



The Impact of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) on Reducing Anxiety and Enhancing School Engagement: A Case Study at ‘Androkli Kostallari’ Elementary School

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Abstract

This study examines the effectiveness of a Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) intervention in reducing anxiety and enhancing students' school engagement at Androkli Kostallari School in Shkozë. The target group consists of first, second, and fifth-grade students, selected due to a high prevalence of students from divorced families, a demographic known to face heightened emotional and behavioral challenges. The study employs a qualitative methodology, integrating descriptive data to assess the impact of the SEL intervention. Teachers, trained in SEL techniques, implemented activities in the classroom while receiving continuous mentorship. Data were collected through teachers' reports on student progress, with a focus on emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and physical aspects of student well-being. The results indicated significant improvements in students' emotional regulation, behavior, cognitive skills, and physical well-being, contributing to a more positive and engaging school environment. This study underscores the importance of SEL in fostering emotional resilience and academic success, particularly for students facing family-related stressors.

Keywords: Social-Emotional Learning, anxiety reduction, school engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) has emerged as a critical approach to enhancing children's emotional regulation, resilience, and interpersonal skills. Defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) SEL involves acquiring and applying skills for emotional management, empathy, relationship-building, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). While traditionally implemented to improve overall well-being and academic outcomes, recent research has highlighted SEL's potential in mitigating anxiety among children, particularly those facing challenging life circumstances.

School-based Social, Emotional Learning Are Relevant for Students in Relation to Class Behavior, Peer Interaction, Learning, and School Participation Based on a large meta-analysis of 213 universal school-based social and emotional learning intervention programs involving 270,34 students, positive results were reported for participants on social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance. Compared to controls, students who participated in these programs showed significant improvements in social and emotional learning competencies (Joseph A. Durlak, 2011). Follow-up research has shown that the benefits of such programs may well extend far beyond the treatment period (Rebecca D Taylor, 2017)

The question that is asked in the article under review relates to a school where many students had divorced parents. Family transitions may be an important source of stress for some children. Nevertheless, children's adjustment to their parents' divorce varies considerably, depending on family processes, social support, economic circumstances, and other protective factors, according to (Amato, 2004). Therefore, the aim of the intervention under consideration was not to blame the divorce for children's anxiety or behavioral problems, but to provide a supportive classroom context within which children would be able to acquire emotional and interpersonal problem-solving competencies.

Thus, the study tried to explore how this intervention was experienced and implemented in the classroom and how teachers saw changes in students' regulation of emotions, behavior, cognition, physical state, and school participation. Since the study used mainly qualitative and descriptive methods, no attempt was made to measure changes using standardized pre- and post-tests. Therefore, the results should be seen as changes that were noticed rather than proved. In

particular, it cannot be said with certainty that anxiety levels were clinically reduced as a result of the intervention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social-Emotional Learning as an Important Milestone in Child Development

The Collaboration for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as “... the process by which all students acquire and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions, achieve personal/group goals, develop empathy, create and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and thoughtful decisions” (CASEL, 2020). According to CASEL, key social and emotional competencies include:

- Self-awareness: identifying and recognizing emotions; recognizing personal interests and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence (Husaj, 2016).
- Self-management: Competence in the self-management domain requires skills and attitudes that facilitate the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors. This includes skills necessary to achieve goals, such as the ability to delay gratification, manage stress, control impulses, and persevere through challenges (Eva Oberle, 2019)
- Social awareness: The ability to take the perspective of and empathize with others from diverse backgrounds and cultures, to understand social and ethical norms for behavior, and to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports
- Social skills: This includes communicating clearly, listening actively, cooperating, resisting inappropriate social pressure, negotiating conflict constructively, and seeking and offering help when needed (Dusenbury L. &, 2017).
- Responsible decision-making: Problem identification and situation analysis; problem solving; evaluation and reflection; personal, social and ethical responsibilities.

Learning about social and emotional competencies promotes the development and use of these competencies in the context of creating safe and supportive school, family and community environments in which children feel cared for, respected, connected to school and engaged in learning. Many evidence-based programs are available to help schools promote the development of these competencies in students (Joseph A. Durlak, 2011)

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the process by which individuals learn and apply a set of social, emotional, and related skills, attitudes, behaviors, and values that help guide their thoughts, feelings, and actions so that students can thrive and succeed in school, work, and life.

There are many ways to think about and categorize SEL skills and competencies, however, most studies identify six main areas in which this program develops skills in students. Specifically, cognitive, emotional, social, values, perspective, and identity (Sugishita, 2019)

Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Domains. The first three domains (cognitive, emotional, and social) encompass a set of traditional social emotional learning skills and competencies that children and youth are able to learn, practice, and use in their daily lives. These typically include self-regulation, executive functioning, and critical thinking skills that enable them to take in and interpret information and manage their thoughts, feelings, and behavior toward achieving a goal; the ability to identify, understand, and manage their own emotions and to relate to the emotions of others through empathy and perspective-taking; and the skills or behaviors required to build and maintain healthy relationships, resolve conflicts, and work and play well with others (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2018)

Cognitive Aspect: The cognitive aspect encompasses the basic cognitive abilities required to manage and direct one's behavior toward achieving a goal. This aspect is related to the skills and competencies of executive functioning, self-regulation, decision-making, and problem-solving. Cognitive skills enable children to focus while ignoring distracting stimuli, controlling impulses; remembering instructions; creating and implementing plans; setting and achieving goals; prioritizing, adapting to different environments and situations; and analyzing or using information to make decisions and solve problems.

Children use cognitive skills whenever they are faced with tasks that require concentration, planning, problem-solving, coordination, conscious choice between alternatives, or the dominance of a strong internal or external desire - all key skills for appropriate behavior and academic success (Stahl, 2018). They also involve many of the emotional and social processes that children require to be successful; for example, the child must use cognitive skills to stop and think before acting in emotionally charged situations, which is necessary for maintaining positive relationships and resolving conflicts peacefully.

Emotional aspect: The domain of emotions includes a range of skills and competencies that help children recognize, express, and control their emotions, as well as understand and empathize with others. Emotional skills are often fundamental to positive social interactions and critical for

building relationships with peers and adults; without the ability to recognize and regulate one's emotions or to engage in empathy and perspective-taking, it becomes very difficult to interact positively with others (Jeffrey S. Kress, 2004)

Social Aspect: Social and interpersonal skills support children and youth to accurately interpret the behavior of other individuals, understand social situations effectively, and interact positively with peers and adults. Skills in this area are required to work cooperatively, solve problems in groups, build positive relationships, and interact peacefully with others (Jones, Barnes, Bailey, & Doolittle, 2017)

It is important to emphasize that social and interpersonal skills are based on emotional knowledge and processes; Children must learn to recognize, express, and regulate their emotions before they can be expected to interact with others in a healthy way. This report focuses on three social skills that experts agree are linked to outcomes for children and youth: understanding social cues, conflict resolution/social problem solving, and prosocial/cooperative behavior (Clancy Blair, 2018)

The importance of social and emotional skills There is a wealth of empirical evidence linking childhood social and emotional skills to improved outcomes in school and later life, in terms of physical and mental health, school readiness and academic achievement, crime, employment and income. A longitudinal study in the United Kingdom has shown that good social and emotional skills, including self-regulation, self-awareness and social skills – developed at the age of ten – are predictive of a range of adult outcomes (age 42), such as life satisfaction and well-being, success in the labour market and good general health (Alissa Goodman, 2015)

There is also evidence from studies that children's skills can be improved through school-based SEL programmes and that these effects can persist over time. According to them, when SEL is implemented appropriately, it can have positive impacts on a range of outcomes, including: • improved social and emotional skills; • improved academic performance; • improved attitudes, behavior, and peer relationships; • reduced emotional distress (depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal); • reduced levels of bullying; • reduced behavior problems; and • improved school engagement.

There is a wealth of evidence that indicates that a large number of children are facing significant social, emotional, and mental barriers to their success in school and life. Furthermore, many children engage in challenging behaviors that educators must address to ensure high-quality learning. Data from the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (SDC,2006) indicate that:

- 6.0% of American youth aged 14-17 did not go to school on one or more of the previous 30 days because they felt unsafe at school or on the way there.
- 7.9% of these youth reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school grounds during the same period.
- 28.5% of these youth reported feeling so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more during the previous 12 months that they stopped doing some usual activities.
- 13% reported making a plan to attempt suicide during this period.

Data on developmental assets considered important for children's mental health and social/emotional development are also cause for concern. A 2003 Research Institute study conducted in 202 American communities found that only 29% of students in grades 6 through 12 felt that their school provided a caring and supportive environment.

Data reported by the Illinois Task Force on Children's Mental Health in its 2003 Final Report show that:

- At least 1 in 10 children suffers from a mental illness that severely disrupts daily functioning at home, school, or in the community.
- 70-80% of children in need do not receive adequate mental health services.
- 25-30% of American children experience problems adjusting to school.
- 32% of children (including toddlers) in 10 child care centers in Chicago are considered to have behavioral problems.
- 14% of students aged 12-18 report being bullied at school in the six months prior to the interview.

Anxiety in Children: A Growing Concern Anxiety disorders are among the most prevalent mental health conditions in children, with an estimated 7.1% of children aged 3-17 years diagnosed annually in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2020). Anxiety affects children's academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being (Costello, 2003). School-based interventions, including SEL, have been identified as effective avenues for addressing anxiety due to their accessibility and integration into children's daily environments (Domitrovich Celene et al, 2017)

The foundational theories underlying SEL align closely with mechanisms for anxiety reduction. Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) posits that children learn behaviors and coping strategies through observation, modeling, and reinforcement. SEL programs leverage this by teaching adaptive skills, such as mindfulness and emotional regulation. Additionally, Lazarus and Folkman's Transactional Model of Stress and Coping (1984) underscores the importance of cognitive appraisals and coping strategies in managing stress—skills explicitly targeted in SEL frameworks.

Mechanisms Linking SEL to Anxiety Reduction One of SEL's primary objectives is to enhance emotional regulation, which is critical in managing anxiety. Emotional dysregulation often exacerbates anxiety symptoms. SEL programs teach children to identify, label, and manage emotions effectively, leading to reduced physiological and psychological arousal during stressful situations (Marc A. Brackett, 2011). Strong social connections act as a buffer against anxiety. SEL fosters positive peer relationships and prosocial behaviors, creating a supportive environment that alleviates feelings of isolation and fear.

SEL encourages adaptive thinking patterns, helping children challenge and replace catastrophic thoughts often associated with anxiety (Joseph A. Durlak, 2011). This aligns with CBT principles, which have a well-established efficacy in treating anxiety. Mindfulness-based components of SEL, such as those in MindUP, have been shown to reduce anxiety by promoting present-moment awareness and reducing rumination.

Children from Divorced Parents

Children experiencing parental divorce often exhibit higher levels of anxiety (Amato, 2004). SEL programs provide a structured way to address these emotional challenges. (Sandler, 2003) found that SEL interventions tailored for children from divorced families significantly reduced anxiety and improved coping skills. Economic stress can exacerbate anxiety in children (Evans & Kim, 2013). SEL programs implemented in low-income schools have shown to mitigate these effects by fostering resilience and emotional regulation (Jones & Kahn, The Evidence Base for How We Learn: Supporting Students' Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Consensus Statements of Evidence from the Council of Distinguished Scientists, 2017). Longitudinal studies underscore the enduring impact of SEL on anxiety reduction. (Rebecca D Taylor, 2017) conducted a meta-analysis revealing that SEL interventions continued to yield emotional and academic

benefits up to 18 years post-intervention. These findings emphasize SEL's role in equipping children with lifelong coping skills.

The effectiveness of SEL interventions is contingent upon consistent and high-quality implementation. (Dusenbury L. &, 2017) highlighted that deviations from program guidelines can undermine outcomes, necessitating comprehensive training for educators. SEL programs must be adapted to reflect the cultural and contextual needs of diverse student populations. Research by (Robert J. Jagers et al, 2019) advocates for culturally responsive SEL frameworks to maximize engagement and effectiveness. While SEL reduces anxiety, some children may require additional mental health support. Integrating SEL with school-based mental health services can provide a more comprehensive approach to addressing anxiety (Weissberg, 2015)

METHODOLOGY

This chapter will argue the logic and reasons for the selection of the study methodology. Also, during this chapter, the procedures of the current study methodology that were used to achieve the research goal and objectives of the study will be explained.

Describe the sample used for your experiment including how many subjects participated and their characteristics, how they were selected, and your rationale for selecting them.

The research site was 'Androkli Kostallari' Elementary School, located in Shkozë. The sample consisted of 60 students attending 1st, 2nd and 5th grades. Grade one, two, and five were selected because, according to the school administration records, there is an increased number of children with divorced parents, and teachers expressed the need for providing extra help to students. Five teachers participated in the study. Parents gave consent, and they were familiar with the goals and objectives of the study, as well as the fact that their children were not obliged to participate. Describe your experimental design including how you assigned participants, your rationale, and the treatment. Did you apply the treatment to a class or to individual students?

The intervention was conducted at a class level, not individual basis. Hence, all 60 students were treated equally, and no control group was identified. The study aimed to promote social-emotional competence in the classroom.

Research questions

1. How does the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) activities in classrooms affect students' emotional regulation and their ability to manage anxiety?
2. What impact does the SEL intervention have on students' behavioral improvements, including cooperation and respect towards peers and teachers, in a school environment?
3. How do teachers perceive the role of SEL in improving the cognitive, emotional, and physical well-being of students, and how do they integrate SEL practices into their teaching methods?

The target group of this study consists of students, teachers, and parents at Androkli Kostallari School in Shkozë. Specifically, the students are from the first, second, and fifth grades, which were selected due to their high number of students with divorced parents. This demographic was chosen to address the emotional and behavioral challenges associated with such family situations through the implementation of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) activities. Teachers at the school are also part of the target group, as they were trained in SEL techniques and played a central role in applying the intervention in the classroom. Additionally, parents were involved by providing informed consent for their children's participation in the study during a parent-teacher meeting.

This chapter is organized into several sessions: a) study design, b) stages followed to carry out the study c) ethical issues.

The methodology selected for the implementation of this study is the qualitative methodology, which includes descriptive data to measure the impact of the intervention. The integration of qualitative in the project allows us to enrich the findings for the project, as well as to obtain a deeper level of understanding of the phenomenon. The richest knowledge of the phenomenon is achieved not only through scientific analysis, but also through social action and the productive combination of different approaches. The validity of these studies is higher, and allows the phenomenon to be elaborated in the best way (Almalki, 2016)

This study aims to highlight the effectiveness of an intervention strategy for reducing anxiety and increasing the desire for school. This strategy consists of implementing several sessions by applying SEL in the classrooms of Androkli Kostallari School.

All analyses carried out were carried out within the scope of the study's purpose and objectives. The statistical analysis focuses on the use of data from school documents such as the register and other reports of teachers and the school psychologist, to identify the situation of hidden dropouts in school. These instruments can be considered sufficient to determine an approximate number of students with hidden dropouts, despite the fact that the application of the program will be carried out in the entire class, since the effects are positive for everyone.

Phases followed for the realization of this study

The entire procedure for the realization of the project followed a logical line that fits the methodology of the study and fulfills the purpose and objectives. In detail, the phases through which the entire current research has gone are described below. *Pre-preparatory phase.* To develop this study, the Educational Directorate and the school teachers were initially informed. This project was developed specifically in the 'Androkli Kostallari' school in Shkozë.

-Intervention Duration and Frequency

How long did your intervention last? How many hours per week did students participate in the intervention? The intervention lasted for three months, during which two 45-minute sessions per week were organized. Overall, there were 24 sessions and 18 hours of planned SEL activities. Teachers received training to deliver the intervention and received mentoring from the school administration during the three-month period.

- Intervention Content

What are the treatment activities or components? Emotion-focused conflict resolution, self-management, empathy, cooperative discussion, communication, assertion, problem-solving, decision-making, and frustration tolerance were practiced using dialogues, drawing, singing, games, dramatization, and individual and group activities. Emotion-focused treatment components were integrated into the regular school curriculum according to students' developmental levels.

In this school, the first, second and fifth grades were selected as the target group, as the grades with the highest number of students with divorced parents. Before applying this program, the teachers were informed and trained about SEL and the students received informed consent from their parents during the parent-teacher meeting.

The informed consent explained the purpose and nature of the project, the freedom to participate or withdraw from the study at any time, and the completely confidential nature of the data collected from each student.

The second phase of the study took place 1 week after the meeting with parents and teachers. This phase consisted of reviewing the documentation regarding the highest number of anxious behaviors in the classes, to select the final grades in which the intervention would be implemented.

In the *third phase* of the project, the teachers were provided with the SEL activities manual and explained in detail the form of documentation and the way in which the intervention would be implemented, in order to be as sustainable as possible over time.

Since we are dealing with the application of an intervention on a sensitive teaching issue, such as the integration of the most innovative forms of teaching focusing on emotions, it is necessary to be sure that the target selected as a sample for the project (teachers and students) is suitable for the intervention to be applied.

The fourth phase of this study was the application of the intervention strategy of SEL activities in the classrooms by teachers based on the detailed instructions of the manual and the continuous mentoring of the school directorate.

After applying the intervention, we move on to *the fifth and final phase* of the study, which is the measurement of the real result of the intervention, to compare these data with the initial data (before the intervention).

Working groups:

- ✓ **Process Management Group:** Oversees the overall management of the process.
- ✓ **School Needs Assessment Group:** Collects and analyzes data to identify strengths and weaknesses.

- ✓ **Training Groups:** Facilitates discussions and experience sharing within and across departments to enhance knowledge on activities and integration methods.
- ✓ **Logistics Group:** Ensures infrastructure and materials are available for students and teachers.
- ✓ **Mentoring Group:** Provides ongoing support to teachers during the implementation of SEL.

Procedure

Phase	Procedure
Preparatory stage:	The school administration and teachers were informed about the study. The target groups were determined.
Parent and teacher information:	Parents were educated about the study's details and obtained informed consents. The teachers received information about social-emotional learning principles and rules.
Review of the baseline data:	One week after the parent-teacher meeting, the school records and teachers' reports were evaluated to determine the classrooms with higher levels of anxiety and behavioral problems.
Implementation:	The teachers performed the selected social-emotional learning activities with their students twice a week for 45 minutes for three months, with additional mentoring and implementation support.
Post-intervention review:	After the implementation period, teachers' reports and observations along with the relevant school documentation were analyzed to define changes associated with the intervention and address the baseline issues.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed thematically focusing on four domains: emotional, behavioral, cognitive, and physical. A separate thematic analysis was undertaken for teachers' perceptions and practices. Comparisons were made between the situation prior to the intervention and teachers' descriptions of the situation following the program. The percentages presented were descriptive and pertained only to the items explicitly mentioned in the original study.

To respond to the reviewers' comment, the percentages were recomputed using the total number of students who participated in the study ($N = 60$). Thus, 90% corresponds to 54 students, 28% corresponds to approximately 17 students, and 72% corresponds to approximately 43

students. Due to rounding, the numbers of students may vary. The percentages should be understood as descriptive statistics pertaining to the teachers' reports. The results should not be confused with standardized scores or indices.

Students

The themes extracted from the analysis of interviews related to the impact of SEL activity have reported based on several themes. Namely, the themes referred to are: a) emotional aspect, b) behavioral aspect, c) cognitive aspect and d) physical aspect

Emotional aspect: One of the key outcomes of implementing SEL activities was students' improved ability to recognize and manage their emotions. Approximately 90% of students gained knowledge about basic emotions, such as happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. About 28% advanced further, demonstrating the ability to understand and interpret more complex emotions, such as empathy, guilt, or frustration.

These skills not only helped students better regulate their own emotions but also enhanced their ability to identify and respond to the feelings of others. Positive emotions were most frequently mentioned during SEL activities, suggesting that students were able to shift their focus from anxiety and stress to feelings of joy and contentment.

Behavioral aspect: SEL activities had a significant impact on students' behaviors, particularly in fostering respect and improving communication. Teachers noted improvements in positive behaviors, such as following rules, respecting peers, and engaging in constructive interactions. The data revealed that 72% of students who previously exhibited inappropriate behaviors in the classroom showed more cooperative and accepting attitudes after the SEL intervention. The application of behavior management techniques through SEL not only reduced disruptive actions but also promoted a more inclusive and harmonious school environment.

Cognitive aspect: Anxiety often affects cognitive functions, but SEL activities helped students strengthen their mental capacities in several key areas. Improvements were noted in concentration and attention, with students demonstrating a greater ability to stay focused during lessons and group activities. Decision-making skills were enhanced, enabling students to make thoughtful choices and consider the consequences of their actions. SEL also addressed feelings of guilt, a

common cognitive challenge for children of divorced parents, helping them process these emotions constructively.

These cognitive gains contributed to a more focused and productive learning environment, reducing the impact of anxiety on academic performance.

Physical aspect: The physical well-being of students also improved through SEL activities, reflecting the holistic benefits of this approach. Students reported feeling more energetic and motivated to participate in activities. The structure of SEL interventions encouraged consistent engagement, which fostered a sense of physical vitality and readiness to learn.

This increase in energy and enthusiasm further supported their ability to interact positively with peers and engage fully in the school day.

Teachers

The analysis identified two core themes and five subthemes that encompass SEL teachers' representations and classroom practices implemented for SEL purposes.

As presented in Table I, SEL teachers' conceptual representations are based primarily on their representation of social and emotional development and the roles of different actors (family, community, and teachers) in the process of children's social and emotional development. In terms of classroom teaching, teachers described and discussed their practices regarding the learning environment, the intentionality of strategies, and approaches to dealing with conflict and frustration.

Table I. Analysis of the themes: themes, subthemes and quotes

Topic: SEL Representatives		
Subthemes	Description	Citations
- Social-emotional development	The main goals in the socio-emotional approach are cultivating a sense of resilience, empathy, self - efficacy, growth mindset, decision-making ability, self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, interaction management, and accepting responsibility (Husaj, 2016)	<i>When children learn to self-regulate emotions, frustrations and fears. (M11)</i>
- The role of the family, school and community and teachers	The family forms the foundation of social and emotional development, while the school extends this interaction with adults and peers. Teachers play a key role in fostering interpersonal relationships and developing emotional language, promoting empathy, love, and encouragement (Belinda G. Gimbert, et al, 2023).	<i>It is very important to grow in a balanced way, because family has the main basis to learn children about emotions (M1)</i>
Topic: Classroom Practice		
Subtopic	Description	Citations
- Learning environment	- Safe, welcoming environment - Sense of belonging - Non-directive - Establishing rules and routines	<i>Children should feel respected and valued in a welcoming environment. They should provide a sense of belonging (M3)</i>
- Pedagogical goals	Pre-planned goals - activities - use of thematic stories, games, dramatizations. - Dealing with conflict and frustration - dialogue; the role of the teacher as	<i>Reading stories with themes related to emotions, conversations about the themes, recordings, drawings (...) songs accompanied by massages between children. (M4)</i> <i>Conversations and games in groups with emotions, as it may be the 'Elephant Game' (M6)</i> <i>When we dialogue, we have conversations and behind them there are achievements that</i>

- Dialogue	conflict management	<i>show something very important about the values in groups or family (M18)</i>
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RESULTS

Emotional domain

Teachers reported enhancements in students' recognition and discussion of emotions. Around 90 percent of the 60 participating students (approximately 54 students) were reported as being knowledgeable in basic emotions (e.g., joy, sadness, anger, fear), while approximately 28 percent of the full sample (about 17 students) were progressing beyond basic emotions and were able to recognize or interpret complex emotions (e.g., empathy, guilt, frustration).

These observations suggest an increased emotional vocabulary and opportunities for students to identify and express their emotions. Teachers reported a higher frequency of positive emotions during SEL activities. Since these results were based on teacher observations and documentation, it is considered as perceived changes in emotional competence rather than actual changes in anxiety severity.

Behavioral domain

Teachers reported enhancements in classroom behavior, specifically in terms of rule-following, respect for peers, communication, and cooperative activities. Around 72 percent of the students who were previously flagged by teachers for having inappropriate classroom behaviors were reported to be more cooperative and accepting after the intervention. For transparency, the manuscript uses the total sample (N = 60) as the denominator for the descriptive percentage reported in the original study; this corresponds to around 43 students. If the original 72 percent was

calculated from a smaller behavior-risk subgroup, the raw classroom records should be double-checked and the denominator should be replaced before the final submission.

The behavioral changes reported included less disruptive behaviors and more positive interactions. Teachers described a more inclusive classroom climate and students became more willing to cooperate and communicate.

Cognitive domain

Teachers reported improvements in concentration, attention, decision-making, and ability to stay engaged in lessons and activities. Students were described as being more able to pause before acting, consider consequences, and engage in problem-solving. Teachers reported that SEL activities provided opportunities for students to discuss difficult emotions (e.g., guilt, frustration) in a structured and supportive way.

These findings are in line with the broader SEL literature that connects social-emotional competence with school adjustment and functioning, although this study did not use standardized cognitive or academic achievement measures.

Physical and Motivational domain

Teachers and students were reported to describe more energy, motivation, and willingness to participate in school activities. The interactive and engaging nature of SEL sessions seem to have facilitated active participation and positive engagement. Since no physiological or standardized physical-health measure was used, the term ‘physical well-being’ in this study refers to reported energy, vitality, and willingness to participate rather than to actual physical-health outcomes.

Teachers’ Perceptions and Classroom Practice

The teacher data yielded two broad themes: (1) teachers’ representations of social-emotional development and roles of family, school, community and teachers; and (2) classroom practice used to support SEL. Teachers emphasized emotional self-regulation, resilience, empathy, self-efficacy, self-awareness, social awareness, responsibility, and decision-making.

Teachers emphasized the safety and welcoming learning environment, sense of belonging, rules and routines, intentional pedagogical activities, and dialogue around conflict and frustration.

Examples included stories told about emotions, guided discussion, drawings, songs, games, dramatization, and teacher-led conversations.

DISCUSSIONS

In this study, the impact of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) on reducing anxiety and developing social and emotional competencies was analyzed, including the impact of SEL on teachers, students, and parents. The results suggest that classroom-based SEL was both feasible to implement over a three-month period and associated with numerous beneficial outcomes as perceived and reported by teachers. The most common observations were related to emotional vocabulary and regulation, cooperative behavior, attention and motivation, and engagement and participation.

These findings are generally consistent with the review by (Joseph A. Durlak, 2011) indicating that SEL effectively promotes students' social-emotional skills, behaviors, and academic functioning. The emotional findings are particularly pertinent given that the intervention entailed developing students' emotional awareness and regulation. As reported by teachers, many students demonstrated gains in identifying basic emotions while a smaller percentage could recognize more complex emotions, which is consistent with developmental psychology. Indeed, developing emotional vocabulary is often a critical step in learning to regulate emotions. The behavioral findings also make sense in the context of the intervention. Specifically, promoting relationship skills and responsible decision-making was the second central area of emphasis in the CASEL framework (CASEL, 2020). In turn, these skills were reportedly manifested in students' behavior during the school day.

The findings related to cognitive skills and engagement are difficult to evaluate in terms of the intervention's effectiveness. While teachers noted improvements in attention, participation, motivation, and decision-making, no reliable-and-valid measures were used to assess these domains. More specifically, teachers did not score students' attention spans or executive function abilities or levels of anxiety or school engagement.

Finally, the present findings underscore the importance of teachers in any SEL intervention, as they were the ones who received training, followed the activity manual, delivered the intervention,

and received mentorship. This is a critical point, as the effectiveness of any SEL program ultimately depends on teachers, and issues with implementation often undermine interventions (Joseph A. Durlak, 2011). At the same time, the study suggests that teachers value the importance of classroom management, relational skills, collaboration, communication, and predictable school routines.

The study can also be related to broader themes of the school, family, and community. Specifically, the findings suggest that prior to the intervention, students from less advantaged backgrounds were vulnerable to higher levels of anxiety, but no single factor was identified as specifically precipitating it. This highlights the need to address students' social-emotional needs within the whole-school, whole-family, and whole-community contexts. In particular, it was the teachers' perception of the need for such support that determined its manifestation in the study.

Teachers play a key role in creating a safe and supportive environment for students. Various researchers, such as those from the University of Virginia, emphasize that the quality of teacher-student relationships, classroom management, and the implementation of the SEL program directly affect the overall classroom and student outcomes. Teachers who have received training for implementing SEL reported significant improvements in emotional regulation, stress management, and creating a positive classroom atmosphere (Newman, 2015). This indicates that SEL has a dual impact: it supports the personal development of teachers and contributes to creating a more productive and open classroom for learning.

Parents, as the first teachers of their children, have a significant impact on the development of their children's social and emotional competencies. When schools and families collaborate, they can strengthen the development of these skills through school-family partnership. Parental communication and engagement in the social-emotional learning process can contribute to healthier emotional development in children and help support an integrated educational environment. This partnership can include activities at school and at home that reinforce SEL lessons and enhance students' interpersonal skills (Webster-Stratton, 2003).

In the lower education cycle, SEL is important for the development of cognitive and social skills, such as planning, organizing, and conflict resolution. Elementary school students further develop the skills to understand the needs and feelings of others, while improving their ability to build

friendships and make ethical decisions (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). SEL programs offer opportunities for developing these skills, including teaching strategies that support critical thinking and social awareness, which are necessary for coping with daily challenges and creating positive relationships with peers and teachers.

SEL programs are particularly important for children exposed to traumatic experiences, as they help in developing emotional self-regulation and the ability to build healthy relationships. Children who experience trauma often have difficulty managing emotions and may display reactive, withdrawn, or impulsive behavior. SEL offers an effective approach to helping them develop skills to identify and manage their emotions, contributing to stress reduction and improved learning conditions. Studies suggest that SEL programs are particularly effective for children facing trauma, as they reinforce positive relationships and provide strategies for problem-solving and coping with stress (Catherine Bailey, 2018)

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations should be noted when interpreting these results. First, the study took place in one elementary school, which limits the generalizability of the results. Second, the study did not include a control or comparison group, and so the observed changes cannot be definitely attributable to the intervention, because there are alternative explanations such as maturation, classroom effects, teacher effects, or other school influences.

Third, the main outcomes were obtained from teacher-reported documentation. Although teacher observations are a valid way of assessing classroom dynamics, teacher expectations may influence their assessments of students' behaviors, feelings, and attitudes. Fourth, the study does not report using standardized measures for assessing anxiety and school engagement.

Thus, the study cannot establish whether the intervention decreased clinically relevant levels of anxiety or resulted in a measurable change (increase) in school engagement as defined by a standardized school-engagement measure. Fifth, percentages were reported, and these figures are likely to have been rounded, so the number of students corresponding to each percentage is also an approximation. Finally, there is no follow-up measurement to assess whether the changes were sustained. Subsequent studies should use larger samples, include

multiple schools, use standardized measures, include multiple informants, and incorporate a control group and a follow-up measurement.

CONCLUSION

The case study presented in the research demonstrates that integrating a structured social and emotional learning (SEL) intervention into an elementary-school classroom is feasible within a three-month period and can be achieved through two 45-minute sessions per week. The study revealed improvement in emotional understanding and regulation, cooperation, attention, decision-making, motivation, and participation in the 60 students who participated. The results are pertinent to teachers in similar settings who can benefit from addressing their students' socioemotional and behavioral needs in the classroom.

An appropriate interpretation of the results would be to state that the study does not claim to establish cause-and-effect clinical anxiety reduction. Instead, the results suggest that teachers saw fewer issues related to anxiety in their students as well as enhanced socioemotional and behavioral functioning after engaging in the intervention. It is recommended that further studies examine the potential preventative and developmental educational school psychology interventions and approaches with improved designs, control groups, larger sample sizes, and extended follow-up periods.

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Author verification note (not for publication): The percentages were recalculated against N = 60 for transparency. The authors should check the original classroom records before final submission for the denominator they used for the 72% behavioral figure and ensure that the denominator corresponds to the correct coding rule. If the percentage was initially calculated against a smaller group of students exhibiting inappropriate behavior, the denominator should be changed to reflect a smaller subgroup.