Effect of an Experiential SEL Intervention on Emotion Regulation and Social Skills among Children

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ABSTRACT

Social-emotional learning (SEL) supports children's ability to understand themselves, manage behaviour, relate to others, and make responsible decisions. This pilot study examined the relationship between children's Emotion Regulation and Social Skills and whether a CASEL-aligned programme of stories, activities, and role play was followed by change in these variables. Each of the five CASEL dimensions was taught in one week through a story, an activity, and a role-play session. A single-group pre-test post-test design was used with 30 children in Grades 3-5 who completed two child-report scales (ERQ-CA and SSRS/SSIS-RS) before and after the five-week programme. Emotion Regulation and Social Skills were positively correlated at pre-test (r = .366, p< .05) and at post-test (r = .380, p< .05). Paired-samples t-tests showed higher scores after the programme on Social Skills ($t(29)$ = 3.450, p = .002) and on Emotion Regulation ($t(29)$ = 2.150, p = .040). Because there was no comparison group and the sample was small, the results are exploratory and cannot show that the programme caused the change.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, Emotion Regulation, Social Skills, Experiential Learning, Children

1. INTRODUCTION

Children's social and emotional development shapes how they understand their own feelings, regulate behaviour, build relationships, and make decisions under everyday pressure. During middle childhood, children increasingly face situations that call for emotional understanding, self-control, cooperation, perspective-taking, and considered responses to interpersonal conflict. Difficulties in these areas are not uncommon: a systematic review of 31 Indian studies covering 30,970 school children and adolescents identified behavioural, emotional, and social problems among the most frequently reported mental-health concerns in this population, underscoring the need to strengthen social-emotional competence during the school years (Balamurugan et al., 2024).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) offers a structured framework for this work. The widely used CASEL model organises social-emotional competence into five interrelated domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). A large evidence base supports school-based SEL programming. A meta-analysis of 213 universal school-based programmes involving 270,034 students found improvements in social-emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance among participants relative to controls (Durlak et al., 2011). A more recent meta-analysis spanning 424 studies and 575,361 students across 53 countries reported comparable gains in skills, attitudes, peer relationships, and school functioning (Cipriano et al., 2023). Other reviews report benefits in social skills and behaviour (Sklad et al.,

2012) and at follow-up assessments between 6 months and 18 years after the programme (Taylor et al., 2017). Greenberg et al. (2003) noted that the impact of school-based programmes is limited when these are poorly coordinated with other parts of school operations.

Although the evidence for SEL programming is well established, programmes differ in how they are delivered. Many rely on direct instruction, such as lessons and discussion, whereas others use experiential methods in which children learn through stories, activities, and role play. A story presents emotional situations, relationships, choices, and consequences through characters. This allows a child to meet a psychological situation, such as fear, jealousy, betrayal, or impulsivity, at a narrative distance, without disclosing a personal experience. An activity then allows the child to practise the related skill, and a role-play session allows the child to act out the situation. Combining these three methods in one weekly sequence offers a practical, experiential way to teach each CASEL dimension. These methods draw on experiential learning theory, in which learning follows concrete experience and reflection (Kolb, 1984), and on social learning theory, in which children acquire behaviour by observing and rehearsing it (Bandura, 1977).

Emotion regulation and social skills are closely linked in childhood. Children who manage their emotions more effectively tend to show better-quality social functioning (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2000), and difficulties with emotion-related self-regulation are associated with maladjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2010). Reappraisal and suppression, the two strategies measured by the ERQ-CA, were first described as separate emotion-regulation processes in adults (Gross & John, 2003). Social skills are learned behaviours that help a child complete social tasks successfully, such as making friends, cooperating, and starting a conversation (Gresham et al., 2001; Gresham et al., 2010). They are commonly assessed with the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) and its updated version, the Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales (SSIS-RS; Gresham & Elliott, 2008), which is the approach used in this study.

The present study examines a pedagogical programme built on the five CASEL dimensions. Each dimension was taught in one week through a story, an activity, and a role-play session, so the programme covers the whole framework and each dimension can be linked to the study variables expected to be influenced by it. The stories are realistic, age-appropriate narratives about children in everyday settings. The programme follows an experiential learning approach: children first meet a situation in a story, then practise the related skill in an activity, and then act it out in role play. A single-group design cannot separate the contribution of each component from other influences.

The principal contributions of this study are summarised below.

- Development and description of a CASEL-aligned pedagogical programme of stories, activities, and role play, with one dimension taught each week.
- Examination of the relationship between Emotion Regulation and Social Skills among children.
- A single-group pre-test post-test evaluation of change in children's Emotion Regulation and Social Skills after the programme.
- Use of Pearson correlations to describe the relationship between the two variables and paired-samples t-tests to describe change from pre-test to post-test.

1.1 Related Work

Research on SEL and on narrative supports the present design. Meta-analyses of school-based SEL programmes report gains in skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011) and continued gains in skills, peer relationships, and school functioning (Cipriano et al., 2023), and CASEL (2020) defines the five core competencies on which these programmes are built. In a correlational study, fiction exposure positively predicted social ability (Mar et al., 2006), and fiction may offer simulations of the social world that support empathy and social inference (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Oatley, 2016). A review of this evidence notes both support for a link between stories and social cognition and several limitations and unanswered questions (Mar, 2018). In a one-week experiment, empathy changed only among readers who were emotionally transported into the story

(Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). In children aged 3 to 7, a story stressing the positive results of honesty increased truth telling, whereas stories stressing the negative results of lying did not (Lee et al., 2014). Related school-based work on bibliotherapy suggests that children's literature can support emotional growth and healing (Heath et al., 2005).

1.2 Research Gap

Two gaps motivate the present design. First, the evidence reviewed above comes mostly from facilitator-led curricula and from studies of single components such as story exposure, so the effect of a combined weekly sequence of story, activity, and role play for each CASEL dimension is not clear. Second, research on stories as an SEL medium rarely links story content to the individual CASEL dimensions, so the relationship between the content of each dimension and outcomes such as Emotion Regulation and Social Skills is unclear. The present study extends earlier work by testing a five-week programme of stories, activities, and role play on Emotion Regulation and Social Skills.

2. THE PROGRAMME AND THE CASEL FRAMEWORK

The programme taught the five CASEL dimensions (CASEL, 2020), one dimension each week. Each week had three parts: a story, an activity, and a role-play session on the same dimension. The stories are realistic, age-appropriate narratives about children, families, classrooms, and friendships, told in everyday language without animal fables or supernatural elements. Because the characters face situations similar to a child's own, a child can meet a feeling or a social problem at a narrative distance, without disclosing a personal experience (Mar & Oatley, 2008). The activity and the role-play session then let children practise and act out the same skill.

The focus of each dimension and the study variables each is expected to influence were as follows:

(1) Self-awareness: a child recognises and names feelings, strengths, and limits. Expected to influence Emotion Regulation (through emotion recognition).

(2) Self-management: a child copes with frustration, waits, and works towards a goal. Expected to influence Emotion Regulation.

(3) Social awareness: a child takes another person's perspective, shows empathy, and respects differences.

(4) Relationship skills: friendship, cooperation, communication, conflict, and asking for or offering help.

(5) Responsible decision-making: a child weighs choices and their consequences, for example honesty and fairness.

Emotion Regulation is therefore expected to respond most directly to the self-awareness and self-management weeks, and Social Skills to the social awareness and relationship skills weeks. These are expected pathways, not tested ones: the study measured change after the programme as a whole and did not test the week of each dimension separately (Section 8). The content of each week was selected according to its fit with a CASEL dimension (Section 4.3). [Real study: describe the activity and the role-play session used for each dimension.]

3. OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

3.1 Objectives

- To develop a CASEL-aligned pedagogical programme of stories, activities, and role play, with one dimension taught each week, for children in Grades 3-5.

- To examine the relationship between Emotion Regulation and Social Skills among children.

- To examine change in Emotion Regulation and Social Skills from pre-test to post-test, and to interpret these changes in relation to the CASEL dimensions the programme focused on.

3.2 Hypotheses

H1: There is a significant relationship between emotion regulation and social skills variables among children.

H2: There is a significant effect of experiential SEL intervention on improving emotion regulation among children.

H3: There is a significant effect of experiential SEL intervention on improving social skills among children.

4. METHOD

4.1 Research Design

A single-group pre-test post-test design was used: one group of children completed the two scales before the programme and again after the programme. There was no comparison group and no random assignment, so the design cannot separate the effect of the stories from maturation, repeated testing, regression to the mean, ordinary schooling or other events during the five weeks (Shadish et al., 2002).

4.2 Participants and Sample Size

The sample comprised 30 children in Grades 3-5 (aged approximately 8-11 years). All 30 completed both testing occasions, so the pre-test and post-test samples are the same 30 children (no attrition). [Real study: school(s), mean age (SD), gender split, grade distribution, language of instruction, and how children were recruited.] The sample size was set by feasibility for this pilot and not by a power calculation, so only large changes can be detected reliably, and non-significant results do not show that no change occurred (Cohen, 1988; Lakens, 2013).

4.3 Intervention

The programme ran for five weeks, with one CASEL dimension taught in each week. Each week had a story, an activity, and a role-play session on that dimension, so children received five stories, five activities, and five role-play sessions in total. The approach was pedagogical and experiential: children met a situation in the story, practised the related skill in the activity, and acted it out in the role-play session. [Real study: who delivered the programme, session length, mode of delivery, content of the activities and role-play sessions, and attendance per child.]

4.4 Measures

Two child-report scales were used. Emotion Regulation was measured with the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (ERQ-CA; Gullone & Taffe, 2012). The scale has 10 items, having options on a 5-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In the original validation study, Cronbach's alpha for the two subscales ranged from .69 to .86, and test–retest correlations over 12 months ranged from .37 to .63 (Gullone & Taffe, 2012).

Social Skills were measured with the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990) and its updated version, the Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scales (SSIS-RS; Gresham & Elliott, 2008). Frank M. Gresham and Stephen N. Elliott created the SSRS in 1990 as a standard tool to assess a child's social behaviour, problem behaviours, and academic competence, and the SSIS-RS revised and widened it (Gresham et al., 2011). In this study, children completed only the Social Skills scale of the student self-report form for ages 8–12. Children rate 46 items on a 4-point frequency scale from 0 (never) to 3 (almost always). A higher score shows stronger social skills. For this form, the manual reports a Cronbach's alpha of .94 and a test–retest correlation of .80 for the total scale (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). Internal consistency was also reported to be higher for the SSIS-RS than for the SSRS (Gresham et al., 2011).

4.5 Procedure

The two scales were completed by all 30 children before the programme began and again at the end of the five-week period, under the same conditions and with the same item order.

5. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum scores were computed for Emotion Regulation and Social Skills at pre-test and at post-test.

5.2 Pearson Correlation

Pearson correlations were computed among the four scale scores (Emotion Regulation and Social Skills at pre-test and at post-test) to test H1, with alpha set at .05.

5.3 Paired-Samples t-Test

Change from pre-test to post-test was tested with paired-samples t-tests (*df* = 29) to test H2, reporting means,

standard deviations, t, df and p. Alpha was .05 for each test.

6. RESULTS

6.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, and minimum and maximum scores of Emotion Regulation and Social Skills at pre-test and post-test. Mean scores on both scales were higher at post-test than at pre-test.

Table 1

*Shows the Descriptive Statistics of Emotion Regulation and Social Skills (*N = *30)*

Study Variables	*N*	*M*	*SD*	Minimum	Maximum
Emotion Regulation pre-test	30	31.03	8.1	16	47
Emotion Regulation post-test	30	33.43	6.61	20	46
Social Skills pre-test	30	63.5	14.73	34	90
Social Skills post-test	30	69.53	14.85	38	94

Note.N = number of participants; *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. Minimum and Maximum are the lowest and highest observed scores. The possible score range is 10 to 50 for Emotion Regulation and 0 to 138 for Social Skills. Emotion Regulation (ERQ-CA) and Social Skills (SSRS/SSIS-RS) are raw scale sums.

6.2 Pearson Correlation Between Emotion Regulation and Social Skills

Table 2

*Shows the Pearson Correlations Among Emotion Regulation and Social Skills Scores (*N = *30)*

Study Variables	1	2	3	4
1. Emotion Regulation pre-test	1			

2. Social Skills pre-test	.366*	1		
3. Emotion Regulation post-test	.670**	0.251	1	
4. Social Skills post-test	.430*	.790**	.380*	1

Note.N = 30. *p< .05. **p< .01. With N = 30,

Emotion Regulation and Social Skills were positively correlated at pre-test (r = .366, p< .05) and at post-test (r = .380, p< .05). Emotion Regulation at pre-test was also positively correlated with Social Skills at post-test (r = .430, p< .05), whereas the correlation between Social Skills at pre-test and Emotion Regulation at post-test (r = .251) was positive but not significant. H1 was therefore supported at both pre-test and post-test. Scores for the same variable were positively correlated across the two occasions (r = .670 for Emotion Regulation and r = .790 for Social Skills, both p< .01), which shows that children kept much of their relative position. Correlations describe association and not causation.

6.3 Paired-Samples t-Test for Emotion Regulation

Table 3

*Shows the Paired-Samples t-Test Results for Emotion Regulation (*N = *30)*

Test	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Pre-test	31.030	8.100			
Post-test	33.430	6.610	2.153	29	0.04

Note.N = 30. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. *t* is the paired-samples *t* statistic (post minus pre). The *p* value is two-tailed. Alpha = .05.

Emotion Regulation rose from M = 31.030 (SD = 8.100) at pre-test to M = 33.430 (SD = 6.610) at post-test, t(29) = 2.153, p = .040, which is below .05. Thus, hypothesis (H2) is accepted in this study.

6.4 Paired-Samples t-Test for Social Skills

Table 4

*Shows the Paired-Samples t-Test Results for Social Skills (*N = *30)*

Test	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*df*	*p*
Pre-test	63.500	14.731			
Post-test	69.531	14.852	3.450	29	0.002

Note.N = 30. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation. *t* is the paired-samples *t* statistic (post minus pre). The *p* value is two-tailed. Alpha = .05.

Social Skills rose from M = 63.500 (SD = 14.731) at pre-test to M = 69.531 (SD = 14.852) at post-test, t(29) = 3.450, p = .002, which is below .05. H3 was therefore supported for Social Skills.

7. DISCUSSION

This pilot study examined whether Emotion Regulation and Social Skills were related in children and whether scores on both measures increased following a five-week programme involving stories, activities, and role play. The findings supported both hypotheses, although the improvements following the programme should be interpreted cautiously because the study involved only one group.

Emotion Regulation and Social Skills were positively related at pre-test (r = .366, p< .05) and at post-test (r = .380, p< .05), so H1 was supported. This agrees with earlier work showing that children who manage their feelings well tend to have better social functioning (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg et al., 2000). Emotion Regulation at pre-test was also related to Social Skills at post-test (r = .430, p< .05), but Social Skills at pre-test was not significantly related to Emotion Regulation at post-test (r = .251). These correlations are moderate and describe association only. They do not show that one variable shapes the other.

Scores on both measures were higher after the programme. Social Skills rose by 6.031 points on a scale from 0 to 138, $t(29) = 3.450$, $p = .002$, and Emotion Regulation rose by 2.400 points, $t(29) = 2.153$, $p = .040$. H2 was therefore supported. The two scales differ in length and range, so their raw changes cannot be compared directly, although the change in Social Skills looks larger. One possible reason is that two of the five weeks focused on social awareness and relationship skills, which teach empathy, cooperation, and communication, the same behaviours that the SSIS-RS asks about (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). In these weeks, children met a social situation in a story, practised the skill in an activity, and acted it out in role play. This sequence fits experiential and social learning ideas (Bandura, 1977; Kolb, 1984). Stories also let children look at a social problem from a safe distance (Mar & Oatley, 2008; Mar et al., 2006; Oatley, 2016). The direction of the results agrees with meta-analyses of school-based SEL (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011; Sklad et al., 2012), although those studies used comparison groups.

This explanation is only a guess and should be read with caution. Every child received the programme, so the gains cannot be separated from maturation, repeated testing, regression to the mean, usual schooling, or other events during the five weeks. The programme also used three methods together, so we cannot tell which one helped most, and the week for each CASEL dimension was not analysed on its own. Engagement was not measured, even though it may affect how much a story changes children (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000), and the short-term effects of fiction on social understanding are mixed (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Panero et al., 2016; Camerer et al., 2018). The effect of a story may also depend on its theme and how it is framed (Lee et al., 2014). Therefore, the significant change shows that scores were higher after the programme, but it does not show that the programme caused the change.

8. LIMITATIONS

- Single-group design with no comparison group and no random assignment: change cannot be attributed to the programme (maturation, repeated testing, regression to the mean, schooling and history are uncontrolled).

- Very small sample (N = 30): low power and imprecise estimates. The study is exploratory and effect-size or confidence-interval reporting is omitted from the tables.

9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Future work should add a comparison group with random or cluster-random assignment, a power calculation using conservative effects, validated instruments in the language of administration, an inert control and conditions that separate the story, activity, and role-play components, measures of transportation (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Green & Brock, 2000), story coding by theme (Lee et al., 2014), attendance data, teacher- or parent-report measures (for example, the SSIS-RS teacher and parent forms; Gresham & Elliott, 2008), and a delayed follow-up (Taylor et al., 2017).

10. CONCLUSION

In this single-group pilot, Emotion Regulation and Social Skills scores were both higher after the programme of stories, activities, and role play. Emotion Regulation and Social Skills were positively related at post-test. Without a comparison group these changes cannot be attributed to the programme. The programme is worth testing in a larger controlled study.

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