Opportunities, Challenges and Benefits of Group Interventions in Schools During COVID-19 Social Distancing

A Training Program and Its Outcomes and Recommendations

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The author recommends listening to "Wind of Change" by the Scorpions before reading this article.

The world is closing in
Did you ever think
That we could be so close, like brothers
The future's in the air
I can feel it everywhere
Blowing with the wind of change

Take me to the magic of the moment
On a glory night
Where the children of tomorrow
share their dreams
With you and me

Lyrics by Klaus Meine

Introduction

The Trend of Future-Oriented Pedagogy

Traditional teaching and learning methods are transitioning toward personalization, which incorporates each student's needs, potential and capabilities, as well as their interests. Achieving the goal of individualization is integrated into the process in the program titled Future Thinking and Future-Oriented Pedagogy, which consists of six key principles that the education system must focus on to succeed: personalization, collaboration, informality, glocalism, change and integration (The Pedagogical Administration | Israeli Ministry of Education, 2018).

COVID-19 Pandemic: Psychological Impact

In January 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) predicted that the novel coronavirus pandemic would have a major psychological impact on people throughout the world, stating: "In public mental health terms, the main psychological impact to date is elevated rates of stress or anxiety." (Mental health and COVID-19, 2020).

In March 2020, the WHO conveyed four recommendations to children's caregivers:

1. Help children find positive ways to express feelings in a safe and supportive environment.
2. Keep children close to their parents and family.
3. Maintain familiar routines in daily life. Encourage children to continue to play and socialize with others.
4. Discuss COVID-19 with your children in an honest and age-appropriate way. Children will observe adults' behaviors and emotions for cues on how to manage their own emotions during difficult times (Mental health and psychosocial considerations during the COVID-19 outbreak, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic caught the Israeli educational system in the midst of the transition to personalization. The volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) caused by the coronavirus now requires that we redefine and evolve our strategies and methods in order to assist students and teachers in enduring the pandemic's broad, life-altering social and emotional effects.

Moreover, the pandemic and its far-reaching consequences forced a sudden shift to online group interventions, providing an opportunity to practice them without preparation, gather information and reflect about what happened during the intervention meetings and analyze their outcomes.

Group Interventions in Schools

"Group therapy interventions refer to a format of several individuals taking part in a psychological intervention aimed at helping them change or deal with a long-lasting problem they are encountering, guided by a therapist or counselor." (Gidron, 2013).

Background, Model and Programs

The innovative **Synchronous Growth Model**: Addressing Students' Developmental Needs while Broadening Teachers' Educational Skills (Yaniv, 2019) was developed using a theoretical framework constructed of four pillars:

- Humanistic education as the guiding philosophy
- Pedagogy and practices
- The biopsychosocial approach
- Bio-behavioral synchrony and social and emotional learning (SEL)

The model consists of two modules: a student-centered module and teacher-focused module.

Integrating SEL into everyday class activities can broaden teachers' educational skills and effectiveness. Therefore, the first course teaching this approach titled: **Group-Facilitator Certification Course in the Israeli Education System** was offered to experienced teachers in their sabbatical year by the Israeli Ministry of Education's Central Teacher Training School in school year 2019-2020.

Article objectives

The objectives of this article are:

- To recommend that education systems redefine teaching strategies and methods to include a psychoeducational approach that empowers teachers to integrate social emotional learning (SEL) into their routine instruction
- To share the experiences of teaching the course and supervising twenty-two teachers in conducting group intervention meetings for students across sixteen groups
- To describe the changes that the program underwent due to the need to shift to blended learning, which combines online and face-to-face methods (Hodges et al., 2020) because of the need to social distance and to obtain teacher and student feedback on the process

Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, program administrators expected that the outcomes of implementing the program would be reflected in student and teacher well-being. The anticipation was that both students and teachers would better understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make smart, practical decisions. The administrators decided to continue the program online during lockdown in order to maintain the routine, but did not expect to achieve the program's goals.

Practical Teacher-Training Program for Group Facilitators

The Group-Facilitator Certification Course consisted of three sections:

1. Group counseling and intervention with children and adolescents: Practical and theory-based instruction using supportive-expressive group therapy to promote child and

adolescent psychological wellness through school-based group counseling (Shechtman, 2010), social and emotional learning, the Synchronous Growth Model and authoritative teaching strategies

2. Group meetings to undergo, participate in and gain experience in group counseling and to achieve personal growth
3. Supervised instruction on setting up and managing student intervention groups: Defining group goals, choosing techniques, preparing materials, scheduling and conducting group meetings and raising discussion topics (See the Group Instruction Supervision Navigator in Figure 1 – a key tool for trainee supervision), accompanied by reflective writing

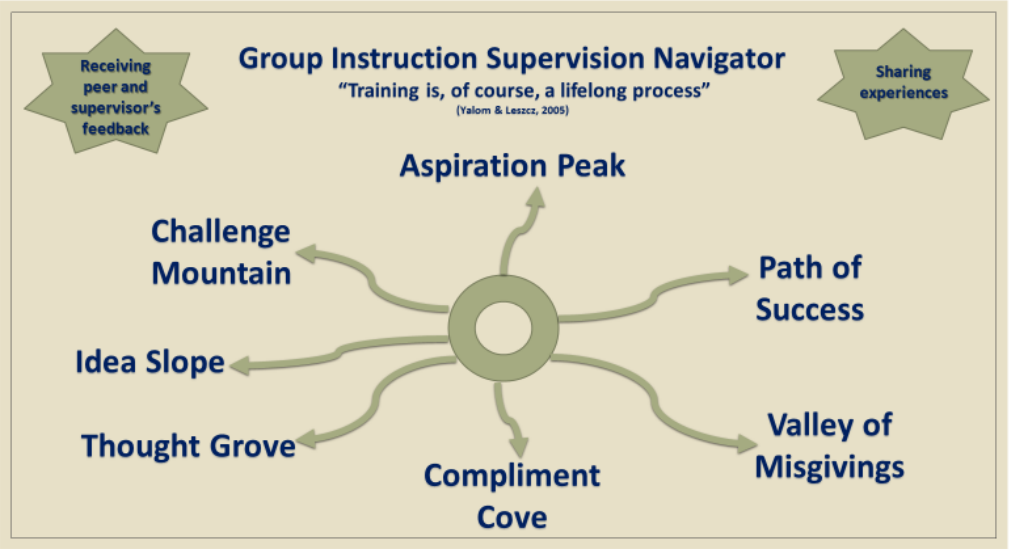

Figure 1: The Group Instruction Supervision Navigator. This core tool guided trainees in discussing their experiences with setting up student intervention meetings.

The Synchronous Growth Model

The Synchronous Growth Model intertwines psychopedagogy and neuropedagogy, helping develop both student and teacher skills by recognizing the **multi-faceted synchrony** between them. In addition to social and emotional interventions for students, the model incorporates personal, professional and experiential development for teachers to practice psychoeducational skills and enhance their competencies.

The Student-Focused Module

The Student-Focused Module is a group intervention program, which was assessed in a pilot study. Fifteen students (ages 15-18) who needed monitoring for issues such as attendance problems, low achievement or a dysfunctional family of origin participated in eight weekly 90-minute student group meetings. The group moderator raised a variety of topics that were of interest and concern to typical adolescents. The moderator encouraged discussion, gave support and suggested solutions in a candid, non-judgmental environment. Students demonstrated openness to participate in these forums, whose topics covered needs universal to students in this age group.

The expected outcomes of this all-encompassing approach were that students would receive support to perform well emotionally, cognitively, socially and physically. Students would mature and develop healthy social-emotional competence required for scholastic performance. Interim results of the student intervention pilot study showed initial success in this program module (Figure 2Figure 2) (Yaniv, 2011).

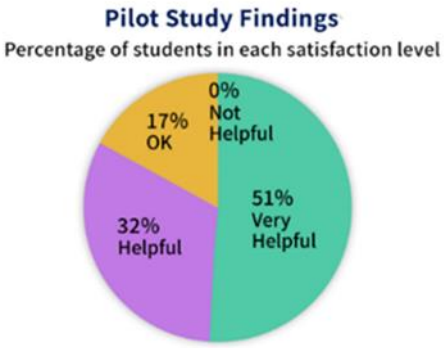

Figure 2: Study outcomes from the Student-Focused Module, reflecting how helpful the program was to students.

The Four-Wheel Student Support Model

This model (Figure 3) presents the holistic observation approach to child development. Each wheel represents a key human development area in which children are anticipated to mature and gain skills. Although each individual develops differently, children are expected to develop a harmonious balance in all areas. Children's developmental delays in one or more areas may cause deficiencies in that particular area and imbalance in the whole development process (Allen & Kelly, 2015).

Moreover, the process of growth and development is interdependent across the four areas; each area affects the others. While synchronous development by chronological age is theoretical, children will always experience slight delays, which may cause low performance in specific areas. A child's major retardation or dysfunctional conduct need to catch teachers' attention in order to be evaluated and treated.

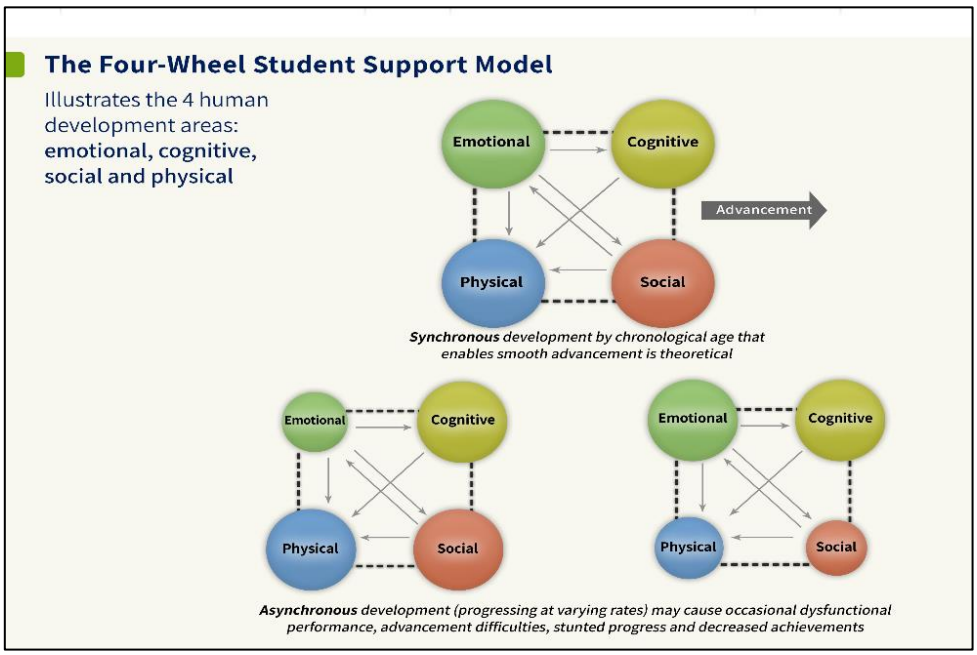

Figure 3: The Four-Wheel Student Support Model, which illustrates four human development areas: emotional, cognitive, social and physical.

The Teachers' Style Module

Expanding teachers' competencies in integrating social-emotional learning into their practices requires a **holistic observation** of their teaching strategies and their impact on students.

Authoritative Teaching Strategies

In the present day, teachers are defined as children's **primary caregivers** (Kalembo et al., 2018). Therefore, they are expected to take personal responsibility for students' overall well-being.

The Teacher's Style Model (Figure 4), based on Baumrind's (1991) authoritative parenting style, represents authoritative teaching, emphasizing teacher-student relationship quality, classroom climate, students' scholastic performance and student well-being. The five dimensions of adult-child educational relationships: demandingness, responsiveness, control, warmth and supportiveness, were proven to improve students' academic achievements and self-regulation and enhance their social functioning.

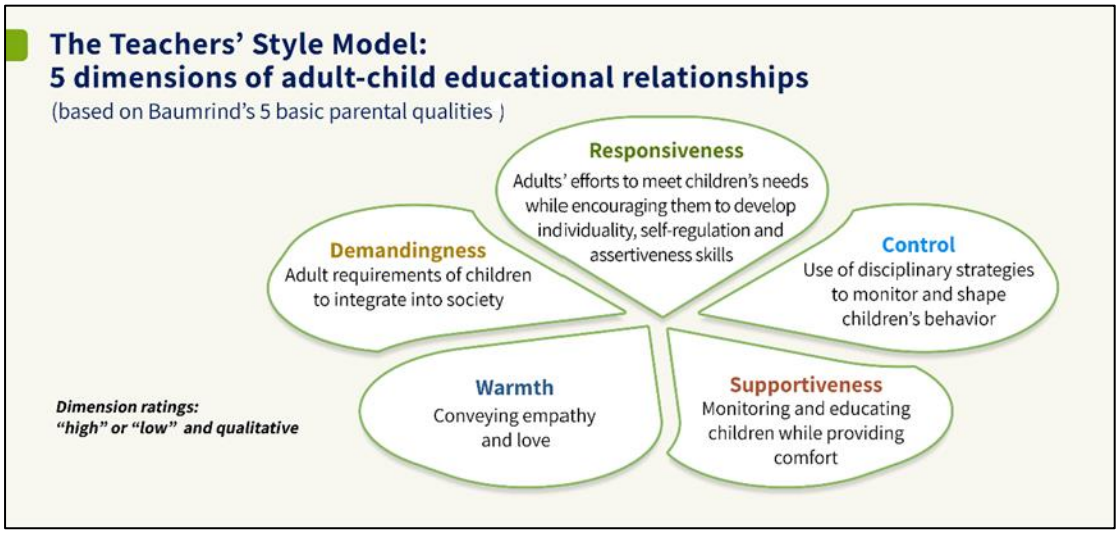

Figure 4: The teacher's style model outlines the five dimensions of adult-child educational relationships

The Shift to Online Study

Group-Facilitator Training Program

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, one-third of the group-facilitator training program took place virtually. Fortunately, one month before the Israeli lockdown, the group conducted an asynchronous meeting online. This set the groundwork for shifting to distance learning, including dynamic participation in virtual group meetings. The course kept its original structure, with some modifications for teachers to study in remote environments and learn more independently while contending with a more extensive array of online resources.

It was challenging for the teachers to study while remaining in lockdown because some of the trainees were parents to young children who needed to be supervised. To accommodate this situation, each class day began with an invitation for the children to participate in videoconference-based play on their parent's screen. The group got to know the children by singing together and practicing breathing and other calming strategies for kids. After that morning kick-off, most of the children were ready to play independently of their parents, and the group meeting began.

If one needs to demonstrate the implementation of supportive-expressive group therapy, group meetings under a stay-at-home order are the right setting. The trainees raised and discussed various real-life concerns such as caring for elderly parents, challenging financial situations, vocational problems and health issues. Participating in group meetings demonstrated the power of the group and the advantages of being a group member in times when tension and anxiety are on the rise.

The theoretical portion of the program was modified in content and structure. Issues such as functioning in uncertainty, dealing with stress and anxiety, social isolation and regressive behaviors were added to the curriculum. Assignments were completed in small groups with online references provided as resources. The coursework alternated between synchronous and asynchronous. The instructor observed that some trainees were online at all times, some took frequent breaks, some unexpectedly became leaders, while others hid behind their screens. Online classes were scheduled and conducted according to trainees' availability and sometimes lasted longer than planned.

Unfortunately, for the course's online period, the instructors and trainees did not modify the group contract and ground rules, expectations, roles or responsibilities such as appropriate participant settings, interruptions and requesting flexibility. Therefore, aside from updating meeting hours to accommodate child- and elder-care schedules, each participant felt free to determine his/her presence and participation individually, which required instructors and trainees to constantly adapt.

Student Intervention Groups

As part of the Group-Facilitator Training Course, 150 students (ages 5-13) from across the country were assigned to 16 local intervention groups for 10 face-to-face group intervention meetings. The course was underway when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, which threatened the continuation of group meetings.

The group facilitators discussed options for conducting the course during lockdown, and the majority decided to continue the meetings online. The facilitators raised concerns such as whether students from under-resourced communities could communicate adequately online, how to maintain the attention of students with special needs and how to reframe group goals.

The shift to online group meetings was successful. Most of the students participated in the group meetings; activities were designed for online environments; and group goals were modified from enhancing personal skills to addressing situations caused by the lockdown and uncertainty – focusing on relaxation, stress relief and anxiety reduction. For some students, this period was an opportunity to flourish as they took upon themselves roles in organizing the meetings and reminding their peers to attend meetings on time.

Data Collection for Process Evaluation

Evaluation is integrated into group intervention programs (Karst & Van Hecke, 2012). Although research on converting to online meetings was not planned, enough data was gathered to assess **the process as a whole**.

The information below is based on group facilitator records, course-instructor documentation including videotaped virtual meetings (via Zoom) and questionnaires that combined quantitative and qualitative assessments and analyses.

Questionnaires: Post-group surveys were administered to both facilitator-course participants and students featuring:

- 12 open-ended questions, including feedback on group participation
- A 10-statement Likert-type scale survey requesting respondent ratings from "not at all" to "very much"

Three parameters were defined for the questionnaires:

- **Attendance** in group meetings
- **Performance** measured in self-expression and participation in group activities
- **Level of satisfaction** in terms of positive feelings and achievement of personal goals

A questionnaire was also administered to the students' parents to obtain their feedback on their child's motivation to attend group meetings and their perception of changes in their children's coping skills and behavior.

Online Group Interventions: Assessment and Reflection

Although the assessment evaluated the educational process as a whole, the online group intervention meetings were addressed explicitly in order to capture input on the consequences of the pandemic's unpredictable restrictions on group meetings.

In the group counselling sessions of the group-facilitator course, the **attendance rate** was 95% (most absences were due to consequences of COVID-19). Participants described the weekly meetings as "an island of sanity" during the difficult period of lockdown and restrictions.

The student-meeting attendance rate was 85%. Most participants showed up to meetings on time (tardiness was due at times to poor connectivity). Yet, while dropouts are common in face-to-face programs, no students dropped out of the online program.

Performance: Group-member roles are well described in face-to-face psychotherapy meetings (Rutan et al., 2007). Some participants performed differently while meeting online than when face to face. Some commented that the virtual environment enabled them to interact within the group while others argued that the setting was restrictive. The course evaluators believed that these behaviors were influenced by personal characteristics such as openness and intimidation. Moreover, as described earlier, online group meetings enabled individuals to enhance their social skills to better engage in the process.

Satisfaction: The level of participant satisfaction in group interventions is important for understanding intervention efficacy (Oei & Green, 2008). Therefore, as part of the practice protocol, the course instructors recommended that group facilitators raise students' awareness of their feelings and what influenced changes in their moods.

At the end of each meeting, participants were asked to rate their moods before and at the end of each meeting on a scale of one (bad mood) to ten (great mood). They were also encouraged to explain what influenced their feelings (positively or negatively). In most cases, ratings showed that participant feelings improved during the meeting, and they expressed satisfaction in the progress they made. These results suggest that the online group activities and atmosphere enabled them to acquire new skills.

This feedback and data shed light on the effectiveness and benefits of continuing group interventions online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Group-Facilitator Certification Course Trainee's Testimonial

Insights into the Group Process

The following feedback was written by N. as part of her final Group-Facilitator Certification Course assignment. N. is an experienced special education teacher at a rural elementary school in Israel's central district. N. gave her consent to share her course feedback.

"The group itself served as a source of support, advice and assistance for me. Throughout the year, the atmosphere between the participants was pleasant; there was a sense of acceptance, inclusion, non-judgment and cohesion. An intimacy was created that allowed us to share feelings and personal experiences, even when we could not meet face to face, when we met instead at a distance via Zoom. The personal rapport shared among group members elicited responses of support, and the expression of support encouraged the expression of deeper emotions.

"In addition, group members formed interpersonal connections even outside the meetings themselves, which united the group even more. The members of the group were always ready to help and support, whether with materials, tools, ideas, or by listening, giving good advice and asking questions that stimulated additional thoughts. A number of instances also arose in which group members raised objections or had outbursts, not always in a very respectful manner. But these instances were rarer, and they provoked dialogue, and usually participants came to an understanding. The group members' personal stories contributed very personally to my experience, as more than once, I identified closely with the feelings raised, and this evoked many thoughts in me and led to personal insights. The fact that we were all educators was excellent because I could identify with the group members and see myself in the dilemmas and problems that arose.

"I believe I also contributed to the group myself, in attending meetings, initiating collaborations and participating in conversations and discourse, both in the discussion circle and in the more theoretical components. In addition, group member participation in parts of the supervision contributed greatly, as did the way that the group members related, provided advice and raised ideas in the various group forums.
"And in addition to all this input, of course, a very large part of the experience success was due to the facilitator herself; she was very present, attentive, inclusive and pleasant, and at the same time, she set boundaries for us, and most of all, made us feel confident. I'm a little disappointed that I didn't get to lead any activity in the group; I may have been a little apprehensive about this role, and I think it could have been an important and helpful experience for me."

The Process of Change: The Story of C.

The following is a case summary of C., who was a participant in one of the student intervention groups. No further details are provided in order to protect his identity.

C. was a twelve-year-old boy, the youngest of three siblings in his family, living in a community with medium-high socioeconomic status. C. arrived at the intake meeting with his mother; he appeared calm and was very cooperative. Both C. and his mother said that at home everything was OK, yet, at school, things were not going well. C. was not actively studying any subject; he was not disciplined and had no social connections. This situation lasted for months. C. was working individually with an art therapist. He liked working with her, yet, he was not making academic or social progress at school.

During the first phase of the three-phase of the program's group sessions, C. was aggressive toward his fellow students; he did not engage in group activities and misbehaved. In the second phase of the program, during the lockdown, the curriculum focused on relaxation techniques, stress relief and anxiety reduction skills. Beginning in this phase, the facilitators perceived that C.'s attitude and behavior were starting to change. C. attended online meetings nearly regularly. He enjoyed showing the group his room decor and sharing his hobbies. At times, C. would roleplay with puppets and hide behind his screen. The group tolerated and accepted his behaviors, and never interrupted him.

During the last phase of the group meetings, the return to face-to-face get-togethers, C. was completely integrated into the group. In the final group meeting, one member bestowed upon C. "the most significantly improved student" award. In his final program feedback questionnaire, C. wrote: "Before I joined the group, I felt like it would be as boring as groups always are. The group helped me understand to respect adults. I'm sad to stop the sessions because I always want that extra hour of fun." In answering a question about the group meetings coming to an end, C. replied: "Who said I want them to end? These days, I am feeling calm."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Group interventions are very empowering forces. For teachers, they are a tool for breaking down barriers toward life-changing opportunities. For children, they build confidence to open doors to better lives.

The Group-Facilitator Training Program, based on a humanistic philosophy and values, guides teachers' practices through the inclusive Synchronous Growth Model toward personalization, the core principle of Future-Oriented Pedagogy.

Trainees achieved competence and emotional literacy through group interventions that employed the supportive-expressive group counseling approach.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forced program administrators to integrate between Future-Oriented Pedagogy and facing the demands of "here and now." Although not predicted, the COVID-19 outbreak gave administrators the opportunity to shift to "emergency education mode" and observe, in real time, the ramifications on groups undergoing interventions.

Despite the lack of preparation and the need to modify goals, blended learning triggered changes in teacher and student emotions and behaviors that were meaningful and successful (see: Trainee's Testimonial: Insights into the Group Process and the Process of Change: The Story of C.).

This article does not attempt to distinguish between or compare online learning to face-to-face instruction. Yet, this particular experience of shifting to emergency remote teaching was proven feasible and challenges the stigma that online learning is lower quality than face-to-face learning (Hodges et al., 2020). This debate will likely rage on in the 2020-2021 school year.

The challenges of the pandemic, including VUCA, for families and children worldwide will continue; therefore, its force cannot be ignored. The WHO predicts that the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have psychological impact, with mental health crises caused by increasing depression and anxiety if substantial investments in mental health services are not made (*Substantial investment needed to avert mental health crisis*, 2020). Households will continue to be deeply affected, and due to their vulnerability to emotional and behavioral disorders, children and adolescents will be at risk and deserving of special attention and care on a daily basis. Therefore, educational counselors are making targeted recommendations to psychology and education policymakers, teachers and parents. Together, children's **primary caregivers** – both teachers and parents – should monitor children's well-being carefully and intensively. **Both** are expected to take joint responsibility and collaborate in raising their own self-awareness to emotions and behaviors, managing stress and anxiety, establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding relationships (including empathizing with others) and making wise and productive decisions (What is SEL?, 2020). For this purpose, based on teacher input and feedback, the program's educational counselor (who is the course developer and instructor) is currently developing "Better Together," the Teacher-Parent Partnership Course, to be taught in the future.

It is important to emphasize that the Group-Facilitator Training Program described in this article requires that the educational system, teachers and families reframe teachers' roles and expand teachers' professional development to help them acquire additional competencies and develop group intervention skills to be applied day to day. Additionally, teachers' professional development and teacher education and certification programs should include group facilitation, preventive educational programs and computer literacy.

To conclude this paper's message, the author recommends reading Positive Education: Positive Psychology and Classroom Interventions, a seminal article by Seligman et al. (2009), which states, "Positive education is defined as education for both traditional skills and for happiness. The high prevalence worldwide of depression among young people, the small rise in life satisfaction, and the synergy between learning and positive emotion all argue that the skills for happiness should be taught in school."

Contrary to the term, "social distancing," which was and still is a tool for maintaining physical distance, the author suggests adopting the term "maintaining friendships while physically distancing," or, as emphasized in Metallica's song, "Nothing Else Matters": "So close, no matter how far…"

Listening to "Nothing Else Matters" will take on even deeper meaning during these challenging times. Enjoy!

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