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Social-Emotional Learning in Children, Second Step Curriculum, and Expressive Arts Therapy: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

In schools across the country students are being taught social-emotional skills through the use of the *Second Step* curriculum. *Second Step* is a universal curriculum which is sought to streamline social-emotional learning (SEL) and can be easily implemented within classrooms by classroom teachers. The curriculum implemented as it currently is does not allow for the creative expression of students to be utilized. Previous research has highlighted that in many cases *Second Step* curriculum proves to be ineffective in nature and lacks longevity or lasting impacts. Social-emotional learning is directly linked to children's mental health, when children lack emotional literacy they are more likely to suffer from mental health related issues. Through a systematic literature review, the *Second Step* curriculum was analyzed and each unit of the curriculum was matched with arts-based interventions supported by peer-reviewed research which seek to achieve the same goal as the *Second Step* unit they were matched to. Creative expression through the use of the various expressive arts therapy modalities (music, dance and movement, drama, visual arts, etc.) seem to be a viable way to increase lasting effect and accessibility of the universally used *Second Step* social-emotional learning curriculum.

Introduction

Emotional Literacy is defined as: "The ability to develop psychologically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually; the ability to become aware of others and how to empathize with them; the ability to use psychological distress as a developmental process" (Coppock, 2007, p. 405). The terms emotional literacy and emotional intelligence will be used interchangeably throughout this research. Emotional literacy is paramount to a child's mental health status. "Emotionally literate children are less likely to experience mental health problems and, if they develop them, are less likely to suffer long term" (Coppock, 2007, p. 405). Neglect to the emotional wellbeing of children has demonstrated detrimental consequences for children (Coppock, 2007). Children who are deemed emotionally illiterate by teachers and caregivers have demonstrated aggressive, depressive, and more anxious behaviors than their emotionally literate counterparts (Coppock, 2007). Due to this issue, the United States Department of Education has sought to include a social-emotional learning curriculum for all children within a public school setting in the United States (Hart et. al., 2009). Social-emotional skills have "been identified as salient predictors of school success" (Low et. al., 2019, p. 415)

Second Step is a "universal, school-based prevention curriculum for children in K-5 grades designed to promote social competence, reduce social-emotional problems, and prevent aggression" and has been "identified as exemplary by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research Improvement" (Hart et. al., 2009, p. 105). However, further research suggests that Second Step is effective primarily when used in its entirety and that oftentimes schools do not have the time and/or resources to implement the curriculum in this manner (Hart et. al., 2009). Without consistent implementation and completion in its entirety, the Second Step curriculum becomes ineffective at positively impacting the lasting social-emotional growth of

children. Research has also shown that the social skills of children being taught with the *Second Step* curriculum "increase[d] during each school year but reverted to prior levels during the summer" (Low et. al., 2019, p. 423); the effects of *Second Step* are not long lasting as one would hope.

The aim of this research is to find ways in which the creativity of children can be fostered in a way that can support and make their social-emotional learning more meaningful and long lasting. There is a gap in the literature exploring ways in which the expressive arts can be injected into the existing *Second Step* curriculum in a manner which can support the social-emotional development of public school children. The goal is to scour the existing research on social-emotional learning and identify where the creative arts can support or supplement this learning in young children.

Second Step curriculum is divided into five units: skills for learning, empathy, emotional management, problem solving, and bully prevention (Second Step, 2011b). Within each of these units there are sub-lessons focused on specific areas of social-emotional development including: focusing attention, following directions, identifying feelings, and managing anxiety amongst others (Second Step, 2011b). Through this literature review, the goal is to identify specific areas of the curriculum that specific creative art modalities can best support. "Creativity through art[s] has the ability to be motivating for children as it has been reported to bring joy, pride, reduce stress, and enhance the sense of belonging which are important factors in an … intervention's effectiveness" (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82). Through this literature review specific interventions will be identified that can be woven into specific areas of the existing *Second Step* curriculum to enhance the curriculum's effectiveness in achieving its goal of increased emotional literacy for young students.

This literature review is divided into sections with subheadings. The first section entitled "Importance of SEL" delves into why social-emotional learning is important for students. This section is supported by the research of Vicki Coppock (2007) who implements a qualitative research study taking a look at what makes for effective emotional literacy work in schools and at the interrelated nature of children's mental health and their emotional literacy. The second section takes a look at what Second Step curriculum is and cites both the curriculum itself and the research of Shelley Hart (2009). Hart's research is in the form of a controlled study which not only takes a look at the effectiveness of the *Second Step* curriculum, but also gives an overview of what the curriculum is. The third subsection of this literature pertains to the ineffective nature of the current curriculum and is supported by the research of Shelley Hart, Carole Upshur, and Sabina Low who all completed trials which sought to measure the effects of the curriculum on the emotional literacy of children. The fourth subsection pertains to the first unit of the *Second Step* curriculum which is skills for learning. This section explores how the use of creativity can enhance executive function skills through Katherine Crenshaw's research and how elements of child-centered play therapy (CCPT) can be adopted to support self-regulation through Brittany Wilson's research. The fifth section of the literature review pertains to the second unit of the *Second Step* curriculum entitled "empathy". Within this section the research of Rachel Sinquefield-Kangas is explored as it pertains to empathy development through the use of student created visual video-artmaking. More elements from Wilson's research on CCPT are explored here as well. The sixth section of the literature review titled "Unit Three" deals with the emotional management section of the curriculum, specifically cooling down. Within this section dance/movement therapy (DMT) techniques are explored through Ayala Nardi's research as it pertains to calming the body. Within this section Yonty Friesem's work of digital media

production as a means to promote emotional management is also explored. The seventh section

pertains to the fourth unit of the *Second Step* curriculum which focuses on the development of

problem solving skills. In this section Victoria Brown's work with process drama is reviewed.

The eighth and final subsection of the literature review considers the final unit of the *Second Step*

curriculum which is bullying prevention. Within this section the work of Kayla Shafer and

Michael Silverman explore music therapy as a means of preventing bullying. Daria Khanolainen

and Elena Semenova's research on visual arts-based methods as a means to prevent bullying are

reviewed as well as Joseph Amorino's research on art-therapy groups to deter aggression,

bullying, and violence.

<div align="center">**Literature Review**</div>

Importance of SEL

According to the Mental Health Foundation emotional literacy and mental health are

interrelated phenomenons (Coppock, 2007). Social-emotional learning is essentially what leads

children to becoming emotionally intelligent individuals. Furthermore "emotionally literate

children are less likely to experience mental health problems" (Coppock, 2007, p. 405). It is

because of this concept that schools across the world have begun to include social-emotional

learning objectives as a key element in the curriculum they provide to their students.

Furthermore, social-emotional competence has been directly linked to academic success in

children (Second Step, 2011b). "Positive emotions influence concentration, memory, problem

solving, and learning skills; positive relationships enable individuals to break out of

dysfunctional patterns; emotional literacy promotes creativity, innovation and leadership and

emotional literacy has a measurable impact on the performance of organizations" (Coppock,

2007, p. 405). In the late 1990s there were negative consequences associated with the neglect of

the emotional wellbeing of an entire generation of young people (Coppock, 2007). A worldwide

survey of both teachers and parents showed that when children's emotional wellbeing was

neglected they were "more troubled emotionally … more lonely and depressed, more angry and

unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, [and] more impulsive and aggressive" (Coppock, 2007,

p. 406). This worldwide survey dramatically impacted educators who had been disillusioned into

thinking emotional wellbeing was of little importance in the world of academics (Coppock,

2007). Shortly after the results of this survey became public, the terms emotional literacy and

emotional intelligence became popular in the world of academia. This was essentially the

"catalyst for a progressive movement to reassert the importance of emotional development

within education" (Coppock, 2007, p. 405). Emotional literacy has become recognized as "an

important preventative strategy in the promotion of mentally healthy children" and this

recognition has made "significant implications for schools" (Coppock, 2007, p. 406).

What is the Second Step Curriculum?

Second Step is a "universal classroom-based program designed to increase students'

school success and decrease problem behaviors by promoting social-emotional competence and

self-regulation" (Second Step, 2011b, p. 7). *Second Step* social-emotional learning curriculum is

"identified as exemplary by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research

Improvement" (Hart et. al., 2009, p. 105) and is used widely across public school settings in the

United States targeting children from pre-kindergarten to fifth grade. The *Second Step*

curriculum was developed with goals in mind. These goals include the promotion of social

competences, a reduction of social-emotional problems, and the prevention of aggression in

children by means of promoting prosocial behaviors. (Hart et. al., 2009). Most *Second Step*

lessons are "administered via in-vivo instruction; however [some] lessons are pre recorded and

presented via videotape" (Hart et. al., 2009, p. 105) The *Second Step* lessons are printed on large

posters which the teachers read from and then ask the class pre-determined questions. These

scripts include what the possible answers from the students should be. Within these outlines there

are supplemental videos which can be shown to the class to support a particular unit lesson they

are working on as well as games and activities. There is limited use of spontaneity and creativity

within these lessons as they are all universally mapped out within the *Second Step* provided

curriculum. In addition, by deeming oneself to be "universal", the *Second Step* curriculum falls

short in accounting for and acknowledging differences in context, socio-cultural location, and

identities of students. Communication, expression, and emotions are facets of the individual

which are culturally bound, a universal curriculum does not have the ability to account for these

differences among young learners. While there are certainly drawbacks to the *Second Step*

approach, there are undoubtedly benefits too. Being a universal curriculum, *Second Step* is

accessible and teachable in a variety of different educational settings. Schools may purchase a

complete curriculum which comes in a neat box with all the materials needed. By administering

materials to schools in such a way, *Second Step* ensures that any educator can successfully

administer the content regardless of prior education or experience teaching social-emotional

learning to students. This approach is taken to streamline social-emotional learning in a cost

effective and timely manner. Schools do not need to invest additional time or money into

planning and implementing social-emotional learning for students.

Is the Second Step Curriculum Effective?

In 2009 Shelley Hart completed a quantitative controlled repeated measures study of the

Second Step curriculum used with third and fourth grade students (2009). Hart sought to look at

how effective the first and fourth units of the curriculum were in achieving their goal of

increased emotional literacy. Unit one of the *Second Step* curriculum deals with items which fall under the umbrella of executive functioning and skills for learning. Hart specifically was looking at how effective *Second Step* was at increasing the impulse control of students. Unit four of the curriculum deals with problem solving skills which was also investigated through Hart's research study (2009). The results of Hart's research "indicat[ed] there was not a significant difference between the intervention and control groups" (2009, p. 109). The intervention group consisted of 75 students (32 third grade, 43 fourth grade) all of whom completed the *Second Step* curriculum at their school. The control group consisted of 74 students (42 third grade, 32 fourth grade) all of whom did not complete the *Second Step* curriculum at their school. Fourth grade students in the intervention group did not demonstrate any significant increases in social-emotional skills when compared to the control group (Hart et. al., 2009). These increases were measured using the *Knowledge Assessment for Second Step* (KASS)*,* a self-report measure which was developed by the authors of the *Second Step* curriculum and uses a pre and post test format (Hart et. al., 2009). These results were contrary to Hart's original hypothesis (2009).

In 2017 Carole Upshur conducted a quantitative research study with the focus of looking at the efficacy of *Second Step* curriculum over a two year period. Upshur used a randomized control method to compare thirty-one preschool classrooms (2017). Within her study, sixteen classrooms received *Second Step* and the other fifteen received the usual curriculum (2017). This was done in order to measure the effects of *Second Step* compared to the effects of the typical curriculum being used in schools. Upshur's findings were that there was negligible difference in emotional knowledge between the intervention group, the group receiving the *Second Step* curriculum, and the control group, the group not receiving the curriculum (Upshur et. al., 2017). It was noted that there were "no statistically significant differences between the intervention and

control children in demographics or in the outcome measures at baseline" (Upshur et. al., 2017, p. 20) and thus this study allows for generalizability to more diverse programs. The findings of this study weren't aligned with the hypothesis, Upshur initially believed she would find that *Second Step* was more effective at increasing the social-emotional learning than standard curriculum and that *Second Step* had a promising potential to improve the social-emotional learning skills of preschoolers (2017).

In 2018, Sabina Low and her colleagues completed a two year cluster-randomized trial to explore the impact of the implementation of the *Second Step* curriculum over time (2019). Low's trial included 61 schools, 321 teachers, and 8,941 elementary students (2019). Assessments of the students were completed in both the fall and spring across the two years for a total of four assessments (Low et. al., 2019). Low found that "most measures fit a pattern in which students improved only during instructional time in school" and regressed during the summer months (2019, p. 415). Data collected did not fit a linear growth pattern as was initially expected (Low et. al., 2019). After this trial Low noted that the improvements observed in academic outcomes and observable behaviors were not evident after the extended implementation of the *Second Step* curriculum, this finding was counter to the original hypothesis (2019). When teachers were asked to report on the improvement of their students it was noted that "teachers in year two did not recognize students' improvement in social skills from the prior year" (Low et. al., 2019, p. 430). In the students who did improve on various social emotional competencies it was noted that their gains "declined during the summer" which left them reverting back to baseline by the start of the second year (Low et. al., 2019, p. 430). The conclusion of this study stated that caution was urged when drawing any conclusions about the lasting impact of implementing the *Second Step* curriculum (Low et. al., 2019).

Unit 1: Skills for learning

The first unit of the *Second Step* curriculum is titled "skills for learning". Among these skills for learning are following "listening rules" and developing self-regulation in order to focus one's attention (Second Step, 2011b). *Second Step* defines the listening rules as: eyes watching, ears listening, voice quiet, and body still (2011b). These listening rules are outlined as desired behaviors for children to display during class lessons and when directions are being given. These listening rules do not account for sociocultural differences among children; not all cultures place value on eye-contact as a sign of active listening or respect nor do all cultures place value on sitting still while listening. Neurodiversities exist which make these listening rules either challenging, impossible, or detrimental for some students to follow.

Focusing attention and listening are key concepts identified in *Second Step* which fall under the umbrella of executive functioning. Executive function is a group of cognitive abilities and complex mental processes that are required for planning and carrying out goal-directed behaviors including but not limited to: managing time, solving problems, impulse inhibition, and organizing tasks (Executive function, n.d.). The *Second Step* curriculum explains that teachers should take time to notice students who are following the listening rules and reinforce their behaviors while teaching the lesson(s) for unit one (2011b). Positive reinforcement has proven to be an effective way to help students display desired behaviors, however it doesn't necessarily teach them self-regulation in a cognitive sense. Through the use of arts and creativity children can also be supported in learning valuable self-regulation strategies without the need or promise of reward as can be the case with positive reinforcement methods. Self-regulation strategies which are learned without promise of reward are valuable in that they become an innate reflexive

ability rather than the response to an external stimuli. Children are learning to manage themselves rather than merely responding to the environment around them.

A study done by Katherine Crenshaw and Stephanie Miller proposes that children can improve their executive function skills through use of creativity and the arts. "Executive functioning (EF) is an element of higher order cognition important to a variety of skills and abilities, such as communication, academics, and emotional regulation" (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 81). Developing one's EF skills can also be supportive in displaying the skills for learning outlined within the *Second Step* curriculum. Crenshaw and Miller's research study sought to explore how creativity can support and enhance the development of children's executive function skills through use of variable and control conditions being used on a population of young learners (2022). It was found that "better creativity is related to better EF" and "linked highly creative people to stronger inhibition" (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82). The reasoning given for these correlations was that "creative manipulations … impact performance on EF by stimulating the prefrontal cortex (PFC) via a mechanism similar to exercise"(Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82). Meaning by engaging in more creative practices the PFC would be stimulated. If we consider the PFC to be a muscle, and engaging in a creative process to be a workout, then this "muscle" would become stronger and stronger with more practice. It was found that "creativity has strong ties to mindfulness, or the understanding that the world is constantly and subtly changing and adapting to change, which was shown to be an effective long-term intervention for EF and also stimulates the PFC and EF when paired with aerobic exercise" (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82). This was a particularly interesting finding in that it supports the use of an intermodal expressive arts therapy approach in which creative expression through use of visual arts, music, or drama is paired with a movement based modality of

expression to exemplify the impact. Allowing children to engage with visual art making followed by a movement based exercise could actually heighten the stimulation to their PFC and increase the development of EF skills. "Encouraging children to be more fully present and reflect on task-relevant information through art with coloring or music rather than language … encourage[s] more accurate EF performance" by heightening the stimuli to their PFC (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82). This more accurate EF performance can then in turn lead to more "accurate" implementation of self-regulation skills and the ability to follow the rules for learning outlined in the *Second Step* curriculum because the rules for learning focus greatly on internal inhibitions, an EF skill. "By adding art therapy ideas into … sessions, there is more potential to increase EF"(Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 89). In their research, Crenshaw and Miller tested this theory of including creative processes for children and found that "based on results it is possible that creative interventions impact EF" (2022, p. 89). It was also found that "creativity through visual art has the ability to be motivating for children as it has been reported to bring joy, pride, reduce stress, and enhance the sense of belonging which are important factors in an EF intervention's effectiveness" (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82). By including both visual artmaking opportunities with movement based creative opportunities the development of EF skills can become increasingly effective for a young population. In addition artmaking can help children to represent and reflect on the world around them and "as children develop their ability to represent and reflect on their representations of the world, they are better able to control behavior consciously and execute EF" (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82) which are valuable skills mirrored in the first unit of the *Second Step* curriculum (2011b).

Another element found in the skills for learning unit of the *Second Step* curriculum is the development of self-regulation skills which are split into various lessons within unit one and

include: learning to listen, focusing attention, and following directions (Second Step, 2011b). Brittany Wilson and Dee Ray propose in their research that child-centered play therapy (CCPT) can enhance one's propensity for developing self-regulation skills (2018). "Person-centered theories, from which CCPT emerges, emphasize the drive toward self-regulation as an innate aspect of the human experience and that childhood motivations tend naturally to harmonize into a complex changing pattern of self-regulation" (Wilson & Ray, 2018, p. 405-406). While teachers are not CCPT therapists, it's possible that teachers can practice engaging in relationships with students which mirror the therapeutic relationship between a child and play therapist while engaging in the *Second Step* curriculum. These relationships include a judgment free environment and rely on intentional reflections with the child (Wilson & Ray, 2018). These intentional reflections are not cognitively based, rather they are person-centered and personal to each child (Wilson & Ray, 2018). CCPT focuses not on leading a child's play by telling them what to do but rather on copying their play through actions and behaviors and including these intentional reflections as you do so (Wilson & Ray, 2018). When interviewing parents as part of their research study Wilson and Ray found that "parents perceived their children's participation in CCPT as predictive of their increased abilities toward self-regulation" (2018, p. 405) and thus the CCPT techniques of being both reflective and non-judgmental may be adopted by teachers and could be a viable addition to the existing *Second Step* curriculum being used in schools today.

Unit 2: Empathy

The goal of unit 2 in the *Second Step* curriculum is to help students develop their ability to have empathy for others (2011b). "This ability provides the foundation for helpful and socially responsible behavior and the development of skills for coping with peer challenges" (Second

Step, 2011b, p. 8). The development of empathy has been identified as a key element of social-emotional learning and is directly linked to academic success (Second Step, 2011b). "Empathy is historically rooted in art as 'Einfuhlung' or aesthetic empathy" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 147). Aesthetic empathy refers to one's ability to consider the perspective of an artwork's depicted form or content (Miller & Hübner, 2023). "If art and empathy are connected, as their history suggests , then … art-making experiences can be viewed as instrumental in evoking conditions for empathetic behaviors" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 155).

Through Sinquefield-Kangas' research it has been found that "the arts have a leading advantage when integrating empathy in education" (2022, p. 146). Rather than using the scripts provided in the *Second Step* curriculum and modeling empathy for children, Sinquefield-Kangas proposes that "a correlation [naturally] exists between visual artmaking and empathetic concern" (2022, p. 146). In addition "current research has linked consuming and creating arts with prosocial or empathetic behaviors" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 146). This proposition provided through existing research sparked Sinquefield-Kangas to investigate this link between empathy and art-making in a deeper way through her own personal research (2022).

In Rachel Sinquefield-Kangas' arts-based research study students were asked to create short (3-5 minutes) videos answering the question: 'What is empathy?' (2022). "Desktop documentaries, video essays, and digital storytelling are forms of video production that allow students to utilize multiple forms of media materials, such as images, texts, videos, and sounds in representing their idea of empathy" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 149). In Sinquefield-Kangas' study the students work with play-doh to form cats and dog figures for their video production (2022). By "rethinking embodiment and the blurring of bodily boundaries, empathy emerges as the [students] feel their thoughts into Play-Doh" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al.,

2022, p. 153). When asked to explain why dogs are empathetic one student in this study responds that dogs are empathetic 'because they love us… and because they come to see what's wrong when you're sad… and when you're excited they're also excited" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 154). Through this response the student identifies compassion and emotional contagion between humans and dogs (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022). Through this artistic process the students are able to define empathy by focusing on the qualities that dogs and humans share rather than focusing on the difference which they clearly possess (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022). "Artistic practices are a form of imaginative expression that calls upon empathetic behaviors such as imagining the thoughts and feelings of (an)other, mimesis, sharing emotions, imaginative projection and sympathy, to name a few" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 146). Through the use of video-making and play-doh sculpture, Sinquefield-Kangas begins to "examine empathy from relational perspectives, exploring it in connection to art objects or as an active construct, such as an empathetic mindset" (2022, p. 146). Through her work Singuefield-Kangas sees that children aren't learning about empathy through their artmaking, instead they are naturally experiencing empathy in relation to the art (2022). "Engaging in creative arts, such as art viewing and artmaking, requires one to call upon lived and emotional experiences in relation to objects" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 146). Through her arts-based research, Sinquefield-Kangas proposes that children have a propensity towards feeling and experiencing empathy through visual art-making and by reflecting on the art that they create. Furthermore, empathy is also evoked within the students by viewing and reflecting on the art being created by their peers. "This study explored empathy not as something that can be developed but rather as something that happens during artmaking" (Sinquefield-Kangas et. al., 2022, p. 155). By injecting art-making opportunities into the second unit of the *Second Step*

curriculum students may be given a chance to experience empathy within themselves rather than merely learning about what it means to be empathetic; students would have an opportunity to learn through experience rather than explanation. This experiential learning may prove to have a long-lasting impact on students where current *Second Step* curriculum falls short.

As discussed earlier, CCPT has sought to explore the development of empathy through lived experiences of children (2018). "The central premise of the child-centered philosophy is entering into relationships with children in which they feel authentically seen, understood, and accepted despite any emotional or behavioral challenge they may face" (Wilson & Ray, 2018, p. 406). While it isn't feasible for every student within a public school setting to enter into formal CCPT, it is perhaps feasible to educate teachers and facilitators of the *Second Step* curriculum on how they can model empathetic understanding within their teaching practices and with their students, specifically in terms of their *Second Step* curriculum facilitation. By "... providing children with an environment in which they may experience empathic understanding, such as in CCPT, [it] may advance their ability to convey empathy towards others" (Wilson & Ray, 2018, 406). Wilson and Ray's research has found that the unconditional relationships that are experienced in CCPT are "both healing and contagious" (2018, p. 406). The contagion of these relationships among a classroom of students can prove to be valuable in terms of reaching a school community at large. Play is something that elementary students engage with naturally throughout their days. "Through intentional reflections made by the CCPT therapist, children also become better aware of their own feelings and internal experiences" (Wilson & Ray, 2018, p. 407). While teachers are not CCPT therapists, they do have the capacity to learn how to make intentional reflections with their students and thus help them to feel both understood and accepted (Wilson & Ray, 2018). Research completed by Mevlut Aydogmug and Ahmet Kurnaz

which sought to explore the effectiveness of reflective teaching found that "reflective teaching practices had an impact on students' success and retention in … school lessons" (2022, p .487). "As children experience the conditions set forth in CCPT, they become better equipped to demonstrate care and acceptance toward themselves and others" (Wilson & Ray, 2018, p. 406). By educating teachers on how to engage in the skill of reflection with their students and within their teaching practice, teachers can begin to foster this acceptance towards self and others within the classroom setting and thus support children in their development of empathy through everyday interactions. Furthermore, Mark Minnott's research on the link between reflective teaching and inclusive teaching found that "features of reflective teaching connect with and are fundamental to inclusive teaching [practices]" (2019, p. 226). These inclusive teaching practices outlined by Minnott include: giving careful consideration or thought; questioning personal assumptions, values, and beliefs; taking initiatives; using intuition; and taking part in development and change (2019). Thus, by teachers practicing reflective teaching when implementing the *Second Step* curriculum they are not only aiding in the success and retention of their student's learning, they are also engaging in inclusivity which is paramount when accounting for sociocultural differences among students, especially when using an universal curriculum such as the *Second Step* curriculum.

Unit 3: Emotional Management (calming down)

The third unit outlined within the *Second Step* curriculum pertains to emotional management (2011b). Emotional management strategies teach "students to recognize strong emotions and use strategies to calm down and have been [believed] to be effective in increasing their ability to cope" (Second Step, 2011b, p. 8). Some of these strong emotions that children may feel include both stress and anxiety. Dance movement therapy (DMT) techniques have

proven to be valuable tools to aid in dealing with these strong emotions in young children. "Dance movement therapy (DMT) offers children a space to encounter strengths and experience a sense of vitality to increase their sense of confidence and self-awareness, thereby erasing their anxiety and /or helping them to achieve more adaptive emotion regulation" (Nardi et. al., 2022, p. 1). Nardi et. al. found that through various DMT applications the sense of self could be strengthened in students and thus their strong emotions, such as stress and anxiety could be tamed (2022). Nardi found that because children are "still developing secondary thinking processes, it is difficult to express emotions verbally; their natural inclination is to physically discharge feelings of stress and discomfort"(Nardi et. al., 2022, p. 4). Due to this fact, Nardi found it would be increasingly helpful for children to use their whole self, including bodily movements in order to navigate their strong emotions (Nardi et. al., 2022).

DMT exercises that were explored in this research to calm both stress and anxiety and strengthen the sense of self included mirroring exercises and movement sequences between poles (Nardi et. al., 2022). Some of the mirroring exercises which proved to be successful in strengthening the sense of self were: mirroring to encourage powerful movement, mirroring to join, and synchronized somatic mirroring (Nardi et. al., 2022). "The study findings indicate that synchronized somatic mirroring, i.e. joining the [child's] movements can make the [child] feel they are in control of the movement, giving them a sense of support and confidence"(Nardi et. al., 2022, p. 18).

Some of the movement sequences between poles which proved to be successful in strengthening the sense of self were: experimenting with balance, controlling and yielding, and holding and letting go (Nardi et. al., 2022). Through Nardi's research it was found that because "DMT combines movement and attention to physical sensations using a dynamic approach" it

"improve[s] emotional and social functioning by integrating body movements, emotional responses, and self expression" (Nardi et. al., 2022, p. 4). By adding DMT therapy techniques into the third unit of the *Second Step* curriculum children will feel a sense of control over the content and additionally will be able to use their bodies as a form of expression as they are often naturally inclined to do at this age.

A study was conducted by Yonty Friesem (2020) which explored how digital media production could promote emotional management in students through the use of visual art. In his study, Frisem challenged students to create digital media productions in which they had complete control over the product. "The feeling of control over the content (personal story), format (stop-motion animation), and access (iPad) made the intervention space safe and therefore creative" (Friesem, 2020, p. 270). Throughout the creation of their media productions, "the students experienced growth as they transitioned from imagining the potential of their idea to executing it and reflecting on their accomplishments, behaviors, and emotions" (Friesem, 2020, p. 270). Friesem found through his research and experience that "media production is a useful transitional object in the potential space to enhance students' self-regulation and self-efficacy" (Friesem, 2020, p. 271). Rather than trying to teach the students self-regulation, this naturally arose as the students began to become the directors of their own creations.

After the students had finished creating their productions, Friesem allowed space for the children to reflect on what had been created. These reflections were monumental to the learning process. "The students were able to acknowledge and reflect on their own positive behavior because of the distancing that the use of [their] animated characters allowed"(Friesem, 2020, 270). Friesem (2020) noted that the children were reflecting on themselves but were able to do this because they were using their self-created animations to distance themselves from these

reflections which allowed for more authentic feedback and reflection. "Students felt liberated to demonstrate a behavior of their character without being judged for it as if it was their own behavior" (Friesem, 2020, p. 270). Through this exercise not only were children able to self-regulate as they directed and created their digital animations, but they were also able to reflect on their feelings and emotions indirectly as they used their digital animation creations as their transitional objects (Friesem, 2020, p. 269). The desire of students to be both recognized and acknowledged as unique individuals is the driving force which makes self-expression through the creation of personal artworks such a valuable tool to use in schools (Friesem, 2020). Through their distanced reflections the students "demonstrated self-efficacy and became aware of their own strategies to regulate emotions and behavior" (Friesem, 2020). Being given the freedom to create their unique works and then reflect upon these unique works gave the students space to regulate their emotions as they worked and also to reflect on these emotions in meaningful ways after the project was completed (Friesem, 2020).

Unit 4: Problem Solving

The fourth unit outlined in the first grade edition of the *Second Step* curriculum focuses on the development of problem solving skills (Second Step, 2011b). Problem solving is a complex cognitive process for children to develop. Children who are skilled problem solvers tend to get along better with peers and have fewer conflicts as well as fewer problems with aggression than those children that are not skilled in problem solving (Second Step, 2011b).

In the outline for unit four, the *Second Step* curriculum outlines a script for teachers in which they ask students questions such as "what are three fair ways you can play with toys with a friend?" (Second Step, 2011b, p. 75). *Second Step* lists the desirable answer to this question as: sharing, trading, and taking turns. With these prompted questions and answers there is little room

for the child to explore possibilities and use their creative brain or unique perspectives to problem solve, instead children are merely reciting what they have been taught earlier in the lesson. This approach is problematic because problem-solving skills and approaches are phenomena which are culturally bound and vary widely across different cultures and belief systems. Furthermore, in order to be effective as a problem-solver, students must also possess the ability to think creatively. The format of this unit is only deemed "successful" if children can remember their teacher's words and holds little regard for the stark differences in which children from varying backgrounds may approach problem-solving. Oftentimes it is more meaningful for children to learn through doing rather than through being told. Process drama is an approach which allows children to explore problem solving through unique firsthand experiences and "is a powerful learning tool in early childhood education" (Brown, 2017, p. 170).

In the literature that's been reviewed, process drama presents as a meaningful way for children to learn and implement their problem solving skills. "Process drama is a medium for learning: a dynamic teaching methodology in which teacher and children collaborate to create an imaginary dramatic world and work within that world to explore a problem, a situation, or a story, not for an audience but for the benefit of the children themselves" (Brown, 2017, 165). Through the use of process drama children get to explore a range of different roles and through these roles they can engage in "a variety of reflective out-of-role activities" which require them to "think critically beyond their own points of view and consider topics from multiple perspectives" (Brown, 2017, p. 165). While process dramas often take place in the imaginal realm the concepts being learned and practiced may be carried over to be used in real life problem-solving situations for children. Process drama allows the children a safe space to explore problem-solving skills with the support of both their teachers and peers.

"Process drama is closely aligned with the way young children naturally learn through dramatic play" (Brown, 2017, p. 165). In Brown's qualitative research study it was found that process drama can provide a meaningful way for children to explore solving both assigned problems as well as spontaneous problems that may arise amongst children organically as they play (2017). With guidance from a teacher or facilitator children are challenged to work as a community (Brown, 2017). An example of an assigned problem in this study is the teacher challenging the children to share food from their imaginary garden with outsiders who did not plant the garden. In this scenario, the children first begin to think: "[we] have worked hard on [this] garden, why should [we] share" (Brown, 2017, p. 166). This is where problem solving comes into play. "The dramatic process allows children to respond intellectually, physically, and empathically to an imagined situation" (Brown, 2017, p. 165). The children must decide amongst themselves how they will solve this problem and physically enact this solution. Children brainstorm together and decide that they can share some of the vegetables they have planted and begin acting out this solution within their dramatic play.

   An example of a spontaneous problem-solving within the process drama context is two children needing the same materials. When this happens the children must stop, listen, and negotiate with one another to solve the dilemma. For example, in Brown's (2017) qualitative study two children have plans to use a large sheet from the materials bucket. In this example one child wants to use the sheet to create a sail for their boat while another child wants to use the sheet as a fishing net to catch food. Both of the children express a desire to use the same material to one another and must think this problem through and compromise their needs to come up with a solution that works for both of them. After discussing this problem amongst the community of children working together, it is decided that the boat does need a sail to move so

the sheet will be used for that purpose and that the second child can use a paper tube to create a

fishing pole rather than a fishing net. The fishing pole allows for fish to be caught and thus the

community will still have food. In this solution both the need for a boat and the need to catch fish

can both be met. It is true that "children as young as 3-8 years [old] actively gain skills in

dialogue, empathy, collaboration, and creative problem solving by collectively pretending to be

in an imaginary elsewhere" (Brown, 2017, p. 165). With the use of process drama children are

not merely absorbing knowledge taught to them by a teacher, they are essentially constructing

their own knowledge (Brown, 2017). There is previous research which proves that "engagement

is a proximal process to achievement, and when demonstrated by students, leads to higher

achievement levels" (Dennie et. al., 2019) within classrooms and across subject matters; children

learn best when they are actively engaged in their learning. "Collaborative problem solving,

critical thinking, and negotiation are central to the process" (Brown, 2017, p. 165). Unit four of

Second Step is focused on the idea of problem-solving and is broken down into lessons including

"fair ways to play" and "inviting others to join in" (Second Step, 2011b, p. 67-82). The use of

process drama in which there isn't a production or a script can touch on and actively engage

young students in practicing both of the concepts named in these sub-lessons of unit four.

Bullying Prevention Unit: Aggressive Behaviors

The fifth unit and final of the *Second Step* curriculum pertains to bullying prevention.

"Bullying affects children in every school and negatively affects bullied students, students who

bully others, and even students who witness bullying" (Second Step, 2011a, p. 6). The skills that

the *Second Step* curriculum aims to teach in this unit include: recognizing bullying through the

use of empathy, reporting bullying within schools, refusing bullying, abstaining from aggressive

behaviors, and explaining the power students have as bystanders or witnesses to bullying

(2011a).   As aforementioned in the second unit of the *Second Step curriculum*, Wilson and Ray cited through their research that the development of empathy is extremely important in preventing aggressive behaviors especially bullying (2018). "Empathy allows children the ability to take on the emotional experiences of others, thus providing children the opportunity to become increasingly aware of the impact of aggressive acts on others" (Wilson & Ray, 2018, p. 407). Furthermore, "with increased empathy, children … become decreasingly aggressive over time" (Wilson & Ray, 2018, p. 407). Wilson and Ray (2018) unintentionally highlight the manner in which the *Second Step* curriculum builds upon itself; if children are more empathetic in nature, then they will display less aggressive behaviors such as bullying.

One area in which the creative arts can be injected into the bullying prevention unit is through the use of music. In Shafer and Silverman's (2013) research it was noted that music teachers hold a particularly unique role in this work. Shafer and Silverman identified that there is a "particular advantage music teachers have in identifying bullying [which is] due to their extended and longitudinal relationships with students" (2013, p. 497). That is, music teachers can play a crucial role in preventing bullying because they are oftentimes working with students throughout their elementary school careers and thus have the opportunity to see children grow and develop over time. Another way in which music can deter bullying by being " beneficial for improving peer relationships and self-management skills" (Shafer & Silverman, 2013, p. 497). When peers have increasingly strong relationships with one another and increasingly strong self-management skills they are far less likely to bully one another. Music requires "demonstration of impulse control and appropriate verbal communication in the operational definition of on-task behavior, both of which can be problematic for bullies and victims"(Shafer & Silverman, 2013, p. 497). Thus when engaging in music class and the creation of music, skills

are developed which are conducive to being a thoughtful peer who is able to control their impulses and abstain from bullying.

Another arts-based area that can aid in the prevention of bullying is the creation of graphic vignettes by students. "Graphic vignettes allow us to assess the extent and explore the nature of bullying and cyberbullying" (Khanolainen & Semenova, 2022, p. 9). Khanolainen and Semenova (2022) found that through the use of graphic vignettes teachers can essentially gain insight of the different perspectives of students through their visual stories and subsequent interviews. These stories and interviews "provide an insight into how bullying situations emerge, how they influence school children's mental health, what coping strategies are commonly used, and how bullying is regarded as a phenomenon" (Khanolainen & Semenova, 2022, p. 10). The information provided within the vignettes is crucial for teachers and *Second Step* facilitators to identify areas of concern and gain insight into how students view and cope with bullying that may arise. "A better understanding of victim's help-seeking patterns is important for reducing bullying and victims' willingness to ask for help largely depends on whether they perceive their environment as understanding and supportive"(Khanolainen & Semenova, 2022, p. 10). Teachers and school administrators who seek to gain insight into how students view their school environment can use these insights to better support victims of bullying, and to reduce the instances of bullying that occur all together. "Graphic vignettes proved to be a valuable tool to study school environments as they enabled [researchers] to see how victims are viewed and discussed by those who never experienced peer aggression first-hand"(Khanolainen & Semenova, 2022, p. 10).

Hu Yan's (2019) research into group art therapy techniques provides further insight into how the use of the arts can be employed in schools to support the *Second Step* curriculum's goal

of preventing bullying. Yan found that "incomplete language skills may be a barrier … to participate in general counseling groups, which requires much self-expression; thus, art therapy becomes an ideal alternative psychological guidance intervention" (Yan et. al., 2019, p. 6). Yan outlined an art therapy group in her research which was aimed at supporting those who have been bullied and preventing further bullying in the future (2019). "The art therapy group experienced an improved social life and significantly reduced bullying victimization" (Yan et. al., 2019, p. 6). Yan found that the implementation of an art therapy group for students had many benefits including: "produc[ing] meaningful art projects, empower[ing] students, improv[ing] interpersonal relationships, and help[ing] students achieve greater self-esteem" (2019, p. 6). Art therapy has "shown advantages for students coping with social issues, especially bullying" (Yan et. al., 2019, p. 2). Art therapy groups can be especially useful in the school setting as a means to supplement existing social-emotional learning curriculums such as *Second Step* because "art therapy is a creative method of expression and communication [and] has been employed in many clinical and other settings with diverse populations" with documented success (Yan et. al., 2019, p. 6).

Joseph Amorino (2016) also conducted research focusing on how art therapy can be used as a viable means to deter aggressive behaviors and prevent bullying among students. Through his research Amorino (2016) found that aggressive behaviors and violence among peers is most commonly a result of a deficit in the processing of aversive experiences and stimuli. Amorino proposed using art-making as a deterrent to these aggressive and violent behaviors because "art provides a safe, non-verbal revelation of the individual and can improve personal, social, and civic life" (2016, p. 17). Amorino developed and implemented a 6 week art therapy program which was used with students (2016). After completing this six week intervention

Amorino (2016) asked for comments and reflections for students in regard to the process. "To paraphrase [student] observations, they were better able to understand themselves, became more appreciative of diversity, felt more patient with others, were able to sort things out for themselves, could put their feelings in order, and considered painting to be a valid response to anger, rather than projecting it on others" (Amorino, 2016, p. 22). The comments of the impact Amorino's (2016) work had on the students participating in the art therapy program speak to the effect the project had on reducing aggressive behaviors and preventing bullying. "The comments of the students themselves … provides the most salient evidence of … effectiveness as an indirect deterrent to aggressive behavior" (Amorino, 2016, p. 22). "When students learn to recognize and manage their emotions and appreciate the perspectives of others, they stand to enhance their interpersonal, emotional, and ethical behavior" (Amorino, 2016, p. 22). Essentially Amorino found that "the act of authentic artmaking can be administered in ways that move young people toward paths of emotional management and deter aggressive behavior" and thus can be employed to prevent bullying within the school setting (Amorino, 2016, p. 22). By including ways for students to engage in authentic artmaking, teachers can indirectly reduce the instances of bullying by providing students a place for students to transport their negative emotions into thoughtful visual forms rather than bottling these emotions and taking them out on their peers.

Discussion

This literature review is intended to provide evidence of the benefits that infusing existing *Second Step* curriculum with various expressive arts approaches could provide, and how the implementation of the arts within the curriculum could enhance the overall effectiveness and longevity of the social-emotional learning of students. The literature review was completed in a

systematic fashion in which each unit of the *Second Step* curriculum was analyzed and matched with recent and relevant peer reviewed articles. The peer reviewed articles that were reviewed were relevant in the sense that their varying arts-based methods achieved social-emotional learning goals which mirrored the specific goals of the different *Second Step* curriculum units. The review of the literature strongly implies that by supplementing the existing *Second Step* curriculum with the addition of arts-based methods the curriculum would become more effective in nature and more accessible for students with culturally diverse backgrounds.

The implications that surfaced through this study could be addressed in future research. For example, while the benefits to social-emotional learning when using the various art modalities has been identified and reiterated through the various articles reviewed, these arts-based practices have not yet been used within the *Second Step* curriculum at this time. The effectiveness of this approach, while probable, is still hypothetical at this time as it has not been implemented within the framework of the curriculum. In terms of future research, it would be useful to extend the current ideas through additional studies which directly apply the expressive arts methods mentioned in the literature review to the existing curriculum and measure its effectiveness when compared to a control group not receiving the arts-based methods. For example, when considering the fourth unit of *Second Step* curriculum, which deals with problem-solving skills, a future study which compares the learning of students who engage with process drama experiences during this unit may be compared to the learning of students in a control group who receive the traditional *Second Step* unit as is may be useful. Further research of this nature would give additional merit to the ideas of this research.

Although the generality of the current ideas must be established by future research, the present study has provided clear support for the inclusion of expressive arts within the *Second*

Step curriculum. The current *Second Step* curriculum has shown to be ineffective in its current state (Hart et. al., 2009; Upshur et. al., 2017) because it lacks room for the creative expression of students (Second Step, 2011a). Furthermore, it was argued that the use of creativity through the arts has an innate ability to not only be motivating for children but also "has been reported to bring joy, pride, reduce stress, and enhance the sense of belonging which are important factors in an … interventions effectiveness" (Crenshaw & Miller, 2022, p. 82). By pairing the expressive arts with the existing *Second Step* curriculum it could be possible to increase the efficacy and long-term effects of a popular and universal social-emotional learning curriculum which is used with students across the country.

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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