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The Fusion Between Differentiated Instruction and Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Development and Education

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THE FUSION BETWEEN DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Thesis
for the degree of Early Childhood Development and Education
in the School of Teacher Education
in the College of Community Innovation and Education and
in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2022

Thesis Chair: Sherron Killingsworth Roberts, Ed.D.

ABSTRACT

This thesis introduces a novel application of the fusion between Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a needed and reciprocal relationship in the early childhood classroom. DI is an approach to teaching that aims to tailor the teacher's instruction to the individual needs of each child. Instruction, content, and students' expression of knowledge can each be differentiated. Differentiation itself is a vast topic that begs to be narrowed and balanced. Some teachers experience obstacles to differentiation or struggle to efficiently differentiate their classroom. In an attempt to solve this phenomenon, this thesis explored DI and specifically its pairing with SEL. SEL refers to any instruction that pertains to the child's social development, emotional development, or the overlapping of the two domains, identity, sense of self, self-regulation, and self-control. This thesis examined how to fuse these two vital and valid approaches of the classroom in order to benefit and maximize our early childhood students' potential. In order to provide important information on how to fuse DI and SEL for the benefit of their future students, this thesis provides a thorough review of related research. Further, this thesis aids the execution of differentiation in the early childhood classroom by fusing DI with SEL. Based on the needs identified by the research literature, this thesis synthesized information to create a website with Google Sites to share information and steps to preservice teachers on how to fuse DI and SEL. The website features a comprehensive classroom simulation based on the fusion of DI and SEL which takes the form of a digital escape room. Results emphasize how DI is enhanced through SEL materials and experiences, and how SEL can enhance ways to differentiate so as to boost student learning.

DEDICATION

I am dedicating all of my work for the service of my Lord and Savior without whom nothing would be possible.

To the family I found, built, and was given. I am blessed to have a family who knows me, supports me, and takes care of me when I'm feeling my best and worst.

How sweet it is to be loved by you.

Finally, I cannot forget to dedicate all of my adult endeavors, including this one, to a little girl who dreamt it all up and never let go.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis was to explore the fusion between Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to maximize learning for students in Early Childhood settings and create a digital resource that demonstrated how to execute that fusion. DI is already an accepted approach to teaching, yet the current literature in the field is concerned with the barriers of implementing DI. Differentiating, in terms of education, is a practice that refers to tailoring what a student learns to how they learn. The teachers' focus is placed on each child's specific needs, talents, abilities, and even interests. DI suggests that this is the best way to ensure that all children are accessing the content. The caveat is that differentiation must address each student. Here lies the main challenge. According to the criticisms of DI, there are too many students, not enough teachers, not enough hours in the day, and often not enough resources to effectively operate differentiation. De Jesus (2012) acknowledges that DI is not as uniform as traditional methods of teaching; However, DI is an investment. Reaping the benefits of differentiating far outweighs the effort and fear of nonconformism. Differentiating supports a student-centered classroom and helps dismantle the traditional style of teacher-centered classrooms. Traditional teacher-centered classrooms are lecture-based where the power and control are placed in the hands of a single teacher (De Jesus, 2012). Placing some power in the hands of the student can result in empowered learners who are more engaged and intrinsically motivated to meet their full potential.

The processes taking place during this shift from a universal, one-size-fits-all classroom, are based in social-emotional skills. As educators and other early childhood professionals attempt to effectively tailor learning content to the learners needs, they are engaging in

social-emotional skills. Cheng et al. (2019) supports that personal connections are required to access the unique and complex characteristics of each student. Adults must make a positive attachment with a child before they can gain their trust and effectively open a child up to learning and risk-taking. As educators attempt to make a positive attachment with each child, they often unknowingly are differentiating for each child and simultaneously initiating SEL.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) supports the efforts toward advocating for DI and SEL. DAP is defined as practices that reflect the child's wellbeing as the primary concern of any given caregiver, especially that of a professional setting (NAEYC, 2020). In my preservice teacher experience as an Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) undergraduate at the University of Central Florida, my studies have placed DAP on the pedestal of education, childcare, childhood advocacy, and professional development, as DAP is the highest standard followed to ensure best practices. I have been taught that in order to provide any type of caregiving or educational service for children and families, their developmental needs and developmental timeline must be considered in all interactions and decisions regarding children.

In keeping with DAP, SEL takes great precedence because social and emotional development is one of many significant areas of development during the early childhood years. Other areas include cognitive development, physical development, and language development (NAEYC, 2020). The area of social and emotional development, however, is unique because it is a less visible skillset. You cannot see this development as well as physical development or hear it as well as you hear a child slowly form the word "water" over time. Emotions are easily tossed aside for a variety of external reasons that might have to do with societal stigmas or a lack of validity placed on the feelings of a toddler. Additionally, relationships are overlooked often

because adults do not perceive them as an area that requires diligent investment and dedication, just as cognitive skills require. SEL is considered a nonacademic and affective variable. But according to DI, overturning traditional methods is not an issue in an innovative field such as ECDE. Rather, progression is the cornerstone of the field of education, as we are constantly learning how to better ourselves, our schools, and our professional development as we serve an increasingly diverse population.

Personal Rationale

A deeply personal question sprouted the origins of this thesis; the question that emerged has been the pebble in my shoe for the entirety of my educational career: Why do children come to hate learning? Or school? As I racked my brain with a multitude of answers to this question, and trekked further in my undergraduate studies, the question evolved: Why do we let them hate school? What could we do to mitigate hatred and sustain joy for learning? I concluded that researching how to prevent this phenomenon, rather than reliving why it occurs, would be the most beneficial use of my professional development as a preservice teacher.

I felt called to DI on two accounts. Both of which derive from my studies as a preservice teacher. Multicultural education and exceptional education point to the necessity of implementing DI and fusing it with SEL. Accommodating and modifying for the students with exceptional beckons fluency of differentiation. Multicultural education calls for differentiation due to the increasing diversity in communities. Diversity exists in backgrounds, languages, experiences, resources, and challenges. The work of researchers such as De Jesus (2012), Sylvester and Kragler (2013), and Raywid (1992) focus on the students who are at risk, yet who are transformed by differentiation and the personal touch of social-emotional initiatives. Not only

can teaching approaches such as DI and SEL be implemented once there is a dire need, DI and SEL must be proactively implemented for every learner.

The second encounter of DI rearing its helpful head occurred in my reading of Smutny and Von Fremd (2010), authors of *Differentiating for the young child: Teaching strategies across the content areas, preK-3*. Differentiation was beautifully illustrated through the metaphor of an adventure (Smutny & Von Fremd, 2010). Smutny and Von Fremd (2010) parallel the process of differentiating your classroom with a metaphorical journey in which there is one trip leader, a role played by the teacher, who must optimize the experience for the rest of their crew. The leader needs to assess how prepared everyone is for the trip, if they have what they need, and then provide what is missing to those who need it. This metaphor of DI as a journey was thoroughly helpful to me as an imaginative individual who desires to help children see their education the same way: As an adventure that flexes creativity and the imagination. Sentiments that De Jesus (2012) says DI can achieve. An additional element of equity, in concert with creativity and imagination, is advocated in the DI journey according to Smutny and Von Fremd (2010), because the focus is on preparing and providing for student needs while simultaneously making sure all adventurers get to see the main sights, sceneries, and experiences.

The following chapter provides a review of related research literature on the topics of DI and SEL. Chapter Three offers readers insights surrounding how this thesis was envisioned and implemented, while Chapter Four reveals the result of said insights. Last, Chapter Five includes the conclusions from this thesis that serve as implications for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH

This thesis, exploring the fusion of DI with SEL, created an online teacher resource that demonstrates how Early Childhood Education (ECE) teachers can leverage that fusion to maximize learning. Therefore, a review of the related research concerning both DI and SEL was conducted in order to gain a better understanding about educational understandings of DI and SEL on individual landscapes as well as the overlaps that are currently available through empirical research.

Differentiated Instruction (DI)

First, I conducted a review of the research surrounding DI that shows how important DI is, especially in the early years. The most comprehensive article in this literature review is from Moosa and Shareefa (2020) who wanted to address how vast the topic of DI is. After conducting a search in my university's digital library, it is evident that thousands of articles on the subject of DI point to an abundance of writing on the subject and plenty exist even indicating that DI is an uncertain teaching approach with unclear parameters (Sparks, 2015). Some might argue that it is too flexible, and many want to make it better, without knowing how (Sparks, 2015). Criticisms of DI were found from article writer Sarah Sparks (2015) in *Education Weekly*. Some related readings featured in my literature review addressed such concerns about DI, but ultimately support my thesis topic in the attempt to advocate for DI and its pairing with SEL.

Bondie et al. (2019) noticed that the research on DI provided varying definitions from a systematic response to policy to the informal teacher perception of student differences (see Appendix A). Moosa and Shareefa (2020) found that DI can also be defined as a teaching approach to instructional strategies that are adapted according to the individual students in the

classroom. Moosa and Shareefa's (2020) detailed report provided a very updated review of research on differentiated instruction dating back to 1990. They studied 100 of the most cited research publications to see trends in the field of DI. Much is written about this vast topic, but the authors aimed to see what synopsis they could come up with. After categorizing 100 publications and logging their relevant citation formation, Moosa and Shareefa (2020) concluded that their findings should provide insight for future researchers. Moosa and Shareefa (2020) asked six research questions about patterns for publication and citation, keywords that were most frequently used, the pattern of collaboration and contribution from publishers and institutions, what countries contributed the most and what were the publication characteristics. Patterns for publication showed that the highest number of publications on DI was from 2006 to 2013. Most searched keywords were teacher-centered rather than student-centered. The same is true for DI and its correlating subcategories attached to it in the 100 publications. This particular feature supports my own claims because social and emotional topics were not a part of the 100 top cited research articles. This indicates that I have selected a potentially unique topic to the field of DI.

According to Moosa and Shareefa's (2020) findings, the United States was found to be the country with the most contributions in this area. Carol McDonald Connor (2011) was one of the most published authors on this topic out of the 100 top cited publications. Out of the 100 authors identified for the study, Connor (2011) contributed 4 publications, which served as the highest number of publications for any other author (Moosa & Shareefa, 2020). Most institutions who were published did not choose to engage in collaborative publications except the Florida Center for Reading Research, University of Connecticut, and College of William and Mary (Moosa & Shareefa, 2020). Finding Florida to be a space for DI research is interesting as my thesis comes from the perspective of a Floridian, preservice teacher. However, my research is not

limited to resources from Florida. The most pressing finding from this study is that out of all the sub-areas studied in the 100 most-cited papers, sub-areas titled learning styles and preferences, student development and wellbeing, or even parent involvement were one of the lower sub-areas of study linked to DI (Moosa & Shareefa, 2020). One of them is Shaw and McCabe (2008), who published Hospital-to-school transition for children with chronic illness: Meeting the new challenges of an evolving health care system. Still, Shaw and McCabe (2008), did not strictly refer to social or emotional learning (SEL), as this thesis attempts to do. None of the other sub areas of professional expertise, institutional (school-based) variables, science, or mathematics were related to students' SEL (Moosa & Shareefa, 2020).

Similarly, Bondie et al. (2019) wrote an extensive literature review analyzing the change in discussion around DI from 28 research articles ranging from 2001 to 2015. Due to the quantity of content being produced surrounding DI and the variety of ways in which it is facilitated and defined, the collection of Bondie et al. (2019) provided evidence for the shifts and changes that took place over time, the attitudes about DI, and a consensus around the topic.

DI was pondered as early as the 1950s, when author Washburne (1953) asked how differentiation could even be achieved in the classroom. Sparks (2015) suggests that the most uncertainty and challenges lie here, in facilitating and supporting DI. Exactly how does the teacher differentiate and to what extent? Guiding questions from Bondie et al. (2019) began with: How did these studies report changes? Three subcategories of this question included: The frameworks supported to define DI, the operationalization of DI, and key barriers of DI. The second guiding question asked: Did changes in practices across studies lead to a common definition of DI? A total of 157 articles were found using three databases and a hand search of other educational and psychological journals was conducted. However, only 28 qualified for

analysis under this literature review's limiting criteria: US-based, preschool-12 grade years, peer-reviewed journal articles reporting research, dated from 2001 to 2015, and the research had to investigate a change in teaching practices characterized by DI (Bondie et al., 2019). Bondie et al. (2019) attempts to iron out the uncertainty of DI by providing a synopsis of its evolution, and its flexibility in what research says is beneficial according to varying contexts. Bondie et al. (2019) gave a platform to all the different voices contributing to DI.

The relevant take away from the Bondie et al. (2019) literature review in relation to my thesis is that the researchers reported no studies that have any explicit correlation with SEL in either subject area, definition, or framework. The authors found that 64% of studies referred to DI and used Carol Tomlinson's definition (2001), which described DI as adjustments to content, process, product, and physical learning environment based on what the teacher thinks students' readiness levels, learning profiles and interests are (Bondie et al., 2019). Other studies reported basing differentiation off of students' backgrounds in order to address culturally relevant pedagogies, which differs only slightly from the Tomlinson (2001) framework. Betts (2004) found that some studies exist on a spectrum when it comes to ownership of DI. The continuum shifted ownership from the prescribed curriculum to teacher adjusted curriculum, to finally a learner driven curriculum (Bondie et al., 2019). The difference in this framework indicates that DI could be less about teacher initiation and teacher perceptions, but rather about placing responsibility and power in the hands of learners so that they get to steer their education where they need to go. Differentiating by giving students the tools they each need promotes self-regulated learning which is an executive functioning academic skill needed for success in their later educational careers. Student empowerment circles back to the concept that teachers

need to be facilitators of learning and serve as guides in order to escape the trap of teacher-centered classrooms that condone traditional discipline.

Bondie et al. (2019) exposed that the literature on DI has evolved greatly from 2001-2015. A variety in approaches to DI may be used to argue how inconceivable DI is in action, but on the contrary, the ever-evolving ideas about DI are well-suited to the world of theory and pedagogies because early childhood development and education is an innovative field that requires progress, skeptics, and new ideas. Sparks (2015), for example, writes about how DI has proven difficult to implement on a broad scale in a way that ensures predictable, academic student achievement. In general, the fact that DI or a step by step instruction manual is not written about verbatim in empirical research may indicate that the topic is ripe for new ideas. When it comes to the variety of perspectives regarding DI, a great amount of room exists for interpretation and personalization. Teachers, therefore, must be given the guidance, trust, and room to interpret and personalize, however, which is a sentiment supported by Gruener (2008).

DI was also discussed as being strongly related to Response to Intervention (RTI) during the time of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) implementation in the 2001 to 2015 timeframe (Bondie et al., 2019). From this origin, narrow definitions of student differences were identified since the focus of the RTI process was meant to flag, serve, and monitor struggling students who might become eligible for special education services. Frameworks from this perspective were inspired to emphasize varying student ability through DI. Because of this framework, the attention on teacher perception of their students in DI dwindled due to the need for strict research and evidence-based assessment to evaluate students. This type of framework regarding DI contrasts with attitudes aligning with the Tomlinson (2001) framework, for instance. However,

addressing teacher perceptions of students and student roles as confident, independent learners in the context of differentiation research eventually supports the fusion with SEL.

Dubasik et al. (2017) took a look at how impactful teacher perceptions can be. Their study looked at the relationship between instructional practices and the ones that teachers endorse and actively utilize. According to their literature review, research already suggests the relevance of instructional practices in the lives of teachers and their impact on children's learning experience, but the determining factor was whether teachers actually used them that mattered. Dubasik et al. (2017) began by identifying 80 instructional practices almost equally divided between three domains: Classroom climate, emotional socialization, and language and literacy. The authors identified these areas according to their own backgrounds and specialties, but also according to relevance in later schooling. All these domains, some of which are classified as non-cognitive variables, are indicators of schooling experience and achievement in later ages. Again, this emphasis supports two notions: The first eight years of a person's life has significant influence on learning and achieving their full potential, and SEL should be prioritized as important skills to expose children to.

Additionally, the study by Dubasik et al. (2017) is considered interdisciplinary because the featured instructional strategies come from four disciplines: Early childhood education, psychology, and language development, and second language acquisition. The instructional strategies were reviewed by 150 Arizona preschool teachers with a range of backgrounds, but most were female, white, and held bachelor's degrees, with Hispanic females comprising 15%. The teachers were instructed to place 80 index cards, one at a time, each with a corresponding instructional practice, on one of 8 piles. 1-8 represented a scale that ranged from "least like" my instructional strategies, to "most like" my instructional strategies. The results indicated that the

most used instructional strategies were related to classroom climate. Their conclusion statement read, "A central consideration is how the endorsement of practices can extend across domains, with the aim of helping to provide young children with the support they need for later academic success (p. 50)".

Dubasik et al. (2017) provided significant evidence for how educators can be well informed on the facilitation of an instructional strategy, such as DI, before enacting it in their classroom. The chaos that occurs during real-time teaching, whether it is behavior management or academic instruction, makes or breaks a teacher's love for a strategy. They need strategies that are going to withstand improvisation of real-time teaching and interactions with students. Educators must feel that instructional strategies justify the effort required to implement and commit to them. For these reasons, it makes sense why Dubasik et al. (2017) demonstrated that the top two instructional practices concerned classroom culture and emotional socialization. Teachers need solutions and methods that efficiently contribute to the greater good, which is a term that can refer to a teacher's overall classroom climate. DI and SEL is a pairing that contributes positively to classroom climate and emotional socialization. Additionally, strategies must be easy to recall for this to work and therefore well-embedded. In this way, Dubasik et al. (2017) justifies this thesis's advocacy for fusing DI and SEL, in order for teachers to feel like they can make an educated decision. Sparks' (2015) discussion surrounding DI implies that this obstacle of facilitation or operationalization inhibits the clarity of DI's vision.

Kragler and Sylvester (2013) provided a study that demonstrated why differentiating instruction is imperative to the learning experience for each individual child. Kragler and Sylvester (2013) persisted that early childhood professionals allow environmental factors of each child's unique experience and homelife to be a significant contributing factor when planning

instruction. Kragler and Sylvester (2013) proved that this is differentiation based on a child's current knowledge, developmental stage, past experiences and homelife. Kragler and Sylvester (2013) presented this discussion through the context of VPK programs in Florida, and through the lens of socioeconomic levels and achievement gap. The achievement gap is the gap between the performance level of low-income children and middle-income children. Kragler and Sylvester (2013) suggested that VPK programs need to proactively address the achievement gap by giving tailored attention to the needs of kids and families from low-income backgrounds. Children who are identified as coming from a low-income household or community are more likely to have less exposure to language in their daily life. Literature and language are emphasized because it is the subject area in which Kragler and Sylvester (2013) focus. The context of low-socioeconomic children and the potential disadvantage they may come to class in is reason for educators to differentiate their instruction and interactions with children, according to Kragler and Sylvester (2013).

García-Carrión et al. (2021) also provided a systematic review of the literature to discuss classroom climate. The evaluation of positive aspects of classroom climate supports my thesis in showing not only the different, research-based, ways to differentiate, but why teachers should differentiate. García-Carrión, et al. (2021) gathered 14 studies that displayed positive features of classroom climate in preschool classrooms. According to García-Carrión, et al. (2021), they differ from other research by focusing on the definitive positive attributes of classroom climate rather than the negative factors. Classroom climate can be looked at through two lenses: structural aspects, and pedagogical practices. Structural aspects include the physical space, ratios, personnel qualifications, and materials available. Pedagogical practices are described as planning and implementing learning activities and supporting children's development through

positive interactions. Pedagogical practices encompass the elements that are less concrete than the structural aspects. Features of an emotionally supportive environment exclude disruption, conflict, and disorganization. Both influential categories of the classroom from García-Carrión, et al. (2021) can be differentiated to maximize learning, according to Tomlinson's (2001) DI framework.

García-Carrión et al. (2021) sees a need for a focus on classroom climate specifically in reference to at-risk children. At-risk children are defined as coming from low-income homes, neighborhoods, and may also be found in minority populations. García-Carrión et al. (2021) indicates that children from ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be placed into a classroom without quality interactions. Here, the claims made by Kragler and Sylvester (2013) are echoed from the work of García-Carrión et al. (2021). While the advocacy for why certain populations are at a disadvantage is not the main focus of this literature, it does aim to highlight the role classroom climate could play. For example, classroom climate can favor or hinder academic performance and social relationships. The research of García-Carrión, et al. (2021) applies to my thesis because this literature review makes clear that pedagogies and physical environment impact the learning experience of even the youngest children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. García-Carrión, et al. (2021) carries the torch in discussing SEL due to their feature of the SEL component of classroom climate. Furthermore, García-Carrión, et al. (2021) leads into the review of the literature on SEL.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

Since this thesis seeks to create a preservice teacher guide in terms of how to fuse SEL with DI to improve student learning, this section will be dedicated to the related literature

regarding SEL in the classroom. SEL refers to two separate, but closely related, domains of DAP. Referencing the term social-emotional encompasses the overlap between a child's social development and emotional development. As seen in the CASEL framework (2020), SEL is also a curriculum (see Appendix A). SEL is the emotional and nonacademic side of the classroom learning that traditional discipline neglects to acknowledge as valuable parts of early childhood education and development, especially when the forces of academic curriculum take their toll.

Jihyun and Shute (2014) researched and wrote a review of the literature that included synopsis of noncognitive domains, how those noncognitive domains are defined, and the importance of noncognitive domains. Noncognitive variables were defined as "variables other than ones measured by test scores...traits that aren't measured by traditional cognitive tests," (p. 1). These variables are the ones described as pertaining to more sensitive matters. It should be noted that while these authors use the term noncognitive in order to define SEL, this thesis refers to SEL as nonacademic (rather than noncognitive) because SEL is a cognitive domain that the field has since realized can indeed be tested and measured. Jihyun and Shute (2014) recognized the misconceptions for these organic human characteristics to be insignificant compared to other academic abilities, yet they spend their review of the literature debunking such myths. Jihyun and Shute (2014) categorized nonacademic (once noncognitive according to them) variables into three domains: Student engagement, behavioral learning strategies, and school climate. Those variables were chosen because they are proven to be important to society in the forms of nonacademic parts of education and economic work life settings, and influential on later academic success. Jihyun and Shute (2014) reviewed longitudinal studies that displayed how such social and emotional skills predict academic success. Teachers expect attendance, for example, which is a time management, executive functioning skill that is nonacademic due to

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falling under the category of behavioral learning styles. The significance of less concrete abilities and tasks links directly to my thesis topic because they give great depth to discussions of academic achievement that is created through SEL.

As I continue to explore the relevance of nonacademic variables, such as SEL, in the classroom, Obaki's (2017) research surfaces, as he stated the imperative role that the physical environment can play in optimizing academic learning, learning experiences for each child, and social skills. Obaki (2017) mainly aims to explore the impact the class environment has on the social elements of the classroom. Obaki (2017) suggests that social interaction has a significant influence on a child's learning experience. Per Simpkins and Parke's (2002) research, peer relationships can influence a child to pursue or neglect their educational endeavors. The influence of peer relationships relates to the social skills of SEL.

On the other hand, if a child is rejected by their peers or even just a few close peers, then the ostracization could harm their identity and confidence according to Gross et al. (1995) and Trawick-Smith (2010). Confidence, self-esteem, and identity relates to the emotional skills of SEL. Bailey (2015) notes that a child who feels unsafe and unconfident will not perform to their fullest academic potential or could potentially refuse to perform or participate at all. The power of social development leads Obaki (2017) to persuade professionals to take preventative and proactive measures by investing in the classroom environment. Classroom layout, tools, activities, and centers can put cooperation at practice, and foster collaboration. These social skills and experiences give a child confidence and security to flourish. The articles I reviewed related specifically to SEL worked to bring my thinking full-circle and support my purpose, which is to fuse DI with SEL. SEL and classroom environment are the type of teacher-driven factors that can

be differentiated by the teacher according to either social needs and conflict or individual needs of students.

Physical environmental factors of the classroom and social situations are thought to be teacher driven because, as Dubasik et al. (2017) was shown saying in the DI section of this literature review, teacher instructional practices have significant influence upon children's learning in the classroom. Furthermore, the teacher's impact in the context of SEL does not dwindle. SEL might be centered around the child, but according to a study by Degotardi et al. (2019), the way the teacher even speaks to a child can affect learning experience and development. Degotardi et al. (2019) was concerned with child-addressed language in a study of 56 infant-teacher dyads, which was conducted to analyze the relationship between language and its effect on the learning experience of the young child. Language refers specifically to the spoken words of qualified teachers to the children and the intention behind each infant-addressed, verbal interaction. Considering that language is a social endeavor, the results of this study can be used to prove how teacher instruction and its effectiveness is greatly concerned with the language the teacher uses, based on the child and circumstances. This is, in essence, differentiation. When a teacher differentiates their language based on the social circumstances, the emotional skills and state of the child, and the unique personality of the child, the teacher is differentiating their instruction.

In a study from Degotardi et al. (2019), the language from the teacher is categorized as direct, indirect, suggestive, non-suggestive, or reasoning commands. The results indicate that a third of daily talk with infants was in the form of a command. The significance of these categorizations is due to the fact that current research already indicates language exposure influences infant development. Therefore, an exploration of language that aims to guide, needed

to be studied. This would prove the effect strategic language has on the learning experience of the young child. Degotardi et al. (2019) called childhood professionals to action as they suggested research on guided language. The tailoring of child-addressed language connects differentiated instruction to social-emotional instructional strategies such as language.

The work of Johnston (2012), author of *Opening Minds*, helped support the claim that DI needs a SEL component which is seen in his powerful examples of differentiating teacher talk. Johnston (2012) iterated many real-world examples of how language can be used to support the emotional development and academic achievement of children. The relevance of teacher talk is that the foundation of student-teacher relationship begins with something personable, such as language and conversation. Degotardi et al. (2019) would validate this as guided conversation.

Another strong piece of the research literature used to support the value of SEL ideas in DI came from Cheng et al. (2019). Their study researched the question: "Does classroom emotional support, organization, or instructional support predict the growth of the student–teacher relationship during the first preschool year for children who are at-risk?" (p. 334). Cheng et al. (2019) aimed to unveil the significance behind both student-teacher relationships and emotionally supportive classroom climate on at-risk children. While describing all the factors that make children at-risk and all the elements of their educational experience that are at-risk, this study hypotheses that a positive student-teacher relationship can have a significant, auspicious impact. Some results disprove parts of their hypothesis. For example, classroom organization did not significantly predict student–teacher relationships, and neither did instructional support. These findings create friction with the findings of Obaki (2017) that say the physical environment can indeed optimize learning areas of all kinds. However, Cheng et al. (2019) did confirm that emotional support, as a part of classroom climate, predicted growth in

the student-teacher relationship, which circles back to aligning with the work of Obaki (2017). According to Cheng et al. (2019), a positive relationship between student and teacher is characterized by low levels of conflict, low levels of dependency, and high levels of closeness. This study stresses the importance of these relationships by reviewing the early years. The most intense development of a human's life happens during this time. Due to this influential yet dependent stage, environmental factors have much to say about how children develop. The experiences of our lives and the people in them can have lasting effects. Relationships with adults can determine dysfunction and long-term negative outcomes, especially for little ones at risk in their earliest years (Cheng et al., 2019). Therefore, DI is a pedagogy that is supported by Cheng et al. (2019) who calls to action for teachers to pay attention to the background of each child in order to tailor the best experience for that child.

The connections that teachers should aim to make with students is the foundation of SEL. Research points toward the significance of this relationship more than the relationship between physical environment and SEL (Cheng et al., 2019), even though the physical environment is still proven to be a strong influencer (Obaki, 2017). Teachers can capitalize on their interactions with children to optimize their social and emotional skills. Through my findings, I synthesize that the research in the literature review shows this can be done through the type of language used with students, instructional strategies, classroom climate, and even physical environment.

Thus far, the SEL portion of this literature review has approached SEL from a wide lens, starting with "noncognitive variables" in general, as defined by Jihyun and Shute (2014, p. 1), a category in which all SEL and everything related to it, fall under. Reviewing relevant literature narrowed the lens at which the current study looks at SEL. The discussion of nonacademic and affective variables narrowed into a discussion of the classroom environment and social

circumstances, and then into an even smaller context of child-addressed language used by the teacher. All of these features of SEL provided support for exploring the natural and also intentional processes of SEL in the classroom alongside DI as a means of fueling and sustaining effective differentiation. Any instruction and interaction based on social and emotional areas of development require differentiation because SEL is individualized in nature. DI also is in need of including SEL components because DI wants to individualize academic learning and experiences in order to ensure that the content is being accessed by all learners, which SEL can help achieve. SEL is dependent on each child individually, their unique temperament, background, experiences, learning profile, preferences, triggers, strengths, and challenges. These characteristics are simultaneously the same characteristics of children that must be considered when differentiating instruction. It is no coincidence that so much overlap exists. SEL can help assist the implementation and success of differentiated instruction.

The Fusion of DI and SEL

The remainder of this literature review is dedicated to those rare published articles which envision DI and SEL strategies in the early childhood sphere working together to enhance learning. When a search was conducted on EBSCO Host's ERIC database including the key terms "differentiated instruction" and "social emotional learning," 134 results appeared and only 5 of which were left after adding the term "early childhood." A closer look revealed that many of these articles focused on secondary education. One of the 46 articles discussed SEL instructional strategies as one means of pursuing SEL for preservice teachers (Dresser & Sugishita, 2019). Yet, this article did not nearly reflect what my thesis suggests, which is the equal partnering of

DI and SEL, as Dresser and Sugishita (2019) mentioned DI as one of many strategies to improve SEL.

Another article from Britt et al. (2016) ideally exemplifies the equal pairing between SEL and DI. Their work takes place in the context of the language and literature core academic subject. The need for a study with an academic subject is due to the academic lens through which DI is usually seen. The experience of read-alouds and the guidance of the teacher creates an optimal learning environment for social-emotional development to take place. Using read-alouds to teach ethical and social lessons is not presented as too advanced of a skill for children who are at the ages of emergent literacy. Even the early childhood ages of learning to read can be greatly influenced by the message or moral of a children's literature book (Fountas & Pinnell, 2018). Therefore, teachers must be skilled and attentive facilitators when conducting read-alouds. The article describes instances in which proactive measures should be taken versus when reactive measures suffice. Ultimately, proactive strategies, such as reading about the relational problem before it occurs, are ideal. Britt et al (2016) still stressed the point that reading to children *during* the upset can serve as a tool to calm down or, after the calm-down, learn from the encounter. The authors present a variety of books that feature the best of both worlds where calming techniques coexist with learning the lesson of any social skill. Britt et al. (2016) helps formulate my thesis because they affirm that academics and social emotional development are integrally linked. Using academics as an instrument to facilitate SEL supports differentiated education, student-centered classrooms, SEL, DAP, significance of peer relationships and general student-teacher relationship, all of which are elements found in the literature review above. Britt et al.'s (2016) findings show that as educators teach and instruct any academic lesson or activity,

they have the opportunity to differentiate. The opportunity can be seized to initiate and facilitate SEL, as seen here, or the opportunity can be seized to use SEL to differentiate instruction.

McElwain and Swartz (2012) will make this fusion relevant to preservice teachers. Their study also serves as another exemplary bridge between DI and SEL. McElwain and Swartz (2012) looked at social emotional development in the classroom with specific emphasis on the emotional skills of the teacher. It might be obvious that educators must be well versed on social-emotional development within children, but this study reveals that not a great deal of research exists claiming that teachers should look within themselves. McElwain and Swartz (2012) hypothesize that the inner self-regulation of teachers might have the most surprising impact on the emotions in the classroom. A teacher's emotional, or not so emotional response, can make or break the child's SEL or the classroom's affect, in general. "Psychological characteristics of teachers have been shown to predict teacher sensitivity to kids," (p. 202). This serves as a significant statement because the teacher's ability to respond to a child while simultaneously responding internally requires a lot of emotional self-regulation, social skills, and cognitive efforts. Teachers can respond either supportively or nonsupportively to either positive or negative emotions of children. A teacher's inner emotions to a particular event or general state of being can and will affect the child unless the teacher can regulate their own emotions while coaching children through upset or joy. McElwain and Swartz (2012) conducted natural observations of 24 preservice teachers in a university lab school. Responses to the children were categorized by supportive or unsupportive responses. Supportive included labeling emotions, validating the feelings of the child, and problem solving with the child. Nonsupportive responses looked like dismissing, ignoring, and any decisions related to power.

McElwain and Swartz (2012) supports my fusion tremendously because they pinpoint the important period of preservice teaching which segues seamlessly into my deliverable being a guide for preservice teachers. Additionally, the discussion of SEL in the classroom justifies my claim that teachers have the power to influence the classroom climate, or emotional atmosphere. McElwain and Swartz (2012) underlines the importance of tailoring emotional responses according to each child, event, or conflict, which is an action that embodies the fusion of DI and SEL.

Bondie et al. (2019) found research on differentiating in a whole-group setting that points back to Johnston (2012), Degotardi et al. (2019), and McElwain and Swartz (2012), whose ideas expose a need to differentiate with SEL. Bondie et al. (2019) found that instructors can differentiate in group settings by differentiating their language to each student as they contribute to whole-group discussion, or answer questions during whole-group activities. Bondie et al. (2019) also talks about specific DI strategies that are social-emotional in nature. Teacher talk can be differentiated according to students' learning styles, profiles, and challenges, which can be as academic related and cognitive as the instructor wants, but the way teachers find out this information about their students and discover effective teacher talk is through social and emotional initiatives. Much of the time that would be considered dedicated to community building and other SEL actually is helping teachers differentiate their instruction. Therefore, in the beginning of differentiating, in the beginning of the school year, or whenever it might be that a student comes through the classroom doors, SEL may need to take the metaphorical wheel of the fusion vehicle and drive DI, even in core, academic, cognitive subjects, especially for teachers who are struggling to implement DI. Prioritizing SEL will maximize differentiation, as

long as educators remember that differentiating occurs during the SEL process as well. Together, in time, DI and SEL can form a reciprocal relationship.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The review of current literature on this topic, outlined in the prior chapter, points to a need for a teacher resource introducing the reciprocal relationship that could exist between DI and SEL. Current searches of research suggests that DI is not frequently found paired with the influences of SEL; therefore, this thesis addressed this need and provided a guide that supports preservice, as well as in-service, teachers in executing the fusion of DI with SEL.

The target audience for the thesis project contained in a website to guide the fusion was directed primarily toward preservice teachers. This thesis defines preservice teachers as all student teachers, interns, and those seeking certification. The research of McElwain and Swartz (2012) underscores how essential the stage of preservice teaching is, particularly regarding social and emotional elements in teaching and learning. Dubasik et al. (2017) defended the imperativeness of all educators to understand, support, and identify with effective teaching strategies in order for them to be implemented constructively. Dubasik et al. (2017) relates to the studies found in the literature review from Bondie et al. (2019) that displayed how teacher perception is one of the greatest influencing factors to choosing instructional practices and implementing them. Consequently, this thesis assumes that it is important for preservice teachers to be given the information and resources to make educational decisions around committing to pairing DI with SEL. Sparks's (2015) criticism and skepticism of mid-career teachers trying to enact DI suggests how difficult some view the implementation of new practices. That challenge served as another valid motivation of mine for creating an exemplary resource aiding the implementation of DI paired with SEL.

I created a digital guide for preservice teachers that is relatable, engaging, and informative. The guide is in the form of a website that demonstrates how to perform the fusion of

DI paired with SEL and justifies how it maximizes all areas of classroom learning. I included visual references for displaying what DI looks like in the physical classroom. Virtual elements such as these served as a model for simulating the fusion. A lesson plan exemplifying the fusion, suggestions, examples, non examples, comic strips were created from a preservice teacher perspective. Finally, a simulation of the fusion of DI and SEL served as a comprehension check. The simulation serves as a comprehensive digital escape room. DI is a pedagogy that aims to innovate and thus escape traditional educational practices. Escaping ineffective teaching habits is a goal of maximizing a classroom that infuses DI with SEL. Therefore, a comprehensive digital escape room is the ideal modern, accessible, and engaging tool to effectively paint the fusion of DI and SEL.

The first step in creating this website was searching for the appropriate resources. For inspiration, I began by exploring external resources that are well-renowned teacher tools, such as C-PALMS and evidence-based content I am exposed to as a student, such as textbooks and classroom management programs. I have specific interest in the *Conscious Discipline* model from Becky Bailey (2015), and the Responsive Classroom model, which is written by co-founder Charney (2002), because they have inspired much of the ideologies that have led me to pursue this thesis topic.

The resource library portion of this digital resource was limited, but does provide key resources that address the field of DI and SEL separately. I gathered additional resources to include, such as children's literature, for example, that embody and honor DI and SEL. I was excited to research and create this website because few sources exist that are explicitly labeled DI and SEL; hence, the need for my digital resource to be shared with early childhood preservice teachers.

As planned, I produced my own creations through the website. First, I defined DI and

SEL and explained the key roles that these two play in the lives of children and teachers. Next, I

defined and explained the parameters and essential elements of the fusion which are DI and SEL.

Then, to support my fusion, I formulated my own lesson plans, real-world examples, and

nonexamples. The justification of implementing samples like this that demonstrate teacher

language as a part of my website's portfolio comes from authors like Johnston (2012) and

Degotardi et al. (2019). Notable characteristics of the fusion between DI and SEL are

differentiated language, or teacher talk, which encapsulated positive and growth mindset, noted

by Johnston (2012). The language we use to convey a lesson to students depends, or should

depend, on each child, their personality, interests, abilities, and areas of improvement, a

conclusion supported by the research of Degotardi et al, (2019). DI is vital in both academic and

nonacademic areas of the classroom. This feature was important to include because teachers need

to be empowered to adapt learning content to their own students' needs, even if the lesson plan is

derived from their district resources or from C-PALMS (2019). I believe a website served as the

most influential vehicle for maximizing preservice teacher outreach and preservice teacher

learning.

Finally, I believe a realistic yet engaging visual representation of the fusion was the most

effective in showing what the DI and SEL fusion looks like and how it is executed. This strategy

is also being utilized due to my own preference for real-world applications. Therefore, a

simulation of the fusion took place for preservice teachers within the creation of a digital escape

room.

Digital Escape Room

According to Daemen et al. (2020), escape rooms are becoming an increasingly popular trend due to the real-world phenomenon of physical escape rooms in recreational entertainment. Originally, physical escape rooms were commercial places where friends and families would purchase an entry fee and go together for fun. Players are locked into a room that is heavily decorated to emulate a particular theme. Just for the experience, teams pay to be locked into a room with puzzles to solve in order to escape. The simulation is entertaining in the same way a haunted house, a who-done-it dinner party, or a mystery game is. Players are left to their own devices to use clues from all around the room to unlock keys, doors, or solve the puzzle. For this thesis, the term players referred to the members playing the game, either as a team or individually, and puzzle and clues were terms that are synonymous with challenges to be solved or completed.

The goals for the recreational use of physical escape rooms were primarily entertainment, based on teamwork and elements of surprise (Daemen et al., 2020). Now, the idea of escape rooms has been translated into educational settings for the purposes of knowledge acquisition, collaborative learning, and joyful engagement (Daemen et al., 2020). Engagement is the most attractive quality of escape rooms for educators because engagement and motivation increase as the game progresses (Classtime Blog, n.d.). Other strategies might hook students at first but lose them as tasks become more demanding and the duration of the activity becomes lengthy. Escape rooms created for educational purposes still have the potential to be lengthy activities, but since classes are divided into either teams or individuals, competition is a motivating characteristic (Daemen et al., 2020). To be clear, educational escape rooms are virtual and no scenario exists in which students are literally locked inside any room nor trapped in any way; the application of an

escape room in an educational setting is pretend, much more so than even recreational escape rooms. While classrooms are sometimes decorated to simulate a theme with festivities and motivate for learning; an educational escape room, digital or in-person, is in no way concerned with being as realistic as a recreational physical escape room.

A digital escape room differs in that it takes place online and for educational purposes, but educators and students can still be within the physical classroom to complete it. A digital escape room also contributes to hybrid teaching for which the 2020 pandemic has shown an ever-present need. Even before the days of COVID-19 quarantining, however, an increasing need to address the generations of digital natives who fill today's classrooms took precedence. Modifying learning to include an online element scratches the students' itch for screen-time in an educational way rather than an aimless and unsupervised manner. Students can also complete the educational escape rooms individually, at their own pace, and all at once if it is done online. Another way to maximize class time and individualize learning is online; however, in terms of teacher planning time, it does require great effort and time on the teachers' part to create an educational escape room.

In the context of preservice teaching, Alvarado-Albertorio et al. (2020) wanted to see what synchronous or asynchronous approaches resulted in when educational, digital escape rooms were used with preservice teachers. Alvarado-Albertorio et al. (2020) used their class of preservice teachers in order to teach gamification as an educational strategy as well as to see how preservice teachers would perform with either a synchronous or asynchronous approach. The study was conducted online due to COVID-19 restrictions, but synchronous produced better engagement and learning, because the professor was available for guidance through video conference meetings (Alvarado-Albertorio et al., 2020). Digital educational escape rooms have

been used in a preservice teaching context and the field addresses the relevance of this new educational trend.

One strategy for creating an educational, digital escape room is a Google Apps for Education escape room. Each Google Slide has visuals, links to different resources as clues, and finally a link to a Google Form to solve the puzzle and submit answers. Players can only continue once they have the correct answer or submission to unlock the next step.

My educational escape room took place digitally in a pretend classroom where a multitude of challenges lie. Exploring the visuals of the hypothetical room, whose physical elements are connected to the puzzles, players face simple to complex large-scale problems that can be solved with the fusion. Only after the player has effectively solved each problem by choosing a correct and appropriate response choice, will they be able to move on to the next challenge. It should be noted that significance has been placed upon the choice of the word "effective" because eliminating the use of labels such as good and bad teaching, promotes the esteem and progress of student teachers. Philosophies of Becky Bailey (2015) support this effort due to her *Conscious Discipline* model that eliminates the labels of good or bad behavior on children. Her work was included throughout the website's pages.

Based on the effectiveness of DI, yet the challenge of its implementation, this thesis focused on the creation of a website to support preservice teachers in their understanding of how DI can have a reciprocal relationship with SEL, which maximizes learning during the early childhood years. Using the need to support the SEL of young children as a rationale for successfully mobilizing DI to boost student learning, the current study created a preservice teacher guide, housed on a website, to prepare teachers for the enactment of this fusion. This online teacher guide was centered around and began with the essential elements of my fusion

which are DI and SEL. Related characteristics that are useful to know were featured through the

website as well such as differentiated teacher language, personal connections, and engagement

between teacher and student, collaborative learning, attention to classroom climate, and flexible

classroom features.

The following chapter provides the results of creating my online teacher guide, showing

the screen shots of the website I composed. Chapter Five concludes the thesis by including a

summary of the study, the educational implications, the limitations, and future research.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this thesis was to create a fusion between DI and SEL that would prove how each pedagogical strategy is mutually beneficial to the other and explore ways to best communicate these findings to preservice teachers, who are often the ones in the most vulnerable position to influence and be receptive to change, a conclusion supported by personal experience and the research of McElwain and Swartz (2012). I created an online guide to embody my thesis into an accessible version on a website for preservice teachers:

https://sites.google.com/view/thefusionthesis/home

The online guide is a website that was created using Google Sites. Google Sites was chosen due to the rising popularity of Google Apps for Education. Google has become a relevant learning tool in classrooms and a critical means of instruction for teachers. My website is referred to as *The Fusion* considering the purpose of this thesis is the fuse, or combine, DI and SEL. When DI and SEL are described as being combined, the intention is to visualize the overlapping of their implementation, efforts, and benefits in the classroom. For this reason, I chose a Venn Diagram to represent *The Fusion,* and used it as the logo for my website. During the planning process, I created a silhouette of my website, where I decided to present the idea of *The Fusion* as a whole (found on page 1), break *The Fusion* up into the individual parts of DI and SEL (found on page 2), justify the significance of *The Fusion* (found on page 3), demonstrate an application of *The Fusion* (found on page 4), and finally engage the audience with the interactive element of a Digital Escape Room (found on page 5) which served as the comprehension check of the digital learning experience, or guide, for preservice teachers.

The Fusion: The Homepage

On the homepage of *The Fusion,* I provided the context of my undergraduate thesis to a viewer who may not be visiting my website from my thesis. I included my statement of purpose, portions of my personal rationale, and explained what was to come for the rest of the guide. Throughout the website, I decided to keep my writing and language in an informal style considering the goal to be accessible and friendly to preservice teachers. Since this website is intended to be an experience that facilitates and encourages, I assigned each page, other than the homepage, a step in order to learn content and then simulate a module or lesson on *The Fusion*. I included information about myself to communicate that I am also a preservice teacher. As I wrote this section, I realized a desire to level with and relate to my fellow preservice teachers; therefore, I included an open letter to the preservice teacher as a third section of my homepage. To avoid confusion and add to the ambiance of a guided experience, I sought to make as many signposts visible to my audience as possible throughout my website. For example, under the "Get Started" heading at the end of the homepage, I provided navigation to linked buttons to each step as well as manually pointed to the left hand side menu where the steps are also displayed.

The Thesis

"The Fusion Between Differentiated Instruction and Social Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Development and Education"

This thesis was created to explore what is traditionally considered one of the biggest challenges in the classroom. In order to display my findings, research, and suggestions, I wanted to create a proactive tool that would allow preservice teachers to interactively and efficiently browse my findings.

Due to the notorious challenges that teachers face in the classroom, the Fusion is meant to be the biggest weapon against traditional teaching methods and the traditional classroom that might just be inhibiting said challenges.

In a step-by-step journey, this digital teacher guide walks preservice teachers through the Fusion between Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), how the Fusion came to be, why its important, and how it works! The Fusion is meant to be the accessible and relatable version of my thesis. My audience will finish their journey at the last step, a comprehension check: A digital escape room!

The Author

Brianna Perry

In my junior year of studying Early Childhood Development & Education, with a minor in Exceptional Student Education, I decided to pursue an Honors in the Major Undergraduate Thesis with the Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida. This program would allow me to focus solely on my field and explore a passion of mine in depth.

Since I am a preservice teacher, I wanted to dive deep into two subjects that I believe would best serve me in my internships and in-service teaching. The field of education strikes me as an imaginative, innovative and progressive field. I wanted to contribute to moving forward in a way that will create new outcomes for our students.

A Letter to the Preservice Teacher...

My target audience is you, the preservice teacher. I once heard from a professor that your undergrad is like drinking from a fire hose. And from another that the first year of teaching is an overwhelming, stressful, disaster. And I'm sure we've all heard plenty of times from experienced teachers that they definitely didn't know what they were doing their first few years. Encouraging, huh? Well I don't know about you, but I don't want to make guinea pigs out of the innocent children that come into my classroom within the next few years.

As you're learning, our main mission as educators or any childcare professional, early childhood or not, is to provide a service. We are responsible for the safety, development, well being, and education of these little sponges. But often, our setting and field gives us 15-30 clients to serve at a time. This makes instruction challenging. Or rather, this fact makes the learning experience challenging for every child, from their own unique perspective. For our own sake, we could teach in a traditional teacher-centered way and never glance twice at whether or not we are even providing a quality service. But as for now, we are young, optimistic, and creative preservice teachers who would never dream of such a fate, for ourselves or our hypothetical students.

The Fusion of Differentiated Instruction (DI) with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) allows us to provide a quality service to students, regardless of their needs. And I'll show you how. DI is instruction that is individualized and tailored to each child. SEL is instruction and interactions that foster relationship building skills, relationship maintenance skills, self regulation, and generally deals with the emotions of your students and their sense of self. The Fusion shows you how these two concepts aren't too far apart after all. And together, they can maximize learning for your students.

Get started

STEP 1

What is the Fusion?

STEP 2

Who are the stars of the show?

STEP 3

Why does the Fusion matter & why should I care?

STEP 4

How do I implement the Fusion & what does the Fusion look like?

STEP 5

Escape the traditional classroom: Check your understanding with a classroom simulation.
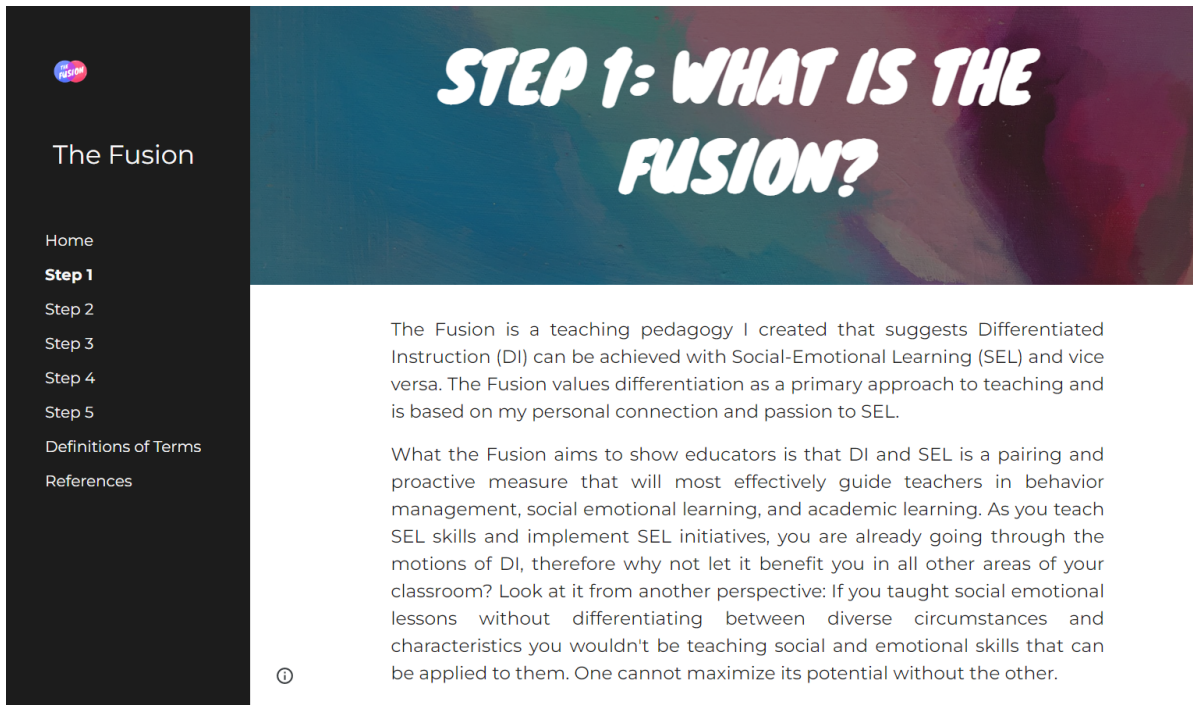
Explore the Fusion

Click on the menu on the left-hand side to get started

Step 1: What is The Fusion?

Page 1 is titled "Step1: What is *The Fusion?*" First, *The Fusion* is defined. Then, I repeat my statement of purpose, for clarity. And finally, I provided a visual graphic of *The Fusion's* Venn Diagram I made myself. I created a separate Venn Diagram than the one from my logo to indicate that one circle represents DI, the other represents SEL, and *The Fusion* is the overlap.

The Fusion
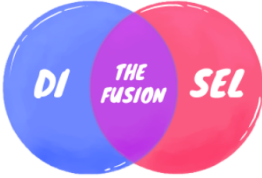
Home
Step 1
Step 2
Step 3
Step 4
Step 5
Definitions of Terms
References

STEP 1: WHAT IS THE FUSION?

The Fusion is a teaching pedagogy I created that suggests Differentiated Instruction (DI) can be achieved with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and vice versa. The Fusion values differentiation as a primary approach to teaching and is based on my personal connection and passion to SEL.

What the Fusion aims to show educators is that DI and SEL is a pairing and proactive measure that will most effectively guide teachers in behavior management, social emotional learning, and academic learning. As you teach SEL skills and implement SEL initiatives, you are already going through the motions of DI, therefore why not let it benefit you in all other areas of your classroom? Look at it from another perspective: If you taught social emotional lessons without differentiating between diverse circumstances and characteristics you wouldn't be teaching social and emotional skills that can be applied to them. One cannot maximize its potential without the other.

characteristics you wouldn't be teaching social and emotional skills that can be applied to them. One cannot maximize its potential without the other.

The Fusion

Home
Step 1
Step 2
Step 3
Step 4
Step 5
Definitions of Terms
References

SEL and DI are the most important elements that make up the Fusion, so lets break them down and learn about them even further.

Click on the menu to the left for Step 2.
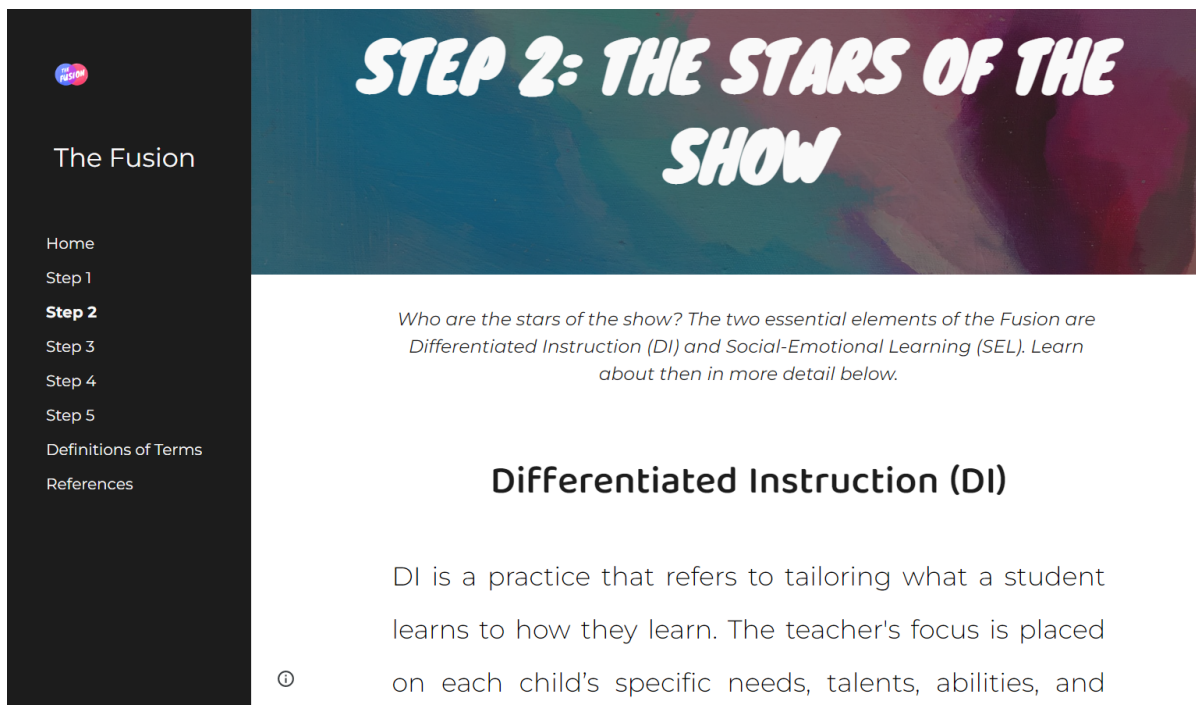
Or click here for Step 2

STEP 2

Step 2: The Stars of the Show

Page 2 is titled "Step 2: The Stars of the Show," because DI and SEL are the two essential elements of *The Fusion.* Using the imagery of stars exemplifies the equal value both DI and SEL share. Step 2 is where I wanted to dive deeper into DI and SEL on their own to provide background knowledge. For both DI and SEL I provided a simplified definition, the significance and relevance of each term in the context of early childhood education, and a real-world example in the form of a comic strip I created myself. Visual depictions of teaching pedagogies could make this website more engaging and accessible for preservice teachers who are already used to spending all their time absorbing research and other evidence-based practices. Using comic strips allowed my audience to become witnesses of real-world instances of DI and SEL, and also gave me a chance to provide real-world examples of DI and SEL I created myself. Additionally, I provided one last section under both DI and SEL headed "More on the Topic." Here, I featured a

peer reviewed article, but one that is an accessible read, discussing DI in contrast to traditional discipline, a topic that is relevant to my personal rationale, and educational digital escape room. This article is, however, only accessible to those with a database login; therefore, I also featured a more convenient resource. Since Carol Anne Tomlinson (2003) is a cited expert in the field of DI, I linked a brief YouTube video of her speaking on DI, herself. For SEL, the resource I included under "More on the Topic" was Becky Bailey (2015). I introduced her book on an earlier page of the website and linked a *Conscious Discipline* introductory video where she also debunks traditional discipline. Before I concluded step 2, I left a note to my viewers indicating the importance of watching the video due to the significance of traditional discipline later on in *The Fusion*.

Differentiation is a broad and old teaching pedagogy. Differentiation was pondered as early as the 1950s, when author Washburne (1953) asked how differentiation could even be achieved in the classroom. There are countless digital references to differentiation in educational contexts. An abundance of empirical research exists on differentiated instruction, as found by Moosa and Shareefa (2020). It is a hot educational topic. Differentiated instruction is different from differentiated education, which is an even broader term.

Deciding to refer to differentiation exclusively as differentiated instruction helps to better facilitate the conversation of DI and narrow the already broad field and terminology. Differentiation occurs in the classroom by differentiating the *instruction*.
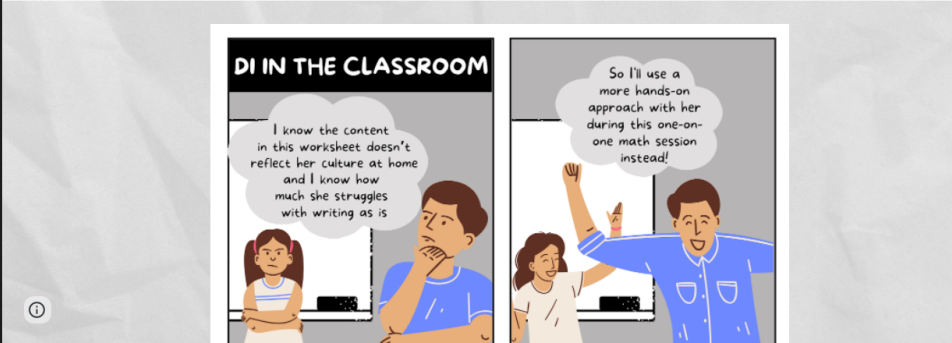
DI IN THE CLASSROOM

I know the content in this worksheet doesn't reflect her culture at home and I know how much she struggles with writing as is

So I'll use a more hands-on approach with her during this one-on-one math session instead!

More on the topic:

Here's an article by Olga De Jesus about differentiated instruction and specifically how it compares to traditional instruction. (When you click this link you'll be taken to an educational database EBSCO Host where you can login to access the article. If not, the information of the article is found below).

De Jesus, O. N. (2012). Differentiated instruction: Can differentiated instruction provide success for all learners? *National Teacher Education Journal, 5*(3), 5–11.

Below is a 5 minute video overview from Carol Anne Tomlinson herself (a highly cited educational professional on the topic of DI):

Differentiation and...
DIFFERENTIATION
and THE BRAIN
A DISCUSSION WITH
Carol Ann **TOMLINSON**

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Social-Emotional Learning pertains to the experiences of children and the instruction from adults that relates to social and emotional skills. Social development refers to human interaction and the relationships in a child's life. Emotional development refers to expressing and identifying feelings as well as identity and sense of self.

Social emotional learning encompasses the overlap between a child's social development and emotional development. Although I say young children, social and emotional skills are a relevant part of all ages and stages of life. That is why this domain in particular is close to my heart. Literally. SEL is the sensitive and affective side of the classroom experience. The term nonacademic is meant to make SEL stand out from all the developmental domains of early childhood which are physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and language development.
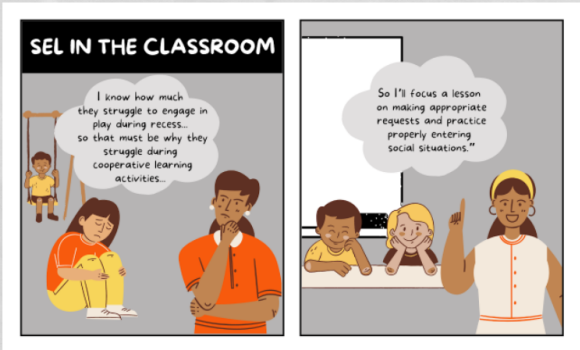
More on the topic:

Conscious Discipline (2015) by Dr. Becky Bailey is a great resource for learning about SEL from a child development lens. Conscious discipline can be used to improve classroom and behavior management as well. (When you click this link you'll be taken to her website). Here's her book:

Bailey, B. (2015). *Conscious Discipline: Building resilient classrooms*. Oviedo, FL: Loving Guidance.

Here's a 5 minute introductory clip to her book *Conscious Discipline*. Her

Conscious Discipli...

Before you move on, be sure to watch the
video above.

You just took a deep dive on DI and SEL.

Click Step 3 to see what the fuss is all about.
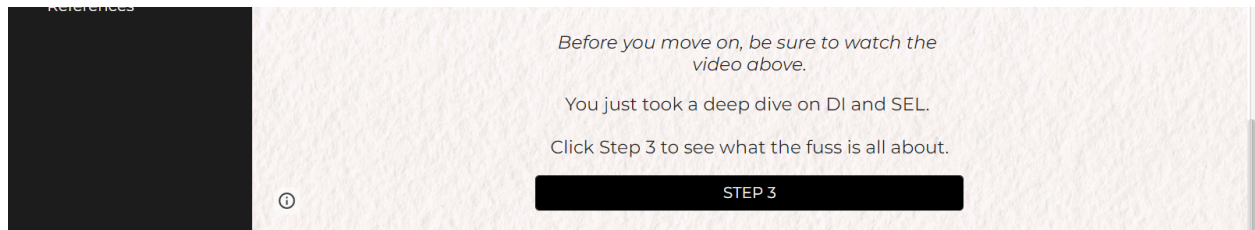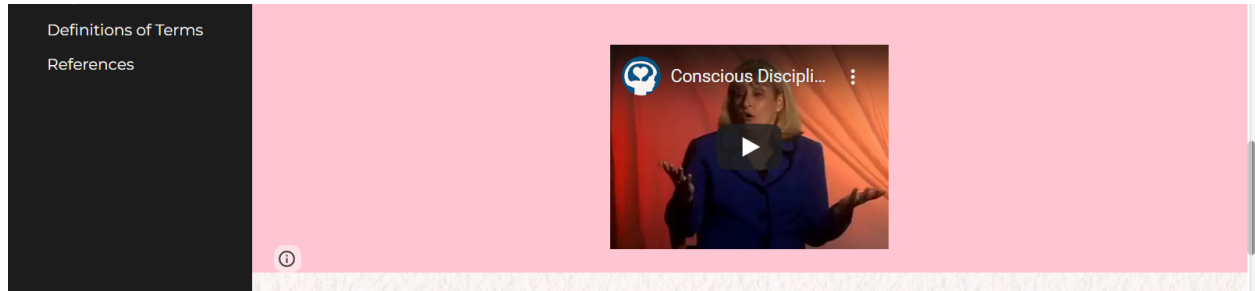
STEP 3

Step 3: Why the Fusion Matters and Why You Should Care

Page three is titled "Step 3: Why the Fusion Matters and Why You Should Care." I

decided it was important to explicitly state the important rationale for leveraging the fusion to

boost student learning. I spent Step 3 tapping into logos, or emotions, to justify the significance

and relevance of *The Fusion.* Much of my personal rationale can be found on this step. Findings

from my review of related research and my own studies in my degree program also inspired this

step.

STEP 3: WHY THE FUSION MATTERS & WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

Looking Back at My Rationale for This Thesis:

Debunking Traditional Discipline

A deeply personal question sprouted the origins of this thesis; the question that emerged has been the pebble in my shoe for the entirety of my educational career: Why do children come to hate learning? Or school? As I racked my brain with a multitude of answers to this question, and trekked further in my undergraduate studies, the question evolved: Why do we let them hate school? What could we do to mitigate hatred and sustain joy for learning? Fusing Differentiated Instruction (DI) with Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) can optimize the learning experience for each child and therefore increase joy, develop a positive sense of self, and increase the likelihood of nurturing lifelong learners.

I believe the Fusion is the opposite of traditional discipline and traditional classrooms. Teacher-centered classrooms are the traditional ones with rows of desks facing the stage for the teacher to profess upon, (De Jesus, 2012). The Fusion is student-centered in nature, as is DI and SEL on their own. SEL is the sensitive and nonacademic side of the classroom learning that traditional discipline neglects to acknowledge as valuable parts of early childhood education and development, especially when the forces of academic curriculum take their toll." The Fusion debunks these traditional and fixed minded attitudes by opening the lines of communication, listening to the deep and personal needs of your child and caring about them.
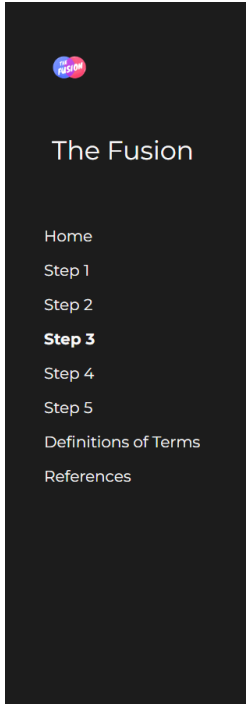
Relationships are the Foundation of a Successful Classroom

As I mentioned in the beginning, our job is to provide a service to children. The first priority of that service includes keeping children safe and protecting their well being. Keeping them safe includes meeting their needs, which means their emotional needs. Children must be attached to one adult for an optimal and healthy development. And if its not to their caregiver at home, the teacher falls in line and must rise to the challenge. If a child has learned there's no need for adults or has lived a life of chaos and unpredictability, they aren't going to feel safe in an orderly classroom where expectations are set by an adult, authoritative figure. Cheng et al. (2019) supports that personal connections are required to access the unique and complex characteristics of each student. Adults must make a positive attachment with a child and gain their trust before they can effectively open a child up to learning and risk-taking. This is where the social emotional learning comes in. Building a relationship is modeling and developing social-emotional skills.

The Fusion is essential to these relationships. As educators attempt to make a positive attachment, or a relationship, with each child, they often unknowingly differentiate for each child and simultaneously initiate SEL. What is required to build a relationship with one person, is not the same for another. Children are no different. There isn't going to be one formula for connecting with all

children, but there are two essential elements to guide you: SEL and DI. I believe differentiating your relationship with every child leads teachers to using the information they've gained during the development of their relationship to differentiate in other areas such as academics.

The Fusion Looks at the Bigger Picture

The Fusion is extremely important to the lives of your children and function of your classroom because it is an investment. Reaping the benefits of differentiating far outweighs the effort and fear of nonconformism. Differentiating supports a student-centered classroom and helps dismantle the traditional style of teacher-centered classrooms, (De Jesus, 2012). In traditional, the power and control are placed in the hands of a single teacher, and children remain externally motivated by rewards and approval, if at all. Placing some power in the hands of the student can result in empowered learners who are more engaged and motivated to meet their full potential.

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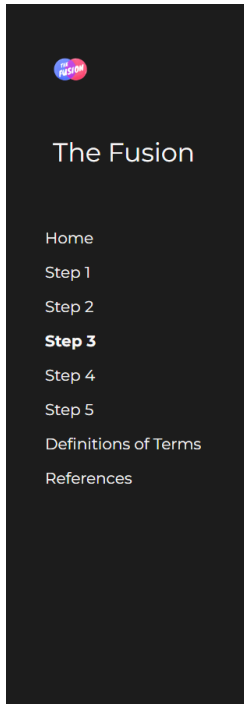
Typically, its around this point in the conversation when others start to list the obstacles to a differentiated utopia. Critics and stressed teachers alike are concerned that there isn't enough time and resources to give every child what they need, let alone what they want, (Sparks, 2015). But the Fusion attempts to explain that as long as you are making those connection and incorporating social emotional learning, you are already differentiating. For example, if you are noticing a high frequency of an inappropriate behavior among your students when they interact with one another on the playground and decide to make the next read aloud or SEL lesson based on your students' social challenges, then you are differentiating.

When you use the Fusion, you are sending the message that every student matters. You decrease the chance of enabling unmotivated students to disconnect as soon as they feel they don't belong. You increase the likelihood of motivating and nurturing lifelong learners when they feel they do belong.

Things just got real.
Click Step 4 to explore the application of the Fusion
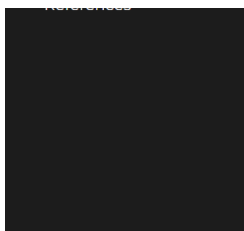
STEP 4

Step 4: How to do the Fusion

Page four is titled "Step 4: How to do the Fusion." Step 4 demonstrates how to apply *The Fusion* and what *The Fusion* looks like in a real classroom. I began this step by explaining that the presentation of my thesis thus far has always led with a discussion of DI first. However, in actively applying *The Fusion* in a classroom, SEL is intended to occur first. The distinction between presentation and application is significant to make because educators must first begin to build a relationship with students before educators can attempt to differentiate in other areas of the classroom, such as academics. Five numbered headings lead viewers through the progression of *The Fusion* by beginning with steps to take in the beginning of the school year, as the school

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year progresses, and as the student-teacher relationships progress. Heading 5 includes a final comic strip I created exemplifying the real-world use of both DI and SEL: *The Fusion.* The rest of the sections in Step 4 are dedicated to examples and nonexamples. First, I include a first-grade, literacy, science and SEL based lesson plan I created. A YouTube read-aloud of the book *How to Grow a Friend* by Sara Gillingham (2015) is linked below the lesson plan document. In the three-day lesson plan, a shared-reading is used to lay the foundation for a discussion of SEL skills, such as friendship, as well as needs of plants. These two themes remain parallel to one another throughout the entire book, therefore making this lesson a valuable vehicle for *The Fusion.* The themes of friendship in the book, *How to Grow a Friend* by Sara Gillingham (2015), easily house SEL while the theme of plants and gardening represents DI. Many educators note that DI must occur within academic subjects. It is the application of DI in SEL and SEL in DI that sets the fusion apart. *How to Grow a Friend* by Sara Gillingahm (2015) was chosen because it proved to be a suitable vehicle for both the social-emotional and the academic messages. By day three, the teacher is intended to use DI to differentiate each available activity based on what the teacher knows about their child, thus far. Multiple options for conducting this lesson are provided due to the uniqueness of each classroom that encourages teachers to tailor each experience. I also included nonexamples of *The Fusion* for preservice teachers to indicate what DI looks like without SEL and what SEL looks like without DI, because *The Fusion* is intended to encompass both DI and SEL.

STEP 4: HOW TO DO THE FUSION
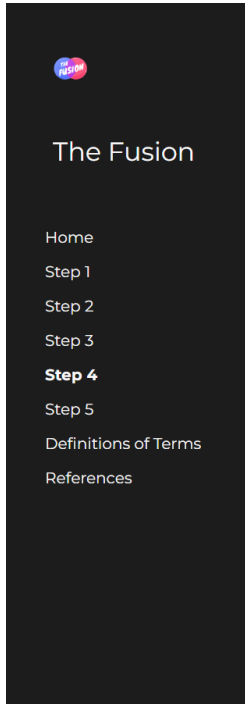
The Fusion

The Fusion can be implemented in any instructional type whether its explicit, indirect, inquiry-based instruction, or concept attainment instruction. However your classroom style is set up, the Fusion can take place at the start of the year to maximize its effectiveness. It is also important to note that The Fusion works in all aspects of the classroom: Academics, behavior and classroom management, nonacademic areas of development, and of course SEL.

In presenting my idea, I began by explaining DI and then SEL, such as on the home page, Step 1 and 2. However, in action, the Fusion begins with the SEL component. As justified in the previous step, it is the relationship element that is the best foot to start out on with anyone, especially a child in your care whom you're just getting to know. As a teacher, you never know what kind of background or classroom experience this child comes from, therefore building trust is going to lay the best foundation for the relationship between teacher and student. In the meantime, since its the beginning of the year, this would be the time to maintain the most structure. Although the differentiation element of the Fusion may be associated with more flexibility and blurred lines, predictable routine and stability is going to be imperative to showing the child that you are a reliable resource for them. It is once you have built that relationship and routine that you can then implement more personalized instruction and use DI.

You're almost there! By the end of this guide you'll be able to apply the Fusion in the Digital Escape Room on Step 5!

1. **Gain trust: Set the stage for safety, structure, and reliability. Show your students that you are a trustworthy adult authority figure in their lives who isn't going anywhere.**

Establish your classroom management system. Consistent routines and procedures are your friend. They will save you from chaos in the long run. These need to be implemented consistently though, and practiced in the beginning of the year through I do, we do, you do strategy (Charney, 2002). Set clear expectations and follow through. Doing so removes uncertainty and an element of surprise that might be uncomfortable or even triggering for some students. If they know what do to, how to do it, and when, you have a better chance at fostering autonomy in each student, which ignites confidence and esteem. Your strategies, even your discipline strategies, should circle back to the SEL aspect of your classroom because the early childhood focus is on the whole child first and foremost.

Morning meetings are a great time to set this impression. Everyday, start your day off on a joyful foot, spend time with the children, and invest in the classroom family that will inevitably form.

Greetings show children that you are reliable because it is a routine and you will always be there. However, making the greeting unique for each student is how you can bring in the differentiation piece of the Fusion, and set the stage for a relationship.

2. **Build a relationship: Now that you have their trust, that can serve as the foundation of the relationship you want to build with each individual student.**

Teacher talk: Use your language to show them that their voice is important to you. Differentiate your language for each child. While seemingly small, this effort actually makes all the difference to fusing DI and SEL. If you say "good job!" to every child after looking at their completed art work, it shows no effort or heart on your part. This is a significantly challenging task however, because anyone saying good job never has malicious intent. The point is that children pick up on the little things; more is caught than taught.

Take time to sit with the children, get at their level, and challenge yourself to refrain from school related subjects. See what you can laugh at together and see what you end up learning about their lives. Remember, all of these efforts are the imperative, social-emotional elements of the Fusion.

3. **Once you've gotten to know your students individually, your instruction can better reflect *who* your students are as people, learners, and a classroom as a whole.**

Tailor the content they learn to match their interests and experiences. Always meet standards, but let them serve as a baseline and a guide.

Tailor the instruction to match their temperaments. This is where anecdotal observations are going to best serve you.

- Be organized and take notes on each child: what they know, their interests, what you know about their home-life, their strengths (abilities and skills), and challenges. *This is data! Quality education is data-driven!* As the school year progresses, add to these notes by observing how they respond to instruction, subject areas, and how they perform in developmental areas.

Differentiate the actual SEL in your classroom by watching how they interact with one another and adapt to each other and the structure of the classroom.

Differentiate the actual SEL in your classroom by watching how they interact with one another and adapt to each other and the structure of the classroom.

- Here is an example: Rosie becomes disruptive during transition times by bothering other students, using materials from centers that are suppose to be put away, or taking the clean up supplies from the shelf. It looks like she needs a job. During transition times, or all throughout the day, every student will have a job. Maybe for your class this changes weekly or even less frequently than that. Delegating jobs provides an opportunity for autonomy and valued contribution. This builds confidence and sense of self. Jobs can be based greatly on abilities and interests. Therefore, you are differentiating based on their social emotional learning and who they are as people! Rosie clearly was capable of more responsibilities since she was ready for the next activity of the day before anyone else! That's why she was so available to disrupt the others.

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4. Ways to differentiate and tailor instruction:

Differentiating with the Fusion is much different than your regular differentiated education practices. While strategies you might learn from differentiated education or instruction might help you out, differentiation in the Fusion is ultimately one that uniquely draws upon SEL.

Consider formative assessment. I have often heard that teaching is the job of an actor, and I believe formative assessment is the best proof of this. Formative assessment is where your improv skills get the chance to shine. Through the semester you will implement plenty of speed bumps of formal and even standard assessment to hold yourself accountable for taking data on your students. This helps you learn about them, see what they know, but ultimately contributes to that differentiation piece of your instruction. Formative assessment is the chance to take in data even more frequently, and typically even more informally. You will use formative assessment to help you guide your instruction sometimes even as it happens. That's why it flexes your improve abilities. On the fly, you might notice that a third of your class is snoozing and you might need to make a change right then and there, regardless of how much time you put into the original lesson plan.

Allow for ample opportunities to respond. Consistently give your students a chance to share what they know, wonder, and want to know. This will contribute positively to your attempt at formative assessment. Student engagement will also increase significantly (Cheng at al., 2019). In turn, you're more likely to observe an accurate representation of what they know if they are positively engaged and enjoying themselves. Circling back to joy is a great way to hold yourself accountable to the Fusion. The relationships and learning experience matters to you and the student. That's what makes the Fusion different. So prompt your students, start dialogue, and show them that their contributions to the class matters. Ample opportunities to respond achieves just this.

5. Eventually, you'll be using the Fusion; You'll be differentiating based on your relationship and their SEL.

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5. Eventually, you'll be using the Fusion; You'll be differentiating based on your relationship and their SEL.

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Do you see the picture of the Fusion now? Do you see that what you learn about your students from SEL can benefit you when it comes time to differentiate in other cognitive areas? Do you see that when you build a relationship with each of your students, in the same breath, you are differentiating for each one of them?

Here's an Example:

Note that the DI portions of the lesson plan are highlighted in blue, the SEL portions of the lesson plan are highlighted in pink, and portions that exemplify both are highlighted in purple because that's where the Fusion happens most explicitly!

Also, a copy of the book is featured via a YouTube read-aloud below the lesson plan.

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***How to Grow a Friend* by Sara Gillingham: Three Day Lesson Plan**

Intended for First Grade

Florida first grade standards:

SC.1.L.14.2: Identify the major parts of plants, including stem, roots, leaves, and flowers.
  A. All plants and animals, including humans, are alike in some ways and different in others.
  B. All plants and animals, including humans, have internal parts and external structures that function to keep them alive and help them grow and reproduce.
  C. Humans can better understand the natural world through careful observation.
See CASEL framework for Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) standards:
https://casel.org/state-resource-center/frameworks-competencies-standards-and-guidelines/

Lesson Objectives

Day 1: On day one, students will participate orally in a shared reading and engage in class dialogue.
Day 2: Students will engage in class dialogue and, as a whole class, create a chart exemplifying the needs of plants and needs of a friend.
Day 3: By day three of this lesson, students will demonstrate understanding of what plants need to grow and what a friendship needs to grow by choosing from a plethora of creative activities to express their knowledge with.

Materials & Resources

Book: *How to Grow a Friend* by Sara Gillingham.
White board for chart or easel or sticky poster pads.
Materials for coloring and papers to color on.
Arts and craft project: White construction paper for seeds, pink construction paper for petals, green construction paper for leaves and the grass, darker green construction paper for stems, yellow paper construction paper for the center of the flower and the roots, and brown construction paper for the soil.

Day One

Introduce the book through the shared reading. This is where the teacher can implement literacy skills. Model appropriate shared reading strategies such as predicting, thinking aloud, modeling proper reading inflection, and use prompts to engage students in the story. Prompts include before, during, and after reading questions. Connect during questions to the lives of your students and what you see them struggle with or encounter between peers.

  ◉ Make observations about what you see and circle back to the SEL, such as "look at her face here. Her face is going like this. (model the face). What is she feeling?" In this example of teacher talk, the teacher is practicing identifying emotions which is an important foundational skill in SEL.

After the reading, discuss what we learned with a conversation to wrap up the read aloud. Tell them why it's important: "It's important to talk about friendship so that we learn how to make friends. We are going to be spending a lot of time together so we want to make friends with one another."

  ◉ Always remember to tailor your language based on your audience: Gifted students, English language learners, and students with exceptionalities. Maturity level of your students could also guide the direction or depth of your conversation.

Day Two

Another shared reading will take place, but this time with more intention. Tell them what's going to happen moving forward and let them be a part of the journey. "Yesterday we read How to Grow a Friend for the first time and we learned what a friend needs. But that's not the only thing the book talks about is it? We are also talking about plants aren't we? Today we are going to re-read How to Grow a Friend, but this time we are going to look out for the needs of plants, and friends."

  ◉ For some, this concept might be too abstract and that is why a re-reading takes place. The teacher should be doing a lot of reprahphing and making connections.

The teacher is going to guide another read aloud looking for the needs of a friend and the needs of a plant. Afterward, the teacher will guide the children in creating a chart. One side will say needs of a plant and the other side will say needs of a friend. As children begin to contribute their ideas and answers, model looking for text evidence by going back into the book. Here's an example of possible teacher talk during this activity: "Rosie said that friends need to swat bad things away just like how plants need bugs to get away. Didn't we see that somewhere? (turn back into the book). That's right, sometimes friends need to swat the bugs away together!"

  ◉ If applicable, just create a Venn Diagram depending on how far your students take their observations.
  ◉ Additionally, depending on your student's literacy skills, they can be the ones to come up

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ideas and answers, model looking for text evidence by going back into the book. Here's an example of possible teacher talk during this activity: "Rosie said that friends need to swat bad things away just like how plants need bugs to get away. Didn't we see that somewhere? (turn back into the book). That's right, sometimes friends need to swat the bugs away together!"

- If applicable, just create a Venn Diagram depending on how far your students take their observations.
- Additionally, depending on your student's literacy skills, they can be the ones to come up and write on the chart themselves.

Day Three

Practicing and applying the lesson takes place only after they've had exposure and instruction with the content. Now the teacher gets to differentiate for each child by giving them different activities to do to express their understanding. There are three ways a teacher could decide to do this. Again, it would depend on the students.

Option 1 is to have 3 centers for each activity and require rotation.

Option 2 is to assign certain students to only go to one center, according to their skills and interests.

Option 3 is to let the students choose their center themselves.

There are three centers and in order to facilitate these activities there would have to be a lot of preparation on the part of the teacher. There is a significant classroom management element here because substantial chaos could ensue if children are given the option to *choose* their activities and run free.

Activity 1 is drawing what they think a friend needs.

- DI opportunity: Prompt the child if they are struggling and ask the child who is very quickly done to elaborate and discuss the meaning.

Activity 2 is an arts and craft project.

- DI opportunity: Give a finished product for a student who might struggle with these types of activities and needs it.

Activity 3 is bringing a friend to the teacher to demonstrate what a friend needs with a play. At this center the children would practice and prepare a script together. This option has lots of SEL involved! Maybe you place the student in this group who is really strong in their interpersonal skills or may be significantly struggling. If there's a need to incorporate more literacy or academics, have them write their pre-prepared script.

Again, there's lots of room to differentiate based on what your students need, their strengths, and response preferences!

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Non-Examples:

THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF SEL WITHOUT THE DI

Trying to implement positive teacher talk by greeting the children, but for simplicity reasons, saying the same thing to each kid. Where's the differentiation?

THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF DI WITHOUT THE SEL

Getting so attached to the DI that is already implemented in the classroom, such as centers, that the preferences and interests of the children get ignored. Where's the engagement?

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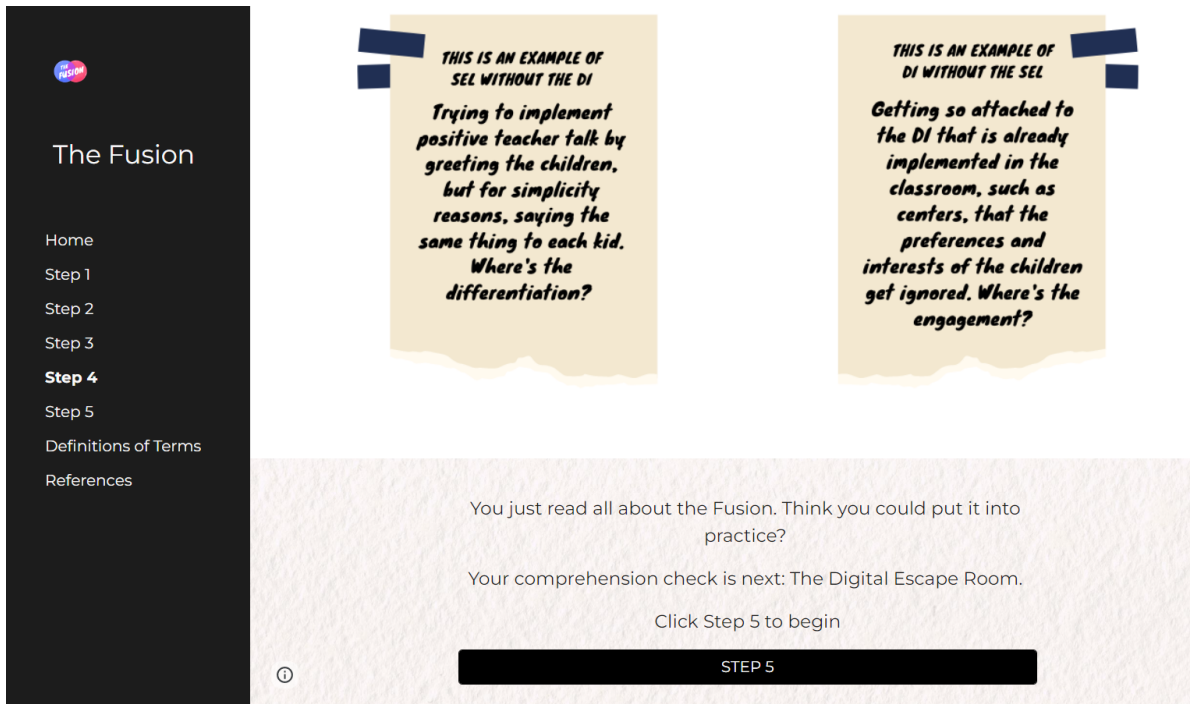
Step 5: Escaping the Traditional Classroom

Page 5 is titled "Step 5: Escaping the Traditional Classroom." Step 5 is the final step, comprehension check, and classroom simulation that takes the form of a digital escape room using Google Forms. Google Forms, Slides, and Sites are common ways that teachers have applied digital escape rooms to their classroom. A digital escape room provides an interactive element. Instead of being purely an assessment, as most commonly found in the teacher-student dynamic, this digital escape room is intended to be informative and challenging. The theme of the digital escape room plays on traditional classrooms, because the challenge is to apply the fusion and accomplish "escaping." Traditional education is an encompassing term referring to traditional philosophies, classrooms, and discipline. Traditional is meant to reflect education that values product over process, fixed mindsets, and is closed off to change. I heard this term used in my undergraduate class lectures and decided to use it in my thesis, because it was a term found

and validated in peer-reviewed journals, such as De Jesus (2012) and evidence-based practices, such as Becky Bailey's *Conscious Discipline* (2015).

STEP FIVE: ESCAPING THE TRADITIONAL CLASSROOM

Welcome to the Digital Escape Room!

Never done a digital escape room before?

Escape rooms were the trendy, recreational, simulation experiences that sparked rising popularity in the 2010's. Now, creative teacher minds translate those immersive experiences into their classrooms. Escape rooms have been recreated into the classroom but digital escape rooms have gained the most popularity due to their efficient creation, limitlessness, and the 2020 pandemic that forced so many into online learning. Participants use their imagination and pretend they've just walked into a festive space decorated with a theme or setting of the author's choosing. In education, teachers use escape rooms for all subject areas. The objective is that you are deeply immersed in the context of a topic and practice applying it through related challenges. Most challenges are meant to contribute to you successfully "escaping" the digital escape room. Up for the challenge?

In this simulation, you are placed in a classroom that needs your help! Prove to yourself that you can escape the traditional classroom, discipline, and instructional strategies by using the Fusion! You'll use the knowledge from the past 4 steps to help you solve each challenge and eventually escape the traditional classroom. Therefore, just as we would tell our students, feel free to go back into the steps to help you problem-solve if you need any advice from the Fusion!

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traditional classroom. Therefore, just as we would tell our students, feel free to
go back into the steps to help you problem-solve if you need any advice from
the Fusion!

The image carousel below shows what you might envision in a traditional classroom

Type your name in the google form below to enter the room and
get started!

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THE FUSION'S DIGITAL ESCAPE ROOM: Escaping the Traditional Classroom

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* Required

CHALLENGE #1

You are in the traditional discipline classroom where trying to reach students and meet objectives is like shooting in the dark, just hoping that the students are learning along the way. Use the fusion to turn the lights on.

HOW CAN YOU TURN THE LIGHTS ON? HERE'S A CLUE: https://www.jigsawplanet.com/?rc=play&pid=0684e7b4381a *   0 points

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YOU USED THE FUSION TO TURN ON THE LIGHT! By listening to your students, observing them, and seeing them for who they are, you'll be better equipped to reach them and meet objectives!

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CHALLENGE #2

Now that the lights are on, you see where you are. You're standing at the front of the room with 20 students in rows of desks staring back at you with blank faces. You need to escape being front and center, but where else could you go?

SELECT YOUR NEXT MOVE (YES, THERE ARE MULTIPLE RIGHT ANSWERS) *   0 points

○ Back of the room to observe.

○ I'm going to stay where I am! I'm the one who knows what I'm talking about anyway... not these kids. They need me!

○ Float around in between desks.

◉ Sit down next to a few students at a time.

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YES! That was a great move! Now you're free and your feet aren't stuck to the front of the room!

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CHALLENGE #3

As you patrol and survey the area you cant help notice how notice how quiet and still it is... quite unnatural. Children learn when they are talking, and enjoying themselves. How else are they going to develop their social-emotional skills? Select all the possible desk layouts that could change the atmosphere, help children to collaborate, and put their SEL into practice.

SEELCT ALL THE POSSIBLE DESK LAYOUTS THAT COULD CHANGE THE ATMOSPHERE, HELP   0 points
CHILDREN TO COLLABORATE, AND PUT THEIR SEL INTO PRACTICE. *

The Fusion

SEELCT ALL THE POSSIBLE DESK LAYOUTS THAT COULD CHANGE THE ATMOSPHERE, HELP   0 points
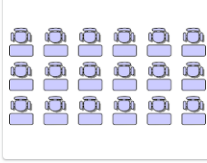CHILDREN TO COLLABORATE, AND PUT THEIR SEL INTO PRACTICE. *

☑ I utilize stations and centers the most!
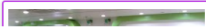

☑ Group seating is best for collaborative learning!

☑ I like unconventional classrooms with flexible seating!

☐ There's nothing wrong with rows of desks and quiet kids. Silence makes my job easier. If they are in their own island, they work harder and don't bother anyone else.
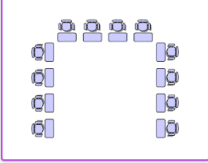
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I also like an unconventional styled classroom but incorporating digital learning easily differentiates instruction.

Open concepts are great for discussions and I feel like were all on the same team!

Paired Learning Works best for my classroom!

We probably wont ever need desks.

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You differentiated your classroom layout to foster collaboration and openness! This will positively affect your classroom management, atmosphere, and overall SEL.

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CHALLENGE #4

You notice a student quite still, looking around, as if they're waiting for something. He has completed the assigned task and has nothing to do. Help him escape his boredom before he decides to do something else with his free time and disrupt the class.

SELECT YOUR NEXT MOVE TO UNLOCK POTENTIAL! (YES, THERE ARE MULTIPLE RIGHT ANSWERS) *   0 points

○ Give him more of the same work to keep him busy. You know... busy work.

○ He could work on his assigned classroom job

○ I could sit down with him and ask him more about his work while using higher-order-thinking strategies toward the topic at hand.

● Turn back the clock: I would go back in time and schedule multiple steps, stations, or centers for this activity so that there are differentiated options for those who need extra time, extra assistance, or extra challenge

○ Truthfully, I don't have to time to address him. If he understands the topic enough to have completed the task, that's good enough for me

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That was a great way to differentiate for this student based on their needs! You read their emotions, saw that they needed more, and sprung into action!

Sometimes it doesn't have to be at the expense of other kids, or your time. You learned that there are efficient ways to elevate learning in either your pre-planning or simply by keeping tabs on all your students!

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CHALLENGE #5

You have almost completely escaped traditional discipline but your final task is the biggest yet. Time to build a lesson. But how? The only way to know is to know your students.

Taking a look at your roster, you notice that in this kindergarten classroom, only 5 of them have ever had preschool or daycare experiences. This means not many have been in social settings with equal expectations placed on themselves and another child.

Child One doesn't even have peers to socialize with outside of school and therefore isn't used to sharing.

Child Two doesn't have the same grasp on concepts of print or phonological awareness that his peers does.

Finally, Child Three struggles with socializing as well, but in a very different way and comes across shy, doesn't talk much, and wont engage.

How can you address all of these struggles?

Select an element of an activity to address Child One's needs *   0 points

- ⦿ Practice turn taking
- ◯ Give every single child an equal amount of toys and materials

Select an element of an activity to address Child Two's needs *   0 points

- ⦿ Facilitate shared readings with the teacher
- ◯ Implement technology

Select an element of an activity to address Child Three's needs *   0 points

- ⦿ Gamify the classroom by turning lesson plans, routines, or academic subjects into team games
- ◯ Assign buddies to stay with each others side at all times of the day

Which activity or lesson plan will best address everyone's challenges *   0 points

- ⦿ Implement morning meeting where everyone gets a chance to share about themselves with a turn taking talking stick and end with a shared reading on a relevant topic
- ◯ Put on a skit to practice turn taking where everyone gets a role to speak
- ◯ Practice holding hands in line so everyone makes a friend and no one gets lost

60

YOU DID IT! You just escaped the traditional classroom by practicing some applications of the fusion.

Now that you have the fusion, you'll never go back to the traditional classroom.

Back   **Submit**   Clear form

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

The Fusion

Home
Step 1
Step 2
Step 3
Step 4
Step 5
Definitions of Terms
References

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CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

This thesis introduces a novel application of the fusion between Differentiated Instruction (DI) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) as a needed and reciprocal relationship in the early childhood classroom. DI is an approach to teaching that aims to tailor the teacher's instruction to the individual needs of each child. Instruction, content, and students' expression of knowledge can each be differentiated. Differentiation itself is a vast topic that begs to be narrowed and balanced. Some teachers experience obstacles to differentiation or struggle to efficiently differentiate their classroom. In an attempt to solve this phenomenon, this thesis explored DI and specifically its pairing with SEL. SEL refers to any instruction that pertains to the child's social development, emotional development, identity, sense of self, self-regulation, and self-control. This thesis examined how to fuse these two vital and valid approaches of the classroom in order to benefit and maximize our early childhood students' potential. In order to provide important information on how to fuse DI and SEL for the benefit of their future students, this thesis provides a thorough review of related research. Further, this thesis aids the execution of differentiation in the early childhood classroom by fusing DI with SEL. Based on the needs identified by the research literature, this thesis synthesized information to create a website with Google Sites to share information and steps to preservice teachers on how to fuse DI and SEL. The website features a comprehensive classroom simulation based on the fusion of DI and SEL which takes the form of a digital escape room. Results emphasize how DI is enhanced through SEL materials and experiences, and how SEL can enhance ways to differentiate so as to boost student learning.

The resulting product of this thesis was an application of all I learned by creating a website to guide preservice teachers in their understanding of how to perform the fusion in their

future classrooms. The first page includes a homepage introducing my thesis, the second page begins the guided journey to applying the fusion with Step 1, the third page is Step 2 and explains the essential elements of the fusion, DI and SEL, the fourth page is Step 3 which shows preservice teachers the significance of the fusion, the fifth page is Step 4 where I demonstrate how to apply the fusion in the classroom, and finally the sixth page is Step Five which features the digital escape room comprehension check.

Limitations of Research and Implications for Future Research

The limitations of my own research offer inspiration for future research. The field of education could be best served with further research regarding the type of resources, mediums, or platforms that reach current teachers most effectively. Stepping into the lives of current in-service educators who struggle with either DI or SEL could shine the most light on these approaches and the current state of our field as a whole. When I started this thesis, my research question was how to ensure learning for young students. I wanted to gather data from real classrooms with real children, but the time limitations of an undergraduate thesis did not allow for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to occur. Future research should include teacher interviews, classroom observations, and an in-person experimentation that tests and applies the fusion. Permission from the IRB was the most significant limitation to my research, as well as obstacles due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaining IRB approval and finding a school site who would give permission required significantly more time that exceeded my time frame and would have not allowed me to meet the timeline and deadlines. Therefore, time proved to be an additional limitation.

The professionals who advised me during my research process foreshadowed that while I would hypothesize a research question or two, the creation of my thesis would ultimately lead to an abundance of additional queries. At times, this made me feel the research would never end, but I have come to the consensus that these additional queries are valuable inquiries to follow up in future research. The field of education is an innovative and progressive one and as such inquisition is imperative to this field's evolution and growth.

As a result of my thesis, I conclude that future research ought to investigate the specific obstacles that criticisms of DI, or failed attempts of DI, refer to, such as time and resources, (Sparks, 2015). This could potentially take the form of interdisciplinary research in studying policy and administration. Educational leadership or state level standards, policies, and regulations are important to study because they are the obstacles the critics of DI refer to (Sparks, 2015). Diving deeper to study and quantify the problems in our field such as lack of resources, lack of time, and lack of support is important future research that can only lead the field to more insights and more effective teaching and learning. In continuing to research these topics such as DI and SEL, future research should focus on the potential these approaches have to positively affect and boost the learning of all students. Extending this future research into communities such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students and families, and student populations with exceptionalities.

Reflection and Educational Significance

Exploring the fusion between DI and SEL was meant to respond to current research that both condoned and complained about DI. In this way, I envisioned my thesis as an exploration with a possible solution. The fusion serves as a solution to the obstacles of DI not by eliminating

or erasing the problems, but rather by attempting to influence the mindsets of preservice teachers before they enter into the trials of teaching. In other words, I created a new place for DI to fit, or function, rather than reinventing DI as a whole. SEL can be thought of as the new place for DI to more effectively operate or the complementary partner to DI. Introducing their reciprocal relationship was meant to be a proactive measure to prevent reactive teaching through an online guide to achieving the fusion my thesis created.

Given the research that did praise DI, such as Kragler and Sylvester (2013), I felt there was enough room in the professional literature to praise and infuse the teaching strategies from my own favorite teaching approaches, such as SEL. Being that SEL is imperative to development in the field of Early Childhood Development and Education, I felt sufficiently well-versed to be able to apply SEL, while I wanted to take on the challenge to learn and implement DI. Reading what empirical research had to say on the matter, which is that DI is a vast topic that begs to be narrowed (Moosa & Shareefa, 2020). As a result, fusing these two teaching approaches became the kernel for a rationale for the fusion of maximizing the benefits of both DI and SEL and applying them more efficiently and effectively. The conclusion that this thesis and its fusion can become a particularly efficient and effective application of DI and SEL best armors this thesis up against the criticism of DI.

In addressing the educational significance of my thesis, I was able to answer, at least in part, the question from my personal rationale "why do children come to hate learning?" and "why do we let them?" I discovered that the obstacles communicated by criticisms of DI, such as Sparks (2015), enable this phenomenon. I learned that real, empirical research from McElwain and Swartz (2012), Cheng et al. (2019), Degotardi et al. (2019), and Dresser and Sugishita (2019) support that the human element of the learning experience is the most crucial answer to

this hypothesis while simultaneously being the problem. Through the fusion, DI and SEL play the role of the vehicle by which to prevent children from falling out of love with learning as well as the vehicle to ensure that the institution of schooling as a whole is attending to the whole child, heart and brain. Children must be seen and heard which can be done best by initiating SEL and maintaining relationships. Then, the educator can prove that they have indeed heard and seen the students by differentiating and tailoring the education. And since research from Degotardi et al. (2019) and McElwain and Swartz (2012) place specific emphasis on the teacher's social skills, emotional skills, and emotional state, preservice or not, it is up to the teacher to be the role model, lead relationship building, and assess and read their students. In Chapter One, at the beginning of my research, I stated "Differentiating, in terms of education, is a practice that refers to tailoring what a student learns to how they learn." Now that my thesis is concluded, I would amend this by defining DI, in the context of the Fusion, being a practice that tailors what a student learns to *who they are,* through social emotional pursuits.

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