

# Kindness in the Classroom: Evaluating the Impact of Direct Kindness Instruction on School and Emotional Outcomes in Second-Grade Students

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Article abstract

This study explores the effects of direct kindness instruction on second-grade students' social and emotional well-being. Amidst the growing integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into educational curricula, this research specifically focuses on the aspect of kindness, a vital yet often under-explored component of SEL. Conducted in a diverse second-grade classroom in a small Midwestern U.S. town, this study employs an action research methodology, using the Second Step curriculum and weekly kindness missions as interventions. The research is guided by two primary questions: the influence of direct kindness instruction on students' social behavior and its impact on their emotional well-being. The effectiveness of the interventions is evaluated using the Social Academic and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SABERS). Findings indicate significant improvements in students' academic, social, and emotional behaviors, underscoring the effectiveness of kindness instruction in enhancing the overall educational environment. The study highlights the need for incorporating structured SEL components, particularly kindness and empathy, in early education, and suggests future research directions for exploring long-term impacts of SEL interventions.

## **KINDNESS IN THE CLASSROOM: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF DIRECT KINDNESS INSTRUCTION ON SCHOOL AND EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES IN SECOND-GRADE STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study explores the effects of direct kindness instruction on second-grade students' social and emotional well-being. Amidst the growing integration of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) into educational curricula, this research specifically focuses on the aspect of kindness, a vital yet often under-explored component of SEL. Conducted in a diverse second-grade classroom in a small Midwestern U.S. town, this study employs an action research methodology, using the Second Step curriculum and weekly kindness missions as interventions. The research is guided by two primary questions: the influence of direct kindness instruction on students' social behavior and its impact on their emotional well-being. The effectiveness of the interventions is evaluated using the Social Academic and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SABERS). Findings indicate significant improvements in students' academic, social, and emotional behaviors, underscoring the effectiveness of kindness instruction in enhancing the overall educational environment. The study highlights the need for incorporating structured SEL components, particularly kindness and empathy, in early education, and suggests future research directions for exploring long-term impacts of SEL interventions.*

**KEY WORDS:** Academic behaviours; Emotional well-being; Kindness instruction; Social behaviours

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the integration of social and emotional learning (SEL) into educational curricula has become increasingly popular. Amidst this paradigm shift, researchers, educators, and school administrators are recognizing the importance of fostering not only academic proficiency but also emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills in young learners. However, there remains a significant gap in directly addressing one key component of SEL: kindness. Kindness, as a component of SEL, plays a vital role in shaping the social and emotional landscape of young learners. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the impact of direct kindness instruction on second-grade students. This age group represents a crucial stage in development, where foundational SEL skills are not only rapidly evolving but also significantly influence future social and emotional trajectories. Yet, this demographic remains relatively under-researched in terms of specific SEL interventions, particularly those focusing on kindness.

According to Durlak et al. (2022), the emphasis on SEL in schools aligns with broader educational trends and policies that advocate for a more holistic approach to student development. These trends, supported by a growing body of research, suggest that SEL programs are not just beneficial but essential for the overall well-being and future success of students as extensive research underscores the vital role of SEL in shaping students' academic and personal success. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) revealed that students engaged in SEL programs exhibited a significant 11% increase in academic achievements. This correlation between emotional-social skills and academic performance challenges traditional educational paradigms by highlighting the intertwined nature of these competencies. Further, Taylor et al. (2017) demonstrates the long-term effectiveness of SEL, with benefits such as improved mental health and reduced behavioral problems persisting over time. This enduring impact is crucial, considering the rapidly evolving and challenging societal contexts students face. Moreover, studies such as those by Jones et al. (2017) have established a direct link between early SEL competencies and essential adult outcomes, including higher education levels and enhanced mental well-being. These findings are important in an era where mental health is a growing concern, as noted by Payton et al. (2008), who found SEL programs significantly reduce anxiety and depression among students. Finally, the comprehensive framework provided by organizations like Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) further cements the position of SEL not only as a beneficial, but an essential element in modern educational curricula, advocating for its integration to nurture well-rounded, academically successful, and emotionally resilient individuals.

In summary, a comprehensive review of existing literature reveals that SEL programs, when implemented effectively, have led to improved student outcomes both academically and socially. Studies have shown that students who receive SEL instruction demonstrate better emotional regulation, increased empathy, and enhanced problem-solving skills. However, as noted by Wigelsworth et al. (2022) in their review of 33 SEL interventions, there is significant variation in the quality of evidence, and ambiguities exist about what defines whole school approaches. The review also reveals a novel and concerning lack of data for

distinguishing effects among different subgroups. Based on our search and observations, there is a notable scarcity of research focusing specifically on kindness as a direct instructional component within SEL. To that end, this study seeks to contribute to this area by examining the effects of a structured kindness curriculum on second-grade students through an action research project. The theoretical foundations of our intervention are rooted in established SEL models, which advocate for the integration of emotional intelligence education in elementary school settings.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research is guided by two primary questions: First, how does direct instruction in kindness influence the social behavior of second-grade students? Second, what impact does this instruction have on their emotional well-being? To address these questions, our study was conducted in a diverse second-grade classroom in a small Midwestern town in the US, characterized by a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Understanding the demographic context is crucial, as it provides insights into the scalability and applicability of our findings to similar educational environments.

### **RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY**

The decision to center our research on second-grade students is grounded in the widely accepted notion within the academic community that childhood represents a pivotal time for the cultivation of social and emotional learning (SEL) skills. This idea is supported by numerous studies (Jones et al., 2017; Taylor et al., 2017). The developmental milestones typical of second-graders—including the emergence of complex emotional understanding, empathy, and the beginnings of moral reasoning—present a unique opportunity. By integrating kindness education into the curriculum at this juncture, we not only aim to enhance the immediate classroom environment but also to set a foundation for long-lasting effects on students' emotional and social development.

Furthermore, research, such as that by Jones et al. (2017), indicates that early social and emotional competencies have a profound impact on a wide range of adult outcomes. Therefore, by prioritizing kindness in our instruction, we are not just fostering a more empathetic, understanding, and cooperative environment among young learners; we are also actively contributing to their lifelong journey towards becoming compassionate and socially responsible adults. This approach aligns with the growing body of research advocating for SEL's integration in early education as a means to promote not only academic success, but overall well-being and societal contribution (Mahoney et al., 2021).

### **RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE**

The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform educational practices and curriculum development. Our findings could offer valuable insights for educators and policymakers seeking to incorporate SEL more effectively into early childhood education. By demonstrating the tangible benefits of direct kindness instruction, this study contributes to the ongoing conversation about the best practices in SEL and supports the development of comprehensive, empathy-centered educational programs.

**RESEARCH SETTING**

The group of students that we are working with for this action research project are 20 second-grade students, most of whom are seven years old at an elementary school in western Nebraska in the Midwest of the United States. The school serves as an educational institution for approximately 220 students operating in a two-section model (i.e., a structure where each grade level is divided into two classes or sections) and catering to kindergarten through fifth grade with a high proportion (74%) of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, indicating a considerable level of socio-economic need within its community. The school is characterized by a diverse demographic composition, with minority students who are of a race or ethnicity other than white constituting 32% of the student body. It is important to acknowledge that the town's demographic composition is primarily White (84%) according to the U.S. 2021 census report. A significant portion of the student population (65%) is classified as economically disadvantaged, which underscores the school's role in serving a diverse and underprivileged demographic.

In addition to their varied demographic backgrounds, these students, consisting of 11 boys and 9 girls, also have a wide range of abilities and needs. Several students have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and receive a variety of support including occupational therapy, speech therapy, and academic intervention (reading, writing, and math). There is one student who is an English Language Learner. Most students do qualify for free or reduced lunch and come from families with economic needs, which is reflective of the school's demographic background as described above.

Overall, this group of students is diverse in their academic achievements. They are a very athletic group and have great ideas when it comes to writing and speaking. Math concepts are another overall strength, with roughly half the students meeting or exceeding benchmarks in the area of math. Many of the students can perform near grade level expectations in at least one content area. However, most students do rely on targeted interventions in at least one content area to bridge the academic gap. Ten of the 20 students are on a RIA plan (Reading Improvement Act) and receive daily Title 1 Reading Intervention, a federally funded program designed to meet the academic needs of students in schools with a high percentage of free and reduced lunch. Many students need their social-emotional needs met before they can effectively focus on academic learning. For instance, several students work one-on-one with a counselor or mentor at school or receive support in developing social skills, which helps increase engagement with their studies. This support varies depending on the individual needs of students but includes friendship groups with the school counselor and direct instruction of social skills (sharing, taking turns, looking at the person you are talking to, etc.) with the Special Education teacher.

Many students also receive instruction using Zones of Regulation which is a curriculum centered around intentionally teaching emotional control and self-regulation skills. The Zones of Regulation curriculum categorizes feelings into four zones; the red zone indicates feelings similar to anger or panic, the blue zone is characterized by feelings of low energy such as boredom or sadness, the yellow zone is interpreted by feelings of excitement or worry, and the green zone is ideally where we want students to be with feelings comparable

to happiness and focus. The breakdown of emotions into these four zones provides students and teaching staff with a common and concrete language to discuss feelings, emotions, and problem-solving techniques. In addition to the interventions, one student works with a therapist once a week during the school day and two other students work with a community mentor once a week during the school day. About one-third of the students in this study required assistance with acquiring school supplies at the beginning of the year. Additionally, several students and their families are dependent on school programs and community resources for food at home, clothes, and other necessities. Snacks are provided twice a day to ensure that students have the energy to focus, but these challenges all have a direct impact on the students' learning.

With 20 students in our classroom, we have plenty of opportunities for collaboration. Students often work in pairs or in small groups for various activities. In addition, we are trying something new this year in our classroom where students have a variety of flexible seating options. As long as students are being respectful and working, they may choose where they sit. Options include one of the ten desks, two standing desks, a table with stools, a table with bench seating, a table with rocking chairs, a table with cushions on the floor, a couch, and clipboards. With so many options, the lead author of this action research project, also a classroom teacher with this participating class, has noticed that many students struggle to stay engaged as they are more focused on talking with their peers. Some students have been given an assigned seat for this reason. While this freedom of choice was difficult for many students at the beginning of the year, there have been some improvements as they became more accustomed to classroom expectations. This opportunity for student choice has given students the opportunity to take more responsibility and ownership of their own learning and has promoted collaboration throughout the classroom.

#### **INTERVENTION RATIONALE AND DESCRIPTION**

The issue looking to be addressed in the classroom was improving the social and emotional well-being of students. Many students have social and emotional needs that make learning difficult. This included deficits in a wide range of skills such as recognizing one's own emotions, identifying problems/the causation of problems, and responding appropriately to setbacks. When students are unable to identify their feelings and what is causing those feelings to arise, they have a difficult time of being rational problem solvers, allowing their emotions to take over decision making and therefore leading to unproductive solutions (i.e., yelling, throwing objects, or using hurtful language towards themselves and others). These unaddressed needs were causing peer conflict as well as disrespect towards school property and personnel, which further limited our learning opportunities. Within the first few weeks of the school year, there had already been several instances where students needed to be removed from the classroom for unsafe or disruptive behavior in order to protect the learning environment for other students.

Many of the negative behaviors that have been observed in the classroom seem to stem from deficiencies in social skills and/or emotional regulation skills. Some examples of these behaviors that have occurred include bouts of screaming and crying from several students when told 'no,' banging their head on the desk or wall when given redirected to follow

classroom expectations, and using pencils and scissors to destroy classroom materials (carving into desks, stabbing holes into cushions, etc.). With a few students, there was a pattern of yelling at school staff members and calling them names when redirected. Additionally, behaviors like taunting, excluding, and physical roughness were causing a significant number of peer conflicts. It appeared that several students were experiencing difficulty making and keeping friendships due to some of these behaviors. These behaviors also severely impacted the learning environment.

The intent of this intervention was to use direct instruction to teach kindness and empathy in order to provide students with the background knowledge to respond respectfully to peers and adults. The exploration of direct instruction in teaching kindness and empathy in educational settings has evolved significantly over time. Schonert-Reichl and Hymel's (2007) research provided empirical evidence that explicitly teaching empathy and kindness can substantially improve students' ability to empathize and respond to the emotions of others. This approach hinges on the theory that social-emotional skills, much like academic ones, can be systematically developed through structured education. Following this, Gordon's (2010, as cited in Talvio et al., 2013) study laid the groundwork by demonstrating the broad impact of directly teaching these social-emotional skills, not only on individual student behavior but also in cultivating a compassionate and cooperative school culture. Further advancing this idea, Jones and Bouffard (2012), through their study in 'Child Development Perspectives,' found that children receiving direct instruction in these skills showed enhanced prosocial and respectful behaviors in a variety of social contexts. More recently, Flook et al. (2015) reinforced these findings by illustrating how direct empathy instruction not only augments students' emotional intelligence but also promotes a respectful and inclusive classroom environment. Collectively, these studies underscore the importance of incorporating direct instruction of kindness and empathy into SEL curricula, highlighting its critical role in nurturing empathetic, socially adept individuals. Based on these previous findings, we also anticipated that this intervention of integrating direct instruction to teach kindness and empathy would lead to less conflict and promote positive relationships in and out of our classroom.

In order to help support the students in the areas of social skills and emotional regulation, the Second Step curriculum was used as a whole group intervention. Second Step is a classroom-based social skills program for students in preschool through junior high (ages 4–14 years), with a curriculum designed specifically for each grade level. According to the Committee for Children, a nonprofit dedicated to the safety and well-being of children and creator of Second Step, this curriculum is developed to reduce impulsive, high-risk, and aggressive behaviors and increase children's social competence and other protective factors. The initial plan was to teach one Second Step lesson daily until all 22 lessons were taught. Due to unforeseen circumstances (assemblies, sheltering for severe weather, and the classroom teacher being absent from school for two days), only 18 of the 22 lessons were taught during the allotted intervention time frame.

The lessons were taught in chronological order in a whole group setting as suggested by the Second Step curriculum. Some lessons in this curriculum at the 2nd grade level include

showing empathy and compassion, emotion management, and problem solving as shown in detail below in Table 1.

In our class, we made learning about emotions and social skills fun and easy for students. The students discovered how to understand what others are feeling by observing their facial expressions, body language, and the situations they were in. This was not just about recognizing feelings like sadness or happiness, but also understanding why people might feel that way. For instance, a frown might mean someone is upset, and we would discuss why they could be feeling upset. At the same time, the students learned important lessons about managing their own emotions. They explored how to deal with feelings like embarrassment when something does not go as planned, anger when they are upset about something, and anxiety when they are nervous about a new situation. We introduced them to different ways to calm down and feel better, like taking deep breaths, talking to someone they trust, or taking a moment to think about what they are feeling.

Table 1  
*Second Step Curriculum for Social- Emotional Learning for Second-Grade*

<b>Unit 1: Skills for Learning</b>	<b>Unit 2: Empathy</b>	<b>Unit 3: Emotional Management</b>	<b>Unit 4: Problem Solving</b>
1. Being Respectful	5. Identifying Feelings	11. Introducing Emotion Management	17. Solving Problems, Part 1
2. Focusing Attention and Listening	6. Learning More About Feelings	12. Managing Embarrassment	18. Solving Problems, Part 2
3. Using Self-Talk	7. Feeling Confident	13. Handling Making Mistakes	19. Taking Responsibility
4. Being Assertive	8. Respecting Different Preferences	14. Managing Anxious Feelings	20. Responding to Playground Exclusion
	9. Showing Compassion	15. Managing Anger	21. Playing Fairly on the Playground
	10. Predicting Feelings	16. Finishing Tasks	22. Reviewing Second Step Skills

Each lesson, which lasted about 30 minutes, was carefully designed to be engaging. We often used stories as a way to teach these lessons. These stories were about kids just like them, facing everyday challenges. After listening to a story, we would have a discussion. This was a time where students could talk about how the characters in the story might be feeling and why. For example, if a character in the story was left out of a game, we would talk about how that might make them feel and why it is important to include everyone. We also focused on how the characters in the stories could solve their own problems. This was an important part of teaching students how to help themselves. They learned that it's okay to ask for help and that there are different ways to solve a problem. We also discussed what students could do



if they saw someone else facing a problem, like being left out or being treated unfairly. This was a way of teaching them to be empathetic and compassionate towards others.

Besides stories, we also had activities and role-playing games where students could practice what they learned. For example, we might role-play a situation where someone was feeling left out and discuss different ways to include them. This helped the students apply what they learned in real-life situations. Throughout the intervention, we talked about important social skills like not excluding anyone on the playground, playing fairly, and taking responsibility for our actions. Our aim was to help students not only understand their own emotions better but also to get along better with others.

In addition to the Second Step curriculum, we also participated in weekly 'kindness missions,' a term we used with the children. Each Monday, students would be given a new kindness mission that they would focus on for the week and then reflect on Friday. The kindness missions that students were given were inviting someone to play at recess, writing a nice note/drawing a nice picture to give to someone else, writing a thank you note, making a poster to encourage people to be kind, and giving someone a compliment. Students were encouraged and reminded throughout the week to complete the mission. On Friday, students were asked to reflect via small group and whole group discussions on the mission. They were asked how they felt after completing the kindness mission, how they thought the other person felt, if anyone did something kind for them throughout the week and how they felt about it. Many students shared that they felt positive emotions after being kind towards someone else and that they would try to complete the kindness mission more than once throughout the week.

There are several reasons why the chosen interventions were selected. First of all, Second Step is the social/emotional curriculum chosen by the classroom teacher's school district, which means we had access to all of the needed resources. In the interest of being completely transparent, the classroom teacher shared that they had not taught the Second Step curriculum comprehensively or with fidelity in the past. We were interested in seeing how effective this curriculum could be in meeting the needs of students. Secondly, "research reveals that teaching SEL within the school leads to a stronger sense of school community, increased prosocial and decreased antisocial behavior, improvements in grades and achievement, and decreases in anxiety and depression" (Brown et al., 2012, p. 865). Furthermore, Second Step is a curriculum that is highly rated by the U.S. Department of Education for teaching children up to 9th grade prosocial behaviors while also reducing aggressive and impulsive behaviors (Brown et al., 2012). We were hopeful that the Second Step curriculum would help us meet the goal of improving students' emotional and social well-being and increase the amount of positive interactions within the classroom.

#### **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

In order to know if the chosen intervention was successful or not, data was collected using the Social, Academic, and Emotional Behavior Risk Screener (SABERS). SABERS is a 19-item universal screener made up of three domains including social behavior, academic behavior, and emotional behavior; it is a teacher-based rating scale of student risk for social-emotional

and behavioral problems for K–12 students. It is grounded within a conceptual model, which states that a student's success in school is not only related to his or her academic achievement, but also success within multiple behavioral domains. The purpose of SABERS is to identify students who are at some risk or high risk in the areas of social behaviors, academic behaviors, and emotional behaviors. According to the SABERS screener, a student with an overall score of 23 or below is considered to be at high risk while a student with an overall score between 24 and 36 is considered to be at some risk of displaying problematic behaviors. Students with a score between 37 and 57 are identified by SABERS as having no significant risk of displaying such behaviors. As the classroom teacher, the lead researcher's role was to select how often students show certain behaviors related to the three areas. Some examples of the 19 behaviors that were rated for each individual student included arguing, showing signs of anxiety, impulsiveness, disruptive behavior, socially acceptable responses, and cooperating with peers. A compilation of all behaviors rated using the SABERS screener can be found at the conclusion of this paper (see Appendix A). Students were selected as never, sometimes, often, or almost always showing each behavior listed on the SABERS screener. Each response generated a point value between 0 and 3 with prosocial behaviors being worth more points and antisocial behaviors being worth less points.

Before starting the intervention, the classroom teacher completed the SABERS screener for all 20 students to have some baseline data and see where each student's starting point was. Although not all 22 Second Step lessons were able to be taught, the SABERS screener was completed again for each student at the end of the allotted intervention time and compared to the initial data. The goal was to lower the number of students who were at some risk or at high risk for social and/or emotional behavior problems through the use of direct instruction of kindness and empathy. The data collection procedure was part of the classroom standard and approved by the school administrator, ensuring adherence to ethical guidelines. The study began with the approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the institution where the second author, serving as a research mentor for this project, was working. Additionally, the study addressed ethical issues by maintaining the confidentiality of student data. All identifiable and trackable data related to students were deleted after the project concluded. These steps ensured that the research was conducted with respect for participants' rights and well-being.

In analyzing the data from the implementation of the SABERS screener and subsequent intervention in a classroom, several key findings emerged, offering insights into the efficacy of the intervention and the behavioral changes among the students. Initially, the SABERS screener identified a significant number of students at risk, with one student categorized as high risk and 13 as some risk. This initial assessment highlighted the need for targeted intervention, particularly in addressing academic, social, and emotional behaviors within the classroom. Following the intervention, there was a marked improvement in the overall risk profile of the class. The number of students at any level of risk decreased significantly, from 14 to 8, indicating a substantial reduction in the prevalence of at-risk behaviors. Notably, only one student remained in the high-risk category, demonstrating the intervention's effectiveness in mitigating severe behavioral issues.

A closer examination of the behavioral areas revealed distinct patterns of change. The most significant improvement was observed in academic behavior, aligning with the intervention's focus and suggesting its success in enhancing students' academic engagement and performance. This improvement in academic behavior was a critical factor in elevating the overall behavioral profile of the class.

The intervention's impact on social and emotional behaviors, though less pronounced than in the academic realm, was still noteworthy. There was a slight increase in the number of students categorized as no risk in social behavior, indicating a positive shift in social dynamics and interactions among students. In the domain of emotional behavior, the decrease in the high-risk category and the corresponding increase in the no-risk category highlighted the intervention's role in fostering better emotional regulation and well-being among students.

The data presented in the tables below provides a detailed breakdown of these changes. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of risk levels and class averages across the three behavior areas in both the initial and post-intervention screenings. This breakdown highlights the growth in each area, particularly the substantial gains in academic behavior and the positive shifts in emotional behavior. Table 3 further elucidates these findings by presenting class averages for each behavior area, quantifying the improvements and offering a clearer picture of the intervention's impact.

In summary, the intervention implemented in conjunction with the SABERS screener demonstrated its effectiveness, especially in improving academic behavior among students. The overall reduction in the number of students at risk and the enhancements in class average scores across various behavioral domains underscored the intervention's positive influence on the students' behavioral and academic outcomes.

Table 2  
*SABERS Screener Result*

<b>Risk Level</b>	<b>High Risk</b>	<b>Some Risk</b>	<b>No Risk</b>
Social Behavior 1	3	11	6
Social Behavior 2	4	10	6
Growth*	-1	+1	+0
Academic Behavior 1	3	10	7
Academic Behavior 2	2	6	12
Growth*	+1	+4	+5
Emotional Behavior 1	4	4	12

Emotional Behavior 2	1	5	14
Growth*	+3	-1	+2
Composite Score 1	1	13	6
Composite Score 2	1	7	12
Growth*	+0	+6	+6

\*Growth is relative to the intended outcome of the intervention.

Table 3  
*SABERS Screener*

Class Average	Points Possible	Screener 1	Screener 2	Growth
Social Behavior	18	10.5	10.5	+0.00
Academic Behavior	18	9	10.45	+1.45
Emotional Behavior	21	15.9	17.2	+1.30
Composite Score	57	35.4	38.15	+2.75

**REFLECTION**

After completing SABERS for the second time and analyzing and comparing the data to the initial SABERS scores, we made several observations. First, the data does suggest that direct instruction of kindness and empathy can positively impact students' behavior. Additionally, when reviewing the progress of individual's scores, we noticed some students who improved in all three behavior areas, some who improved in one or two areas, some who had little or no change, and some who regressed in one or more behavior area.

When thinking of these individuals, especially those who showed regression, most of those students had had a major life change since the start of the intervention. For example, there was a student who was an only child who experienced a new sibling being born, one whose stay at home mom began a new job, and a student and their siblings who were removed from the home and placed in different temporary foster care homes. Many students face obstacles that cannot be controlled in the classroom but can adversely affect the classroom environment. Some of these students may benefit from other interventions that classroom teachers are not able or qualified to provide (i.e., therapy or counseling).

However, the data suggests that most students benefited from the intervention. While this finding is promising, we do not feel confident that the increase in SABERS scores can be

solely attributed to the intervention. The increase in academic behavior success could potentially have been improved as students became more accustomed to the classroom expectations and being back in school. At the start of the intervention, students had only been in second-grade for the duration of about a month. We believe many of the students may have needed more time to adjust to the new environment. Additionally, there were other factors that could have been part of the success. For example, the school's guidance counselor has been teaching a weekly lesson focusing on similar skills like being respectful and we've read a lot of stories together about being kind to others. While these factors would also lead to the belief that direct instruction of kindness and empathy can improve social and emotional behavior, it cannot be said for certain that the implemented intervention was the sole reason for the improvement.

Another question that came from the data in this study was if this intervention helped prevent or limit regression from specific students. For example, throughout the duration of this study, several students experienced significant life changes at home that had the potential to severely and negatively impact their behavior. While some of these students did show regression in one or more of the three behavior areas, most did not show a significant decrease in their SABERS scores. It is compelling to know if the intervention helped to minimize further regression. A separate study could be done in the future that focuses on students who are at risk of experiencing large life changes (i.e., family changes, parents being incarcerated). With this study, there could have been a control group in order to provide a comparison. For example, participants could have been split into two groups, with only one group receiving the intervention. This would allow the researcher to see if students are more likely to regress in prosocial behaviors when experiencing a significant life changing event without direct instruction of kindness and empathy.

Lastly, the long-term impact of the intervention is open to discussion. Will students be able to maintain these skills after the intervention is no longer in place? Or will students lose some of the skills as direct instruction of kindness and empathy is no longer heavily focused upon on a daily basis? Because the duration of this study was short, we wonder if a longer intervention would produce even greater results and improvements in student behavior or if the growth would plateau or eventually cease altogether regardless of the intervention. A future research idea would be to do the same study but for a longer duration and compare the data to this study in order to see how the duration of direct instruction of kindness and empathy would impact students' behaviors.

The next steps for research are going to be to stop the daily intervention. Empathy and kindness will still be taught in the classroom as needed during impromptu moments. However, the classroom teacher will no longer teach daily lessons solely focused on empathy and kindness. In December, 2024, the SABERS screener will be completed once again for each of the 20 students and compared to the data collected before and after the intervention. We will evaluate if students maintain the skills that they learned during the intervention or if their skills and behaviors regress without direct instruction. While this may depend on the findings from the SABERS screener in December, 2024, the plan will be to adjust the intervention beginning in January, 2025, to weekly lessons of direct kindness and empathy

instruction. If students' SABERS scores decrease after the cessation of the daily intervention, it will indicate that regular and consistent instruction of kindness and empathy needs to be included in daily lesson plans. Conversely, if students' SABERS scores maintain or increase, we will feel more confident about transitioning to weekly lessons of kindness and empathy. We recognize that the results may be influenced by confounding variables, such as classroom dynamics, individual student differences, and external environmental factors. To address these potential variables, we will rely on teacher observations to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention's impact. As with many educational research studies, isolating the effects of a single intervention on student performance is challenging, but we aim to mitigate this by triangulating our data with qualitative insights from the teacher.

Overall, we were very pleased with the results from the study. We had predicted that direct instruction on kindness and empathy would have a positive effect on our classroom environment, and this was proven through the students' SABERS scores. However, we did not expect to see such a large improvement in such a short amount of time. As reported by the classroom teacher, the amount, severity, and duration of outbursts and unsafe or disruptive behaviors significantly decreased, which increased the learning time and made the classroom a more positive environment. Since the cessation of the intervention, there have only been four large, disruptive outbursts from students, with one of those instances resulting in the student being removed from the classroom. Before the intervention, these disruptions were happening almost daily, if not several times a day. For future school years, the implementation of the Second Step curriculum will begin shortly after the start of the school year to help students achieve early success.

## **DISCUSSION**

In the rapidly evolving landscape of education, the findings of this action research focusing on the effects of direct kindness instruction on second-grade students offer valuable insights into current trends and challenges. This study aligns with the growing emphasis on SEL, an area gaining increased recognition for its role in students' academic and personal development. SEL programs, known for their positive impacts on academic achievements, mental health, and behavioral outcomes, are becoming integral to educational curricula. We think that our study's emphasis on kindness and empathy offers unique insight into SEL, highlighting an often-overlooked component that is vital for fostering a supportive and cooperative learning environment.

The significance of this study is further underscored by its application in a diverse classroom setting, mirroring the real-world diversity of many schools. This is particularly relevant as education increasingly strives for inclusivity, especially in schools serving economically disadvantaged populations. The positive outcomes observed in our study suggest that structured SEL components, specifically those focusing on kindness, can be beneficial across diverse demographic groups. This finding is crucial in advocating for the integration of such components into broader SEL programs, ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have access to education that supports their holistic development.

Moreover, the study sheds light on the need for structured SEL components in elementary education. Integrating kindness and empathy training into SEL programs can provide a foundational basis to help develop well-rounded individuals. This approach not only benefits students in their immediate academic and social interactions but also prepares them for future challenges by instilling essential life skills. The study's implications extend to teacher training and resource allocation, emphasizing the need for educators to be well-equipped to implement effective SEL strategies. This is a crucial aspect, as the success of SEL interventions heavily relies on the capability and resources available to teachers.

Our study also opens avenues for future research, particularly concerning the long-term impacts of SEL interventions. Investigating the sustainability of behavioral changes brought about by kindness instruction can provide deeper insights into the enduring effects of SEL programs. This is particularly relevant in understanding how early interventions can shape students' future emotional and social competencies.

### **RESEARCH LIMITATIONS**

In this action research study, several limitations emerged that are crucial for understanding the context and scope of the findings. One limitation was the incomplete implementation of the Second Step curriculum, with only 18 of the 22 planned lessons delivered. This potentially undermined the effectiveness of the full program, as the impact of the missing lessons remains unassessed. Additionally, the study did not control for external variables, such as the influence of other SEL-related activities and personal life changes among students. These unaccounted for variables could have influenced the outcomes, calling into question whether the improvements could be attributed solely to the intervention.

Furthermore, the short duration of the study limits insights into the long-term effects of kindness and empathy instruction. While immediate behavioral improvements were observed, the sustainability of these changes without ongoing direct instruction is uncertain. Another constraint was the study's sample size and diversity. Conducted in a single classroom with 20 students, the results, though promising, may not be generalizable across different educational settings or broader student populations. Moreover, the reliance on the SABERS screener as the primary measurement tool introduces potential bias, given its subjective nature as a teacher-based rating scale.

### **IMPLICATIONS**

Despite the limitations, we believe that the results of this study hold significant implications for various aspects of educational practice and policy. It provides preliminary evidence supporting the integration of direct kindness and empathy instruction in elementary education, aligning with the growing emphasis on SEL in educational discourse. These findings can inform curriculum development and advocating for structured SEL components, especially those focusing on kindness and empathy, within early education programs.

The study also highlights the need for adequate teacher training and resources for effective SEL program implementation, as evidenced by the challenges encountered in fully integrating the Second Step curriculum. In terms of policy implications, the positive

outcomes observed could influence educational decisions, promoting the adoption of comprehensive SEL curricula, particularly in schools serving diverse and economically disadvantaged populations. In a landscape where mental health and social skills are increasingly acknowledged as critical to student success, the findings can influence educational policy, advocating for the adoption of comprehensive and inclusive SEL curricula. Such policies would not only address current educational challenges but also pave the way for a more empathetic, socially adept, and academically successful generation. Moreover, the study paves the way for future research, especially in exploring the long-term impacts of SEL interventions and their effects on various demographic groups. Further research could also focus on isolating the effects of specific SEL components, like kindness instruction, in more controlled experimental settings. Lastly, the study reinforces the importance of a holistic approach to education that encompasses not only academic achievements but also the emotional and social development of students, highlighting the integral role of SEL in fostering well-rounded student success. ■

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:**

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**Braelyn Verba** is a 2nd grade teacher with Kearney Public Schools. Focused on continuing her professional learning to better support students, her topics of academic interest include STEM education, the benefits of kindness instruction and social/emotional learning, as well as incorporating play into the classroom.

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**Appendix A**  
19 Items Rated Using SABERS

<b>Social Behavior</b>	Arguing
	Cooperation with Peers
	Temper Outbursts
	Disruptive Behavior
	Polite and Socially Acceptable Responses Towards Others
	Impulsiveness
<b>Academic Behavior</b>	Interest in Academic Topics
	Preparedness for Instruction
	Production of Acceptable Work
	Difficulty Working Independently
	Distractedness
	Academic Engagement
<b>Emotional Behavior</b>	Sadness
	Fearfulness
	Adaptable to Change
	Positive Attitude
	Worry
	Difficulty Responding to Setbacks
	Withdrawal