought me closer with her" and that "[my teacher] made me feel more comfortable about everything." The expansion of the teachers' roles brought about improved student-teacher relationships, as manifested in the closeness and comfort that students report.

Students, too, were encouraged to alter their classroom presence, as they were asked to share their own lived experiences and their truth with their peers and teacher. Instead of providing analysis of a published poem—the kind of academic work that

would require no change in their roles—students were tasked with creating their own poetry, an activity that required them to serve as emotional participants who shape the classroom climate. Students discussed this changed way of being in the classroom, saying "it helped me get stuff off my chest that I need to get off" and "[the program] gave us another way to explain what we had to say." The simple fact that students mention this as a benefit of the program shows the extent to which the program enabled them to act differently in the classroom; if their previous roles had given them space to "get stuff off [their] chests," they would feel no need to mention it in focus groups. Because the spoken word program gave them a new space to inhabit in the classroom as a sharer, as one who has an important truth to explain, they noted this difference in their roles.

As students and teachers expanded their roles as a result of the classroom-level introduction of an SEL program, teachers themselves noted the importance of the alteration of traditional identities in the classroom. One teacher said, "I've never had that kind of a breakthrough with a kid before." Another said, "I have learned things about [my students] that have really helped." By providing a forum in which students can share aspects of their lives that are normally excluded from the classroom environment, SEL programs provide the opportunity for students to become more complete within the classroom, to bring more of themselves into this altered classroom role. As teachers and students stretch their traditional roles in the classroom and present aspects of their lives, they create an environment in which community-level relationships—student-teacher and peer-to-peer—improve.

Mechanism 2: Discovered Commonalities

As the higher-level structure of a classroom changes and brings with it alterations to individuals' roles, these changes give rise to micro-micro level changes, or changes within individuals in the classroom. Classroom-level changes to the instruction and practices in the classroom support and foster community-level benefits because they invite the teacher to reshape the classroom environment in the hopes of establishing a space for dialogue, practicing social and emotional skills, and demonstrating empathy for classmates (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). These new classroom practices rest on the creation of a space for the finding of commonalities; as the proximal benefit of SEL programming is improved student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships, effective SEL programs give teachers the space to create a classroom in which students and teachers share their experiences and understand themselves and each other as part of a community of shared or similar experiences. SEL programming is not about assimilation, and students are not encouraged to blend in or follow the pack; rather, they are encouraged to give voice to their own experiences, especially around emotional regulation and interactions with others, and in that sharing, they often find common ground.

Because of the nature of these action-formation level changes, we can see a relationship between the core components, the expansion and alteration of roles within the classroom, and the finding of commonalities. Indeed, role expansion and the finding of commonalities can be mutually reinforced: as students and teachers bring more of themselves into the classroom as they expand their roles, they observe similarities and commonalities with others, who also share more of their emotional lives in the classroom. Further, as students and teachers find increased commonality, they may also inhabit their

altered roles more thoroughly and bring even more of themselves into the classroom. In the model for key mechanisms, this is represented in the bidirectional arrow between mechanisms one and two; the model is not linear, but rather a cycle that provides for the interrelationship between aspects of effective SEL programming. It is important to note, however, that the model posits that initially, role expansion precedes the finding of commonality for the first iteration of the cycle. Students and teachers must first be shown expanded roles before they can find the commonalities that push them further into those roles.

Spoken word poetry may focus on this sharing of personal experiences more explicitly than other SEL programs as the material shared is almost exclusively drawn from students' past and present experiences within and outside of school. Nonetheless, most SEL programs rely on some personal disclosure, be it in the form of a morning meeting, a teachable moment, or the interpretation of a story about SEL competencies (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). Teachers' classroom practices therefore bridge disparate personal experiences to create a shared commonality within the classroom, either explicitly or implicitly drawing connections among different people's and groups' feelings in a particular moment.

Reflecting on their experiences with spoken word, many of the students referred to this finding of commonality with others. One student said, "[the residency] helped me connect with people that I'm not used to and see that somebody had the same experience that I did." This finding of commonality across experiences was especially important in creating positive peer-to-peer relationships, as students reported that the more they could understand "where someone was coming from," the more they felt they could interact

with them positively. In reflecting on what she had learned, one student commented, "It's like you're not alone. [Other] people go through things, too." Another student made a similar point, reflecting that "people had different stories, but somehow it connected." This bridging of experiences demonstrated by the feeling that one is no longer alone crystalizes the importance of finding commonality within SEL programming; as students share their experiences or interpretations, classroom practices must enable them to identify similarities in order to forge improved student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships.

One student cryptically shared that the residency taught him "how to experience yourself in other people." Although he did not fully explain his meaning, his explicit reference to the aspects of himself that he experienced in others pointed to the importance of creating a classroom space in which people can share commonalities. Many other students echoed this notion that they were learning more about their peers. One student said she "didn't know why [others were] always like that…and in [their poetry, they] told me why." This greater understanding of their peers' motivations brings into focus the importance of commonality for SEL instruction; a deeper awareness of others' motivations and behaviors may lead to increased empathy and interpersonal skills.

Teachers, too, noted this commonality among their students. One teacher referred to "the bonding experience of the kids," while another mentioned that the students "learned a lot about each other, which helped students to connect and engage in different ways." This sharing of personal experiences that the teacher identifies as a bridging agent between students who perceive themselves to be quite different demonstrates the ways in which effective SEL programming can invite connections that arise from exploring

seemingly unrelated backgrounds. The content of students' stories may be quite different, but they begin to realize that they share a bond in the act of storytelling; they are all shaped by their history and trying to find ways to make meaning in their present. More directly, one teacher noted that "it certainly connected students and…deepened their relationships with one another." Another teacher, perhaps moved herself by the poetry she witnessed, summed up her experience, saying "the beauty of spoken word is that it lets you figure out what your story is and how to live among other stories through the process and in the final product of what you create." Indeed, SEL programming taught her and her students that everyone has a story to share, a background experience that shapes their current understanding, and in exploring those stories, we learn about our common experiences and navigations of the world.

As a result of the SEL programming's alteration of individuals' roles within the classroom, students and teachers are able to share more of themselves. This disposition towards increased emotional and personal revelations leads students and teachers to find commonality in experience, troubles, and triumphs. This attitudinal shift among classroom participants is not an ambiguous result of SEL programming's presence, but rather the logical outgrowth of the individual changes that SEL programming brings about in the classroom; as the SEL program alters and expands student and teacher roles and leads them to share more of themselves, they begin to understand their mutual similarities.

Mechanism 3: Altered Behavior

The third mechanism for effective SEL programming is an outgrowth of the action-formation mechanism of discovered commonalities, as it is the aggregation of

these individual-level attitudinal changes into classroom, classroom-level observations. Much in the same way that the altered and expanded roles of students and teachers leads to attitudinal changes as classroom members identify and experience their shared humanity and common experiences, so do these individual changes in perspective within the classroom alter individual peer-to-peer and student-teacher interactions. These altered interactions and behavior aggregate up to the classroom-level changes observed; as researchers noted that classrooms that employ SEL programs are "safe, caring learning environment[s]" with improved classroom management (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 407) in which students and teachers help and care for each other (Elias, 2006), we can see that these classroom-level changes are the accumulation of individual behaviors and interactions among students and between students and teachers. These behavioral changes follow from the attitudinal shifts that result in the finding of commonalities within the classroom, and as students and teachers continue to change the ways they treat each other, researchers are able to identify the positive patterns of behavior isolated in the proximal benefits of SEL.

As with the relationship between expanded roles and discovered commonality, the transformational mechanism of altered behavior is also represented by a bidirectional arrow. As students find more commonalities, they begin to shift their way of treating each other, which aggregates into patterns of behavior identified as a classroom-level change. This shift in behavior can also create the space for increased commonality. Because the mechanisms do not affect all students at the same time or in a uniform fashion, some may quickly identify their commonality and change their behavior, and this change in behavior may cause other students to realize a commonality that they had previously not

seen. In this way, the alteration of behavior within the classroom is bidirectional, as it may aggregate up to classroom-level changes and it may push for action-formation changes that shift participants' perspectives.

This shift in behavior seemed to be an outgrowth of the sharing of common stories; students time and again remarked that as they learned more about their peers and understood their common struggles and problems, they changed their behaviors and interactions. Repeatedly, students expressed similar sentiments to one student, who said "I feel like I have more respect for [other students in my class]." More specifically, another student related the story of a classmate: "To me [he seemed] like he doesn't really care about school…he's just riding along and I won't take him seriously, but [then] I heard…his poem…something personal…that's serious, I was like, oh…after thinking that, now I know him more and I have more respect for him. I treat him better." This change in the way that students treated each other and interacted more respectfully can be seen in the classroom-level benefits observed in primary research (Brown et al., 2010).

Another student offered a different example of how his behavior had changed as a result of learning about his peers, saying "we learned something new about them [our classmates] and we changed towards them…like you can give them a shoulder to lean on. Like they can come talk to you about their problems." In reflecting on his experience with a friend in class, another student remarked "I remember that day he opened me up…to always be kind to people and to always try to help them fit in with others." These changes in behavior, whether they be treating peers with more respect, giving them space to share their emotions, engaging in acts of kindness, or helping peers to fit in where they

may not, arose from an understanding of common humanity that the SEL program brought to the classroom.

In a similar way, several teachers noted that the finding of commonality students reported had very real consequences in student behavior and interactions, especially for their students who were previously marginalized. One teacher observed that, "one girl…was being bullied by three kids in the class [before the residency started]. She wrote about it while [the residency] was there and then yesterday [a week after the residency], they [the student and her previous bullies] were all joking around." We, of course, base our interpretation on the teacher's reading of the situation and cannot know for certain that the sharing of one girl's experience led to an understanding of common feelings and a change in peer-to-peer relationships. Nonetheless, the teacher's view demonstrates that the residency created a space for sharing so that the girl and her bullies could understand their common experiences as students trying to navigate high school.

Another teacher remarked that "a couple of girls who had some pretty big problems at the beginning of the school year…were being really nice to each other [after the residency] and I think it was because some things were being said that they weren't aware of." As students shared and became aware of new information about their peers, their relationships necessarily changed and grew. As students disclosed personal information and then recognized their commonalities with others in the classroom, they formed closer bonds and their peer-to-peer relationships alter. A teacher said, "I've seen kids work together in my classes [since the residency] that in the beginning of the semester wouldn't even sit near each other." This may be because, as one teacher explained, "they have that connection…[so they are] less judgmental and more accepting

of each other." These new connections, finding new bonds and shared experiences, are essential for the development of the proximal benefits posited by the SEL efficacy model.

Shifts in behavior did not only occur at the peer-to-peer level; teachers also observed a change in their interactions with students. One teacher offhandedly remarked that "we encouraged each other," noting that the poetry program had created a "we" in her classroom that included students and herself, each encouraging others. Another teacher shared a compelling story of connection from her classroom:

> So one of my students who, whole first semester, all of January, before [the residency] [he was] hateful, extremely aggressive to me. And when he let me read [his] final piece, the final piece was about why he treats women the way he does. It turned out that …within the last year or two he had a baby by a girl who won't let him see the baby, so now women are nothing to him. And after that, when I was able to have that conversation with him, totally different kid…not that everything has turned around for him, but I think his perception of me and that I know his story it's really helped.

By encouraging that student to adopt an expanded, holistic role that integrated several disparate aspects of his identity, the SEL program was able to foster community level benefits as seen in the improved student-teacher relationship. Indeed, the teacher here traced the mechanistic model I provide: the spoken word poetry program offered the student and the teacher expanded roles in which they could share aspects of their lives, which in turn led to a deeper understanding and changed perceptions within the classroom, which has in turned helped classroom interactions between the student and the teacher. The situational mechanism of the changed and expanded roles gave the student and the teacher the space to bring more of themselves into the classroom, which altered attitudes—the action-formation mechanism—and then behaviors—the transformational mechanism.

It is these individual changes in student and teacher behavior and interactions that aggregate up to the classroom-level changes observed by previous researchers. As classroom-level observations can only glean patterns of interactions, it is the individual alterations in student and teacher treatment that gives rise to these patterns. Students and teachers alike reported treating one another with increased kindness, respect, and mutual understanding, and it is these individual interactions that aggregate to the classroom-level benefits with which SEL programming has been associated.

Discussion

In my work with spoken word, I saw firsthand the power of SEL interventions on youth. I heard students share stories of rape, bullying, and drug abuse; I watched as friends realized that their fathers were in the same jail; I saw teachers comfort crying students who confronted their peers. I also laughed along with the students' jokes, found peace in their strong statements of identity, and marveled at their ability to pick up the pieces and walk through each day of their lives. In interviews and focus groups, I heard time and again how important the program was, how happy students were that they got the chance to share their stories and learn about their peers, and how necessary programs like this one are for people to truly understand each other as humans. Not a single student or teacher expressed regret at having taken part in the program, and in spite of speaking to a variety of students who were less than enthusiastic about the prospects of performing spoken word poetry in front of their classmates, even the most negative voices had something positive to say about their experiences or what they learned.

In spending time in classrooms and with the students, teachers, and poets, I was struck by the unique magic I felt I was witnessing. Students took seriously the work they

were doing and stepped into their changed roles with gusto and confidence; teachers and poets created safe space for student exploration and growth. In investigating SEL programming further, though, I found that while these experiences may have been magical, they were far from unique; indeed, they were the product of key mechanisms that underlie all successful SEL programs. By understanding that explicit SEL instruction, SEL classroom practices, and integrating SEL into the curricula lead to the expansion and alteration of teacher and student roles, allow participants to identify their commonalities, and encourage students and teachers to treat each other with more respect, we can see the bridging mechanisms between the core components of SEL programming and the benefits they bring about in the classroom. By isolating and identifying these key mechanisms, I hope to offer a framework for practitioners and researchers alike to better understand the processes that bring about greater SEL competencies.

Applying social mechanism theory to SEL programming enhances the current models available, and it pushes our thinking about classroom-based programming to examine underlying causal forces that bring about changes that we understand only as associations. This new mechanistic model offers educators and practitioners new ways to think about their work and the implementation of their programming, as it puts forth clear steps they can follow to elicit the benefits that SEL programming promises. Additionally, researchers can focus on these three mechanisms as levers for change, examining different programs' fidelity to and incorporation of such mechanisms. More broadly, though, this research has implications beyond the realm of SEL programming; as most teachers desire classrooms marked by healthier student-teacher and peer-to-peer

interactions, these mechanisms provide a model for improving classroom functioning outside of SEL programming. Teachers themselves could endeavor to create spaces for role reformation and change so that students and teachers identified commonalities and changed their behaviors based on these realizations without imposing the structure of an SEL program. In this way, the proposed model could have further reaching benefits than for SEL researchers and practitioners alone.

Limitations

As discussed, this research is not meant to test the logic models put forward by Rimm-Kaufman and Hulleman (2015); as it is based on a case study of one SEL program, the data would not permit such a test. Nonetheless, relying on a single case study does present several limitations. Most apparently, it is possible that the mechanisms that I observed are specific only to the spoken word poetry program I worked with and do not generalize to other SEL programs. Without a comparison case study, I had to rely on the research base and previous discussions of proposed mechanisms that matter, rather than drawing on further qualitative data. Additionally, this work is limited by the length of my case study; as I only collected data for six months, I could not observe longitudinal change or follow up with participants to evaluate the long-term effects of the program. It is possible, although unlikely, that were I to return to the five schools that formed the primary foundation of the case study, I would observe that the program had no changes and that students and teachers had returned to their pre-residency roles and relationships. Finally, my research is limited by its specific scope on SEL programming; it is possible that the mechanisms I identified are part of any successful student program and the SEL benefits were incidental. Perhaps all programs that bring about improved student-teacher

and peer-to-peer relationships rely on these three mechanisms, and my focus on SEL is unnecessary.

Strengths

In spite of the above limitations, this mechanistic study of SEL programming has several strengths. Because it emerged from a qualitative case study, I offer thick description of the classroom- and individual-level changes observed, as well as members' voices in explanation of their experiences. Drawing on study of five different schools, I was able to observe variation in the program implementation, student perceptions, and teacher reflections, giving richer description and a more wide-ranging understanding of the program and its effects. Further, bringing the social science mechanism literature to bear on SEL programming offers a new perspective and understanding of the process such programs follow to bring about classroom-level benefits.

Future Research

With the key mechanisms identified, rigorous future research is needed to test the hypotheses presented. Only through careful examination of SEL programs can we know whether all successful implementations rest on these three mechanisms in the formulation presented, or if there are successful programs that manage to effect positive change to classroom relationships without one or more of them. Finding SEL programs that do not involve one of the three mechanisms may be difficult; nonetheless, such a program may exist, and it would benefit the proposed framework to test such a program to determine if the three mechanisms are indeed necessary for successful SEL program implementation. Further, longitudinal study of participants within an SEL program would yield greater insight into the duration of the effects of such mechanisms; it is possible that over time,

one mechanism becomes more salient as others become less important. It may also be useful to examine two parallel sets of SEL programs with different focuses to examine if an emphasis on one mechanism or another provides differential effects. If the proposed theory of key mechanisms withstands rigorous research, though, it represents a concrete set of guidelines that all SEL program practitioners can ensure are present within their programs, and will result in greatly improved classroom relationships and social and emotional learning for students the world over.

Conclusion

In drawing on a qualitative case study of the implementation of a spoken word poetry program in high schools in a mid-sized southern city, I offer a mechanistic model that explains the observed associations between SEL programming and improved student-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships. Following Coleman's (1990) model for mechanisms that move between levels, I posit that SEL programs enable students and teachers to expand their roles to express themselves more fully in the classroom. This leads to a perspectival shift in which participants identify their commonalities, which in turn leads to altered interactions and behaviors. These changes in the patterns of individual interactions aggregate to the classroom level, explaining the correlations observed between SEL programming and improved classroom environments. This research offers practitioners and educators clear guidelines for improving their classroom climate, irrespective of their desire to implement SEL programming, as they can focus on expanding student and teacher roles in the classroom in the hopes of identifying commonalities and potentially altering behavior. Similarly, researchers now have a testable model for better understanding the benefits that SEL programs offer to students;

they can examine the pathways of these mechanisms, particular programs' fidelity to these mechanisms, and the pathways in other programs that move between levels and aggregate up to observed classroom changes.

References

Anderson, P., Blatt, R., Christianson, M. K., Grant, A. M., Marquis, C., Neuman, E. J., et al. (2006). Understanding mechanisms in organizational research reflections From a Collective Journey. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, *15*(2), 102–113. http://doi.org/10.1177/1056492605280231

Biesbroek, G. R., Termeer, C. J., Klostermann, J. E., & Kabat, P. (2014). Rethinking barriers to adaptation: Mechanism-based explanation of impasses in the governance of an innovative adaptation measure. *Global Environmental Change*, *26*, 108-118.

Brown, J. L., Jones, S. M., LaRusso, M. D., & Aber, J. L. (2010). Improving classroom quality: Teacher influences and experimental impacts of the 4rs program. *Journal of educational psychology*, *102*(1), 153.

CASEL. (2013) "Effective social and emotional learning programs." *2013 CASEL Guide*. Retrieved January 12, 2016, from http://static1.squarespace.com/static/513f79f9e4b05ce7b70e9673/t/526a220de4b00a92c90436ba/1382687245993/2013-casel-guide.pdf

CASEL. (2015). SEL Defined. Retrieved January 19, 2016, from http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/

Cohen, J. (2006). Social, emotional, ethical, and academic education: Creating a climate for learning, participation in democracy, and well-being. *Harvard Educational Review*, *76*(2), 201–237.

Coleman, J. S. (1969). Games as vehicles for social theory. *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 12, 2-6.

Coleman, J. S. (1990). *Foundations of social theory*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group. (1999). Initial impact of the Fast Track prevention trial for conduct problems: II. Classroom effects. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 67*(5), 648 – 657.

Cook, T. D., Murphy, R. F., & Hunt, D. H. (2000). Comer's school development program in Chicago: A theory-based evaluation. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*(2), 535–597.

Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, *82*(1), 405–432. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01564.x

Elbertson, N. A., Brackett, M. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2010). School-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programming: Current perspectives. In *Second International Handbook of Educational Change* (pp. 1017–1032). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. http://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-2660-6_57

Elias, M. J. (2006). The connection between academic and social-emotional learning. In M. J. Elias & H. Arnold (Eds.), *The Educator's Guide to Emotional intelligence and Academic Achievement* (pp. 4–14). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Elias, M. J., & Weissberg, R. P. (2000). Primary prevention: Educational approaches to enhance social and emotional learning. *Journal of School Health*, *70*(5), 186–190. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2000.tb06470.x

Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Graczyk, P. A., & Weissberg, R. P. (2003). Implementation, sustainability, and scaling up of social-emotional and academic innovations in public schools. *School Psychology Review*, *32*(3), 303–319.

Elias, M. J., Zins, J. E., Weissberg, K. S., Greenberg, M. T., Haynes, N. M., Kessler, R., et al. (1997). *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.

Goetze, D. (2014). World views and social actors: A social mechanisms approach to development situations. *Agency and Changing World Views in Africa*, *40*, 55.

Greenberg, M. T., Weissberg, R. P., O'Brien, M. U., Zins, J. E., Fredericks, L., Resnik, H., & Elias, M. J. (2003). Enhancing school-based prevention and youth development through coordinated social, emotional, and academic learning. *American Psychologist*, *58*(6-7), 466–474. http://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.58.6-7.466

Hedström, P., Liu, K. Y., & Nordvik, M. K. (2008). Interaction domains and suicide: a population-based panel study of suicides in Stockholm, 1991–1999. *Social Forces*, *87*(2), 713-740.

Hedström, P., & Ylikoski, P. (2010). Causal mechanisms in the social sciences. *Annual Review of Sociology, 36*, 49-67.

Hernes, G. (1998). Real virtuality. In P. Hedström & R. Swedberg (Eds.), *Social mechanisms: An analytical approach to social theory* (pp. 74-101). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press

Hoadley, Ellen D. (2008). IT value sustainability: Searching for explanatory causal mechanisms. *Review of Business Information Systems (RBIS)* 12.2, 59-64.

Matysiak, A., & Vignoli, D. (2012). Methods for reconciling the micro and the macro in family demography research: A systematisation. In *Advanced Statistical Methods for the Analysis of Large Data-Sets* (pp. 475-484). Springer: Berlin Heidelberg.

Merrell, K. W. (2002). Social-emotional intervention in schools: Current status, progress, and promise. *School Psychology Review, 31*(2), 142–147.

Payton, J. W., Wardlaw, D. M., Graczyk, P. A., Bloodworth, M. R., Tompsett, C. J., & Weissberg, R. P. (2000). Social and emotional learning: A framework for promoting mental health and reducing risk behavior in children and youth. Journal of School Health, 70(5), 179–185. http://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2000.tb06468.x

Raver, C. C., Jones, S. M., Li-Grining, C. P., Metzger, M., Champion, K. M., & Sardin, L. (2008). Improving preschool classroom processes: Preliminary findings from a randomized trial implemented in Head Start settings. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 23*, 10 –26.

Rimm-Kaufman, S. E., & Hulleman, C. S. (2015). Social and emotional learning in Elementary school settings: Identifying mechanisms that matter. In J. Durlak, C. Domitrovich, R. Weissberg, & T. Gullotta (Eds.), *The Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning* (pp. 151-166). New York City: Guilford Press

Robers, S., Zhang, A., Morgan, R.E., and Musu-Gillette, L. (2015). Indicators of school crime and safety: 2014 (NCES 2015-072/NCJ 248036). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice

Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC.

Schwartz-Shea, P., & Yanow, D. (2013). *Interpretive Research Design: Concepts and Processes*. New York: Routledge.

Scriven, M. (1994). The fine line between evaluation and explanation. *American Journal of Evaluation*, *15*:75–77.

Solomon, D., Watson, M., Battistich, V., Schaps, E., & Delucchi, K. (1996). Creating classrooms that students experience as communities. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 24*(6), 719 –748.

Zins, J. E., & Elias, M. J. (2006). Social and emotional learning. In G. G. Bear & K. M. Minke (Eds.), *Children's Needs III* (3rd ed., pp. 1–14).

Appendix A: Student Focus Group Protocol

Notes for focus group facilitators:

- The focus group guide is designed to ask very broad questions that allow a wide range of responses from the students. The initial questions should be asked as close to verbatim as possible.
- Follow-up with probes help to illicit additional information and to clarify initial responses. These are more flexible and should align and flow with the conversation. (See indented bullets for examples.)
- The questions are roughly grouped according to topics. Try to stay on the topic but don't be so rigid as to lose the opportunity to further explore or clarify a youth comment.

I. Introduction:

Hello. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me (us).

My name is _____. I am from Vanderbilt. We are helping to gather your feedback about the [Spoken Word Organization] program. Our conversation today will take about 20-25 minutes.

I will be asking you several questions about the [Spoken Word Organization] residency program that you have had in English [*or other*] class. There are no right or wrong answers. We really just want to know what you think about the program.

Also, everything that you say is confidential. That means that we will not share what any student says with the program staff or your teachers. We will give them a summary of what the group of students said about the program.

We are audio taping this session simply so we don't miss any of your feedback. The recording can only be accessed by our evaluation team. Your teachers or your school cannot access them.

Now for some ground rules:

- Everyone's input is valuable so please speak up. Remember, everyone's experiences are not the same.
- Please be candid and honest.
- Please be courteous to others. Respect everyone's feelings. So for example, only one person at a time should speak. Please do not carry on side conversations.

General Probing Questions:

- ❖ Can you tell me more?
- ❖ How?
- ❖ When?
- ❖ Why?
- ❖ I don't quite understand
- ❖ Does anyone have an example of that?
- ❖ Has that been anybody else's experience?
- ❖ Anyone have a different idea?

II. Warm-up: General Perceptions of the Program

I would like to begin by asking you a few general questions about the [Spoken Word Organization] Residency Program.

- What was your favorite part about the program?
    - Why?
- What was your least favorite part?
    - Why?
- What changes would you suggest to make the program better?
- What did you think about the poets leading the class?
    - How would it have been different if your teacher had led it?
    - What was different about the program compared to your other classes?

III. Program Outcomes

- Did the experience affect you in any way?
    - In what ways?
    - How?
    - Why? What made the difference?
- Did anything surprise you during the program?
    - Can anyone provide an example?
- What did you learn from the program?
    - Can you give me an example?
    - How is that helpful?
- Did the experience change your confidence about speaking and writing?
    - In what ways?
- Did the experience make you feel differently about your classroom?
    - About your classmates?
        - How?

    - About your teacher?
        - How?

- What did you think of the slam [i.e., students reading their poems at the end]?
    - How did it affect you?
        - Why/how?
    - Did anyone in this group read something you wrote during the class or at the slam?
        - Why did you decide to read or to not read your writing?
    - What was most meaningful about the slam?
    - Did you record your poem with the audio engineer?

IV. Wrap-Up

I have just a few more questions for you.

- Would you like to see this program offered again at your school?
- Have you talked about this program with any of your friends?
    - What have you said?
- Are you interested in participating in another spoken word program, either during or after school (e.g., club activity)?
- What else should I know that is important about your experience in the program?

Thank you for your time and for talking with me (us) about [Spoken Word Organization] Program.

Appendix B: Teacher Interview Protocol

Notes for interviewers

- The interview guide is designed to ask very broad questions that allow a wide range of responses from the teachers. The initial questions should be asked as close to verbatim as possible.
- Follow-up with probes help to illicit additional information and to clarify initial responses. These are more flexible and should align and flow with the conversation. (See indented bullets for examples.)
- The questions are roughly grouped according to topics. Try to stay on the topic but don't be so rigid as to lose the opportunity to further explore or clarify a teacher's comment.

I. Introduction:

Hello. Thank you for agreeing to talk with me (us).

My name is _____. I am from Vanderbilt. We are seeking your feedback about the [Spoken Word Organization] classroom residency program. Our conversation today will take about 20 minutes.

Everything that you say is confidential. We will not share the identity of you or any of the teachers we interview with the program. Similarly, we will not share quotes in the report that allows you to be identified. We will provide [Spoken Word Organization] a summary of teachers' feedback as well as what the students have said in focus groups.

We are audio taping this interview simply so we don't miss any of your feedback. The recording can only be accessed by our evaluation team. The recording will be deleted after we transcribe the interview. The transcription file also will not identify you.

II. General Perceptions of the Program and Alignment with Instructional Standards

I would like to begin by asking you a few general questions about the [Spoken Word Organization] Residency Program.

- What do you like best about the residency program?
- Do you think it is beneficial to have the poets lead the classes? *(Don't ask if repetitive.)*
    - In what ways?
- What is the most challenging aspect of the program?
- Was it challenging to integrate the program into your instructional plans and routine?
    - Why? Why not?
    - Does it align well with state instructional standards?
- Is this the first time you have included [Spoken Word Organization] in your classroom?

  If no,
    - Was this experience similar to your previous experience?
        - Why or why not?
- What changes would you suggest to improve the program?
- Are you likely to include the program in your classroom in the future?

III. Program Outcomes

Now I'd like to ask you about some of the outcomes of the program.

- Did anything surprise you during the program?
    - What?
    - Why?
- Did you learn anything new?
    - What?
    - Can you provide an example?
- Did you learn anything that you might incorporate into your own lesson plans or teaching strategies?

- Can you provide an example?

- How do you think the students benefited?
  - Did the students experience other types of benefits?

    (probing here for a range of outcomes including academic, social emotional)
  - Did some students benefit more than others?
    - Why?
    - Can you give me an example?
- Did the experience seem to change the climate of the classroom?
  - In what ways?
- What did you think of the slam [i.e., students reading their poems at the end]?
  - How did the students react?
  - How did it affect you?
    - Why/how?
  - What was most meaningful about the slam?

IV. Wrap-Up

I have just a few more questions for you.

- Do you plan to incorporate the program into one of your classes in the future?
- Have you talked about the program with any of your colleagues?
  - Would you recommend it?
  - Why or why not?
- How might some of the key elements of the program -- those that create change if any -- be integrated in classrooms on a more regular basis?
- What else should I know that is important about your experience with the program?

Thank you for your time and for talking with me (us) about [Spoken Word Organization] Program.