

Impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Programmes on Emotional Intelligence and Academic Achievements of Students

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ABSTRACT

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs have become essential in fostering holistic child development by enhancing self-awareness, emotional regulation, social skills, and responsible decision-making. These competencies are critical for academic success, healthy relationships, and overall well-being. This study explores the implementation of SEL programs at Hibiscus International School in Malaysia, focusing on Years 1 through 6. Educators observed significant benefits, including improved emotional intelligence, classroom behaviour, and student engagement. However, challenges such as limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient training hinder effective implementation. Through qualitative interviews with teachers, this research identifies key themes, including the impact of SEL on emotional intelligence and academic performance, the role of teacher-student relationships, and the structural barriers to success. Findings highlight the need for systemic support, including professional development, resource allocation, and leadership commitment, to optimize SEL outcomes. This study underscores the critical role of SEL in nurturing well-rounded individuals equipped for academic and life success.

Keywords: Social and emotional learning (SEL), Emotional intelligence, Holistic education

INTRODUCTION

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes are now an integral part of instructional practices for whole child development. The main objectives of SEL are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills and responsible decision making as key competencies. These abilities are important for children because they help them to control their emotions, build healthy relationships, and make moral judgments (CASEL, 2024; Durlak et al., 2022).

The importance of SEL is stressed by many educational philosophies and frameworks. As an example, Goleman's (1995) theory on emotional intelligence emphasizes the importance of social and emotional intelligence in achieving success in personal life and workplaces alike. This is also similar to CASEL which provides a comprehensive framework for incorporating SEL into curriculum as well as school culture.

Hibiscus International School in Segambut, Malaysia is a good illustration of a learning institution that has embraced SEL programs. The institution acts as an inclusive learning environment for all children from diverse backgrounds. For students in Years 1 through 6, Hibiscus International School integrates SEL into its curriculum to enhance their academic performance and emotional intelligence. This school's purpose is not only to produce academically excellent individuals but also well-groomed ones who have great emotions and social skills.

Purpose of the Study

Even though the advantages of SEL programmes are becoming more widely acknowledged, there is still a lack of empirical data about how they affect students' academic performance and emotional intelligence, especially in Malaysian elementary schools. Although the goal of Hibiscus International School's SEL programmes is to promote holistic development, the precise effects of these initiatives on students' academic and emotional

development are not well-documented (Slade & Simpson, 2022).

The dearth of tangible proof of the efficacy of SEL initiatives makes it difficult for educators and decision-makers to assess their effectiveness. Comprehending the effects of these initiatives is essential for making well-informed selections regarding their execution and enhancement.

This study is to explore the experiences of teachers in implementing SEL programs, and how they believe these programs influence students' academic engagement and performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Effects of SEL Programs on Emotional Intelligence

Studies that were conducted recently have consistently shown that SEL programmes have a favourable effect on students' emotional intelligence (EI). Domitrovich et al. (2018) discovered, for instance, that SEL programmes considerably enhance students' social and emotional competencies, dispositions, and actions, resulting in enhanced emotional control and social interactions. Students who took part in SEL programmes showed improvements in their interaction skills, empathy, and self-awareness.

According to Oberle et al. (2019), SEL treatments support emotional and mental wellness. According to their research, pupils who participated in SEL programmes had better levels of empathy, self-awareness, and emotional control. This emphasizes how crucial SEL is to develop emotionally aware people who can successfully navigate challenging social settings. Long-term research by Taylor et al. (2019) looked at how SEL programmes affect students' emotional development over time. They discovered that pupils who took part in excellent SEL programmes in elementary school showed persistent increases in emotional intelligence well into adolescence, underscoring the enduring advantages of SEL treatments.

SEL Programs and Academic Achievements

Studies have demonstrated the beneficial effects of SEL programmes on academic results. Yang, Bear, and May (2018) found that when pupils received SEL teaching, their academic performance improved much more than classmates who did not participate in SEL programmes. These gains were linked to improved emotional and cognitive capacities, which supported improved learning and scholastic success.

A meta-analysis by Mahoney, Durlak, and Weissberg (2018) showed that SEL programmes are linked to better academic results, such as higher test scores and grades. The results of the meta-analysis demonstrated that social and emotional learning (SEL) programmes improve students' motivation and engagement, which in turn helps them succeed academically. Sklad et al. (2018) offered more proof of the advantages SEL programmes have on academic success. According to their research, SEL interventions enhanced student behavior in the classroom, boosted their desire to learn, and enhanced their academic achievement. They emphasized how crucial it is to incorporate SEL into the curriculum to establish a nurturing learning environment that fosters intellectual and emotional growth.

The Role of Classroom Relationships

The success of SEL programmes is greatly dependent on classroom interactions. Positive teacher-student connections generate a supportive learning environment that supports both intellectual and emotional growth, according to research by Roorda et al. (2018). Pupils with positive, encouraging interactions with their instructors showed more emotional intelligence and were more involved in their studies.

Pitlik (2021) studied the effect of peer interactions on students' academic and emotional results. Positive peer relationships in the classroom were found to be linked to greater academic achievement and motivation. By fostering positive interactions among students, teachers may create a collaborative and supportive learning environment in the classroom, which increases the overall success of SEL programmes.

Zinsser and Curby (2020) emphasized the value of trust between educators and students in fostering SEL

outcomes. Students who had faith in their professors were more inclined to participate in SEL activities and use newly acquired abilities in everyday life. This trust created a secure and caring atmosphere that supported intellectual and emotional development.

Collaborative Learning and SEL

Collaborative learning techniques improve SEL results, as students cooperate to accomplish shared objectives. According to Klein & Schwartz (2021), group learning enhances academic achievement and promotes the growth of social and emotional competencies. Students' total emotional intelligence is enhanced by the effective communication, conflict resolution, and relationship-building skills they acquire via group projects and peer interactions.

Zhang and Wang (2022) stressed the value of organized collaborative learning activities to promote SEL. Students' social skills and emotional control significantly improved when they worked together on well-designed collaborative activities. Through collaborative learning, students may practice SEL capabilities in authentic settings, which improves their capacity to use these abilities outside of the classroom.

Oberle & Schonert-Reichl (2023). backed the advantages of group education for SEL. Cooperative learning environments greatly improved student social skills, empathy, and collaboration, in which students collaborate in small groups towards common objectives. By including collaborative learning, SEL programs can optimize the development of social-emotional competencies.

METHODOLOGY

In this study, qualitative interviews were employed as the primary method for data collection to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perspectives. The researcher utilized a semi-structured interview format, which allowed for a flexible yet focused exploration of key themes while encouraging participants to share their insights freely.

A purposive sampling technique was applied to select a diverse group of participants relevant to the research topic, ensuring a rich variety of perspectives. The study's sample consists of five Hibiscus International School teachers who have firsthand experience implementing SEL programs in their classrooms and to gather a variety of experiences and perspectives, a mix of instructors from different grade levels (Year 1 to Year 6) is used. These educators were also chosen based on their willingness to participate in the study and their engagement in SEL efforts. They have relevant expertise and can offer insightful commentary on the execution and results of SEL programs. The participants are as tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Table of Participants

Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	
1	Teacher Uma	F	A primary school teacher with early childhood education expertise.
2	Teacher Rebecca	F	a committed teacher who focuses on incorporating SEL into her lesson plans.
3	Instructor Hayden	F	an instructor renowned for her cutting-edge techniques and commitment to the welfare of her students.
4	Teacher Kasturi	F	A SEL program implementer with great expertise, she is a proponent of holistic education.
5	Teacher Nabilah	F	A more recent hire who has demonstrated a keen interest in SEL and how it affects students' growth.

Each interview was conducted comfortably and privately to facilitate open dialogue. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data, allowing the researcher to interpret the findings to the research questions. This methodology provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the complexities of participants' lived experiences.

The thematic study of educators' experiences and views of SEL aims to clarify how teachers comprehend and apply SEL frameworks in the classroom. This qualitative technique collects data through semi-structured interviews, allowing educators to express their perspectives on SEL projects' effectiveness, obstacles, and benefits. By systematically coding and analyzing the interview transcripts, researchers identify key themes that reflect educators' beliefs about SEL's impact on student development and their own professional roles.

FINDINGS

Training and Materials

Teachers cited inadequate training and resources as a major obstacle to successfully implementing SEL programs. In his remarks, Teacher Hayden pointed out that:

"A lack of resources and materials can be a barrier to SEL's successful curricular inclusion and more support from the school administration in terms of funding and resources," he underlined.

Teacher Rebecca had a similar worry, emphasizing the value of certain things where she quoted,

"Continuous professional development for teachers on SEL strategies is very important."

She stated that to foster trust with pupils and provide a secure space in which they feel free to express their feelings, this kind of training is crucial.

Difficulties in Organization

Significant structural impediments to the successful implementation of SEL, including large class sizes and constrained teaching time, were also mentioned.

As she notes, *"consistency can be challenging, especially with large class sizes."*

Teacher Kasturi teaches second-year students. She advised that the smaller class would be more effective in her quotes:

"Smaller class sizes or additional support staff could help ensure that each student receives adequate attention."

Teacher Uma also discussed the limited time for SEL activities due to a busy academic schedule and suggested "integrating SEL into existing subjects" as a solution.

With this strategy, SEL concepts might be emphasized in a variety of curriculum areas, giving children's constant exposure.

Changes in Student Engagement

Teachers saw that participation in SEL programs improved student engagement in the classroom.

As a result of SEL, teacher Rebecca observed that her pupils' social skills have improved, which has resulted in "higher levels of classroom participation and collaboration."

Students showed higher interest in their learning activities as they became more helpful and empathic with one another. The emotional and social skills acquired through SEL, which contributed to creating a more welcoming

and upbeat learning environment, are believed to be directly responsible for this enhanced engagement.

Impacts on Academic Performance

Teachers had differing opinions about how SEL affected students' academic achievement. Teacher Kasturi, for example, noted that,

"a noticeable increase in students' self-awareness and self-regulation,"

which she thought went hand in hand with better academic performance. She clarified that improved emotional regulation skills in pupils translate into more successful goal-setting and goal-achieving, which improves academic performance. Other educators, like Teacher Hayden, pointed out that SEL's advantages to academics were more indirect.

Although SEL *"improved academic performance,"* he said, it did so more so by "boosting students' focus and motivation" than by directly advancing their academic abilities. This suggests that SEL's contribution to improving students' general emotional and mental health is intimately related to its effect on academic achievement.

Behavioural Improvements

SEL programs have been connected to observable behavioural improvements in the classroom in addition to their effects on academic performance.

Teacher Hayden stated, *"I have noticed significant improvements in my students' ability to communicate their emotions and resolve conflicts."*

These enhancements, according to her explanation, have

"led to a more harmonious classroom environment and better academic focus."

SEL programs benefit the classroom climate by assisting students in improving their communication and conflict-resolution skills. This results in a more engaged, focused, and cooperative learning environment.

DISCUSSION

Challenges and Barriers to Implementing SEL Programs

Though SEL programmes are beneficial, there are several obstacles and difficulties in putting them into practice. Key barriers to SEL implementation were noted by Elias, Elias & Arnold (2022) including insufficient finance, poor professional development, and conflicting academic agendas. For SEL to be successfully included in the curriculum, there must be sufficient resources and teacher training.

According to Miller & Smith (2021) school leadership plays a critical role in removing obstacles to implementation. A strong commitment to SEL and strong leadership support are essential for integrating SEL programmes into school culture. School leaders are essential to ensure the sustainability of SEL and provide a supportive climate.

Cipriano & Brackett (2023) investigated the difficulties in quantifying SEL results. Because social and emotional skills are multidimensional, evaluating their effects may be difficult. This is especially true for SEL programmes. It is crucial to create valid and dependable evaluation instruments to precisely gauge SEL capabilities and assess programme efficacy.

SEL Enhanced Emotional Intelligence

Research indicates that students who participate in well-structured SEL programs exhibit higher levels of

emotional intelligence. For instance, a study conducted by Min et al. (2024) demonstrated that a short-term intervention program based on the SEE Learning curriculum significantly improved social-emotional competencies among elementary school students. The findings suggest that such programs not only foster emotional regulation but also enhance resilience in students.

In this study, teacher Uma mentioned, that "Students are better at expressing their feelings and comprehending the perspectives of others." In the classroom, this has resulted in fewer disputes and more cooperative behavior." The implementation quality of SEL programs plays a crucial role in their effectiveness. Dowling and Barry (2020) found that higher implementation fidelity correlates with better outcomes in students' emotional well-being and academic performance. This highlights the necessity for schools to adopt evidence-based SEL frameworks and ensure proper training for educators.

SEL Enhanced Academic Achievement

Research consistently shows that SEL programs contribute positively to students' academic performance. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), students engaged in SEL demonstrate higher levels of school functioning, which includes improved grades, test scores, attendance, and homework completion (CASEL, 2024).

A meta-analysis of over 400 studies revealed that universal school-based SEL interventions lead to significant improvements in academic achievement, with participating students showing an average increase of 11 percentile points compared to their peers who did not participate (Cipriano et al., 2023). Moreover, a systematic review by Durlak et al. (2022) emphasized that SEL programs yield medium to large effect sizes regarding academic outcomes. These programs help cultivate essential skills such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making, which are critical for academic success. By fostering these competencies, SEL enhances student engagement and motivation, leading to better academic performance (Greenberg et al., 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs in enhancing students' emotional intelligence and academic performance. Through qualitative interviews with educators at Hibiscus International School, key insights were gained about the benefits, challenges, and implementation of SEL programs. Teachers reported improvements in students' emotional regulation, empathy, and classroom behaviour, leading to better engagement and a harmonious learning environment. However, barriers such as limited resources, large class sizes, and insufficient training underscore the need for systemic support to optimize SEL program outcomes. The findings contribute to the growing body of evidence advocating SEL as an essential component of holistic education, emphasizing its potential to prepare students not only for academic success but also for life's social and emotional demands.

To optimize SEL program implementation, schools should prioritize teacher training, provide sufficient resources, and integrate SEL into the curriculum for consistent exposure. Addressing structural challenges like large class sizes with additional staff or smaller classrooms ensures equitable attention to students. Strong leadership support and reliable assessment tools are also vital for enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of SEL initiatives, fostering environments that nurture students' emotional well-being, academic success, and overall development.

Although the study provided concentrates on the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programmess in qualitative method, future research could also focus on the relationships of psychopathology with chronic stress, burnout, competitive anxiety, and negative emotional states among teachers. Valuable insights could be gained by examining how specific psychopathological profiles (e.g., depression, and anxiety disorders) mediate the effects of these stressors in various populations, such as students or teachers too.

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